Brats in the Musical Playpen

Michael Shore

With the “New Music, New York” series happening at the Kitchen, it’s important to note the existence of another experimental music scene. I’m referring to the young, wild rebel underbelly of “free” musicians (and I don’t mean it doesn’t cost anything), which includes Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, and improvising trio Fall Mountain. This is one scene that’s below the underground, without even as much public recognition as the mature, established school represented at the Kitchen.

While this music is often dauntingly different and hard to get close to, it is not all that new: Anthony Braxton’s abstract musings, John Cage’s bare-bones conceptualism, the searingly impressionistic pure sound forays of Ligeti or Penderecki, have all done it before. It’s ostensibly completely dissociated from, even antithetical to conventional — and most unconventional — notions of “music.” That it is so easily dismissed as noise intrigues me: Rather than mere noise, I think this kind of music is simply the opposite, the other side of the mirror, of the musical approach Western man is used to.

In the past few weeks, solo, duo, trio and other recitals have been given by most of the local practitioners of this art, as well as a few imported from other areas of the world, most of the action centered at Giorgio Gomelsky’s Zu loft. There were duets between guitarist Chadbourne and

Robert Fripp

at exercising some inestful restraint I maintain I focus what I do though than make it more diffuse, with electronics and synthesis, the way most people, among very shallow to me; they all be using a regular old organ synthesizer or something. It’s a potentially incredible device. The guy I’ve seen recently on synthesis interests me this young guy.

Robert Fripp

Steve Beresford and David Toop, who came to Zu on leave from England’s improvising collective called Company, used a multitude of objects, found objects and esoteric ethnic instruments to sometimes harrowing, sometimes humorous effect, setting up bizarre, whimsical logic/anti-logic paradoxes in sound. Toop, on bamboo tubes, was then joined by violinist Nigel Coombes for a stunningly modulated example of more “musical” free improvisation. The finale was the 2000 Statues Orchestra at Columbia’s McMillin Theater, with Zorn, Chadbourne, Ostertag, Fripp, Beresford and a host of others. Two long works were offered, each following the by-now standard freestyle arrangement of building and subsidizing orchestral textures, alternating with spontaneous solos. The sounds overall were difficult, willfully ugly, yet strangely evocative. There was genuine humor in the music, in a brief swing passage — Zorn proving he can play straight and melodic — and a hilarious blues parody by Chadbourne. Basically, a thoroughly unusual and disturbingly original conception was in evidence, as well as an air of preternaturalness best summed up in one listener’s reaction: “It sounded like a contorted elephant trapped in barbed wire.”

This is music beyond formlessness, in a whole new realm. These guys aren’t just peering into the doorway of the unknown: They’ve taken a flying leap into the Black Hole. DEVO described their first album as “The important sound of things falling apart.” Ha! They don’t even know the half of it.