

It was difficult, October 4, to squeeze into the Knitting Factory's lobby far enough to overhear Glen Velez, Layne Redmond, and Steve Gorn. They've outgrown New York's smaller spaces. When I complained recently that too much world music blands out, I didn't have them in mind. Velez and Redmond learned drumming from both Indian and Arabic traditions, Gorn plays ragas on Asian and South American flutes, and a thread of jazz runs through their collaborations, especially in melodic moments. Nevertheless, their every piece sprouts so naturally from its melodic/rhythmic kernel that you hear no reference to styles, only ideas. Nothing is grafted on.

The arithmetical feats alone kept you on edge. At the outset Redmond ran through an 11-beat ostinato on the mbira (thumb piano). She divided it 3 + 3 + 3 + 2, but the rest of the ensemble's accents, once they entered, crossed hers with 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3. Several of the pieces were in a slow quintuple meter, including *Assyrian Rose* (a new record on CMP), whose off-accent kept throwing the five off balance. The evening's finale, *Blue Castle*, layered melodies in two seven-beats at once, one twice as fast as the other (hardly impossible, but try it). I know from past experience that Velez uses additive patterns such as 9 + 10 + 11, but I couldn't count fast enough to hear whether any such complexities underlay his tambourine solo.

Weeks earlier at the same joint, the Ordinaires dished up some slick number tricks themselves, including one tune—"Nature," from *The Ordinaires* on Dossier—with a 29-beat pattern, divided 7 + 7 + 7 + 8. Their prime numbers had machinelike precision, Velez's had the flexibility of jazz. Gorn's gracefully darting melodies were amazingly well-tuned: I once heard him play an 11th harmonic over a drone (a dissonant interval) so perfect it sounded in repose. *Assyrian Rose* featured Chicago guest artist How-

Glen Velez / Brian Eno

Playing the Numbers

BY KYLE GANN

ard Levy in a wild, soulful, and well-applauded harmonica solo as fluid as an oboe's tone, also playing parallel offbeats with French hornist John Clark. When they switched for one piece to a frame drum quartet, I figured it was a throw-away to give the winds a rest. Instead, it

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was the evening's climax: hot cross-rhythms, shifting meters, and somehow a catchy melody, with just four goddamn drums.

Velez and company are as close as anyone's come to the universal crossover group. Their pretty timbres and pure tuning attract the naïve ear. Jazz fans and raga buffs alike enjoy following the variations they spin around their rhythmic patterns, which are complex enough to intrigue experimentalists. Their improvs are cleanly sculpted and motivically intricate enough to satisfy any lover of Brahms. Their rhythms are classic, their melodies romantic, their technique astounding. They probably don't make enough noise to please industrial band devotees; aside from that, they may be New York's most perfect musicians.

Brian Eno's *Tropical Forest Sound Installation* at the World Financial Center's Winter Garden, September 10 to October 8, had that familiar Eno blend of superficiality and genius. Your typical sound sculpture often fails through preciousness of intent, either trying to make a delicate acoustic point



MICHAEL THIBODEAU

that only Mr. Wizard could care about, or forcing attention to environmental sounds that most of the inhabitants wish they could block out. *Tropical Forest* was neither subtle nor intrusive. Like most of Eno's music, it seemed to have arisen without tortuous thought, and was as delightful as it was opaque.

As if making fun (it's a temptation) of the Winter Garden's neat rows of palm trees, *Tropical Forest* brought the cries of monkeys, bullfrogs, and a dozen exotic birds into corporate America. The first sound you might notice was a high-fre-

quency static like that of distant crickets, coming from speakers concealed around the space. Intermittently, you heard the angular whistling of potoos, motmots, yellow-ridged toucans, chachalacas, screaming pihas, and other creatures, recordings originally made by Richard Ranft, the curator of wildlife sounds at the British National Sound Archive. (Imagine that job?) Eno's stated stimulus was the destruction of 20 million acres of rainforest a year, driving untold species to extinction. Forest noises died out, gradually replaced with mournful, otherworldly synthesizers.

As with all of Eno's work, it was impossible to tell how much irony he intended, but the audiovisual contrasts of palm trees, monkey screeches, dirges, and businesspeople all stalwartly marching from one office to another bracketed the whole scene outside everyday reality and made it look like a clip from *Koyaanisqatsi*. The World Trade Center loomed through the WFC's huge glass arch as a surreal backdrop, and the imagination reflexively slowed down the corporate stride into a minimalist dance. It only takes a soundtrack to turn real life into a movie. The three-piece-suiters paid no mind—maybe they'd heard it too many times already. But a dozen or so people who looked like me (tieless, unimpressive portfolios) sat, stared, and raptly listened.

The second hour (the piece ran 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 7) sowed doubts. The dirge subsided, the chattering and whistling resumed, and then came bursts of spookier noises: bells, glissandi, small clusters. This jungle ambience was more caricatural, less pleasant than enigmatic. Max Neuhaus, Maryanne Amacher, Bill Fontana, and Leif Brush have all done this kind of surround-sound piece in parks and corporate spaces for years, so there was nothing terribly original about Eno's basic concept. But I'd never heard an installation that oozed such cleverly mixed signals, that put such a mordantly comic spin on its environment. ■

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