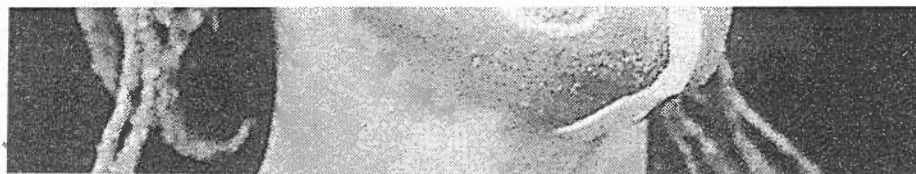


of bikutsi, a genre that literally means “to beat the ground continuously.”

Rising Senegalese star Alioune Mbaye Nder drove Le Setsima Group through the concert's highly charged second half. Although lyrics in his native Wolof tended to be lost on the crowd, Nder's nuanced declamation and charismatic presence superseded all language barriers. The outdoors lessened the cutting power of the sabar drums, with which Mor Guèye Seck and Lamine Toure improvised visceral running commentary on the vocals. The tamas (talking drums) were also less prominent. If these were concessions to the perceived tastes of Western audiences, the newcomers should return with the music as they love to play it and we love to hear it. —Lara Pellegrinelli



GIVE THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT: LES TÊTES BRULÉES' JEAN-MARIE AHANDA.

about barricade placement, and said the queue had dispersed into an unmanageable mass once the problem was corrected. “The PD has always been very respectful of our hip-hop audiences,” she says. Ruben believes the 6000-capacity venue was full at the time the

line was cut, given that she allows more space for older, picnicky crowds like the ones drawn by Fresh and his cronies.

“I was wondering where everybody went,” said Fresh after the show. “I got a lot of calls on my cell phone from friends and family trying

David First Slips Inaudibly
From Drones to Rock and Back

JUMPING THE GROOVE

BY KYLE GANN

The day minimalism was born, inertia became a problem again. It had last been one in the 18th century. Bach and Handel, once they started a musical movement, were content to chug along without significant change in tempo or texture until the final chord. Haydn and Mozart, taking cues from operatic usage, learned with difficulty how to modulate, smoothly or dramatically as a piece required, from allegro to adagio, from frisky 16th-notes to sturdy whole notes and back. And that, it seemed, was that. But then, in 1963, Terry Riley let some tape loops run over and over and over, and momentum once again exerted its formidable gravity.

Because every rock lover knows the power of a groove, knows the pleasure the body takes in continued predictable movement, and knows how suicidal it is for a band to break a propulsive dance rhythm. Classical composers, on the other hand, deeply resent the groove as an infringement of their expressiveness, a grid that straitjackets their compositional powers. Nevertheless, minimalism's steady-state beat has attracted an enthusiastic audience, and postminimalist composers have had to relearn how to quietly escape the momentum dilemma without los-

ing the smooth, meditative pacing that makes the style click. David First's recent success in that venture is what made his June 7 concert at The Den at Two Boots such a quietly eloquent kick in the pants.

To begin with, First has always been a master at slipping things by you anyway. His group starts playing consonant drones that you quickly fall in tune with, then five minutes later they're playing a wildly out-of-tune cacophony, and you can't remember where the change came. Gradualness is his basic m.o. Now, however, he's raising the stakes. He used to be a rocker before turning to more austere microtonal continua; in this concert and in an upcoming CD, he's making a bold attempt to prove again that he can make his music appeal to more than new-music cognoscenti, by incorporating songs and even dance tunes. It's one thing to slip gradually from in-tune chords to out-of-tune ones. Slipping from drones into rock songs and back is a tougher proposition.

So First disappeared from the scene for a few years in a buzz of background creativity, and reappeared in this '50s rec-room-looking space with Jane Scarpantoni on cello and Bob Hoffnar on pedal steel guitar; First played computer, harmonica, and guitar with e-bow. Thick drones, with a prominent major ninth, filled the room, and pitches began to slide in and out of tune. From somewhere, a syncopated beat was hinted at, but you couldn't tell whether it was added by the computer, came from another room, or resulted from the beating of the harmonies. Finally, an undeniable backbeat emerged, and First started picking

consumer culture. Then the soupstic *McSweeney's* took over as zine célèbre. But no. 14 proves that the crew—brainy, pugnacious Old Lefties who can actually write a sentence—haven't lost their bite, bringing together foaming invective, engaged labor reporting, first-person anthropology on the society called capitalism, and engagingly bizarre literature. Often described as contrarian, *The Baffler* is far more honest and far less popular than that would imply (Limbaugh's a contrarian); its union-social democratic line has been unhip, even on the left, since the '70s. On the other hand, it's still hipper than *The Nation*. —David Krasnow

light arabesques on his guitar in an easy, salsa-tinged tempo.

Intimate as the space was, I wasn't aware when the beat first became audible, when First started blowing his harmonica, or when his guitar drones gave way to light melodies. I caught when he began singing, initially just a drone on “ooh”—but I didn't notice when “ooh” turned quietly into lyrics for a song called “Baby Destiny.” I listened as the song trailed off with a computerized maraca beat as its loudest surviving component, but Scarpantoni had started playing 3-against-2 cross rhythms with those maracas before I realized it, and somehow the quiet rock song morphed into a continuum of pulses at diverse tempos. Grooves came and went, but dissolved bit by bit in processes too slow to register.

Can this gradualness bridge the gap between drone-minimalism and rock? Will rock fans sit through the drones for the songs, and new-music fans the songs for the microtonal and polytempo effects on either side? That's new music's most urgent question of recent years: whether it can put down roots in the commercial world and still bring its experimental baggage with it. First's upcoming CD, *Universary*, is full of dance beats imposed over impressively complex-looking tuning charts. (From the other side, the repetitive chord progression from “Pyramid Song” on Radiohead's new disc, *Amnesiac*, reminds me enough of Arvo Pärt to spark hopes for a bilateral rapprochement.) If there is a point of success in that direction, First, the master of the unnoticeable transition, may reach it before any of us are aware he's there. ▣