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The power of two

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Wadada Leo Smith, David Murray, Kaki King, Nels Cline, Petra Haden, Marc Ribot and Jherrek Bischoff (from left), Town Hall, NYC, May 2014. Courtesy Red Bull Music Academy

Since 2010, attendees of the annual Undead Music Series in New York have had the opportunity to witness “A Night of Improvised Round Robin Duets,” which co-presenter Adam Schatz describes as “the greatest way to trick a roomful of people into listening to 100-percent improvised music for two hours.” After shuttling among venues, the Round Robin landed this year on May 14 at the Town Hall, a capacious room that would’ve been unbookable if not for the co-sponsorship of the Red Bull Music Academy (RBMA). “We love the historical context of the legendary jazz shows that have happened in that space,” said Undead co-founder Brice Rosenbloom shortly before the event.

This was the first theater-seated show in Round Robin history (they’ve also transpired in New Orleans and Detroit), and like last year’s go-round at Brooklyn Masonic Temple—the first Undead-RBMA collaboration—the span of genres, aesthetic temperaments and even generations was huge. “Allen Toussaint comes from a [New Orleans] background that we haven’t really highlighted much,” said Rosenbloom, “so we’re thrilled that he’s bringing that tradition into the mix. It’s also great having someone like Wadada Leo Smith onstage with younger folks like Jamie Lidell and Daedelus.”

“We like the idea of challenging people,” Schatz said about choosing participants from within the jazz world and well outside of it. “But we also don’t want it to be a negative experience for anyone. We do the order a couple of days before, so the artists don’t have much time to think about who they’re playing with. It goes deeper into the truth of this show, which is that you can’t play with an ego. You only have 10 minutes. You’re playing with two different people and you’re contributing to this bigger piece. So this is not about you. When you experience it as an audience, it’s something that will only happen that way once. You are involved in a singular human event, and isn’t that fucking fantastic?”

The Round Robin always starts and finishes with a solo performer, so at Town Hall it was Nels Cline’s electric guitar that put things in motion. After five minutes the mutton-chopped Daedelus (Alfred Darlington) took position at his laptop, sending huge and amorphous low-register sounds into the space. Trumpeter Dave Douglas brought about an atmospheric and lyrical shift, prompting Daedelus into a slow groove as he summoned thundering bass tones by whipping his arm forward, almost like pitching a baseball. It was one of the night’s most striking gestures.

Shigeto, the Detroit beatmaker, confined himself to drum set and a fairly straight-ahead swing feel as Douglas wound down. But when keyboardist and fellow Detroiter Amp Fiddler emerged on synth and Nord electric piano, first with Shigeto and then with Marco Benevento on acoustic piano, an enigmatic sort of magic took hold. Fiddler’s sparkling lines and whimsical phrasing brought the show to one of its early peaks. That sort of attuned listening could also be heard when multi-instrumentalist Jherrek Bischoff, on a vintage “viola” electric bass (à la Paul McCartney), paired up with tenor legend David Murray for a dialogue full of sharp angles and fertile spaces.

“I have no idea what Allen Toussaint is going to sound like as an improviser, none at all,” Schatz said before the gig. Well, funny thing. After an inspired piano-guitar colloquy with Marc Ribot, Toussaint was forced into a kind of juggling act as Jamie Lidell struggled for several interminable minutes to get sound from his gear. Toussaint played the *Jeopardy* theme, Chopin’s funeral march—anything to keep the gears turning and the mood light. Leave it to this master entertainer to turn a near-disaster into an opportunity. Lidell finally leapt in with just the right muscular, gospel-drenched ad lib vocal, beginning with “I’m sorrrrrrry!”

There were more head-turners. Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington explored swing and groove in a loft-jazz way with Murray and then Ribot. James Carter went straight to triple fortissimo on tenor sax, first with Benevento and then with the comparatively quiet Petra Haden on wordless vocal. After Toussaint left, Lidell manipulated his vocals and sonics more abstractly against the steady tabla beat of Karsh Kale.

Occupying an important slot just before the end, Kaki King played electric guitar and set up straightforward groove figures with Kale and trumpet great Wadada Leo Smith, the final musician in the order. It worked well enough: Smith’s penetrating wail on muted and open trumpet, resounding in the big hall, was a thing of great beauty. But one got little sense of the facility and textural depth that make King so unique as an acoustic stylist.

Following his several minutes of solo reverie, Smith walked off, then reemerged with Carter and Murray in tow. Soon every musician except Toussaint was onstage for a jam session encore. But did this illuminate or add to what had already taken place? Not really. Nothing would have been more powerful an ending statement than Smith’s haunting horn all alone, much like Joe Lovano’s tenor sendoff in Brooklyn last spring. That was closure enough.

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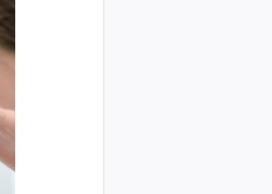
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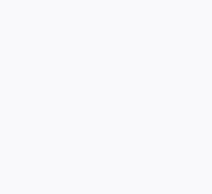
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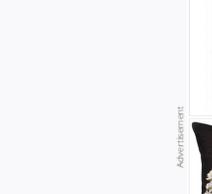
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