



Hamilton: less slick, more nuanced analog synthesizers

LONA FOOTE

## Electric Games

By Kyle Gann

Tom Hamilton &  
J. D. Parran  
Loren Mazzacane  
Jon Rose

The synthesizer is such an anonymous instrument that few of its players have come up with a personal style. Tom Hamilton is one of the few who has. Example: *Best Value We've Seen Yet*, the third piece on his October 12 Experimental Intermedia concert with

reedsman J. D. Parran, started with a restful chord. Over it, little noises burred, and alongside it ran a geometric computer video by artist Morey Gers. The video didn't grab me because its patterns were symmetrical, and ever since the old "laser art" days I've been suspicious of symmetrical graphics as too easy. But after several seconds I noticed that Hamilton's restful chord was gradually tuning itself downward. Then it began a near-imperceptible glissando upward. After a few slow

rises and falls, it stabilized, but I couldn't trust it, and kept waiting for the reference point to move again—a subtle way to be kept on edge.

Hamilton can do such tricks because, scorning digital homogenization (like C. Bryan Rulon of the First Avenue trio), he goes back to the less slick, more nuanced analog synthesizers of the '70s. At this concert he played an Oberheim Matrix 12, wired to a tableful of God knows what components. In *The So-Called Blues*, playing bass clarinet, Parran improvised a tune on trills and turning motives. Beneath him, Hamilton started with the rough plunk of a string bass, then added more until he sounded like a walking fugue of string basses, with a momentum that made the piece swing. Baritone Tom Buckner joined the pair for *In a Better World We'd All Be Our Twin*, on a text by Hamilton. All three started and ended with toys: bird calls, whistles, bells, a softly clicking set of false teeth. From there they built up in a crescendo of twitters, Parran and Buckner (in excellent voice) polarizing Scelsi-like around a drone. The cloud of brilliant, filter-swept timbres Hamilton surrounded them with at climax seemed infused with light.

Parran, switching between clarinet and sax, played his own solo, *Rapinet/Rapophone*, beginning with wide sweeps of his range and subsiding into a triple-time dance of agile multiphonics. His pitch memory is wonderful, his suave tone almost too pretty. It's no fault of his that I prefer hearing him with Hamilton; I'm not very susceptible to unaccompanied woodwinds, and short of knocking me in the nose with it, there's not

much you can do with a solo clarinet that would keep my attention more than a few minutes. The only real weakness in these structured improvs was their formal vagueness. After they were through, you weren't quite sure where you had gone or why you went there. Except that the ride was exciting.

The following night at Roulette, New Haven guitarist Loren Mazzacane played idiosyncratic blues against himself on tape. "Low-key" doesn't do him justice. In beatless time-suspension, he plucked slow tunes while Suzanne Langille breathed a few lyrics into a microphone, and Brian Johnson rolled *pianissississimo* tremolos on a vibraphone. Never wasting a note, Mazzacane poured so much vibrato and emotion into every climbing, soprano phrase that I thought of Schoenberg's description of Webern, "a novel in a single sigh." As in some modern troubador performances, the absence of pulse (even when Johnson moved to trap set) stopped time and abandoned your brain to the exquisite disorder of wandering, nonsynchronous melodies. (Did they repeat or not?) It was all the more intense for being barely audible.

Brian Johnson was the evening's unsung hero. Two-thirds through the set, you realized that Mazzacane wasn't going to do anything he hadn't already done, and the beauty began to pall. Johnson, though, rushed silently from vibes to drums to jingle bells to rattles, busting his butt to remain tastefully inconspicuous behind the softest music in New York. Mazzacane had the soul, but Johnson provided the variety

that kept the concert off the ground.

A performer has to have a gimmick to play New York, and there's enough new technology around right now to supply the next 300 tricks. The violin-controlled-MIDI-synthesizer slot was filled October 17 at the Kitchen by Jon Rose from Australia. In four improvisations, Rose fiddled while the synthesizer hummed. He'd stop, his gadgets would slowly run out of material. He'd swing his bow one way, the synth would ping; then he'd swing back and it'd blip. In the third improv he toned down the computer and showed some jazz and bluegrass chops, and in the fourth he drew squeals and chirps from a pair of bows. The more he streamlined his materials, the more meaningful his results. It's an axiom.

You can't expect someone from Australia to know how common this kind of show has become here, but you'd think someone at the Kitchen would have more savvy than to consider this a big deal. Rose made his first bow-swing as though he expected jaws to drop, but his composer-infested audience included people who had used the same gizmos to better ends. Nic Collins (present), Michel Waisvisz, Richard Teitelbaum, Tod Machover, and others have used hand- and instrument-controlled MIDI devices to create not only engaging theater, but lucid music that can stand on its own after the novelty dies. Whatever entertainment value Rose's music had disappeared when you closed your eyes. His toys may play in Adelaide or Akron, but we've seen that movie with better popcorn. ■

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