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COOL Grooves with Barney Rachabane, Darius Brubeck, Lulu Gontsana and Bongani Sokhela

IT'S A LITTLE known fact that the King of Thailand is a huge jazz fan. So huge, in fact, that he requested that a jazz festival be held in Bangkok in celebration of his jubilee year. Darius Brubeck and the Afro Cool Concept played a gig at that festival and one of the songs they played is the title track for their new CD, *Still On My Mind*, which was launched at the Centre

for Jazz and Popular Music on Wednesday night.

The band comprises some of the most respected musicians in South Africa – Darius Brubeck on piano, Bongani Sokhela on double and electric bass, Barney Rachabane on alto saxophone and Lulu Gontsana on drums. It goes without saying that the gig was eagerly anticipated and these seasoned musicians easily

lived up to expectations.

The first track they played, *Tshona*, was a simple South African melody, introduced by Rachabane. Listening to him play, it was hard to believe that he started playing by ear, on the streets of South Africa, with a humble pennywhistle. After progressing to clarinet, he finally came home to roost with the alto saxophone. His style of

improvisation was fast, adventurous, fluid and filled with humour. I mused that, if Rachabane's improvisation style were a face, it would be comedian Jim Carrey's – such was the

expression and versatility with which he played. Brubeck then entered with his trademark style of seamless chords interspersed with flowing runs of notes. It was all extremely professional and entertaining. It had just enough experimentation to keep the jazz buffs happy, yet not so much as to become inaccessible to the layman.

The next tune, *Jeep's Blues*, was named after the composer Johnny Hodges' nickname. Rachabane's playing had a personal edge of pain to it that seemed to emulate the melodramatic agony of blues singing. As his saxophone wailed

into the microphone, his face contorted with emotion. This was followed by a moment of perfect harmony between piano and sax. You'd have been forgiven for thinking that you had heard two saxophones on stage – such was the synchronicity between the two. Rachabane opened the tap of his solos in short outbursts of oiled, yet contained, energy.

His style reminded me of pantsula dancing, in which the dancer often moves slowly for a couple of counts before throwing himself into impossibly fast rhythmic movements. Brubeck brought a touch of glamour to the dance as he twiddled the keys like a sassy flapper-girl routine. Bongani Sokhela, always a crowd pleaser, launched himself body and soul into his improvisation, taking the double bass to places it is not used to going and eliciting huge applause in the process.

All the tunes they played were special, but a personal favourite was *Still On My Mind*, which they dedicated to a couple, sitting in the audience, being filmed for the matchmaker TV show, *All You Need Is Love*. The exquisite delicacy of the ballad matched the fragility of an intense love affair. Each band member outdid himself on this one; Rachabane explored the upper reaches of his instrument's abilities



while Brubeck revelled in gushy chords and notes that fluttered like a quickening pulse.

Gontsana's drumming, which had been bold and extrovert on the last tune, slowed to a subtle tap which, coupled with Sokhela's bass line, created

a hip soul groove in the background.

Luckily for those of you who missed this gig, Darius and the Afro Cool Concept will be playing again today at the Rainbow Jazz Restaurant in Pinetown. The music kicks off at 1pm.

For further details, or ticket prices, call 031 702 9161.