

Anderson unleashes his jazzy take on the lore of Richmond

BY MATT MATHIS
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

If Richmond were a song, what would it sound like?

Drawing a blank? Well, you might confer with Ashby Anderson. He seems to have a pretty good handle on it.

On Wednesday night, the Richmond-based pianist/composer/conductor debuted his newly completed, four-movement masterwork, "The Historic Richmond Jazz Suite."



Anderson

The commissioned piece, which has taken Anderson two

years to finish, is the artist's musical adaptation of historical people and places in the Capital City.

As would be expected, members of Richmond's music community, educators and historical and cultural enthusiasts crowded in the Hyperlink Café Wednesday night to witness the historical first for Richmond.

They heard places and people musically interpreted by Anderson, including:

■ "Devil's Half-Acre" — a 12-minute piece based on the former slave jail located in Shockoe

Bottom, which later was converted into Virginia Union University.

■ "Locomotive 231" — a similar length composition based on the train, which remains trapped

in the collapsed Church Hill Tunnel.

■ "Steppin'" — an ode to the work and life of one of the city's most famous residents, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

■ "Soul of 2nd Street" — a glimpse into the heyday of Jack-

son Ward's famed Second Street.

Since all seven members of Anderson's A Work of Art Ensemble front bands of their own, they were up to the rigors of the demanding piece, which flaunts a complexity of rhythms and melodies.

None was more challenging than "Devil's Half-Acre," which begins with a crash of dissonance and never allows the listener to get comfortable. The threatening horn-driven melodic line is clearly a reflection of the horrific lives led by jail inmates. The piece is in constant motion — moving from a frantic wall of sound to suddenly being reduced to a single bass line, which Mike Hawkins had sounding like weeping in the night. While the mid-section of the piece takes an upbeat turn, it is soon submerged back into the original dissonance — a reminder that history repeats itself.

"Locomotive 231" focuses more on the movement of the train than its final destination. The horn section of Mark Ingraham on trumpet, Kevin Simpson on saxophone and Sam Savage on trombone imitates the train's

whistle. The whistle changes with each refrain, which, Anderson says, expresses how the story of the train has become lore with the story evolving over time.

"Steppin'" borrows heavily from the traditional New Orleans jazz style. It is rich in growling trumpet and trombone blasts before plunging into a straight-ahead jazz motif, designed to reflect the pioneering exploits of Robinson.

"Soul of 2nd Street" is steeped in the blues and features a heavy African back beat provided by percussionist Kevin Davis.

"I wanted to provide a village feel," says Anderson.

The piece reflects not only the hustle and bustle of commerce in and around Second Street, but offers suggestion of the life and nurturing aspects of the place known as the "Harlem of the South."

The more than 80 people in attendance were visibly pleased. Many of them flocked to Anderson during intermission to offer congratulations. The group also played a second set of original Anderson tunes.

MUSIC REVIEW

ASHBY ANDERSON

IN: "The Historic Richmond Jazz Suite"
AT: Hyperlink Café
Wednesday night

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