

On Location

Festivals, concerts, clubs

Michael Snow Memorial Music Gallery, Toronto, Canada

Until recently, the film maker and composer Michael Snow (10 December 1928–5 January 2023) was known as “Canada’s greatest living artist”, an honorific for which he was proud, but which always obscured what he thought was his greatest accomplishment: his music. As a result, he would have chuckled at the news that his public memorial requires the art community to sit silently while his longtime musical collaborators, CCMC (Canadian Creative Music Collective) perform a live improv set in his honour. Around 200 stalwarts of the art scene dutifully fill the 918 Bathurst Centre for Culture, a converted Buddhist Temple that serves as the current home of the itinerant Music Gallery, a performance space founded by original CCMC members.

On stage is an expanded version of the CCMC line-up, including Snow’s original co-founders, Nobuo Kubota (voice/percussion) and Al Mattes (electric bass); longtime participants John Kamevaar (Octapad Digital Percussion Pad), John Oswald (tenor sax), Paul Dutton (voice); and recent regular Mani Mazinani (CAT Synthesizer). Casey Sokol is unfortunately unable to join due to recent knee surgery, and while his contribution would have been most welcome, it’s fitting that the piano bench, where Snow had sat, remains empty.

After a joke by Dutton apologising for being late – “We were trying to put together a set list” – Kubota leads off with a low chant and a small sound box that provides a synthetic drone undertow. As usual, Kubota plays with language and voice – alternating between Japanese and gibberish and lampooning the local audience’s inability to tell the difference. His eulogy begins seriously, but slowly moves into the surreal when he starts hitting his head with an amplified rubber hammer, triggering a loud, humorous “tok”.

A low bass sound slowly comes in and the rest of the group join the fray. Dutton’s buzzing kisses and vocal splats duet with Oswald’s saxophone squeaks as Mattes provides bass runs underneath. Mazinani’s CAT synthesizer playing offers counterpoint, along with sonic homages to Snow, who often used the same synthesizer in performance. Early on the CAT’s high whistles evoke Snow’s whistle solos from his film *Rameau’s Nephew*, and later a deep octave dive calls to mind a sequence from *La Région Centrale*.

After staying in the background for the first part of the set, Kamevaar takes a prominent role with his Octapad, presenting a sudden rhythmic drum solo. Kubota takes the baton back – literally – hitting his head a few more times before launching into another vocal solo that leads into an extended group improv filled with paired timbres: two voices, the sax and the

synth, the drum and the bass, with the hi-hat riding high above.

The absurdity of the moment, seven grown men making strange and odd noises in honour of a dead friend, contrasts with the particular virtuosity of their performance. Finally, the sounds scale back, releasing tensions, but Oswald won’t let it go, leading to another Kamevaar drum solo with Mazinani’s bass synth underpinning. Dutton’s throat flutters, Oswald squawks again and a cell phone rings in the audience and brings us back to earth.

At the intermission, Laurie Kwasnik presents a ten minute cut of her work-in-progress, *Fields Of Snow*, which focuses on his musical performances over the years. The footage is a revelation, especially a sequence dating back to the 1950s with Snow burning it up as a ragtime piano player. Further footage of Snow playing is looped in a video gallery in a separate room, playing concurrently to the concert and through the intermission. I don’t partake, but it is nice to know that Snow is playing somewhere close by.

The intermission allows the less diehard music fans to cycle back into the night, on to another gallery opening or home for an aspirin. After a decent pause, CCMC make their way back onto the stage for a second set. The tension of the earlier set, with a packed crowd and something to prove, doesn’t quite carry through into the next one, but the interplay of old friends is still pleasurable.

As the second set winds its way down, a heckler makes her way towards the stage, quietly taunting the group. While some members ignore her interjections, Oswald lends her a mic and Mary Margaret O’Hara joins in, adding her own vocal flutters and whoops to the music, backed by brother Marcus, who slowly lets the air out of a half-deflated balloon. When CCMC’s improv fizzles, Mary Margaret O’Hara steps up to the front mic to sing a final verse from a Patsy Cline song: “*I love you so much, it hurts me/Darlin’; that’s why I’m so blue/I’m so afraid to go to bed at night/Afraid of losing you*”.

Chris Kennedy

John Dikeman/Pat Thomas/John Edwards/ Steve Noble

Lit & Phil, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK
Tyneside is the first stop on the stellar quartet’s UK mini-tour. Their performance reminds me that free jazz fire music, over 50 years old, has evolved its own common practice. In its early days, this challenging music received little support and much abuse; now it attracts quite large and very enthusiastic audiences. The gig is sold out on the night, with about 60 people filling this compact and historic venue – post-Covid, music audiences are finally picking up.

This is the second time the quartet have played together. The first was in 2019, when they made a recording at London’s Cafe Oto, recently released as *Volume 1* by the 577 label.

Pat Thomas (piano), John Edwards (bass) and Steve Noble (drums) are familiar figures to UK audiences, American tenor player John Dikeman much less so. Dikeman, born in 1983, grew up in Wyoming. Moving to the East Coast, he studied with Milford Graves and Joe Maneri; pioneer free improv saxophonist Jack Wright was a major influence. Dikeman worked with Nate Wooley and Daniel Carter, before finally settling in Amsterdam. William Parker and Hamid Drake inspired him after he discovered them on record as a teen, and he now shares a trio with them.

I first encountered Dikeman’s explosive music at Amsterdam’s Bimhuis, with his trio Universal Indians plus guest Joe McPhee. Dikeman’s playing has Albert Ayler’s huge, thick, grainy, vocalised tone. The sound is all, and squalling lines unfold essentially simple melodic material. The holiness church origins of free jazz are real for Dikeman. Some years ago, he explained to me by email that “Coltrane... was Old Testament, where Ayler was the New Testament – ecstatic and rejoicing!” With Dikeman involved, a performance is rarely less than blistering.

Shifting swing and tumbling free jazz momentum is one very skilful aspect of the group’s work. Edwards and Noble steer the group through ever-changing time-feels including episodes of slurred swing – towards the end of the first set, a swing groove segues into a free ballad. This is postmodern freedom. Noble’s thematic approach to drumming is clearest in his solos – the first one is notable for an Ed Blackwell-ish use of beaters.

Another subtlety is the way the quartet switch through every instrumental combination – tenor saxophone and drums duos reminiscent of Coltrane and Rashied Ali, piano and saxophone, and so on. The bass amp fails on the night, so the quartet courageously do without any amplification – to my mind, the results are preferable. John Edwards is one of the loudest bassists unamplified, with a lot of slapping and pulling.

Both sets feature fully improvised, no holds barred expressionist fire music – an arch form with an incandescent climax, and no obvious use of compositions. A highlight of the second set is a rather baroque episode of fluttering, trilling solo piano by Pat Thomas. The improvisation concludes in a quick march-like feel with staccato punctuations and slap-tongued saxophone, segueing into pointillism. On the dirge-like coda, Dikeman sounds closer to late Coltrane than Ayler. The friend I am with finds the high intensity too unrelenting – a common criticism of fire music. But as Dikeman would insist, the sound is all.

Andy Hamilton

Saidi Kanda & Mvula Mandondo

The Rose Hill, Brighton, UK
Tanzanian multi-instrumentalist and singer Saidi Kanda has lived in the UK for over 30