

# Classic jazz from Detroit's Royal Garden Trio

By Hiram Lee  
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There are wonderful musicians who only ever achieve a certain regional success or become known only to the most obsessive aficionados of their given genre of music. One often finds such groups by accident and is left wondering “Why on earth are they not better known?” or “What are they doing *here*, in this little club?”

Like so many musicians who must retain their day jobs while playing music at night or on weekends, they may lack this or that feature perceived to be “marketable.” Perhaps their work is out of step with today’s trends, perhaps they do not appeal to the right demographic. The affluent arbiters of taste in the music industry and the entertainment media, not among the most sensitive and alert themselves, are typically skeptical about what large numbers of people will respond to and dole out their money and attention accordingly. All too often backward and superficial works get promoted.

Smaller, independent labels with too few resources at their disposal simply do not allow for the exposure that many fine artists might be due. A certain amount of good or bad luck no doubt comes into play as well.

One group deserving a wider audience is the Detroit-based Royal Garden Trio. Featuring clarinetist and saxophonist Tom Bogardus, guitarist Brian Delaney and cellist Mike Karoub, the trio performs a repertoire of jazz and popular songs of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

It is often the case today that such music is treated as a novelty. One sees it performed by young musicians who dress in exaggerated, vintage attire. Much of it feels like caricature. Happily, one does not find that with the Royal Garden Trio. They do this music justice.

This review will focus on two of the trio’s recordings, the albums *The Second Recording* (2005)

and *The Royal Garden Trio III* (2010). Both come as something of a breath of fresh air.

Much of what is produced in jazz today is stiff and academic. Much remains dominated as well by the influence of atonal “free” or so-called “avant-garde” jazz. Any number of soloists today can—and do—take the most complex, unorthodox or adventurous paths through their chord changes but, as it turns out, this is not always the most *musical* path.

There is too little that “swings.” Too little has the wit and humor of some of the best jazz. Whole areas of human emotion and experience tend to be neglected.

The music performed by the Royal Garden Trio is something else. One senses these musicians know their history and have assimilated some of the best of the ideas and attitudes of jazz in the 1920s and 1930s, when this most sophisticated music reached its widest, popular audience. There are textures present in these recordings which one strains to find elsewhere. The instrumentation itself, featuring clarinet and cello, is rare in jazz today and provides fresh and different tonal possibilities and color. These are different voices.

The trio’s rendition of Duke Ellington’s 1943 classic “Come Sunday” from their *Second Recording* is beautiful. Bogardus handles very well the soaring, contemplative clarinet parts that Ellington so often wrote. He retains a soft, round tone when rising into the higher register of the instrument. Contrasted with the warm resonance of Karoub’s cello and the patient lyricism of Delaney’s guitar, a very rich performance begins to emerge.

Also among the more memorable performances is “Spain,” the trio’s version of the 1923 composition by Isham Jones and Gus Kahn. The original, recorded by Jones’ orchestra, felt like something of a novelty in its own day. It is significantly improved upon by the

Royal Garden Trio. The slower tempo suits the melody well, and the musicians glide across the measures like a breeze blowing across the surface of still water. People fall in love listening to this kind of music.

Karoub's cello stands out on many of the recordings. On the more gentle performances, like the trio's rendition of Thelonious Monk's monumental "Round Midnight," from their *Royal Garden Trio III*, his cello mourns and sighs; on the up-tempo numbers it dances. The thick, full-bodied tone of his instrument is capable of more fleet-footed and intricate flights than one might expect. He is a delight on "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles."

On the whole, I prefer the purely instrumental performances featured on the trio's albums to those featuring vocalists. The singers, while talented, play it a bit straight. They don't quite share the wit and relaxed rhythmic sensibility of the musicians. The trio's version of Charlie Shavers and Sid Robin's "Undecided," however, featuring singer Jo Serrapere, does capture some of the spirit of a youthful, conflicted mind as Serrapere sings "First you say you do and then you don't, and then you say you will and then you won't ..." Karoub's cello amusingly appears to rattle off all the possibilities, nervous and electrified.

The very *human* quality in the playing of these performers should not be taken for granted. It is no small thing to achieve.

On occasion, the trio performs original compositions as well as new works by other composers. Among the more beautiful of these is "Firefly," by pianist and musicologist James Dapogny, a tribute to the Ann Arbor, Michigan jazz club of the same name. A home base of sorts for many Michigan jazz musicians and fans, the Firefly was shut down by the Michigan State Department of Treasury in 2009 for delinquent sales tax payments, depriving the community of one of its main avenues for experiencing this music. The musician's sense of loss is keenly felt in this tender performance by the group.

In spite of the loss of the Firefly, the Royal Garden Trio can still be heard performing throughout the Detroit area. One encourages audiences to seek them out. One hopes as well to see new recordings from the trio.

More information can be found at the group's official site. The albums are available here. A sampling of four

tunes ~~can~~ be heard

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