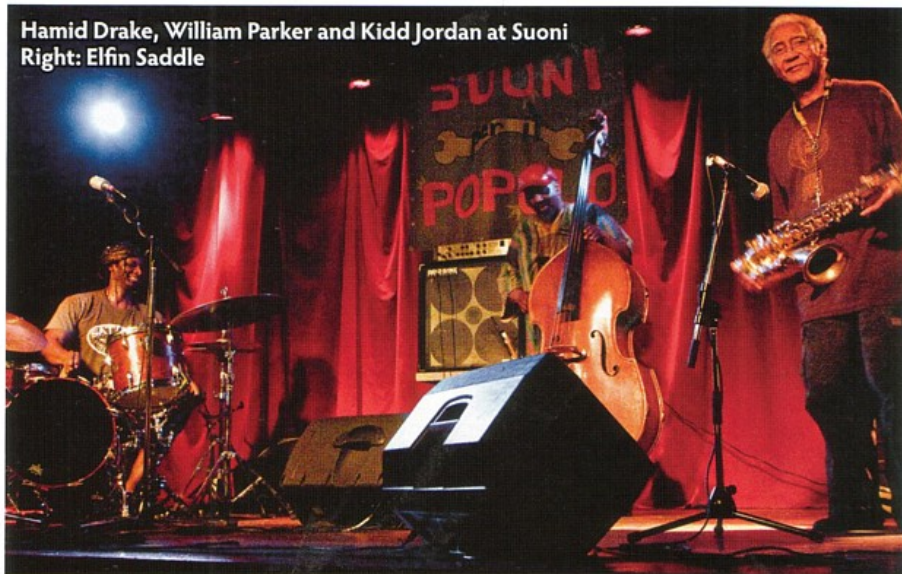


Hamid Drake, William Parker and Kidd Jordan at Suoni
Right: Elfin Saddle



Suoni Per Il Popolo

Montréal, Quebec

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Festival International de Jazz de Montréal

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The Suoni per il Popolo's 10th anniversary edition featured 110 acts over 21 days, offering an intensive experience of cutting-edge rock, jazz, and electronic music. The Casa del Popolo's new live music room was quieter than the adjoining resto-bar previously used, providing a worthy partner to the main Sala Rossa hall. Simultaneous live performances every evening meant that one could catch at most half of the action, and folks could be seen scurrying from one venue to the other between sets. Freeing up the old Casa space opened up a third option, nightly DJ spin-nings.

Festivals as eclectic and contemporary as the Suoni provide an opportunity to survey emerging musical trends and technologies. For example, there were 20 solo sets, with approaches ranging from a cappella voice to layered loops blanketed by reverb. The latter was especially prevalent, perhaps a sign of how hard economic times have forced musicians to find ways to create a full sound with minimal personnel, or maybe it's simply that cheap digital memory chips have expanded the possibilities of this approach.

Noveller, aka Brooklyn guitarist Sarah Lipstate, sculpted thoughtful loop-based work benefitting from a variety of strategies. She invoked prerecorded backing tracks and melodies, creating songs with widely varying arrangements that avoided the predictability often found in music based on additive loops. One frantic piece layered guitar feedback with rapidly strummed notes above the fingerboard, conjuring up a thrashing wall of

sound, while the next brought the volume down to quiet swells with overlaid bell harmonics. Two other one-woman bands used similar set-ups, feeding live cello playing into delay devices. While Montrealer Rebecca Foon stuck to low-register lines and elegant tonal patterns, New Yorker Julia Kent's relaxing atmospherics resulted from thick layers of extended techniques. Other solo highlights included C. Spencer Yeh (as Burning Star Core) and Didi Bruckmayr. Yeh started with long distorted tones sprinkled with fast violin runs. Over time, a prerecorded heavy metal drum solo crashed in and water sounds meshed with cut-up vocal lines. Visually, Bruckmayr projected an angst-filled persona set against a backdrop of computer-generated monsters and 3-D eels that moved about like demented screen savers. Musically, he displayed masterful command of a wide array of vocal techniques. The overall effect was akin to watching an ultra-tense video game.

The Bruckmayr show was part of two evenings billed as "What's Up Vienna," featuring collaborations between musicians from that city and Montrealers of a similar bent. NTSC is a duo of Billy Roisz and Dieb 13 whose interactive setup intimately mixed video and audio, the images bouncing to the music in Norman McLarenesque fashion. While the technology was impressive, the images never varied from strobing test patterns with frequent loss of vertical hold, while the music's electronic bleeps, doodles and LP surface noise was overly familiar. I look forward to this system being used with deeper material. The Viennese sub-festival also included a wonderful set from Christof Kurzmann on vocals, sax, and laptop and Martin Brandlmeyr on percussion. This was electropop in the widest sense, quiet electro-acoustic improvisation through which occasional songs broke through. Finally, Radian set up like a rock band with guitar, bass, keyboards and drums, but allowed only fragments of pop hooks, deemphasizing rhythm and melody.

The avant-rock Constellation label, best known for recordings by Godspeed You! Black Emperor, celebrated their 13th anniversary by spotlighting their current roster. Most memorable was Elfin Saddle, a folksy Rock in Opposition trio with charming vocal harmonies. Each member often played two or more

instruments at once: one player, for instance, would kick a snare drum while one-armed accordion playing left the other arm free to play a tune on toy xylophone.

Weird rock ensembles included Gavin John Sheehan's 15-piece orchestra of Montreal post-rock luminaries. Their set began with a thundering crescendo of droning feedback, overblown horns and small wind instruments, progressed into early Pink Floydian pop (with floating vocals over strummed acoustic guitar) and finally settled into dense instrumental rock. The No Neck Blues Band's set started at the stroke of midnight, bringing their brand of eerily menacing free improvisation to the stage. Hypnotic tribal beats mixed with shrieks of slide guitar, pounding one-fingered piano and synth chords, repetitive yet organic. Hair Police's non-stop set of thrashing white noise rock featured unintelligible vocals and screeching feedback guitar, making early no-wave bands seem like muzak by comparison.

A wide variety of strategies were also employed by jazz artists. The Kidd Jordan/William Parker/Hamid Drake trio showered the capacity crowd with two hours of high-energy psychedelic free jazz. The Matthew Shipp Trio's approach was more measured, the set-length improvisations interspersing Shipp's own compositions with standards, including a rousing "Take the A Train." Between these two models were the improvisations of Ken Vandermark's two outfits, the Frame Quartet and Vandermark 5. Their material remained highly structured but not as tightly wound as Shipp's. Both Vandermark units were held together by funky drummer Tim Daisy, giving the music a rockier feel compared to the others' lighter, more fluid touch.

European free improvisation was amply represented by the Canadian premiere of Alexander von Schlippenbach's 11-piece Globe Unity Orchestra, as well as several shows by subgroups of the larger ensemble. Although few original members remain from the group's original 1966 line-up they still pack a wallop, and even with no instruments miked the Sala overflowed with powerful waves of sound. Each player took a solo turn and Rudi Mahall's lines raised the roof in what was already a bamburner of a set. Like the festival itself the concert offered information overload, and both will take some more time to process. **Lawrence Joseph**