

home-spun and famous

Sonic Circuits Festival of Experimental Music. Washington, D.C. September 22–27, 2009.

MUSICOLOGISTS LOVE TO remind us how utterly primal and universal their subject has proven to be. They point to bone flutes and other instruments turned up at the earliest proto-human excavation sites and to the failure among anthropologists to find a single culture, present or past, bereft of music. They use brain science to explain how the capacity in humans to create and process music is even more deep-seated than the circuitry for spoken language. Yet evolutionary squatting rights have done little to stop or explain a professionalization of music in modern culture that's given rise to separate classes of performers and listeners.

Peculiar, then, how one of the most potent forces returning primal blur to the professional-amateur line today is not a bone-flute renaissance, but the explosion of futuristic-style experimental and electronic music by and for the masses. Nerdy audio tinkerers and electronic soundsmiths are realizing their numbers, giving up some basement time, and jamming together in clubs with each other and—increasingly—alongside the pros in festival settings.

Exhibit A here could be the recently-concluded Sonic Circuits Festival of Experimental Music in Washington, D.C., with a confluence of home-spun and famous acts sustained over the course of a week and nearly fifty shows—fully half of which featured local talent. Here is where urban experimentalists with year-round dedication to local consortia like the Electric Possible, <electricpossible.org>, and District of Noise, <districtofnoise.org>, shared festival billing with the likes of veteran composer-guitarist Elliott Sharp, avant saxophonist Evan Parker, multi-instrumentalist Ned Rothenberg, Helsinki legend Pekka Airaksinen, Lou Reed collaborator Ulrich Krieger, and founding Kraut rock band Faust.

The interplay benefitted everyone. A Washington, D.C., musician named Zach Mason, performing as Soft Pieces, belied his sobriquet the minute he fitted his hard metal Slinky with



ABOVE: Soft Pieces (Zach Mason) fitted a slinky with a contact mike. **RIGHT:** Avant saxophonist Evan Parker (right) performs with multi-instrumentalist Ned Rothenberg. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Kraut rock band Faust.

a contact mike and dove into the audience, thrilling everyone with thunderous crashes of coil that seemed to blast from the P.A. and everywhere else. Guitarist Anthony Pirog, with his sweetheart cello-guitar duo Janel and Anthony, and guesting with drummer and fellow local Jason Mullinax, edged remarkably close to Nels Cline ingenuity, and proved he could easily become famous tomorrow. Meanwhile the Nine Strings duo of double bass and cello made its incidental, restrained improvisations seem perfectly at home on the stage of the renowned Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Preserving the hybrid of local and international talent is all the more noble given the Sonic Circuits Festival's vitals as a steadily growing institution. Begun in 2002 by the Washington, D.C., chapter of the American Composer's Forum, each annual Sonic Circuits Festival has sported a growing sponsor list and a broader set of venues, this year including the conventional (small local bars), the cavernous (the famed Black Cat nightclub), the stately (Embassy of Switzerland), and the historic (the Kennedy Center).

The shows delivered reliable and frequent thrills, nowhere more than with the headliners on the festival's final night. Los Angeles art-punk quartet Health played a scintillating set of fast industrial loops overarched by slowly cascading minor chords. Singer Jacob Duzsik kept a primal tom-tom and mallet nearby to occasionally help drummer Benjamin Miller stir up sweat lodge pheromones. In his best vocal moments, Duzsik managed to deliver dreamy, dissociative lyrics in the languid sprit



of Mazzy Star, despite the band's penchant for incredibly fast tempos. Even an interlude of sixteenth notes sounded slow compared to the rest of the hummingbird-fast "We Are Water," from the band's latest album *Get Color*. Remarkably, Health does not sacrifice precision, even at breakneck speeds; and the cleanly executed bass and synthesizer notes were all the more impressive in the absence of an onstage laptop, a frequent crutch to lesser bands hoping to maintain Health's level of accuracy amid the speed.

Despite their scourge status among live-music purists, laptops remain a staple of modern electronic-music performance; and they figured in many of the Sonic Circuits Festival acts, including the final night's set by Pekka Airaksinen. Even this veteran experimentalist—mastermind of the 1960's psychedelic noise group The Sperm and frequent collaborator of Nurse With Wound—ceded some space to a Macintosh alongside his keyboard. Predictably, it proved impossible to tell how he was employing the machine, prompting one nearby concertgoer to advocate—only half jokingly—for bylaws mandating public pro-

acts



jections of laptop screens just to see what the hell the musicians are doing with them. Whatever his process, Airaksinen generated a strange brew of rinky-dink toy piano tone and ghost-in-the-attic knocking sounds, tied together with majestic chords that—given Airaksinen’s tenure—he either borrowed from or lent to a young Keith Emerson.

Legendary German iconoclasts Faust delivered the finishing blow as the festival’s final act. With big beats and heady prog-rock concepts as mortar, Faust erected a wily sonic wall, at once majestic and ridiculous: a trumpet weezed; coins spilled from a jar to punctuate a dirge; bandmates fiddled with each other’s effects pedals; a saxophone’s dive bomb wail stirred *North by Northwest* crop-duster peril. As confederates to the mayhem, the 1969 founders Jean-Herve Peron and Werner “Zappi” Diermaier enlisted three newer members, including musician and painter Geraldine Swayne. She provided a spellbinding, ADHD-ravaged parlour recital of sorts: here she’s singing, now she’s reading ominously from a book, on to the guitar, then a monologue with Helen Mirren mimesis, now she’s taking a few minutes to paint a distended human form on a large canvas.

The audience gobbled it up, and Faust—true to the Sonic Circuits’ barrier-busting spirit—spent ample time after the show mingling with concertgoers. The coziness, and the band’s resourcefulness, even extended to the street outside the club, where Swayne managed to sell that onstage painting of hers to an audience member for \$300. —Richard Sheehee

Guelph Jazz Festival. Guelph, Ontario. September 9–13, 2009.

The annual Guelph Jazz Festival is always populist. In its sixteenth edition, it extended its support of outdoor improvisation, plus interaction between Third and First World musicians without lessening its commitment to Free Music. Much of the outstanding music making came from the latter, however, with American pianist Marilyn Crispell one of the standouts. She was featured in American, European and Canadian group settings.

Crispell’s playing was powerful and outer-directed at the River Run Centre in a trio with two stalwarts of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, the seemingly ageless tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson and the colourful percussionist Hamid Drake, whose rhythmic conception works well in any context. Anderson often gave quivered or vibrated renderings of reflective lines that were paralleled with linear arpeggios or kinetic pedal-pushed frequencies by Crispell. Meanwhile, Drake’s palm or stick movement conveyed all the rhythm. The climax was a version of Tisziji Muñoz’s “Fatherhood,” built on ecclesiastical chording from the pianist, ruffs and rebounds from Drake, and gospel-like preaching from Anderson.

Only one member of the Stone Quartet is European—French bassist Joëlle Léandre. Yet when she and the Yanks—trumpeter Roy Campbell, violist Mat Maneri, and Crispell—intersected with sophisticated and intuitive improvising in the sanctuary of St. George’s Church, the outcome related more to Continental sounds than American Free Jazz. Campbell, phrasing subtly, at points appeared to be breathing in notes rather than expelling them. Hand-muting asides were another favourite strategy, clutching a tone until it dissolved. Crispell rumbled or spun out connective chords, decorating the improvisations. Maneri shredded fiddle notes in a deadpan fashion, equally honouring Paganini and Stuff Smith. Léandre sometimes bowed her bass with excruciatingly heavy motions, as if physically pulling the notes from the bass, and other times sliced, diced, and rubbed timbres from the instrument while yodelling in pseudo-operatic soprano. Adapting to the moment, she emphasized her resounding pizzicato pulse.

At the River Run the next night, Crispell was featured in Ottawa bassist John Geggie’s trio with Toronto drummer Nick Fraser. Without perpetuating Canadian stereotypes, Geggie’s compositions—and the affiliated improvisations—were more cerebral and studied than those from American bands. Yet there was enough sense of space and structure

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to separate them from European conceptions. The bassist confined himself to thumping tone-bonding or resonating picking, leaving theme statements to the pianist’s key patterning and downshifting runs. Fraser’s inventions included irregular clip-clopping and the suggestion of bell-pealing on the Gregorian chant-based “Credo.”

Canada’s other solitude was represented by a rip-snorting performance at St. George’s Church Hall by Jean Derome et les Dangereux Zhoms + 7. The two extended performances were both postmodern pastiches in which the individual talents of the twelve musicians provided scope for the Montreal-based reedist-composer to express his heroic ideas. As Martin Tétrault’s pressurized turntable drone created a crackling ostinato, and Joane Héту’s moist murmurs, hiccups, and yodels supplied verbal commentary, the pieces mixed rock beats from the electrified rhythm section, legato pacing from the violinist and violist, and jazz-inflected jabs from pianist Guillaume Dostaler, gutbucket blows from trombonist Tom Walsh, and expressive triplets from trumpeter Gordon Allen.

Days later at the River Run Centre, the World Saxophone Quartet was equally flamboyant playing the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Resplendent in sharp suits, the four reedists—David Murray, Tony Kofi, James Carter, and Hamiet Bluiett—were backed by Lee Pearson’s showy drumming and the electric bass of Jamaaladeen Tacuma. There were crowd-pleasing techniques, as when Pearson played with his sticks behind his back while balancing another on his head, and when Murray or Carter ripped off a series of screaming vamps

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