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Hearts and minds all astir

Shelly Berg's trio and saxophonist Tom Scott reach deep at the Vic.

By Don Heckman, Special to The Times
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The enigma about jazz is that it encompasses art music and entertainment. Too often, artists and reviewers tend to limit their perspectives to one area or the other. That has resulted in the emergence of pigeonhole, entertainment-oriented genres such as smooth jazz and, alternately, an approach to improvisation in which speed, technique and virtuosity take precedence over emotion, spirit and soul.

These thoughts came to mind Thursday night at the Vic in Santa Monica during a performance by the Shelly Berg trio and saxophonist Tom Scott. Berg is a professor and the chair of jazz studies in the Thornton School of Music at USC. That might suggest an academically oriented approach to jazz. But from the first hard-swinging notes of his opening selection, "I Hear a Rhapsody," it was apparent that pianist Berg embraces both the art aspects and the viscerally emotional qualities of the music.

Working in empathic unity with bassist Chuck Berghofer and drummer Randy Drake, he danced his way through the balance of the set — as soloist and accompanist — with the same engaging qualities, pulling the capacity crowd into his enthusiasm, capturing them with the imaginativeness of his lines and the buoyancy of his rhythms.

The same can be said of Scott. Although he has had a hugely successful career as a film and television composer, producer and recording artist, his playing retains the passion and inventiveness of a musician still intent on discovery. Alternating on alto and tenor saxophones, he ran the gamut from driving bebop (on "I Should Care") and soul/funk (on Les McCann's "Beaux J. Poo Boo") to lyrical intensity ("Stars Fell on Alabama").

Singer Tierney Sutton, called up from the audience, topped off the set with "I Thought About You." Filled with fascinating twists and turns, her performance, like those of Scott and the Berg Trio, affirmed that jazz can (and should) touch the senses, the emotions and the mind.