Massif Collective is an exciting five-piece jazz combo from Clermont Ferrand in the Auvergne region of France. They drew a capacity crowd to the Blue Lamp in Aberdeen on Thursday for an event co-hosted by Jazz at the Blue Lamp and the Music Department at the University of Aberdeen. The Collectif is led by pianist Yannick Chambre who also composed many of the pieces in Thursday’s programme. This included the first number which laid out the group’s basic jazz styling. Marc Verne’s drum style made an instant impression. It was powerful, up front and marvellously complex. The two saxes, in addition to playing a major role in improvisations especially Davy Sladek’s often free flying soprano sax sounded delicious together as they played the themes. The piano sometimes supported the numbers in the background but his improvisations were always the star turn of the performance. It was a little later in the performance that bass player Dominique Mollet really came to the fore. In the second piece Rose, composed for Yannick’s daughters, his bass line developed more and more in complexity as he underscored Davy Sladek’s sax solo and then he took over with a magnificent bass solo that combined rhythmic and melodic effects brilliantly. It was not really until the second half of the concert that drummer Marc Verne had his own solo improvisations, they were great but perhaps it did not matter that we had to wait because the wonderful details of his playing were on display throughout the performance. I loved the way his drumming matched the particular mood of each of the pieces and he balanced his playing with every other member of the combo when they were up front. Franck Alcaraz on tenor sax gave us several beautifully laid back improvisations that had an almost hypnotic power. One of the most interesting highlights of the concert was a piece entitled Le Loup which was based on the folk music of the Auvergne region. It was fascinating to hear how the spirit of jazz improvisation grew out of the folk background. It was followed by a piece which had a romantic sounding piano introduction. Here the double bass gave a wonderfully expressive solo and then the piano took flight beneath the smooth sounding sax duo. The second half of the concert opened with a lovely laid back piece featuring the finest tenor sax improvisation and it ended with the sax duo under which was a gently tinkling piano part. The following piece featured the first drum solo but Marc Verne had already excelled behind Davy Sladek’s solo. The next number entitled Fast and Furious lived up to its title followed by a piece in which the bass solo had all the impact of a guitar solo.
The final number in the official programme entitled West Coast sounded fresh and free with both saxophones having starring roles. A tsunami of enthusiastic applause and shouts of “Encore!” (In France they shout bis, bis, so that a French audience can seem to be hissing at the performers) brought forth a special piece and an extra performer. Aberdeen guitarist Colin Black had met the Massif Collectif at a jazz festival in Germany. The group invited him to join them on stage in a performance of a piece which he had composed for them entitled Mémoire. Improvisations for guitar, tenor sax and bass and a lighter touch on the drums using soft headed beaters went down well with the audience. Today, Friday, the Massif Collectif will give a masterclass with Aberdeen music students. It should be great.