

VISION FEST

BY TOM GREENLAND



Wadada Leo Smith

An annual high point of the city's free[dom] jazz scene, Vision Fest's 26th incarnation comprised archival film screenings, an academic conference, six nights of music (five at Roulette, one at La Plaza at The Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center), movement, poetry, visual arts (installed, improvised or exhibited separately), celebrating lifetime achievements of Wadada Leo Smith and Oliver Lake. Much to ingest, yet deep immersion in these musical sounds/sights/spirits can reward curious listeners with transformative experiences.

Night 1 (Jun. 21st), curated by Smith, showcased the trumpeter/composer's work in seven unique but overlapping settings. But first, attempting to address the crowd with a silent mic only to hear a chorus of "we-can't-hear-you's!" Smith waited until the PA was audible to quip: "It's ok, just feel me!" And certainly his energy—his feeling—was palpable on the traditional opening prayer, a minor meditation on Albert Ayler performed duo with drummer Pheeroan akLaff. Next a black-and-white film clip showed a young Smith playing a freely structured soliloquy. His string writing was featured in three sets performed by RedKoral Quartet (violinists Mona Thian, Shalini Vijayan, violist Andrew McIntosh, cellist Ashley Walters): quartet alone on the pensive "Quartet No. 10"; with Smith, akLaff and pianists Sylvie Courvoisier and Erika Dohi on the catholic "Flight 93 in Pennsylvania's Sky"; and with poet Thulani Davis on her recital of "Billie Holiday, Dark Lady of the Sonnet". After a break, Smith, half-crouched over muted horn, blew fragmentary yet cohesive blasts, gently but decisively directing the pianists and akLaff through "New York City's Central Park in August". Although 'caged' behind clear Plexiglas sound baffles, silent for long stretches, akLaff proved a key contributor, driving the latter piece and closing prayer (a duo with Smith) into deeper dimensions. If anything, the event showed that Smith is not just (in Festival co-founder Patricia Nicholson-Parker's words) "one-of-a-kind", but (in his own words, responding to her accolade) "multiple kinds".

Night 2 (Jun. 22nd) commenced with a bang: pianist Matthew Shipp's quartet (violinist Jason Kao Hwang, bassist Michael Bisio and drummer Jay Rosen) morphing between long, incessant minimalistic figures and lush ballad textures, uncannily in sync with a video of Katy Martin enshrouded in cellophane daubing orange and blue paint blots against a wall, music gradually building to a resplendent climax at the precise moment she turned (onscreen) to stare directly into the audience. Jo Wood-Brown's projected collages provided backdrop for drummer Whit Dickey's trio (alto saxophonist Rob Brown and bassist

Brandon López), Brown long-winded, calmly ecstatic, López kinetically extroverted, proactively rhythmic. Dancer Davalois Fearon and multi-instrumentalist Mike McGinnis' duo fused her athletic sensuality with his fluid lyricism. The evening ended with a 1-2 punch. With Lois Esby's paintings onscreen, William Parker (doso n'goni, gimbri, gralla), Cooper-Moore (home-made instruments) and Hamid Drake (drums) wowed listeners with a calypso-esque groove that moved to funk—Cooper-Moore tearing up his diddley-bow with nods to Delta blues and Bernie Worrell—to a mercurial closer, Cooper-Moore (electric banjo, mouth-bow), Parker (hunting horn) and Drake restively but sinuously transitioning between reggae, swing, straight-8ths and other rhythms. The second punch, taking longer to land, was equally powerful: clarinetist Ned Rothenberg, pianist Sylvie Courvoisier and Drake explored a series of musical scenarios kindled by Courvoisier's frantic but precise two-handed attack, Rothenberg's sensitive balladry and Drake's forceful yet empathetic style, the latter proof positive a full-fledged imagination isn't limited by a bare-bones drumkit.

On the 3rd night (Jun. 23rd), choreographer Yoshiko Chuma used archival film footage of 1946 Bikini Atoll A-bomb tests accompanied by trio (violinist Jason Kao Hwang, cellist Aliya Ultan, trombonist Steve Swell) plus dancers (herself, Miriam Parker, Emily Mare Pope) to pose (silently) those difficult questions arising at the spectre of mushroom-shaped clouds. Two more acts fore-fronted a younger generation. Jaimie Branch's trio (bassist Luke Stewart and drummer Tcheser Holmes) played a traditionally rooted yet stylistically contrarian set, Branch equally adept on trumpet and electronics, accompanied by an amazing live-edited (by Scott Kiernan) video of the band, a paradigm of onstage/onscreen audio-visual synergy. Vocalist/flutist Leo Chang, trumpeter Chris Williams, cellist Lester St. Louis and dancer Parker's set was more subdued, favoring hypnotic washes and drones, Parker repeatedly falling down then rising from the floor with unflappable stamina and poise. As William Massa digitally painted (offstage but onscreen), tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis, cornet player Kirk Knuffke, bassist Parker and drummer Chad Taylor used blues and gospel as anchor points, Knuffke and Lewis an unlikely but nevertheless well matched pair of soloists, Taylor aggressive, busy, but not to excess. Flutist/vocalist Nicole Mitchell's quintet (pianist Joshua White, bassist Ken Filiano, electronic percussionist Val Jeanty and drummer Terri Lyne Carrington) played a set of her originals spanning bossa nova, swing and funk, Jeanty overlaying turntable scratches, sampled vocals and other effects onto Carrington's promethean, John Bonham-esque timekeeping.

By the 4th night (Jun. 24th), many of the same fans returning to the same chairs, the festival's transformative powers were beginning to sink in. Tenor saxophonist Isaiah Collier, pianist Jordan Williams, bassist Stewart and drummer Holmes played high energy modal-based compositions, hitting that ineffable 'it factor' about 35 minutes after downbeat. Sparks (pianist Eri Yamamoto, alto saxophonist Chad Fowler, bassist Parker, drummer Steve Hirsh) embodied its name, particularly in the creative friction generated between Yamamoto and Hirsh, intuitively sympathetic. Trumpeter Ahmed Abdullah and drummer Francisco Mora Catlett's dectet (vocalist Monique Ngozi Nri; saxophonists Sam Newsome, Don Chapman, Alex Harding; tuba player Bob Stewart; pianist D.D. Jackson; bassist Radu ben Judah; conguero Román Díaz) brought broad sounds and loving vibes, inviting listeners to echo phrases from Sun Ra's "Enlightenment", together conjuring a "Space World" of "strange mathematics [and] rhythmic equations"; nimbly reacting to Nri's recitation of Louis Reyes Rivera's "A Place I never been: especially for Malcolm

X" before finishing with a cha-cha and boogaloo, the last featuring a bombastic but soulful turn by Jackson. Pianist Angelica Sanchez trio-ed with bassist Michael Formanek and Drake, her sharp, rapid, crystalline runs close-tallied to Drake's sustained in-the-pocket grooves. Fay Victor's SoundNoiseFUNK (saxophonist Newsome, guitarist Joe Morris and drummer Reggie Nicholson, with violist/violinist Eddy Kwon guesting) came last, each artist adding spoken word, Victor up front with a panoply of yodels, clicks, stutters and other extended vocal techniques.

Night 5 (Jun. 25th) started softly, lushly, with the busy hum of composer Jason Kao Hwang's 24-piece string orchestra (10 violins, 5 violas, 4 cellos, 3 electric guitars, bass, drums) in a 10-part suite of contrasting themes and motions, each artist soloing, Hwang conducting with wave-like, taffy-pulling, crooked-elbow or punching gestures (alongside traditional conducting patterns), finishing with a loud rocking two-chord vamp, violins/violas all standing/soloing. Nicholson-Parker mashed spoken word with movements, supported by Ellen Christi and Jean Carla Rodea's loosely harmonized scat vocals and drummer Mela's beats/chants (the latter two singing in Spanish) while Jo Wood-Brown's photo/painting collages scrolled overhead. Swell's septet (bassoonist Karen Borca, alto saxophonist Rob Brown, violist Melanie Dyer, pianist Dave Burrell, tuba player Stewart and drummer Michael TA Thompson) developed solos and group improvs around the leader's tunes, achieving a couple stirring plateaus along the way. Music+life partners Ngozi Nri and Abdullah sang a short folksy set mostly comprised of Sun Ra melodies and Nri's original poetry, Abdullah adding vocals, trumpet and djembe. The finale, by Joshua Abrams' sextet, unfolded as a long, layered, trance-inducing groove driven by the leader's gimbri, Parker's doson n'goni, Drake's frame drum and Mikel Patrick Avery's stark muffled drumkit while Lisa Alvarado's harmonium gently droned out of time, bass clarinetist Jason Stein mostly vamping until his inventive solo turn midway through.

After five nights in Brooklyn, the final event (Jun. 26th), a tribute to Oliver Lake, was held outdoors at La Plaza at The Clemente in Manhattan's Lower East Side, hot humid late afternoon air slowly cooling as the sun set. It began with a band of 21 tween- and teenaged musicians, directed by William Parker, playing a couple of extended pieces with recitation and solos, a glimpse at the scene's future. Tenor/bass saxophonist JD Parran's sextet (violinist Gwen Laster, guitarist Kelvyn Bell, bass trombonist Bill Lowe, bassist Hilliard Greene and Lake's drummer son Gene) covered four of the tributee's compositions, the last two featuring dramatically festooned dancers (Nicholson-Parker, Parker, Fearon and Jason Jordan) threading through the crowd, alone and in pairs, exuding music in their movement. Lake conducted vocalists Shanon Chua (soprano), Chaela Harris (alto) and Ravi Seenerine (tenor), cushioned by violinist Veronica Jurkiewicz, flutist Jameka Gordon, tenor saxophonist Elliott Levin, bassist Matt Engle, drummer Kevobatala, on a handful of vocal works, their voices blended in sweet but tangy close harmony. Next he recited original poems backed by Trio 3 bandmates bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille, calling awareness to recent racism in America, sounding tributes to artists like Amiri Baraka, Hamiet Bluiett, Cyrille and Smith. The latest iteration of the World Saxophone Quartet—Bruce Williams (soprano, alto), Greg Osby (alto), David Murray (tenor, bass clarinet), James Carter (baritone)—delivered deep grooves and colorful chords, Murray discharging a pair of radicalized solos, Carter honking, popping at the bottom end, Williams stretching out a soulful coda. It wasn't over: returning to 'reality' after deep musical immersion, many fans took the festival's transformative sounds/sights/spirits home with them. ❖

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