

Vision Festival

by John Sharpe



Photo by Alan Nahigian

Muhai Richard Abrams

Never has the Vision Festival tradition of honoring the lifetime achievement of seminal figures in the avant jazz world seemed timelier. In a week that saw the passing of previous honorees Bill Dixon and Fred Anderson, the award for Chicago AACM founder Muhai Richard Abrams was spectacularly apt. Abrams' solo set, dedicated to Anderson who had been due to appear on the same bill, was one of the early highlights of the Festival.

Starting with a resonant peeling chord, Abrams sat otherwise motionless at the keyboard. Whether because of the occasion or not it was an emotionally charged set, with a palpable sense of purpose in its unhurried construction. Ringing dissonances in the bass register acted as a recurring motif for the opening section, sometimes thickened into long tendrils of notes, at others extended in a sustained tolling passage with overtones zinging round the hall. It was a whirling kaleidoscopic two-handed exposition, fusing together jazz, classical and trance musics into a deeply personal whole. Overall there was a ferocious focus to Abrams' conception, somber without being funereal.

At the Abrons Arts Center for the second year, the 15th Vision Festival (Jun. 20th-30th) touted the veterans of the avant scene, along with a scattering of younger names and European visitors, in an enlarged program of some 50 shows across ten days. Already with more tributes necessitated than might be wished, there was nonetheless a surfeit of vital life-affirming music, though the audience was noticeably thinner on some nights than in previous years.

Not a tribute, but a comeback of sorts, saxophonist David S. Ware's return to performance following a kidney transplant saw him follow a solo set in Autumn 2009 with an outing for his new trio. Bass supremo William Parker and master drummer Warren Smith maintained an open yet propulsive backing in a completely improvised set, not closing down any of Ware's options. Not that that was ever likely. After a prolonged tenor shout out fuelled by circular breathing, the reedman carried on where his acclaimed solo *Saturnian* (AUM Fidelity) left off, delivering a forceful statement of intent, sounding back in top form. Though sitting throughout his power was undiminished; he was technically assured, his stamina proven in a startling upper register outpouring pushing the boundaries of where the saxophone could reside.

Wadada Leo Smith's last show at the Vision Festival in 2008 was one of that year's peaks, so expectations were roused for his rare appearance with German drummer Günter Sommer in *Touch the Earth 2* (also an indirect tribute to late bassist Peter Kowald

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 46)

Konfrontationen

by Andrey Henkin

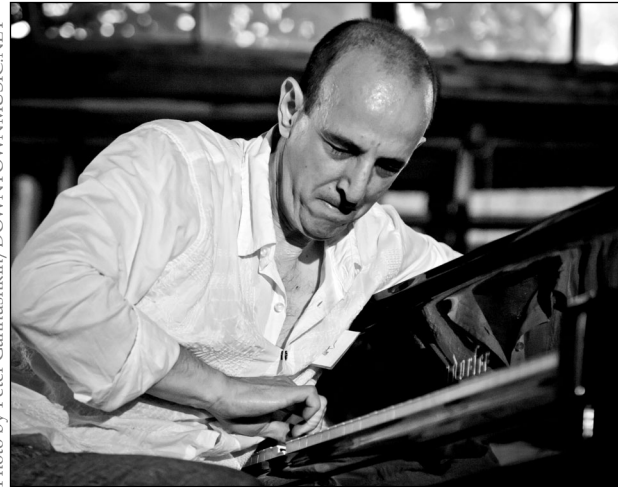


Photo by Peter Gannushkin/DOWNTOWNMUSIC.NET

Agustí Fernández

That Europe has been more supportive of jazz than the country of the music's birthplace is by now a statement of historical fact. Every country has its jazz festivals, from the largest capitals to the smallest towns. Some can feel generic while others capture a certain bygone zeitgeist. To get off the train in Nickelsdorf, Austria, about an hour southeast of Vienna and even closer to the borders of Hungary (once a major Cold War border crossing) and Slovakia, is to enter another era in European jazz, one that recalls such festivals as the Baden Baden Free Jazz and Total Music Meetings. To say that Nickelsdorf is small is an understatement - its population is under 2,000; to say the annual Konfrontationen festival held there is significant is also a misestimation; aficionados of the European school of free jazz and improvised music need to put this on their calendar.

The festival is the brainchild of Hans Falb, whose restaurant in the center of town is its epicenter. The few hundred visitors to the four days (Jul. 15th-18th) eat schnitzel in the front and listen to the music in the back, a slowly expanding open barn-like area, all elements of the festival mixing: musicians and affiliated tradespersons like your correspondent, photographers, listeners and organizers. There is a wonderfully subversive anti-hierarchy going on at Konfrontationen, very much in keeping with the open music showcased there.

This year's edition was co-curated by saxist Mats Gustafsson and thus became, like *Perspectives in Southern Sweden* last year, a sort of iPod shuffle of the music that engages him, both as a listener and a player. Some of the performers were the same - Clayton Thomas, DIEB 13, Hairy Bones, Raymond Strid, Sofia Jernberg and Sven-Åke Johansson - as was the somewhat violent lurching from 'traditional' free jazz to noise rock to electronic music.

The aforementioned traditional takes on free jazz came right from the start, with the trio of trombonist/cellist Günter Christmann, guitarist Christian Munthe and drummer Raymond Strid playing a 35-minute set of shuffled cells of sound, fragmented and fractured, the aural equivalent of an eclipse box. To follow this up with almost 90 minutes of *The Ex & Brass Unbound* probably would never fly in more rigid American improvised music circles. The Dutch noise-punk band played a number of pieces from their 'songbook', augmented by a horn section of saxists Ken Vandermark and Gustafsson, trombonist Wolter Wierbos and trumpeter Roy Paci. It was probably louder and more energetic than *Nova Rock*, Austria's biggest rock festival, amazingly also held in Nickelsdorf a month earlier.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 46)

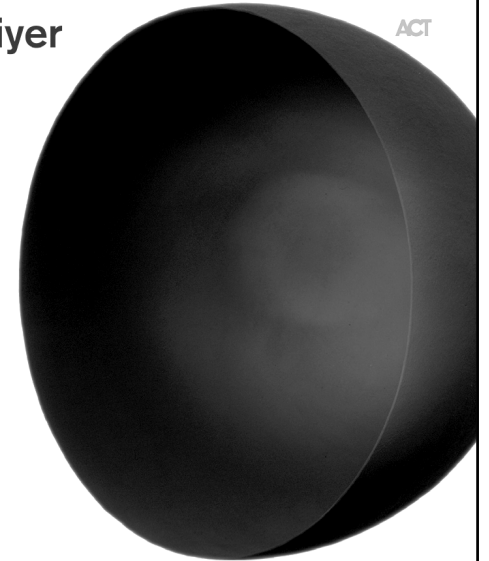
ACT
vijay iyer

2010 musician of the year
(jazz journalists association)



vijay iyer
solo

ACT



solo
ACT 9497-2

after his ACT debut *historicity* "defined the jazz landscape in 2009" (l.a.times) and became one of the most acclaimed albums in recent memory (#1 jazz album of the year in the new york times, los angeles times, chicago tribune, village voice & downbeat critics' polls, popmatters.com, national public radio), vijay iyer releases his first solo piano recording.

"vijay iyer is a singular figure in contemporary jazz."
chicago tribune

08/29 nyc - charlie parker festival
09/11 philadelphia - live arts
more concert dates at
<http://www.vijay-iyer.com/shows.html>

exclusive US distribution by

ALLEGRO
www.allegro-music.com

www.actmusic.com
e-mail: info@actmusic.com

THE ACT COMPANY

(VISION CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13)

who made up the original trio). But his absence allowed them to revel in the unmediated communication afforded by the duet format. One of the reasons this pairing works so well is the use both make of silence, contrasting long pauses with intense eruptions of sound. Sommer added a theatrical presence, which enhanced the already top-quality musical impact. Restlessly varying his implements - at times he played with shaker in one hand and what looked like a broom head in the other - the German kept time for short stretches, demarcating structure. Smith, like Sommer, was very precise and deliberate in what he did, while simultaneously inspired and even impetuous. Their set boasted sensitive use of dynamics and demonstrated the cohesive invention that distinguishes the very best improvisers. A standing ovation was just reward for a standout set.

Further demonstrating that an extemporized session doesn't need to lack inner design, Dave Burrell announced the name of his Peace Out trio's set as Inner Earth, before laying down an opening gambit of repeated hammered chords. Burrell's flexible rhythmic style and command of historical jazz styles meant that a notable synergy developed between the pianist and Hamid Drake: when the drummer whipped up a flurry, Burrell responded with a glissando along the keys until Drake crescendoed and Burrell returned to plink-plonking at the treble end. Denied his customary outlet of infectious interplay with Drake, bassman William Parker concentrated on propulsion, not by the default route of walking, but his patented method of brief passages of skipping, hopping, sprinting, jumping pizzicato merged into an ongoing flow. By the end Drake was echoing Burrell's patterns back at him in what became a dizzying exhibition of seat-of-pants navigation.

Darius Jones trio's set at The Local 269, part of a series of shows at various downtown venues prior to the Festival proper, was another high spot. Leading off with multiphonic squeals, backed by Adam Lane's sonorous arco and Jason Nazary's polyrhythmic stuttering barrage, Jones indulged in all sorts of timbral variation, matching Lane and Nazary's liberties with time. The climax of their set was "I Wish I Had A Choice" - another of Jones' so-beautiful-it-hurts tunes - introduced by saying "When you choose to walk this path, then you are on it - this has a lot of relevance to me."

There were too many deserving sets to name check over the duration, but honorable mentions go to pianists Matthew Shipp, John Blum and Lafayette Gilchrist, Rob Brown's New Quartet, Perry Robinson's North South Ensemble, Ned Rothenberg's In Sync, Mark Helias' Open Loose and William Parker's In Order To Survive.

Though tinged with sadness the collective By Any Means, billed as a tribute to drummer Rashied Ali, provided one of the most effective sets, full of energy and soul and looking forward as much as back. That they did so by co-opting Rashied's brother Muhammad Ali onto the drum chair made the achievement particularly satisfying. Parker's bass solo on the first piece was a study in repeating riffs, gradually getting quieter and quieter, until Ali shouted out "Anybody ever heard of the freedom train?", before unleashing a crashing fusillade of percussion. Charles Gayle's reentry on tenor saxophone, heralded with a long held train whistle, quickly built into the extreme high registers, as he shook his horn up and down animatedly. Any concerns that Ali would struggle to fill his brother's shoes proved unfounded. He varied the tempos, propelled the band and evinced an unimpeachable dynamic sensibility. ♦

For more information, visit visionfestival.org

(KONFRONTATIONEN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13)

On the Friday and Saturday of the festival, concerts were also held in the afternoons offsite, meaning in a real barn about five kilometers away in the middle of farmland. These portions of the festival were when the ridiculous heatwave passing through Europe became most apparent, ie it was difficult to focus on the precisely insectile vocals of Sofia Jernberg in duo with Raymond Strid. But moving outside to hear an unscheduled solo saxophone recital by Roscoe Mitchell was to experience the master with no walls to enclose him, his sharp inimitable lines radiating out like the buzzing of insects and chirping of birds.

The festival's highlights came in quick succession on the Friday night, with sets by the trio of pianist Agustí Fernández, bassist Ingebrigt Håker Flaten and drummer Paul Lovens, Swedish Azz and The Thing XL. The first was a debut but with none of the tentative feeling-out of so many improvised meetings. It was brutally expansive, with each musician pushing their textural boundaries in close cooperation. Fernández in particular was uncharacteristically bombastic, both inside and out of his piano. Swedish Azz put out a fascinating record on Not Two this year, a mashup of classic '50s Swedish bebop and modern Swedish free jazz as played by tubist Per-Åke Holmlander, vibist Kjell Nordeson, DJ DIEB 13, drummer Erik Carlsson and Gustafsson. Seeing it live made the often-impenetrable LP more understandable. The Thing XL brought the Pan-Nordic power trio of Gustafsson, Flaten and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love together with its own expanded horn section: Joe McPhee, Ken Vandermark and Johannes Bauer, plus The Ex guitarist Terrie Hassels. The set started at 2 am to a bleary-eyed audience and finished close to 3 to a rambunctious crowd screaming for more. They got a gently beautiful encore to ease them into sleep.

Saturday night's performances were of a more introspective variety with Vandermark in trio with laptopperist/vocalist Christof Kurzmann and drummer Martin Brandlmayr, what was in essence a quieter entry into the sax-drum duet pantheon, colorized by electronic effects. Andrea Neumann, Clare Cooper and Clayton Thomas demonstrated the varied sounds that can be gotten individually and collectively out of strings with inside piano (an instrument that approximates and reduces a piano's sound board), guzheng (Chinese plucked zither) and upright bass, respectively, an abstract trio that relied on the beaten, bent and scraped. And most beautifully and assertively, depending on the moment, American bassist John Lindberg and Dutch clarinetist Ab Baars presented a 90-minute set devoted to the music of the late John Carter.

Since the final day was on a Sunday, the proceedings moved in the afternoon to the church next door for two sets: the duo of Evan Parker and Sten Sandell and Joe McPhee solo. The first was recapitulation of the recent *Psalms* album where Parker's tenor was matched against Sandell's church organ. Parker set up in the pulpit across from Sandell and the pair gave a devotional set, the tonalities of the instruments meeting in the air across the nave. McPhee gave a nod to the recently completed World Cup by improvising a piece on vuvuzela. He also took advantage of the sacred surroundings to create music on trumpet and saxophone dedicated to the recently departed Bill Dixon and Fred Anderson.


Among the final night's sets were one pleasant surprise and one slight disappointment. When this correspondent saw Hairy Bones (saxist Peter Brötzmann, trumpeter Toshinori Kondo, electric bassist Massimo Pupillo and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love) at Perspectives, it didn't quite live up to the album's ferocity, coming off as timid, if one can believe it. But at Konfrontationen, the quartet blasted through a lengthy set, Brötzmann and Kondo in particular

delving into a heady rapport the saxist has with few others. The penultimate Transatlantic Series band of Roscoe Mitchell, Evan Parker, bassist Joëlle Léandre, pianist Tony Hymas and trumpeter Hugh Ragin suffered somewhat from allstar syndrome. None of the players seemed to want to take over the proceedings, tiptoeing around each other, and thus the first 45 minutes or so was frustratingly disconnected. But after it almost wafted into nothingness, Ragin began a solo trumpet fanfare and the rest of the group, perhaps resigned to an underwhelming set, came back strong to add another 20 minutes that cleansed the palate. ♦

For more information, visit konfrontationen.at

CJR-5: Remembrance

Joe McPhee / Michael Bisio
Raymond Boni / Paul Harding




Remembrance

Recorded LIVE at the 2001 Earshot Jazz Festival

North Country Distributors
Tel: 315-287-2852 • Fax: 315-287-2860
Email: info@ncdsales.com

"EMOTIONALLY EVOCATIVE"
"MELODICALY SEDUCTIVE"
"PANORAMIC VISTAS"
-JazzTimes

LISA nuance
HILTON



"ADDICTIVE"
-JazzChicago.net
"EXQUISITE"
-All About Jazz

FREE MP3's at:
www.LisaHiltonMusic.com

Catalina's Jazz Club
HOLLYWOOD 8/31
BUDDY GUY'S
CHICAGO 9/30
SCHWARTZ CENTER FOR THE ARTS
DOVER, DELAWARE 10/23