

The Music Catches Fire: Free-Spirited SIMF Turns Eighteen

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Things weren't supposed to turn out like this for the Seattle Improvised Music Festival (SIMF): the organizers close to celebrating their twentieth event . . . the venue serving as home to some of the finest local, national and international free improvised musicians . . . the annual showcase turning into the longest running event of its kind in North America. "This wasn't by design," comments festival co-organizer Dennis Rea, over coffee at Bauhaus in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. "It was just that people were stubborn enough to hang in there and keep sweating for it." With this year marking the festival's eighteenth, no one is more surprised than Rea and his fellow organizers. "Nothing to make you feel old than to have your festival grow to the age of maturity," he adds, laughing.

When SIMF started in 1984, the "festival" was more accurately a "small party"—an invitation-only event at a downtown loft, hosted by musician Paul Hoskin. No more than twenty people attended the event. Hoskin's idea was to put musicians together in unforeseen combinations in an attempt to move them out of their musical habits and routines. The show generated enough interest to warrant a similar event the following year. Shortly thereafter, Hoskin moved to New York City. "The number of people interested in improvised music was increasing as more people showed up in Seattle," comments Rea. Concerned that the festival might desist after Hoskin's departure, Rea, veteran avant-garde saxophonist Wally Shoup, producer/engineer Doug Haire, and musician Charley Rowan sat down in 1988 and worked out a plan to continue the event.

The third SIMF showcase was held at the New Melody Tavern (now the Tractor Tavern) and featured ten acts over the course of a single evening. "Even people who were enthusiastic about improvised music gave us about a zero chance of success," comments Rea. "But everyone was thunderstruck when 200 people showed up on a Sunday night to pack the place. I think we realized at that point that we might have struck a nerve, and there was a potential for a wider interest in that sort of music."

The world's most notable free improvised musicians have performed at SIMF.

Local artists such as Amy Denio, Wayne Horvitz, Steve Fisk, Craig Flory, Matt Chamberlain, Brad Hauser, Eyvind Kang, and Reuben Radding have showcased their work there over the years. International artists such as Belgian pianist Fred Van Hove, Berlin-based trombonist Johannes Bauer, German clarinetist Theo Nabicht, and British saxophonist John Butcher have made the trek to Seattle.

"You would be surprised at the number of musicians, and the *stature* of some of the musicians, that desire to play this festival," says Rea, his voice more surprised than arrogant. "It is *the* showcase for free improvised music in the Northwest."

What exactly is free improvised music?

That question will exist as long as this music is performed. Is it avant-garde jazz? Is it experimental music? Is it fusion? The inability to swiftly categorize this music has largely resulted in its marginalized status (and has left countless free improvisers defending their art). Either you like free improvised music (the random noodling of saxophones . . . the explosive and cacophonous style of percussion . . . the punchy and abrasive rhythm), or you don't. No one is on the fence with this music.

'Free improvised music' means just that: music entirely improvised without any preconceived written musical material. It's not beholden to any genre, though many people immediately think of the later works of John Coltrane or Eric Dolphy when this type of music comes to mind. Indeed, it would be fair to say this genre of music *does* have its roots in jazz — particularly the first- and second-generation improvisers. But true improvisers can be traced back to a handful of British musicians during the 1960s, such as Evan Parker (soprano saxophone / electric autoharp), Hugh Davies (organ synthesizers), Derek Bailey (guitar), and Jamie Muir (percussion). These musicians formed the Music Improvisation Company in 1968 and ultimately defined this music for future generations.

The spirit of these musicians continues today. Contemporary improvisers are coming out of the areas of twentieth-century classical music, avant-rock, and world music. "The link to jazz is pretty tenuous," comments Rea. "I think any free

improviser would acknowledge a debt to jazz as a form of music that really opened the way for freer and more improvised music. I also think that you would find some improvisers who would resist being tagged as jazz players."

Perhaps the most common criticism leveled at this type of music is that it is a "musician's music": one must be a musician in order to fully understand and appreciate its idiosyncratic form. Rea disagrees with this claim, pointing to the importance of audience involvement. "One thing I would say about this music, more than any other kind of music, is that the audience completes it," says Rea. "The musical structure isn't necessarily going to be as explicit as it is with composed music. You are watching it happen before your eyes. There is a level of trust involved between the musicians, and between musicians and the audience. The audience has to believe that musicians are capable of pulling music out of the air, and it's going to be compelling and as emotionally resonant as any other kind of music. I think it can be truly exciting to watch people in the act of creating something meditative, where there's obviously some synergy and chemistry. Some people are apt to judge all free music [as being] very strident and angry." In fact, it can be extremely melodic, ravishingly beautiful, expressive — any adjective you can apply to music can be applied to *improvised* music. It's all free to unfold. It's all free to happen."

This year, Rea and company will be presenting German percussionist Paul Lovens, accompanied by Rudi Mahall, Torsten Müller, and Jeb Bishop; Canadian bassist Travis Baker, accompanied by Emily Hay and Sara Schoenbeck; Peggy Lee and Ron Samworth, the Vancouver B.C.-based cellist and guitarist, respectively; and pianist Gust Burns, drummer Greg Campbell and percussionist Gregory Reynolds (three local musicians who are currently driving and revitalizing the Seattle improv scene).

A representation of Seattle musicians is of particular importance this year, says Rea. Indeed, the Seattle scene is rich now, with young musicians breathing excitement into

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the genre. Gust Burns's "Sound of The Brush" series . . . the talented roster of improvisers that comprise the Monktaile Creative Music Concern . . . the Sunday Matinee series that kicked off last month — these are only a few of the events and musicians making recent and significant contributions to the local scene. "We noticed that, although there was this new generation of improvisers coming up on the scene, there wasn't really any representation of them last year," Rea comments. "This year we are really enthused to present a bunch of those people because I think they have reached a point where they can start to showcase."

As SIMF turns the page on another year, the question stands: How has such a marginalized music festival managed to last so long?

"I have been asked in the past, 'How does the audience know that it isn't just a bunch of random racket?'" says Rea, explaining the festival's tenure. "I think that question presupposes that the audience doesn't have the ability to judge when music is really connecting or not. I believe audiences *do* have that ability, and it should be fairly obvious when people are playing together as a unit, or whether there are three or four individuals on stage who are not connecting. I think that throughout the history of the festival we have had a very high success rate of music actually catching fire and being meaningful."

The 18th Seattle Improvised Music Festival begins February 14, 2003 and runs through February 22, 2003. For more information, visit the festival online at www.seattleimprovisedmusic.com.



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