

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2008

A SJ

The Philadelphia Inquirer

WWW.PHILLY.COM

Review Music

West shows he has guts; it's a voice he's lacking

By Dan DeLuca
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Brave is the word you'll hear, if you haven't already, in reference to Kanye West's new album, *808s & Heartbreak*.

The rapper-producer's fourth studio album, which has already been declared "great art" by no less an authority than West himself, is brave, much like a glamorous Hollywood actor packing on the pounds and getting down and dirty for a seriously unpretty role. (And in hopes of an Oscar.)

Album review

Kanye West: 808s & Heartbreak

★★½ (out of four stars)

It's brave in the tradition of radical departures such as David Bowie's 1977 *Low* or Neil Young's 1982 *Trans*, in that it represents a major artist's risking alienation of his core audience by refusing to deliver what they loved about him in the first place.

How radical a departure is it? It's been hyped as an album filled with West singing, not rapping. That overstates the case: Many of West's navel-gazing ruminations on these 11 songs are a mix of straight-up rapping and poor vocalizing.

The fascinating failure that is *808s & Heartbreak* (Roc-A-Fella ★★½) is seriously short on two things.

Though it takes its name from the See **WEST** on H6

Kanye West goes in a different direction on his new CD.



BOB WILLIAMS / For The Inquirer

The members of Baltimore's Complex Tumble — (from left) John Dierker, Mike Formanek, Will Redmond and Dave Ballou — warm up at the West Philadelphia restaurant Gojjo, Sci Fi Philly's home base. The concerts, with local and out-of-town acts, are held nearly every Sunday night.

BLOWING their own HORN

With the Sci Fi Philly concert series, young Philadelphia jazz artists are helping to create a scene for themselves.



Philly's Sonic Liberation Front, an Afro-Cuban group with Terry Lawson on sax and Todd Margasak on trumpet, plays at Gojjo. "The energy is always happening," says a series organizer.

By David R. Adler
FOR THE INQUIRER

It's Game Four of the World Series, and patrons of Gojjo, an Ethiopian restaurant at 45th Street and Baltimore Avenue, watch the Phillies downstairs on two screens. Upstairs in the cafe, Ethiopian men are just as engrossed in a version of bocce played on a green felt table. Across the hall, behind a closed glass door, avant-garde jazz is sounding at full intensity.

For the young musicians who run the Sci Fi Philly concert series, it's a fairly typical Sunday night.

Since launching in May, Sci Fi

Philly (scifiphilly.com) has become a cornerstone of jazz and improvised music in the city, a haven for underexposed local talent and a magnet for high-level out-of-town bands.

At a time when musicians of all genres are forming their own labels, distributing their own music, and directing their own careers, Sci Fi Philly follows the same imperative: Create your own gigs, form your own scene.

Sci Fi evenings are held nearly every Sunday at 9 p.m. and normally feature two or three acts for a \$5 cover. On World Series night, Philly's own Sonic Liberation Front, an edgy Afro-Cuban See **GOJJO** on H12

A Conversation With ... Gary Steuer

City's new arts 'czar' rules a tottering empire

By Stephan Salisbury
INQUIRER CULTURE WRITER

ting into when he accepted Mayor Nutter's offer to resuscitate an office that



Creating their own jazz scene

GOJO from H1

group, shared the bill with Complex Tumble, a Baltimore free-jazz quartet featuring esteemed bassist Michael Formanek.

Despite the ball game, turnout was a respectable two dozen or so. "The energy is always happening, regardless of the attendance. If 20 people show up, it feels great," says bassist Jon Barrios, 35, who runs the series with his roommate, alto saxophonist Dan Scofield, 27, and their friend Stephen Buono, 32.

Listeners in the rear were multitasking, watching the Phillies with the sound off. Screams and applause erupted sporadically from downstairs. Drummer Will Redman of Complex Tumble called out between numbers: "What's the score?"

Bad economy or not, musicians are accustomed to hard times. Yet in jazz the talent pool is deeper than ever.

For several years, Ars Nova Workshop and Bowerbird have nourished Philly's experimental music circuit, staging concerts in various venues. Tritone, the South Street rock club, reserves some nights for cutting-edge jazz as well. But these presenters alone can't meet the demand.

Sci Fi Philly, with sponsorship from Ars Nova and support from the High Two record label, has picked up some of the slack.

"Gojo fulfills a need for not-so-famous musicians to take their music outside of New York, to help it grow and to cross-pollinate with players from other cities," says New York-based saxophonist Michael McGinnis.

Sci Fi also provides a consistent space that can foster not just close listening but also social interaction among fans.

"A lot of shows," says Scofield, "you go and sit in your folding chair and leave. You see all these people with common interests who don't necessarily hang out. Here they can show up an hour before and eat, and then stay later."

Gojo's manager, Habtamu Shitaye, 48, gives Sci Fi free rein and likes what he sees. "The music is a big plus," he says.

And it attracts all types, from young guys in Sonic Youth and Tool T-shirts to older enthusiasts. Maggie Davenport, "50-something" and from West Philly, enjoyed her first visit, noting, "There's more to the place than meets the eye."

Carl Anderson, 62, from Yeadon, has attended nearly every Sci Fi event. "It's young, talented people, it's cheap, and if I'm not enjoying it I can walk out, which I haven't done."

The series has exceeded expectations.



BOB WILLIAMS / For The Inquirer
Terry Lawson of Sonic Liberation Front performs at Gojo. Since launching in May, Sci Fi Philly has become a cornerstone of jazz and improvised music in the city.

"We're booked into March," Scofield says. "Except for maybe three shows, the turnout has been either solid or fire-code violation."

Spreading the wealth is the rule here — the musicians receive 100 percent of proceeds from the door. "People are pleasantly surprised even to be paid, which is bizarre," Scofield adds.

Barrios, who used to run a club in Fayetteville, Ark., called the Five Squirrels, knows all too well why music venues tend to focus on their bottom line. "The benefit of our series," he says, "is you're taking an unused space, and musicians run it and bypass that whole struggle. It's very hard for a club to make money, I understand. But musicians shouldn't be paying that price."

Sci Fi has showcased a broad spectrum of local talent, from aspiring players such as bassist Evan Lipson, violinist Katt Hernandez, and trombonist Daniel Blackberg to veterans Bobby Zankel, Edgar Bateman and Elliott Levin.

At the same time, Sci Fi is raising Philadelphia's profile as a destination for touring bands, and a regional hub for new and progressive music. Recent shows have featured the groundbreaking New York groups Brinsk, OK/OK, and Mostly Other People Do the Killing, as well as the Chicago ensemble Herculaneum. These bands boast some of the country's most promising player-composers, including Jon Irabagon, Jacob Wick and Aryeh Koblinsky.

On Nov. 16, Sci Fi presented Ionic Bonding, a benefit for Neighborhood Bike Works, with more than a dozen

saxophone-drum duos playing five-minute sets. Tonight's show will feature the quartets Racket Club and MSPV, Michael Mantra's Audio Emotif, and a duo between local sax veteran Jack Wright and his bassist son, Ben. Other shows have involved the balafon, mandolins and computers.

Music this offbeat may never gain a mass following, but there's no reason it can't appeal to fans immersed in avant-rock, DJ culture, and other alternative orbits. This is one of Sci-Fi's loftier long-term goals: audience outreach and development.

The series is also offering incentives for the creation of new music. In partnership with a nonprofit run by Zankel, Sci Fi will award \$250 for a selected musician to premiere his or her funded work at Gojo on Dec. 21. A small grant, perhaps, but "it's symbolic," says Scofield. Submissions have poured in.

When possible, Sci Fi and its allied presenters avoid scheduling shows at conflicting times, which says a lot about the camaraderie of this underground musical sphere. Even if Sci Fi, Ars Nova, Bowerbird, the electro-minimalist Philadelphia Sound Forum, and Tritone's Avant Ascension series (third Wednesday of every month) have their own agendas and appeal to different crowds, there's a good deal of overlap. "Everyone knows it's in their interest to work together," Barrios says.

Initiative is the key ingredient, and Sci Fi proves the do-it-yourself route needn't be arduous. As Barrios says: "You find the place, set it up, get the right people involved. Something needs to be done, you can do it."

2009 WORLD TOUR

神韻 DIVINE PERFORMING ARTS

A glorious culture reborn

"Breathtaking."
— CurtainUp

DECEMBER 19 - 21
THE MERRIAM THEATER
250 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia

Ticketmaster (215) 336-1234

www.DivinePerformingArts.org

Presented by the Greater Philadelphia Asian Culture Center and the Greater Philadelphia Falun Dafa Association

Cadillac

RED TAG EVENT

Right now you'll find unprecedented values on our best-selling luxury models. From the award-winning Cadillac CTS to the legendary Escalade, Red Tag incentives have never been more impressive. The price on the tag is the price you pay. Now's the time to move up to Cadillac.



2008 ESCALADE

\$69,515 MSRP

\$64,260 YOUR PRICE

-\$6,750 CASH BACK

\$57,510 RED TAG PRICE* AFTER ALL OFFERS

\$12,005 TOTAL VALUE FROM MSRP