

Down But Not Out

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2001 AT 4 A.M.

I'll never forget my first trip on the New York subway, in 1981. I saw a sign that referred to the WTC, and my mental screen froze. Why in the world, I thought, is there a notice in the subway for Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*? I would have had a hell of a time figuring how Muslim extremists had bombed both books of Bach's keyboard masterpiece.

Like some monster performance-art piece gone horrifically awry, the worst terrorist strike in history played to a distinguished audience of avant-garde artists. By one of those succulent ironies that so characterize our city, the epicenter of American finance and that of American avant-garde music are only a few blocks from each other. Dozens of composers and new-music performers live south of Canal Street, most of whom witnessed at least some of the terror, several of whom became temporary refugees; but so far as a week's worth of frantic e-mails and phone calls could ascertain, none were injured or killed.

One of underground music's chief gurus, La Monte Young, and the artist's wife-collaborator, Marian Zazeela, had a reluctant front-row seat from their Church Street picture window. Electronic composer and sometime lutenist Laurie Spiegel, living six blocks from ground zero on Duane Street, refused to evacuate; living without electricity until September 16, she kept her spirits up by playing acoustic music by candlelight. Composer Barry Drogin was evacuated from his day job near the Custom House, and watched the horror from Liberty Park. Violinist Tom Chiu of the Flux Quartet, heading to work from Brooklyn despite having already seen the second blast, found himself in a Park Place subway station engulfed in smoke.

The composer living closest to the blast, as far as I can tell, was David First, only 1600 feet east of the south tower on Dutch Street. The first boom alerted him to a stream of papers floating into his courtyard. As the second plane hit, he says, "a huge gaseous ball of flame claimed our entire field of vision and threw us back onto our floor in horror." The toppling of the first tower turned the sky pitch black, but luckily he closed his iron shutters before the rushing cloud of smoke and debris reached his window. He grabbed two cases of CDs of the projects he's been working on for two years, plus an unfinished article for a new-music magazine, and went out into a street caked with what looked like two inches of gray snow. His wife, artist Patricia Smith, left behind years' worth of paintings whose fate, as of this writing, is still uncertain. With wet towels around their faces, they walked over the bridge to Brooklyn and relocated with a relative there.

Yet, for all the density of composers nearby, the music scene escaped miraculously with no apparent loss of talent. Touring helped. Robert Ashley was performing in Portugal with his right-hand singer Tom Buckner, Phill Niblock was in Gent, Belgium, Mikel Rouse in Berlin. Several composers, including Elodie Lauten and Joe Pehrson, have worked temp jobs at the WTC, but none were currently employed there. The only new-music-connected organization located there was the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, who have often sponsored important concerts. Having offices on the fifth floor, their staff escaped unhurt, although one artist who worked in their 91st-floor studios is missing. Ironically, they could rent cheap studios to artists because spaces became difficult to rent after the 1993 bombing attempt.

I had planned to hear Christina Wheeler at the Knitting Factory on the 11th, which of course didn't happen. Ten blocks north of ground zero, the Knitting Factory is closed indefinitely, and looking for places to move their scheduled concerts (get info at www.knittingfactory.com). Roulette, further up, has had to cancel one or two concert rentals mainly because the police haven't allowed foot traffic below Canal; their season will probably begin on schedule October 15. The Kitchen canceled some components of its Quebec festival due to the problematic logistics of getting artists and their equipment into the country. A bigger concern is money. There had been plans to make up the shortfall in city and NYSCA funding from recent years, and the emergency has apparently scotched those. New York new music has been hard hit financially, and now no relief is forthcoming.

Still, let its fans know that the Downtown music scene has survived intact. The only problem at present is, there's no downtown. But people express eagerness to start performing again, to show we're all still here. The reassuring news only confirms what I've said about Downtown composers for years: If they didn't have the survival skills of cockroaches, they'd have ceased to exist long ago.

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