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Providence trio Katahdin's Edge cuts a groove in Texas

01:00 AM EST on Tuesday, March 21, 2006

BY PARRY GETTELMAN
Special to The Journal

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Booking a flight into Houston instead of Austin would save Providence jazz trio Katahdin's Edge hundreds of dollars on its first-ever trip to the South by Southwest Music + Media Conference, and the 7:50 a.m. return wouldn't be too big a deal. The band's Saturday night showcase would be over before 10 p.m., leaving plenty of time to drive back to Houston and catch some sleep before heading to the airport Sunday morning.

But although Austin, Texas, has a reputation as the most laid-back of cities, its SXSW music festival can be an endurance test -- both for fans striving to see as many of the 1,300-plus showcasing acts as possible, and of the artists trying to maximize their exposure to listeners, journalists, record companies, distributors, booking agents, and anyone else who can help their careers.

"What's great as a musician is to drive down the street with the window down, and hear band, band, band, band, music, music, music, music," enthused Katahdin's Edge pianist Willie Myette Saturday, a few hours before the group's showcase. "You can imagine what it must have been like in New York back in the day, on 52nd Street."

But the group's real purpose was not to check out the competition.

"Our goal in coming down here is first to play some good music, play the best we can, play as much as we can, and meet as many people as we can, to try and establish some new connections," said Myette, sitting at a table outside the retro-chic Cafe Caffeine in South Austin with bassist John Funkhouser.

That resolve led the group to accept a last-minute invitation to play a Neil Young tribute at one of the dozens of unofficial parties surrounding this year's SXSW, which took place Wednesday through Sunday. Since 1987, the festival has grown from a small, regional affair into one of the music business' premier international conventions. In the afternoons, the whole of central Austin turns into a sprawling industry shindig, with seemingly every restaurant, record store, vintage clothing shop, coffeehouse and motel parking lot sprouting a stage.

Before leaving for SXSW, Myette, Funkhouser and drummer Mike

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Connors quickly worked up a cover of Young's "Don't Let It Bring You Down." They flew into Houston Thursday evening, pulled into Austin about midnight, got up the next morning for a rehearsal and that afternoon played the party, co-sponsored by the Berklee College of Music, Myette's alma mater.

"Then we just crashed last night," said Myette Saturday, just before playing yet another last-minute gig at the coffee shop.

MYETTE HAD SPENT the morning scurrying around the Austin Convention Center with friend and publicist Ginny Shea, meeting-and-greeting at the SXSW trade show and doing a video interview for the SXSW Web site, www.sxsw.com. And now, in addition to a 6 p.m. show at Cafe Caffeine and the original 9 p.m. official SXSW showcase at the Elephant Room downtown, Katahdin's Edge was going to play the closing 1 a.m. slot at the Elephant Room as well, filling in for a band that had canceled.

"You might as well, if you're here already," said Myette, although he pronounced himself "kind of dazed" after a day-and-a-half whirlwind that included running around Austin to pick up rented equipment, as well as the schmoozing, playing and interviewing.

Funkhouser groaned comically now at the thought of that morning flight out of Houston, explaining: "I'm just thinking about the future."

SXSW has never hosted a sizable jazz contingent, so Katahdin's Edge might seem a bit of a tough sell. But as Myette explained, Katahdin's Edge is not a traditional jazz trio.

"We're jazz on the edge, fringe jazz, and it has a lot more rock and funk elements in it," Myette said. "There are definitely times when we're playing, we sound like a funk band. The only difference is, we're not playing in 4/4. We're playing in odd meters that give the music a whole different twist. Like there can be kind of a Middle Eastern/Balkan feel to it, and then you're hearing funk grooves that come along with it."

Turning to Funkhouser, Myette said, "You definitely play much heavier than if you were playing with a traditional jazz group, and it's the same thing at the piano. I approach it much differently, much heavier."

THE HANDFUL OF people at Cafe Caffeine initially seemed more interested in coffee than music, but they paid close attention as Myette, Connors and Funkhouser tossed musical ideas back and forth, building hummable riffs into dynamic, complex constructions atop that heavy bottom.

A few hours later at the Elephant Room, Katahdin's Edge found a packed house. Fans craned their necks around pillars or jockeyed for position near the small stage in the long, narrow room to watch Myette attack the piano.

He used his seat more as a launch pad than a resting place, sometimes bracing one foot against it. Occasionally he leaned inside the piano to pluck at the strings or knock out a rhythm on its lid. His electric organ received even rougher treatment, and two young men at a table up front yowled approval when he flipped the keyboard practically upside down and played it overhand.

The vigor of Connors' pounding moved a fan in a loud Western shirt to drape himself devotedly over the drummer's shoulder, until a female SXSW volunteer gently asked him to back off. After the set, a gaggle of male fans peppered Funkhouser with questions about his unusual acoustic/electric standup bass.

By the second set, at 1 a.m., the crowd had thinned, but the band was even more intense, and the listeners were even more intent. When the night finally ended, one new female convert in her late 20s bounced up and proclaimed: "That was crazy!"

There would be no swift departure for Houston, as fans lingered to ask for autographs, buy CDs or rhapsodize about the unusual time signatures. The female SXSW volunteers treated the band like indie-rock stars, getting their pictures taken with a grinning Myette.

SXSW had been a success. In addition to the enthusiastic response, Katahdin's Edge had attracted the attention of the Chicago Tribune's pop-music critic, and of a possible distributor for the group's second CD, *The Ridge*, set for self-release on May 2.

"I'm so beat! I'm fried!" Myette proclaimed happily, as he turned to talk to another new fan.

The next local appearance for Katahdin's Edge is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. June 17 at the Narrows Center for the Arts, 16 Anawan St., Fall River. Tickets are \$12 in advance, \$14 at the door. Call (508) 324-1926 or go to www.ncfta.org.

For more information on Katahdin's Edge, go to www.katahdinsedge.com.

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