



Enough Is Enough

At two prominent jazz festivals, bright moments and cloudy forecasts

by Larry Blumenfeld

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In an overheated basement beneath the Lower East Side's Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts one recent Sunday afternoon, the hot question was this: "What is considered 'serious music'?" At one of two discussions sponsored by the Vision Festival—a six-night mid-June celebration of (for lack of a better term) avant-garde jazz—the talk centered on the scene's lack of funding and/or respect. Referring to the strange spot so much of jazz finds itself in—once commanding popular appeal, now an art-music stepchild—Voice critic Francis Davis noted: "The musicians find themselves between a rock and a hard place, or, as it were, between rock and a classical place."

Maybe the matter was best addressed during Vision's opening night. Seated at a small electronic keyboard, multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore led an ensemble including alto sax, cello, drums, and dancer Marlies Yearby. The group began with an earnest rendition of the traditional spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and ended with Cooper-Moore's grumblings over the music: "Bastard. . . whore. . . prostitute. . . jazz. . . . You don't like that name?"

Vision was packed with vital music, not to mention a large and diverse audience. Still, long-term health worries hovered over the proceedings. One flyer at an information table declared a "cultural emergency"; you could sign a petition imploring New York City to "roll back the destruction of the Lower East Side as a center of culture" and "fund a space that can serve as home for improvised music." Ever since rising rents shut down Tonic earlier this year, choreographer and Vision producer Patricia Nicholson and guitarist Marc Ribot have been on a mission, now forwarded by the nascent Alliance for Creative Music Action. "Enough is enough," Ribot told me. "It's time for New York to support what I do, what we do. Why is what is possible in Vienna and Bern not possible here?"

The future posed a differently shaped question mark at the annual JVC Jazz Festival kickoff party in Gracie Mansion's backyard. "Someone asked if this is the last time they'd see me," said George Wein, the founder of the JVC and Newport gatherings, and the father of the modern jazz festival for more than half a century. "I'm telling you: I'm not going anywhere." But in January, Wein sold his company, Festival Productions, to Shoreline Media, a New York-based entertainment company now rechristened the Festival Network. He vows to stay hands-on involved, and the new corporation's head, Chris Shields, has echoed that sentiment. But it remains to be seen what shape the JVC Festival will take beyond this year, the last fully under Wein's imprimatur.

Indeed, standard-bearing resilience formed the theme at this year's JVC (which ran June 17-30), including 70th-year celebrations for bassist Ron Carter and singer Nancy Wilson, and 80th-year

fetes for saxophonist Lee Konitz and singer Eartha Kitt. An opening-night concert at Town Hall showcased the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, whose very existence in New Orleans since the floods of 2005 is an act of resilience. Two New York based guest artists joined the band in spots: Violinist Jenny Scheinman improvised ably on the dirge-like "St. James Infirmary," and Steve Wilson, playing soprano saxophone, credibly covered clarinet lines on the raucous "Shake That Thang." But the band was fully satisfying for its own charms: drummer Joe Lastie's funky command at every tempo; bassist Walter Payton's woody tone and wily timing; and the sweet-toned playing and warm-hearted manner of leader, singer, and trumpeter John Brunious. When Allen Toussaint, a New Orleans institution unto himself, took the piano chair, the music reached an even higher level. "Put some pep in your step and some pride in your stride," he sang on a tune extolling the band's virtues. "It's like the Pied Piper, but for people so much nicer." Far from the gorgeous decay of the French Quarter's Preservation Hall, the group seemed every bit at home.

Beneath the faded glory of the massive, arched stained-glass window that backs the Vision Festival stage, the always-prominent William Parker mounted a 15-piece ensemble of unusual instrumentation—from banjo to baritone sax, cello to South Indian vocalist—for the opening-night premiere of a commissioned piece, "Double Sunrise Over Neptune." Parker, whose bass playing has been a driving force in free jazz for more than two decades, alternately conducted and played African and Middle Eastern instruments; he left Shayna Dulberger to generate the powerful bass grooves he'd composed, one of which anchored the swift, tricky, seven-beat meter of the piece's opening section. Parker's hour-long composition allowed for some fascinating musical dialogues: alto saxophonist Rob Brown and singer Sangeeta Banerjee traded undulating phrases; Joe Morris's guitar and Brahim Fribgane's oud eerily shadowed each other. But, as with so many of Parker's large-ensemble works, it was the entrancing ebb and flow—and the sparkle of silence after a crescendo—that made a lasting impression.

The next day, the Vision Festival honored trumpeter Bill Dixon with a lifetime recognition award, acknowledging not just his achievements as a player and composer, but also his formative role in creating, more than 40 years ago, the forward-leaning festival October Revolution in Jazz and the artist collective Jazz Composers Guild. These acts still resonate with a purpose that underscores the present Vision Festival. And Dixon's piece, performed by his 17-piece Sound Vision Orchestra, reverberated with sonic intent of equal relevance and, in some spots, a delicate beauty. It began with keening soprano sax lines, then the bent pitches of timpani. There were some pithy cornet solos by Taylor Ho Bynum, Stephen Haynes, and Graham Haynes, while Dixon, who is 82, played some horn in a style that's become customary for him: brief blurts, amplified, echoed, and delayed through finely calibrated microphones. But Dixon was concerned principally, if not altogether, with timbral shifts and sonic waves, an undulating canvas of sound.

The panel-discussion query about "serious music" was begged by one interesting fact: This year's Vision Festival was marked by a succession of large-scale pieces, some performed with scores laid out on music stands. (Of course, all likely made use of real-time group improvisation à la Butch Morris's "conductions.") Such was the case with "Fifty Violins for Leroy Jenkins," a memorial salute for the pioneering free-jazz violinist who passed away in February at the age of 74, assembled by Jason Kao Hwang and conducted by Billy Bang, two of Jenkins's disciples. OK, I counted just 36 fiddles, and that only by including the two cellos and seven basses in the ensemble. Still, they filled out the stage nicely and provided a truly orchestral palette for Bang to work with. The piece, drawn from music that Jenkins had composed, made great use of all those strings. Sometimes they bowed in unison, sometimes they plucked as one; in other spots, a melodic solo by, say, Hwang, took hold, while the other strings functioned as, well, string-section backing. Jenkins's lovely themes were clearly in evidence, but so too were the in-the-moment directions that Bang gave to his musicians. The piece was compact (25 minutes), diverse

(conventional-sounding here, cacophonous there), and unlike anything else heard at either festival.

Though they run concurrently, the Vision and JVC festivals hardly compete: They largely represent separate worlds. The only musician I saw listed in both programs was pianist Vijay Iyer, who performed a stirring opening-night Vision set with his Fieldwork trio and an equally notable JVC duet with saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa at the Rubin Museum. If there was one JVC set that could've fit comfortably with Vision Fest's offerings, it was saxophonist Lee Konitz's Zankel Hall concert. He played in a variety of contexts, from trio to solo-with-string-quartet to nonet to big band, mixing it up with tenor saxophonists Joe Lovano and Ted Brown and drummer Paul Motian, among others. At one point, he played Louis Armstrong's "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," treating the string quartet as if they were the Preservation Hall crew, with Lovano playing clarinet lines on soprano sax. Contexts aside, it's Konitz's tone—wide, breathy, precise, and carrying little vibrato—that's the real attraction, as radical today as it was 60 years ago.

Both the JVC and Vision fests were studded by that tried-and-true lure—the supergroup. During a four-part Ron Carter show at Carnegie Hall, intermission gave way to what first appeared like a dream (with Miles Davis as the subtext): bassist Carter alongside pianist Herbie Hancock, tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and drummer Billy Cobham. Carter's mere suggestion of the familiar grooves to "So What" and "All Blues" tickled the crowd. Shorter's subtly inventive playing on "Seven Steps to Heaven" brought on knowing smiles. And jaws dropped during Hancock's solo on "Stella by Starlight." It was all over in some 25 minutes (no encore)—glorious though it sounded, one had to wonder why, after assembling such a quartet, you'd pull the plug so soon.

The Vision Festival's final night ended with a very different dream team: Billed as "Louis Moholo and Friends," the quartet featured Moholo (a South African drummer rarely heard in New York), the ubiquitous Parker on bass, Dave Burrell (a pianist of sublime and versatile gifts), and Kidd Jordan, a legendary educator in his hometown of New Orleans, as well as a singular, ever-questing tenor saxophonist. Parker started things with some multiphonic bowing, but soon settled into powerful, hard-plucked grooves. Jordan poked at shards of melody here and there, then bent his knees deep, reached up into his horn's highest register, and issued overtones that floated above the growing din, somehow seeming to direct it all. At first, Burrell offered logical chord progressions (it could've been a Gershwin tune), but before long, he too was chasing something larger and more obtuse. And Moholo kept this sonic juggernaut moving surely, with little to no bombast. His brief snare rolls and carefully placed cymbal crashes served like road signs, while his sure bass-drum kicks kept the fuel coming.

After an hour or so, the music ceased. Patricia Nicholson, in her role as producer, stepped up to the stage, signaling with thumb and forefinger as if to say: A little more? Parker smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, and shook his head. Enough is enough, he seemed to reply. And it was.