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Backstage with...Bill Dixon

By Hank Shteamer

Mastering your instrument is one thing, but how many musicians can say they've helped secure the future of an art form? Trumpeter-composer Bill Dixon was nearly alone among the first wave of free-jazz players in realizing the importance of DIY practices. In 1964 he founded the Jazz Composers' Guild (whose members included Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp) and staged the fabled October Revolution in Jazz festival in New York. Later, he launched the Black Music Division at Bennington College, where he mentored aspiring musicians for three decades before retiring from that post in 1996. As for his trumpet work, Dixon's extension of the horn's vocabulary is something today's vanguard players are still coming to grips with. On Wednesday 20 the musician premieres a new large-ensemble work at the Vision Festival, where he'll also receive Lifetime Achievement honors. TONY recently visited the 81-year-old artist at his Vermont home.

How does it feel to be honored for Lifetime Achievement?

I was rather flattered when [the Vision Fest] decided to give me recognition—everyone else has made believe I wasn't here! [Laughs] The fact that I never went for any of the isms that a lot of musicians do, you would think that would be a credit. The fact that I haven't wasted my time being a sideman to every musician who had \$50 to hire me, you would think that would be a credit. But it turns out that the game is played in a different way.

Can you give us an idea of what you'll be presenting at the concert?

I've written maybe 150 pages of music, and I think I have three rehearsals, so the question is, how can I make it so that it doesn't just become a sight-reading exercise? That's not what these guys want to be doing. In 1985 I did a big orchestra workshop [in Vienna]. I could tell from the second I passed out the music that it was not going to work. After about two or three minutes, I just said, "Give me back the music." I tore it up and said, "Okay, now let's start from scratch." So tomorrow I'll put [the Vision Festival piece] in ink and send out the parts. I'll get to my first rehearsal, run things down, and the things that I can get done, I'll do; the others, I won't. Either way, I'm going to have a great time.

Do you see the Vision Festival as an outgrowth of the artist-run events you organized in the '60s?

Well, things have moved forward in a way I couldn't have foreseen, because there were no grants or anything like that in the '60s. Society has let this music in the door that way, but [the Vision Festival organizers] have had to work very hard writing grants, and at that they've been very successful.

Do you remember when you first realized the importance of artists being self-sufficient?

Some people believe that no matter what happens, it's destiny. And maybe that's true, but some of us say, "Let me help [destiny] along here," you know what I mean? [Laughs] The thing that I was talking about is never going to happen: musicians one day realizing that they have the power. The lowliest musician playing is a powerful person, because without his counterpart on various levels, there's no music industry. — Hank Shteamer