

Chico Freeman and the New Guataca  
Half Note jazz club  
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Perri Pagonis  
[perripagonis@yahoo.com](mailto:perripagonis@yahoo.com)

Chico Freeman is one big-size guy. As one watches him sit or stand in centre stage the viewer is reminded of performers like Albert Collins, Muddy Waters and Albert King. They were all impressive in size and commanded attention from their audiences like human electro-magnets. He and his current Latin/jazz quintet play in a great range of jazz styles, but with a constant underlying presence of South American percussion.

Indeed, for a group that is driven by Freeman's effortless and emotive tenor saxophone, percussion is almost as dominant in the pieces he presents to the listener as the sax. His band includes a drummer who plays a standard five-piece kit. His right-hand man, Rodrigo Rodriguez, plays an endless array of bongoes and hand-held percussion pieces. Freeman, when not occupied with his sax, sits and plays a collection of crash and ride cymbals as song accompaniment. His set opens with the piece, "To Wisdom, the Prize." It is a smooth latin-lounge composition with wafting, melodic sax and bass lines. Piano accompaniment reminds one of the work of Vince Guaraldi, with its light, tickling phrases. The piece morphs into a light, tight, cool, steady jam that is simultaneously sexy, smart and infinitely danceable.

"La Marquette" follows the first piece. It is a Spanish block party song that struts, twists and undulates with passionate Latin rhythm. The hip-shaking riffs feature many off-beat time signatures, stops and starts, fade-ins and outs, and complex structures that hold the listener firmly in its grasp while never losing danceability. The song grooves through half-note, tranquil heartbeat phrases to speed romps layered over with swooping, lush, low-end bass.

All pieces presented to the crowd have extended soloing and group improvisation that change focus discretely from one member to the next. All members of the group have virtuoso musical skills and are capable of both collective collaboration for song solidarity and soloing expertise when it's time for personal melodic runs and leads.

"One for Ahmad," their tribute piece to jazz pianist Ahmad Jahmal, is a skipping, skittery, cantering piece that features piano and bass syncopation with vocal overlaps a la jazz guitar legend George Benson. Other performance highlights were "Blackfoot," which showcased atmospheric descending and ascending scales with an occasional walking bass line. The effect was simultaneous, hypnotic, toe tapping followability to the multi-layered piece. Also showcased in the 2-set show were the Grover Washington-esque "Helen's Song," and David Sanborn reminiscent "The Message."

Chico Freeman and his band play South American flavored jazz that borrows from jazz album-oriented artists of the past several decades. His style is always pleasing, danceable, fun and sophisticated without becoming heavy-handed or didactic. He and his band have a great time on stage and they're infinitely enjoyable to watch and hear. Smart Greek guys who like Latin music need to boogie around and have some fun sometimes, too. Chico Freeman provides a fine

musical soundtrack for them to enjoy first, and later, examine at their will.

Pussycat Dolls  
*Doll Domination* CD Review

The world would be a much more boring place without the Pussycat Dolls. One of the highlights of my mornings for the last few weeks is to get up early to watch the Russian soap operas on Channel 11 and surf MTV and Mad TV during the commercials. The Pussycat Dolls are always on. They dance like the dirty, baby sisters of the Radio City Rockettes and look good in petroleum-based clothing. It's a great way to start the day.

Their new CD, *Doll Domination*, contains 18 tracks that run the gamut of R&B, dance, and rap musical styles. Many of the songs are real, clap-track burlesque gems including the current hit "When I Grow Up," and "Bottle Pop," which features rapper Snoop Dogg on support vocal. When PCD play up thier campy, bump&grind, pole dancing craziness they're a force of Nature. They're five stunning young cupcakes who poleax the viewer of ther videos with buckets of estrogen, hairspray, hair mousse and perfectly tanned flesh. If they would only stop there, the world would be a better place, the planets would align themselves and all would be well with the universe. The they don't do it. Nope, they don't.

They are so close to being the perfect girl group but they'll never go from impulse power to warp drive unless they can stop thinking about their marketplace songs and start enjoying their own product. They're young girls and, of course, they're conscious of image and how they'll be accepted by the public. If only they, or their producers, could stop taking their position in society so terribly seriously, even for a minute, this mentality would instantly translate itself through their videos and CDs to the audience. When their mindset can shift from "tight bodies and bikinis = damge to the competion and greater market shares" to "tight bodies and bikinis=a blowout groovy beach party" then they'll have the potential to really domimate the globe for a while like mid-90s Spice Girls. Now they're pinpup girls, but they have the potential to be self-effacing, worldwide fertility icons.

Unfortunately few bands ever really break out of the trap of self-inflicted self-importance. Even such paragons as The Rolling Stones, with all their talent, decades of success, collective musical genius and electrifyng stage shows are singularly incapeable of one thing: they can't laugh at themselves. Not for any reason. Neither could Bauhaus, Led Zeppelin, The Who, Oasis, REM, The Doors and almost anyone else you can name.

What separates bands that have reached a sense of completeness is the ability to become, simultaneously, the genuine article and the satire of themselves without sacrificing anything from one element to augment the other. The few bands I cn think of who actually achieved this level of playng I can name on fewer than two hands: New York Dolls, Parliament-Funkadelic, ZZ Top, Alice Cooper, Hanoi Rocks, Kix, Ramones and Ringo Starr. There are some others, but not many. Society is still to insecure with itself to allow glorious self-effacement. The Pussycat Dolls have the chance to show the world that sexy can not only be smart, but secure in itself by demonstrating that strength by light-hearted self-mockery. Laughter can destroy a mountain. If one can laugh at himself, then he is not only fearless, but indestructible.

So, PCD have some ballads, risque rap, and lots of danceable teen-party pieces on *Doll Domination*. It's a nice record that's not going to damage anybody. Your ear never wanders from the presented pieces and the rhythms are always engaging to the listener. It gets my vote for one of the best party albums of the year. The Pussycat Dolls are smart girls. Maybe they'll see the light of shoo-shooing their metacognitive shackles and maybe they won't. I'm waiting for the next disc to make my final opinion. Meanwhile, the Russian soap operas on Channel 11 await me.

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