

# Swing and freedom in the kitchen

NYC jazz drummer/leader Billy Mintz cooks and stews in the Piano Kitchen

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Some sort of magical sight-sound vibration occurred on Friday night in the intimate and off-the-beaten-path venue known as the Piano Kitchen — by day, the workshop of piano technician and musician Jim Connolly. In the house this night, nicely transformed into a suitably vibe-equipped jazz room, was the fine, understated and uniquely artful drummer Billy Mintz, who lived in LA for many years but has been back in his native NYC turf for the past twelve years.

It was a special occasion, a return visit for Mr. Mintz, who played in the old "Santa Barbara

New Music" series at Muddy Waters on occasion, on a short West Coast run with his fascinating quartet — aka 4tet — performing music from a CD which is, in fact, the first album under this veteran's name. Joined by his wife, Roberta Piket, on piano and a synthesizer emulating a Hammond B-3 organ, the impressive, breathy-toned tenor saxist John Cross and ever-flexible bassist Putter Smith, this was a group with a strong yet loose ensemble identity, and a musical statement to make, with the drummer at the core.

On the album, and in performance, we detected echoes of Thelonious Monk and another

famed, poetic drummer-leader, the late, great Paul Motian (who was also a major Monk fan). But he boasts balladic graces on tunes like "Haunted" and "Beautiful," reminiscent of John Coltrane's "Naima," and also encourages passages of free-play elasticity in the group.

## CONCERT REVIEW

This is a drummer in no hurry to impress or dazzle, but who does so in a natural and subtle way. Friday's set opened with a short ballad and eased into the spare drum solo. Mr. Mintz has the unusual and rare capacity to be minimal, introspective, but also informed by a mysterious tension. His new body of songs

shows a range and a melodic gift, from his vocal ballad "Destiny," unpretentiously sung by Ms. Piket, to a rumba and soul-jazzy moments.

All roads led back to more introspective spirits by the end of the 90-minute adventure, with a dirge-y piece in 5/4 time and then a ruminative tune, with Native American melodic overtones, to close. In the end, Friday's Piano Kitchen event was notable on at least two counts: the musical presence and explorative spirit of the visiting artist, and the sense of a new jazz room in the making, in a town desperately seeking more jazz.

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