

Sicilian Sax for Obama

George De Stefano (January 09, 2009)



Saxophone prodigy Cafiso to play at pre-inaugural event

Francesco Cafiso, the teenage alto saxophonist from Vittoria, Sicily, will perform January 19, at the "Inauguration and Martin Luther King Jr. Day" event, which will be held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. on the day before Barack Obama's inauguration as President.

Cafiso's performance is just the latest milestone in the nineteen year old jazz prodigy's amazing career. Without doubt one of the most precocious talents in the music's history, Cafiso began performing professionally when he was only nine years old, which beats the record of another Sicilian horn player, trumpeter Roy Paci, who made his debut when he was thirteen. (Cafiso started studying music when he was six, under the tutelage of his father.) In 2001, when he was 12, Cafiso won the Massimo Urbani National Award, an annual prize given to outstanding young Italian jazz musicians.

A year later Cafiso met Wynton Marsalis at the Pescara Jazz Festival, and the American trumpeter/bandleader/composer was so blown away by the young Sicilian's assured playing that he invited him to join his septet for their European tour.

The next year saw Cafiso perform at Lincoln Center, with Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, which Marsalis directs. During the summer of 2004, he appeared in many of Europe's most prestigious jazz festivals, playing with Marsalis, pianist Hank Jones, the Count Basie Orchestra, and the great Sicilian-American saxophonist Joe Lovano.

Hungry for experience and new knowledge, he went to New Orleans, where he played with Wynton Marsalis' father, pianist Ellis Marsalis, and studied with the jazz clarinetist Alvin Batiste.

Cafiso began recording in 2001, accompanied by one of Italy's leading jazz artists, the pianist Stefano Bollani, on the aptly titled *Very Early!* (Philology). He's played, as a leader or sideman, on nine albums since then. In 2006, he released *Happy Time*, consisting entirely of his own compositions. It's a good record, but it's evident that his composing abilities were not the equal of his playing chops. (But then again, he was only 17). The album he released later the same year, *Seven Steps to Heaven* (Venus) was far superior, evincing the teenage saxist's rapid artistic evolution.

His next recording, which he made in September 2008 in New York with American musicians (he was accompanied on his previous albums by Italians), will be released this year.

Francesco Cafiso, who will be twenty in May, is a remarkably sophisticated and committed artist with broad knowledge of his chosen genre. In a recent interview with the Italian online magazine *Sax Forum* (www.saxforum.it [2]), he spoke about the musicians he most admires, his artistic philosophy, and his love for jazz.

He studied classical music and flute at the Conservatory of Catania. "I love all music and I think that for a musician it's fundamental to know all musical genres," he said. "I also think that jazz and



classical music have much in common.”

From Wynton Marsalis, whom he calls a “fundamental figure” in his life and art, he “has learned many things, about being human and about music. I learned that the greatest ones are the most humble...I also believe that first of all a great musician must be a great person.”

Asked about his favorite saxophonists, he said, “I have learned to love them all. They all have their particular qualities and all are originals, telling stories that are unique, marvelous, sad, happy, exasperated. Parker, Coltrane, [Cannonball] Adderley, [Phil] Woods, [Paul] Desmond...I could cite them all, I like them all.”

But he admits that Phil Woods is for him “one of my fundamental points of reference.” The American saxophonist, perhaps the greatest of Charlie Parker’s disciples, has “a stupefying sound and technique: he’s absolutely magisterial.”

Asked whether jazz “still has a lot to say,” Cafiso replies with passionate conviction. “Jazz will never die, just as music and art will never cease to exist as long as man is on this earth...Today we surely live in difficult times, times of crisis not only economic but also cultural and intellectual. But as they say, hope is the last thing to die and I am optimistic. Jazz will never die.”

At next week’s pre-inaugural Kennedy Center event Francesco Cafiso will play with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. In bocca al lupo, Francesco. But then, with his drive, dedication, and remarkable talent, he hardly needs my encouragement.

Francesco Cafiso’s website: www.francescocafiso.com [3]

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