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Still on fire, just like 40 years ago

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Brian Auger's Oblivion Express,
The Jake Langley/Joey DeFrancesco Trio
At the Mod Club in Toronto, Saturday

It's rare enough to come across one Hammond B-3 organ these days, let alone two on the same stage -- much less two in hands as expert as those of veteran Brian Auger and relative youngster Joey DeFrancesco. There they were, though, Saturday night at the Mod Club, where DeFrancesco was supposed to be the star of the show and yet Auger proved to be the story.

That's not to say that Auger stole the show, just that his contribution to this particular evening was for various reasons the more interesting, not least in pop-cultural terms as a study in memory and survival.

Auger's career on the pop side of jazz dates back to London in the mid-1960s, when his band of the day, Trinity, featuring the singer Julie Driscoll, had a modest international hit with its recording of *This Wheel's on Fire*.



Auger did not reprise that classic Dylan song on Saturday but his set still unfolded

in something of a time warp. He has his own daughter, Savannah Grace Auger, in Driscoll's place now. She sings effectively in a declamatory, soul-inflected voice and otherwise bides her time during his lengthy B-3 and electric piano solos by dancing to herself in a lithe, if rather vacant manner that might have brought Paris Hilton to the few younger minds at the Mod Club but harked back much further to the go-go girls who graced the pop-music TV shows when dad was last on the charts.

If Auger didn't play *This Wheel's on Fire*, he did offer The Doors' *Light My Fire*. And he revisited his own past with *Indian Rope Man* ("Daddy, make it funky," exhorted Savannah Grace) and *Brain Damage*, as well as calling up Donovan's *Season of the Witch* and two jazz staples of similar 1960s vintage, Les McCann's *Compared to What?* and Eddie Harris's *Freedom Jazz Dance*.

To his credit, Auger has updated them all rhythmically with the assistance of his son and drummer, Karma D. Auger, and his bassist on this tour, Derek Frank.

He also re-energizes each tune with his own flashy keyboard solos, playing directly to the crowd without playing down to the crowd. It's not as though many folks at the Mod Club would have caught his allusion to Gil Evans's *La Nevada* in *Brain Damage*, but there it was all the same.

And here Auger is, still doing what he was doing 40 years ago, and still going strong 40 years later with plenty of enthusiasm and no apparent compromise.

As it happened on Saturday, he started late and ran long, despite asking for and receiving the promoter's permission to do an encore. So it was that Philadelphia's Joey DeFrancesco and his two Toronto bandmates, guitarist Jake Langley and drummer Terry Clarke, were squeezed for time.

And what's this? One-and-a-half tunes into their set, Dexter Gordon's *Cheesecake* and Louis Jordan's *Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't My Baby?*, Auger was back onstage again, there to stay for what little was left of the evening.

Not that he was unwelcome, nor that he was overbearing. This was a "hail fellow, well met" sort of encounter in which DeFrancesco seemed to be inspired by Auger's prompts and prods, especially on *See See Rider*, a slow, screaming blues that stood as the high point of the entire night.

