

JazzTimes

18th annual FIMAV

Venue/ Location: Victoriaville, Quebec Canada

Location:

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John Zorn, Bill Laswell, Fred Frith and Dave Lombardo were waiting in the wings, ready to cap off the 2001 Victoriaville festival, with the 25th show of outside instincts in five densely packed musical days. Before they came onstage, intrepid founding artistic director Michel Levasseur suddenly interrupted his introductory comments to apply a red clown nose-double takes all around. It was a startling moment, coming from the normally soft-spoken director, but not an undeserved impulse of giddiness. This was, after all, the most successful festival in its 18-year history, and also an artistic triumph over an alleged aesthetic midlife crisis.

There is no other festival on the continent quite like FIMAV (Festival International Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, aka Victo), which has always celebrated improvisational and otherwise experimental artists from jazz, rock and classical camps, as well as outsiders with no card-carrying idiomatic affiliation. In recent years, some festival watchers have assailed a presumed stodginess, clamoring for a change in focus-more representation of the surge in experimental electronic musicians, for instance, less of the old guard of the avant-garde. Somehow, Levasseur pulled off a hat trick with this year's program, satisfying varied customers and even establishing new resonances among unlikely sources.

One found, for instance, some disarming links between disparate characters: the dazzling, texturally hypnotic set by the European electronic quartet called Poire_Z-Gunter Muller, Erik M, Norbert Moslang, Andy Guhl and not a single laptop among them, refreshingly-was followed by a similarly compelling and minutely sound-obsessive trio setting, but entirely acoustic, with clarinetist Xavier Charles, saxophonist John Butcher and trumpeter Axel Dorn. Their hyper-sensitive explorations of extended technique and buried timbral treasures in their instruments, resisting all temptations to "blow" or otherwise sate egos, amounted to the most poetic set of the festival.

Dorner proved himself to be a festival hero, returning in the fantastic penultimate set of the festival, a fluid sound painting created with venturesome pianist Sophie Agnel and antic French turntablist Erik M. After that, the jammy Zorn-Laswell-Frith-Lombardo set seemed stiff and anticlimactic. Then again, drummer Lombardo fared much better as the tight as an over-tightened drum behind Mike Patton's raucous, arty, speed-metal band Fantoma. Not

surprisingly, the crowd for that loveably in-yer-face show was young, huge and ever swaying.

Speaking of the Victo rock element, one boon to the fest's health is the fact that members of Sonic Youth have trained their artier side projects in the direction of this humble, beautiful Quebecois town. Thurston Moore has been here a few times, and showed up this year in a duet with Japanese noise-guitarist and catharsis merchant Keiji Haino. Moore was surprisingly circumspect, a support player to Haino's naturally attention-seizing shaman persona.

More impressive was the Victo debut of Youth front woman Kim Gordon in an abstracted, quasi-art-pop setting with Jim O'Rourke, Ikue Mori and DJ Olive. Gordon was powerfully charismatic as she deconstructed tunes, abused her guitar and droned her way into our heart cavities. More, please.

Though also supplying tidbits of his own private sonic experimentation, Bill Frisell presented a fairly radical rectitude, compared to the rest of the fest. His trio with drummer Kenny Wolleson and foursquare bassist Tony Scherr dealt out more triads than any other visitor to Victo this year, and without apology. The set included dreamy covers of "Shenendoah," John McLaughlin's 11/8 "hit" "Follow Your Heart" and "What's Going On."

Other popular repeat visitors, up from New York, included Dave Douglas, with his excellent, pliable Witness ensemble, and Zorn's Bar Kokhba, your basic Jewish music in South America by way of the Knitting Factory pact. Both Douglas and Zorn-whose sets in Victo with Masada have been past zeniths-are riding high on the power of expanded ensemble colors, bringing their own personalized concepts to the table.

In other noise news, Victo regular Otomo Yoshihide's alternately bracing and meditative "Cathode" project mixed electronics, feedback and the resoundingly acoustic source of Ishikawa Ko's ancient Japanese reed instrument, the sho. Afterward, the crowd willingly perched in the thoroughly darkened space where Amy Denio and Francisco Lopez did their head-clearing shtick, building up a thunderous wall of sound that rocked one's cerebrum and sternum almost equally. British electronic marauders with the punning name of Stock, Hausen and Walkman whipped up a pleasingly kaleidoscopic barrage of sounds.

Other Victo regulars were up to plenty of good stuff: crazed British vocal virtuoso Phil Minton inevitably stole the show with the avant-cabaret group Four Walls; French reedman Louis Sclavis teamed up with Montrealer Jean Derome for a fantastic, site-specific, Franco-Quebecois collaboration in a jazz-quartet mode, a perfect melding of structure and freedom; Silent Block's theatrical sonic palette included objects on throbbing speaker cones, corporeal sound artifacts, and other antidigital means, worked up to a fever pitch; Vancouver's Broken Record Chamber swerved through noise, rhythm and humor, fetchingly.

And, first but not least, the festival's opening concert belonged to evocative Hungarian Tibor Szemzo's blended the sonorous lilt of his narration, poetic texts, archival film footage and artful rock-meets-minimalist settings. From that early vantage point, it was many shows until Levasseur donned the victorious clown nose, but it was an auspicious beginning to a left-field festival that continues to deserve love and respect.