

Guitarist Larry Coryell turns to the classics

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Guitarist Larry Coryell can veer far from the jazz mainstream and indeed built the early part of his career, in the 1960s and '70s, doing just that. But Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase, where he's playing through Sunday, he zeroed in on standards and classics, producing some of the most pristinely beautiful work he has given Chicago in recent years.

And yet there was nothing predictable about Coryell's playing, the guitarist up-ending jazz conventions even as he referenced them.

From the opening notes of Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are," Coryell established the framework of the set yet to come. The alternate melody notes and splashes of dissonance that distinguished his opening passages put the tune slightly off kilter, even as Coryell shaped his lines with the craft of an accomplished vocalist.



Before long, he was off and running, unreeling fleet, steadily swung eighth notes that bounded forward via unusual melodic intervals. Here was "All the Things You Are" cast in decidedly idiosyncratic terms.

In Milt Jackson's "Bags' Groove," Coryell's trio – featuring Chicagoans Larry Gray on bass and Paul Wertico on drums – reveled in the blues, but with delicacy and understatement. Wertico's sleekly articulated rhythms and Gray's softly resonant bass notes gave Coryell a subtle backdrop, against which he played poetic, single-note lines.

Lest listeners think Coryell was getting a little too mellow, he picked up the energy level considerably in "Some Day My Prince Will Come," offered as a tribute to Miles Davis, who immortalized the tune as a vehicle for jazz improvisation. But Coryell didn't follow Davis' fragile, profoundly introspective tack. Instead, the guitarist fired off quicksilver lines and boldly astringent chords.

Bassist Gray turned in a bowed solo of the sort you might sooner expect at a classical concert, the warmth of his tone matched by the long-lined lyricism of his phrasing. And drummer Wertico used brushes to hint at backbeats that were just barely perceptible.

Coryell always devotes at least one piece in his set to a solo in tribute to his wife, and, as usual, it was the Gershwins' "Our Love is Here to Stay." His intro here, and in his trio version of Luiz Bonfá's "Morning of the Carnival" (from the film "Black Orpheus") proved a bit precious, with their ethereal, ultra-moody scene-setting. But Coryell quickly made matters more interesting via

sweetly stated inner voices in "Our Love is Here to Stay" and an unexpectedly muscular tone and ebullient rhythmic spirit in "Carnival."

The highlight for the trio came in Coryell's "The Dragon Gate," a hard-charging piece in which Gray and Wertico's driving rhythms inspired increasingly ornate solos from Coryell. As the song progressed, the musicians played bigger, brighter, bolder, until they abruptly stopped on a dime. Only musicians who have played together as long as these three could have pulled it off.

It's possible that as the weekend unfolds, Coryell will dig more deeply into original compositions. If he doesn't, he clearly still has a great deal to say in the standards, which, even at this late date, inspire meaningful work from him.