



Snaggle with the Ali Brothers at Storm Stayed Brewery.

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Reviewed by J. Bruce Parker

All hail the rise of craft beer brewing! The feared rival to the big guns of Labatt and Molson, which once ruled the Canadian brewing industry for over a century, has dug deep roots throughout the province, with a handful of fine breweries taking up residence in London. My local is Storm Stayed on Wharncliffe Road, approaching its eighth year in 2026. Like most craft breweries, Storm Stayed engages its community with a wide variety of events, ranging from a mom and kids time to the music of opera. And do I need I advise you that there is beer available for those of a certain age?

Snaggle, a six-piece jazz fusion band from Toronto, took up residence on November 25; their second engagement at Storm Stayed within the last twelve months.

They have been defined as a “cross between Miles Davis and Rage Against The Machine” with a nod to American jazz fusion band Snarky Puppy. In the words of band leader, keyboardist Nick Maclean, “expect performances swinging between moments of quiet clarity to cataclysmic bursts of energy, worthy of a crumbling galactic empire.”

Adding to that attack of a ‘galactic empire’ is Jay Yoo on electric guitar, Matt Gruebner on bass, and Adam Mansfield on drums. Fronting the entire musical onslaught are the Ali brothers, Brownman on trumpet and Marcus on tenor saxophone.

So, what is it like for musical siblings to perform and record together? Marcus Ali tells me, “He’s five years older than me, so I was in high school when he was in university. We played tunes around the house, but by the time I got out of high school, we were starting to gig together and eventually began getting calls to play as a ‘horn section.’ We grew up listening to the same music, so we have an instant connection.”

Marcus adds, “We are anomalies in our family. Our parents were math and science teachers. They moved to Canada from Trinidad as my Dad saw the future and wanted to work with

computers. We grew up in a house that was full of music. Dad listened to a lot of classical and calypso and loved Baroque music. My mother loved Sarah Vaughn, Nancy Wilson, Joe Williams and Count Basie, so we had all of that music ringing in our ears.”
So, here’s to parents!

It was also the ether of the Canadian airwaves permeating the Ali household, specifically station CJRT FM, which offered the music of Moe Koffman and the Boss Brass. The brothers absorbed it all.

Band leader, Nick Maclean, began as a music student at Humber College. In his fourth year, he was required to create a recording project and the essence of ‘Snaggle’ was born in 2012. Over time, the band has evolved and expanded. Nick refers to the current lineup as his “dream team” wound up tight with a “ton of synergy.” And it shows!

Nick tells me, “Inspiration was from my grandfather. He wasn’t a musician, but he introduced me to jazz. He introduced me to Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington and Count Basie. My high school years were filled by listening to all that. When I got to Humber, I discovered more modern jazz bands which directly affected the sound of Snaggle like Weather Report, Brecker Brothers, electric era Miles Davis, Return to Forever and the Mahavishnu Orchestra. One of my big touch stones is Herbie Hancock.” Now there is a musical pedigree!

Describing them as an ‘up-tempo jazz fusion band’ does not do them justice. Tight? Like a Ludwig drumhead! They do not proceed with caution, but rather digging a groove and working it like a coal mine.

Composer, arranger, producer of Browntasauras Records and trumpet player, Brownman Ali embraces the work of the electric Miles Davis era. He is a protégé of the mighty Randy Brecker, who referred to him as “One of the next great voices in the new generation of jazz improvisers.” Adding to the natural sonics of the saxophone, Brownman often incorporates the Boss ME-50, a pedal unit designed for electric guitars. With the added effects of modulation, reverb, echo and delay, his sound becomes stratospheric.

Guitarist Jay Loo does not get lost in this brass onslaught. He cuts through cleanly, given ample opportunity to stretch out his skill and musical legs on his Fender.

In the rhythm section, Matt Gruebner on five-string bass initiated several songs, bringing his melodic sound to the forefront.

Rounding out the rhythm section, drummer Adam Mansfield holds it all together. No drum solos, just great timekeeping, locking it all in.

On this tour, the music is inspired by the writings of American science fiction author, Issac Asimov. So, without hearing a note, I am a bit lost. Outside of 'Star Trek' and its many incarnations, I am not a huge science fiction fan. The only Asimov book that I own is his guide to the works of Shakespeare. Yes, he actually did write that.

Nick Maclean tells me he was introduced to the writings of Issac Asimov by Brownman. Being a science fiction fan, he connected immediately and eventually read all fifteen novels of Asimov's 'Foundation Universe.' The huge anthology tells the future of humanity and the rise and fall of the human galactic empire.

Nick explains, "Things Asimov was writing about in the 1950s, we are starting to deal with now, especially the rise of AI. I find it all an incredible and fruitful source of inspiration for composition. So, all of the compositions that we are playing on this tour and that we will be recording are inspired by places, people, events, and ideas from those 15 novels".

The song, 'Twilight of Civilization,' begins as a plaintive call from Brownman's trumpet. It quickly grows into an aggressive pedestrian strut, backing down somewhat when brother Marcus brings in the voice of his tenor. It rumbles along, very tough, very urban, but surprisingly, very softly, reminiscent of the theme of loneliness and marginalization of American composer Aaron Copland's 'Quiet City.'

'Lonely Man Robot' seems to summon the tenderness of Chet Baker's trumpet with Nick carefully meandering on his Rhodes keyboard in quiet contemplation.

Science fiction, like jazz, can be considered a niche genre. Both have fans which are vast and loyal but tend to scamper into the sanctity of darkness when illuminated. So maybe it makes sense to blend the two. I mulled over this notion while studying and forgetting the sequence order of my beer flight.

Their two sets were made up of entirely original material: no covers.

Snaggle, at this stage in their musical evolution and on this tour, retains the essence of jazz fusion from the 1970s and, with the help of Issac Asimov, propels it into the next century. Their sound is big, bold, engaging, and tough as nails.

For more information about Snaggle, visit <https://nicholasmaclean.com/snaggle>

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For more information about Storm Stayed Brewery, visit <https://stormstayed.com/>

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