LONG PLAY FESTIVAL
BY TOM GREENLAND

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-minimalist 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 Ekmel’s nearly continuous, hour-plus vocalization of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s ‘Stimmung’, melding all manner of hums, sighs, 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-discos be with abstract light-bulb images projected overhead behind, conjoining urban and rural imagery. At Littlefield, Detroit duo I-R aggressively spattered 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 Gnaoua’s hypnotic sound, featuring Ma’alem Hassan Ben Jaafar’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 glissando, siren-like microtones, simultaneous sung/bowed harmonies and syncopated foot-stomps. Friday’s final performance was a DJ set at Littlefield by Mattmos (M.C. Schmidt and Drew Daniels once again) spinning educational ‘chronicles’ through genre and time.

Saturday began at the bookstore, where cellist Zoé Keating and bassist Brandon Lopez discussed racism, hierarchical structures, economic imperatives, artist-audience relations and other aspects of presenting new art. In contrast, at Roulette, ﬂoor four 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 seemingly professional affection of three dozen high-schoolers singing (from memory) Philip Glass’ Music for Airports. They squeezed out of the Opera House exit doors.

The Backyard

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