

At FIMAV, Nate Wooley's Columbia Icefield Welcomed the Melt

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Trumpeter Nate Wooley's Columbia Icefield project began in 2019, when he assembled a group of musicians to help interpret his compositions that grappled with the enormity and beauty of the natural icefield in the Rockies. Since that time he's remained as busy as always with a variety of groups and miscellaneous works including the ongoing *Seven Storey Mountain* recordings, which was the project that last brought him to FIMAV back in 2017. Asked to return this year, Wooley pondered the task of writing new material for the 2019 ensemble, and eventually his inspiration came from a personal loss.

In 2022 Wooley's friend and mentor, trumpet player and frequent Bill Frisell-collaborator Ron Miles passed away suddenly of an illness. In his introduction to the Sunday afternoon concert, Wooley credited Miles with being responsible for holding him accountable to his study and artistic growth, and dedicated the concert to his friend via new compositions which paid homage to Miles's life and works. The theatre was moved to complete silence as Wooley began with a solo overture to introduce the program.

There was one change to the Columbia Icefield group since 2019, but certainly a pivotal one. Guitarist Mary Halvorson was replaced by Ava Mendoza, adding fuel enough to melt away a significant fraction of the original glacial structure. Still on retainer was drummer Ryan Sawyer, who, partway indulged in an honest to goodness drum solo, followed with an extended maraca solo complete with strobe lights and a kind of rhythmic phasing that cleared the way for Mendoza and pedal steel player Susan Alcorn to lock on. The duo were excellent foils, playing together and across each other with equal positive effects.

Whether it was Mendoza's presence or the influence of Miles on the compositions, there was a groove factor that gave the show a joyous pulse. As the group reached a late crescendo, replete with Alcorn shredding on the pedal steel supported by Sawyer in an unexpected approximation of vintage Sabbath, there was no doubt that the icefield was in real danger. In the aftermath, Wooley gathered himself to close with a solo elegy that was as lovely and expressive a eulogy as anyone could deliver.