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Vision Festival 2007

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The tagline for this year's Vision Festival was "The Revolution Continues"—a reference to the October Revolution in Jazz, spearheaded by trumpeter/composer Bill Dixon back in 1964. If you walked just two blocks down Norfolk Street, however, you could see the forlorn little building that used to be Tonic, New York's avant-garde hub until just a few weeks ago. Marc Ribot, in his much-discussed essay "The Care and Feeding of a Musical Margin", angrily pressed the point: it's not an easy time for avant-garde jazz and improvised music, and it never was. (Dixon was scheduled to perform at Tonic on the night of the 2003 blackout, an eerie hint of things to come.)

One thing is certain: The Vision Festival, if not the revolution, continues. This year the 81-year-old Dixon was a Lifetime Recognition honoree; he marked the occasion with an eagerly anticipated large ensemble premiere. On a sadder note, the death of violinist Leroy Jenkins was a major theme as well. Billy Bang and Jason Kao Hwang, two of the best-known violinists on the scene, coordinated "50 Violins for Leroy Jenkins" as a memorial tribute, and Myra Melford led a Jenkins-dedicated project called Spindrift, featuring guitarist Brandon Ross.

Along with Dixon's extended large-group work, the festival included a premiere of William Parker's "Double Sunrise Over Neptune," for 15-piece ensemble, the first full-length set of the week. Interestingly, Parker (pictured) did not play bass—that role fell to Shayna Dulberger, who held down the three-part succession of relentless pulses with great stamina and concentration.

The vamp-driven odyssey lasted just under an hour. It began with roughly 15 minutes of a hypnotic, looped line in 7/4, transitioning to a more irregular seven-beat rhythm and finally an ascending six-note bass figure in 4/4. The instrumentation was odd, and Parker deployed it efficiently in subgroups. Gerald Cleaver and Hamid Drake paired up on drums and percussion. Joe Morris' banjo and Brahim Frigbane's oud doubled the bass lines but also broke off into counter-riffs. Later, Morris switched to guitar for one of the more prominent solos of the piece, then mirrored the third bass line with dark chord voicings.

Astringent unison lines sang out in the horns and strings, but time and again the players veered into free and overlapping dialogues. Sangeeta Banerjee wove in her yearning Hindustani vocals; Parker would raise his hands to quiet the band before her entrances. When he wasn't conducting, Parker joined Bill Cole on various double-reed instruments (shenai, Tibetan oboe, more). Hwang, trumpeter Lewis Barnes and alto saxophonist Rob Brown stood out among the soloists.

The piece took its most compelling turn in the third and final section. Sabir Mateen, switching from tenor sax to clarinet, burrowed into the seams of the ensemble. Then the strings announced a marvelous lyric passage, voiced in stark octaves. Gliding above the inexorable rhythm, this motif took on a magical quality, and ultimately brought the piece to a placid end.

Dixon's work, as yet untitled, was an altogether different animal: deeply abstract, with no explicit tempo, its plan coming into view almost glacially over the course of an hour-plus. Dixon mainly stuck to conducting, but he played trumpet during the second half-hour, sending extraordinary sounds into the hall: broad, rippling long tones; breath effects; echoing low notes that conjured great marine depths.

Bringing Dixon's music to life was the Sound Vision Orchestra, which has performed a number of ambitious orchestra works since debuting at Vision in 1998. Andrew Raffo Dewar began the piece alone on soprano sax, his angular split-tones soon offset by Warren Smith's timpani glissandos and Michel Cote's grumbling contrabass clarinet. As more players entered the fray, Dixon urged them on to

a huge, almost violent crescendo before abruptly cutting them off. This was the conceptual core of the piece, and Dixon repeated the gesture a number of times.

There was much else, however: quiet, dissonant chords sustained at length by the whole group; majestic unison lines with a pronounced classical flavor, on the order of Richard Strauss; a riveting duo exchange between Cote and tuba player Joe Daley; the vibraphone of Warren Smith, which introduced a new harmonic fullness to the piece; solo breaks by the cornetists Taylor Ho Bynum and Graham Haynes; a bass saxophone romp by J. D. Parran. But one longed to hear more from the veteran bassoonist Karen Borca.

Two other world premieres, Nicole Mitchell's "Xenogenesis Suite: A Tribute to Octavia Butler" and Roy Campbell's "Ahkenaten Suite," were also slated to take place during this year's Vision Festival. In addition to all this new music, there were solid sets in the first two nights alone by Fieldwork, Cooper-Moore, Marc Ribot's Spiritual Unity and Henry Grimes with Marilyn Crispell and Rashied Ali. The financial squeeze may be on for artists and presenters, but Vision's offerings certainly do not suggest a community in decline.