

LONG PLAY FESTIVAL

BY TOM GREENLAND



Denardo Coleman

The first ever LONG PLAY festival, latest of Bang on a Can's marathon concerts, aims to bridge the gap between new, jazz and world musics. Established in 1987, Bang On a Can reflects founders Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe and David Lang's roots in post-minimalistic contemporary classical music. As composition professors (the former two at NYU, latter at Yale) they have mentored generations of grad students and many of the five dozen concerts over a long weekend (Apr. 29th-May 1st) featured current or former students interpreting works of the new music canon, supplemented by rock/pop/EDM and jazz composers while artists from Cuba, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, Puerto Rico and Trinidad represented global cultures.

Your correspondent attended parts or all of 31 sets totaling 26.5 hours. The proximity of The Center for Fiction bookstore, Mark Morris Dance Center, BAM Opera House, outdoor plaza at 300 Ashland Place, BAM's Adam Café (all within a half block of each other) and Roulette (two blocks away) minimized transit time between sets while the two outlier venues, Public Records and Littlefield in southwest Gowanus, were only minutes away by bike. What follows is a play-by-play tour through three days-into-nights of concert-going.

Friday started at 5 pm with Ekmeles' nearly continuous, hour-plus vocalization of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, melding all manner of hums, clucks, overtones and spoken words (in German and English) in complex tessellated layers. At Roulette, M.C. Schmidt humorously intoned the words to Robert Ashley's *The Backyard* over partner Drew Daniel's tabla-laden post-disco beat with abstract light-bulb images projected overhead behind, commixing urban and rural imagery. At Littlefield, Detroit duo I-R aggressively sparred with analog synthesizers on pieces like "Flail", which combined on-screen imagery of street maps with beats that sounded like pneumatic drills tearing up pavement in the midst of a traffic jam. At the opera, Terry Riley's seminal *In C* was magnificently rendered by the Bang on a Can All-Stars acoustic/electric octet to accompany Sasha Waltz' choreography featuring a 14-member troupe dressed in sleeveless shirts and shorts in contrasting pastel colors.

Over at Roulette, guitarist Gary Lucas and Labelle vocalist Nona Hendryx' tribute to Captain Beefheart included a slideshow of his artwork, personal anecdotes and blues-rock covers of his tunes. At BAM Café, Innov Gnawa's hypnotic sound, featuring Ma'alem Hassan Ben Jafer's passionate voice and pulsing sintir, stirred first one, then a crowd of dancers. At Littlefield, electric guitar quartet Dither premiered Nate Wooley's "Three Anthems for Abandoned Cities", beginning and ending with clean bell tones interwoven into chorale textures, swarming, buzzing skronk in the

middle, followed by a grungy Radiohead-esque piece by Aeryn Santillan. Julia Wolfe's String Quartets, as played by Ethel, combined 16th-note hootenanny fiddling with phasing cross-accents, slow glissandi, siren-like microtones, simultaneous sung/bowed harmonies and syncopated foot-stomps. Friday's final performance was a DJed set at Littlefield by Matmos (M.C. Schmidt and Drew Daniels once again) spinning electronically-enhanced disco favorites.

Saturday began at the bookstore, where cellist Zoë Keating and bassist Brandon Lopez discussed racism, hierarchical structures, economic imperatives, artist-audience relations and other aspects of presenting new and improvised musics. At Roulette, Brian Eno's ambient milestone *Music for Airports* was rendered by the Bang on a Can All-Stars dectet and 12-voice Choir of Trinity of Wall Street, lulling incessantly until no one listening would have worried about a missed flight.

The strongest set of the festival was pianist Kris Davis and bassist Dave Holland's duo at Littlefield, a seemingly modest affair that began with a cover of Eric Dolphy's "Les" followed by a medley of five originals, the music moving through hard/post/freebop played in quick unison into rambling soliloquies, conversational exchanges, overlapping phrases and floating interludes, coalescing into thematic clusters even as the pair pursued individual musical pathways: Davis improvising with impeccable clarity and graceful passion; Holland, in an unusually expansive mood, with sterling chops and eclectic techniques.

In the darkened space of Public Records trumpeter Wooley performed Éliane Radigue's *Occam X*, which she composed with/for him, lingering 20 minutes on a single, quiet (quieter even than the venue's noisy ventilation system), breathy tone—played open, then muted, then filtered by a paper-thin metal sheet, finally phase-shifting as Wooley panned the trumpet around the room like an old-fashioned security camera. Next Michael Pisaro added sonic projections to Radigue's recording of *L'île re-sonante*, its visceral impact greatly enhanced by the venue's audience-enshrouding speaker system. Back at Littlefield, Craig Harris played a set of pieces for trombone, piano and string quartet, finding interesting correspondences between his brusque horn and the tightly knit viols. Outside on the plaza seven-piece Rumba de la Musa nested 3+2 Cuban clave with cascara rhythms over rumbling tumba and conga, Abraham Rodriguez' soulful voice providing the *aché* factor.

Another standout performance was Marcus Rojas' solo tuba set at the bookstore during which he coaxed throat-sung overtones through the mouthpiece simultaneous with conventionally blown notes, humorous spoken asides, R&B or Led Zeppelin-style basslines, timpanic taps on bell, fast angular arpeggios (on a transposed piece by Cole Davis), rapidly strummed valves à la a flamenco guitarist's *rasgueado* to end with a quote of Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman". At one point a woman in the next room, disturbed by the strange emanations, called out, "Are you okay?" to which Rojas, after finishing his musical phrase, not missing a beat, shouted back: "No!"

At Littlefield, Flutter, aka vocalist Fay Victor and flutist Nicole Mitchell, debuted its casually cohesive duo chemistry. Another fine set, at Roulette, was bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille and last-minute piano sub David Virelles, who milked wonderfully resonant sonorities from the hall's big Steinway grand. Back at Littlefield, Sun Ra Arkestra got off to a late start (needing time after sound-check to don its signature resplendent costumery) but the packed crowd didn't mind, especially when the ebullient crew delivered as expected and more. Leader Marshall Allen, who will be (the Cosmos willing) 98 years old by the time you read this, showed remarkable savvy on alto saxophone and EWI. By the fifth swinging number, "Love in Outer Space", the whole hall—especially baritone saxophonist Knoel Scott, who, mid-

song, stood up, de-horned and danced his trance—was traveling the outer-spaceways.

After a peek at Pan in Motion in the BAMcafé your wearying correspondent caught two final sets at Mark Morris Dance Center. First, Matthew Welch's virtuosic, 20-minute solo bagpipe reading of Anthony Braxton's "Composition No. 247", which began with stentorian braying offstage. Then, moving between several music stands placed around the room, he fired off rapid passages suggestive of late-period John Coltrane, Evan Parker or even Eddie Van Halen's "Eruption" solo, stippling the perpetual torrent of sound with trills, triplet flourishes, high-register leaps and 'bent' notes. Second was Michael Gordon's *Timber*, a piece for 6 percussionists, each playing a wooden 2x4 plank of varying length with contact mics mounted on a sawhorse, all arranged in a hexagon so drummers faced one another.

Sunday began in the murky interior of Public Records, where TAK Ensemble (voice, viola, flute, clarinet, percussion) essayed compositions by Tyshawn Sorey, David Byrne and others. The festival's newest generation was represented by Brooklyn Youth Chorus, a precociously professional aggregate of three dozen high-schoolers singing (from memory) Philip Glass' *Liquid Days* and five premieres, handily negotiating thorny fourth chords and Major third harmonic cycles in Olga Bell's *Let Them Not Say*.

At Littlefield, bassist Nick Dunston debuted Spider Season, a trio of bass, trombone and koto. At Public Records, guitarist James Moore and vocalist Alicia Hall Moran played a song cycle inspired by Duke Ellington's "Solitude". At Adam Café, Soo Yeon Lyuh bowed, gripped and pulled the wrapped silk strings of her haegeum (Korean spike fiddle) to evoke almost human cries of pathos, first in an arrangement for string trio, later in a free improv with guitar.

At Roulette, solo pianist Jenny Lin's interpretation of Galina Ustvolskaya's work was dense and intense: wearing a black outfit with semi-transparent sleeves padded from elbows to mid-palm, she lunged both forearms, linebacker-style, into the crack between black and white keys, sounding them all concurrently, producing gimongous chords.

One of the more charismatic artists was composer/vocalist JG Thirlwell, whose theatrical deliveries of original songs at the dance center boasted angst-ridden lyrics accompanied by tasteful arrangements often morphing from dirgy, minor-key ruminations into pompous anthem rock. Nois Saxophone Quartet's set at Roulette included Shelley Washington's *BIG Talk*, written for two baritone saxophones, a humorous but strenuous musical rejoinder to those irksome cat-callers who prey on passing females, the foghorn howls and long-tones of the low winds embodying the endurance victims require to weather such harassment.

The finale, held in the opera house, fêted Ornette Coleman's 1959 album *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, joining jazz sextet—leader/drummer Denardo Coleman (Ornette's son), guitarist James "Blood" Ulmer and bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma (veterans of Coleman's "free-funk" period), trumpeter Wallace Roney, Jr. and alto saxophonist Lee Odom and versatile pianist Jason Moran—with 20-piece orchestra in an attempt to bridge that problematic gap mentioned in the first paragraph of this review. The results were mixed. For one, the formality of the venue and physical isolation of the onstage musicians impeded the intimacy and interaction requisite for successful free improvisation. Indeed, a few stalwart free jazz fans could be observed leaving early. On the other hand, Coleman's promethean themes proved highly resilient across an array of distinctive arrangements by Dunston, Harris, Mitchell, Carman Moore, David Sanford and Pamela Z, infusing these crafty orchestral passages with undeniable spirit. And more than a few fans could be overheard humming "Lonely Woman" as they squeezed out of the Opera House exit doors. ❖

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