

Chicago Tribune

By Howard Reich
Published September 26, 2010

Fierce Raelettes Wow Hyde Park

Ray Charles died six years ago, but the Raelettes still can render an audience nearly hysterical.

Technically speaking, only one of the three singers who shook up the Hyde Park Jazz Festival over the weekend-Chicago's Tammy McCann-ever toured with Brother Ray. But with Chicago divas Dee Alexander and Joan Collaso harmonizing alongside McCann, the neo-Raelettes gave the fourth annual Hyde Park soiree its most heated and moving moments.

The incendiary performance came in the nick of time, because practically everyone along the freezing Midway Plaisance was shivering Saturday night as Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra launched a hard-swung tribute to Charles. Once the Raelettes started trading phrases with vocalist Perrian Jordan-the CJO's brass and rees wailing behind them – the place seemed to warm up by a few hundred degrees.

Or maybe it became impossible to think about the cold when McCann, Alexander and Collaso were going full tilt. Snarling their lyrics, wagging their fingers and swaying their hips, the trio had the Raelettes routine down cold (or hot).

Actually, they made a bigger splash than Charles' back-up vocalists usually did because the originals were subservient to the celebrated headliner. For good reason.

This time, the tables were turned. Though Jordan offered a decent evocation of Charles' repertory (I could've done without the sunglasses), the would-be Raelettes far more vividly captured the sass and attitude of the man's music.

In "Hit the Road, Jack," the vocal trio strutted in place while hissing the tune, staring laser-eyed into the crowd as if they meant every wither word. The message was clear: Do not dare cross these women.

The tour de force came in "Unchain My Heart," the sound of these three voices crying the title phrase-each time bigger, bolder, hotter – brilliantly expressed the genius of Charles' innovations in soul. Alto saxophonist John Wojciechowski's blues-drenched laments enhanced the moment.

hreich@tribune.com