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Magical musical tribute to Byrd, Van Eps **Accomplished acoustic guitarists enthrall in New York**

By Phil Elwood

NEW YORK – Bucky Pizzarelli, Howard Alden, Gene Bertoncini, Frank Vignola, and Ron Affif, - among the best acoustic guitarists around – got pretty well strung out at the Kaye Playhouse on Wednesday night.

The event was a posthumous tribute to Charlie Byrd and George Van Eps, both pace-setters in the guitar world – Byrd for his blending of Spanish and Brazilian guitar styles and rhythms into the post-bop jazz mix; Van Eps both for his scholarly technical publications and, more important, for his invention of the seven-string guitar – enabling guitarists to create marvelously rich bass lines.

Although all the guitarists on stage acknowledged Byrd and Van Eps in comments, and in playing reflected their influence, this night became a magnificent musical experience, as soon as Affif (Gene Harris' guitarist for years) hung out a blue note, swooped it down a couple of octaves and walked it back up.

Affif, standing, added some body language, dug in further on his guitar and set the crowd up for who (and what) was ahead, who happened to be Alden, playing a gorgeous original, "Tango y Bongo," and following it with a remarkable version of Blue Room," in which he walked the bass and often plucked his low notes a couple of octaves up like a stride-pianist. All the while, he tinkled little melodic riffs 'way up on his guitar's neck.

As Alden let his last note ring, Pizzarelli joined in and the pair played a guitar tone-poem based on Claude Thornhill's "Snowfall" – a stunning, delicate performance, with fugue-like exchanges, beautiful variations on the theme and, of course, impeccable technique.

The Alden-Pizzarelli duo next revved up "Stompin' at the Savoy" with Bucky taking three full solo choruses while Alden kept his wonderful lower-register chords churning along – he even added the swing classic's counter melody.

Bertoncini, solo, barely amplified (and closer to Byrd's style than the others), played a beautiful, brief, classical Spanish number that gave way to a warm, lush, Jobim piece, then joined Alden and Pizzarelli.

The arrival of Frank Vignola made the group a quartet, and the four of them proceeded to play some of the most remarkable ensemble guitar work I've ever heard, basing the next 25 minutes on Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz" and then on the Ray Noble-Charlie Barnet-Charlie Parker flag-waiver, "Cherokee". An astounding performance all 'round; the calm sure-fingered Vignola's contributions were particularly impressive in concept and execution.