

By David R. Adler
For The Inquirer

Philadelphia-born Ari Hoenig, 33, is one of the most accomplished jazz drummers of his generation, having worked with Joshua Redman, Mike Stern, Philly's own Pat Martino, and more. Now based in New York, he remains frequently in touch with his roots. To celebrate the release of his Dreyfus Records CD *Inversations*, he returned to Chris' Jazz Café – the site of his first professional gig (at age 17, backing guitarist Jimmy Bruno). Pianist Jean-Michel Pilc and bassist Johannes Weidenmuller, who also perform on *Inversations*, joined Hoenig in a tempestuous reading of standard and original material.

They began with Charlie Parker's "Anthropology," a complex theme that Hoenig stated with remarkable clarity on the drums. Later, on the slow-paced "WB Blues," Hoenig wove complete melodies by altering the pitches of his drumheads with his hands and elbows. Radical it might seem, but Hoenig follows in the footsteps of such innovators as Max Roach, who insisted that the drums could do more than keep time. Taking the idea to its logical end, Hoenig has issued two albums – *Time Travels* and *The Life of a Day* – of unaccompanied drum-set music.

Face contorted and limbs flying, Hoenig coaxed his bandmates into a relentless flow of finely calibrated creativity. Chordal and rhythmic patterns were putty in their hands, but they never lost one another, or the audience. Following Hoenig's epic waltz "The Painter" and his darkly hued ballad "Farewell," they deconstructed the Mercer/Schertzing song "I Remember You" and closed with a dense arrangement of Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma."

Pilc played with astounding dexterity and whistled a blues solo that would be the envy of many horn players. Weidenmuller's rapport with Hoenig, seasoned by their stint together in the trio of pianist Kenny Werner, kept even the wildest excursions on the rails.

Jazz like this, with its discernible tempo and tonal harmony, has been saddled with the misleading label mainstream, but Hoenig's commitment to the tradition only spurs him to greater risk-taking heights. Following the set, the club honored Hoenig by inducting him into its Hall of Fame.