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Live Music and Humor: Jay Leonhart and Josh Nelson at Vitello's

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By Don Heckman

Studio City, CA. What is there to say about a bassist who is a prime jazz player, sings, and writes his own hilariously whimsical songs?

A lot, actually, if his name is [Jay Leonhart](#), who had a full house audience in stitches at [Vitello's](#) Saturday night, aided by the brilliant support of pianist [Josh Nelson](#).



Josh Nelson and Jay Leonhart

But no description of what Leonhart did in his 1½ hour set can do full justice to the unique musical range of his performance – not surprising given a performance and recording resume that includes gigs with artists reaching from Tony Bennett to James Taylor and Marian McPartland to Bucky Pizzarelli and beyond.

He came on stage and immediately settled any L.A. doubts about whether a bassist with a reputation as a Bob Dorough and Dave Frishberg-like instrumental humorist could cut it as a jazz player. Suffice to say he did so, from first tune to the last, even though one of his best-known songs is "It's Impossible to Sing and Play the Bass."

Despite that whimsical reservation, his songs are at the center of any Leonhart show. And he offered a non-stop array of appealing goodies. Among the many highlights:

- "Bass Aboard A Plane" – describing a problem faced by all bassists.
- "Me and Lenny" – in which Leonhart, sitting in first class, unexpectedly finds Leonard Bernstein next to him on a flight from New York to Los Angeles.
- Add to that: a song about history's first double bass; a song inspired by Ivan Lins during a trip to Brazil; a song about an invasion of aliens from Venus titled "They're Coming To Get Me."
- A song about "Life on the Road."
- As well as "Double Cross," written after Leonhart had read a Robert Ludlum spy thriller.

All were masterful blends of humor, often sardonic, with catchy melodies and colorful harmonic schemes.



Jay Leonhart

Further displaying his versatility, Leonhart included his own versions of "Stay Cool" (directly after the Bernstein song, of course) and Eddie Harris' "Freedom Jazz Dance."

I mentioned Josh Nelson's "brilliant support" on piano. And it was all that and more. Leonhart's charts were broadly conceived, with numerous interactive as well as paired passages between bass and piano. As well as many areas in which Nelson had to interact, start and stop with spontaneous cues between both players. And it all happened perfectly – a pair of gifted players operating on precisely the same wave length.



Josh Nelson

There's a lot I could add. But none of it would be as on target as Leonhart himself in action. And the thought that kept recurring as we headed home after the performance was "When will Jay be back in L.A. again?." Let's hope it's soon.

Photos by Faith Frenz.

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