

A close-up, profile photograph of Henry Threadgill playing a saxophone. He is wearing a white shirt and a dark tie. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the instrument against a dark background.

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Performance Review

The Music of

Henry Threadgill's Zooid

October 18, 2013, The Community Church of New York

By Nora McCarthy

Photo of Henry Threadgill (opposite page) by Ken Weiss

The Community Church of New York—"the church of the free spirit that seeks truth wherever it may be found," was brimming with an abundance of both spirit and truth this past Friday with the creative brilliance of The Music of Henry Threadgill's Zooid performance. Presented by The AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians,) the modestly attended concert was a much anticipated infrequent appearance of the leader, composer, saxophonist and flautist, Henry Threadgill. His humble presence as he walked on the stage, subtly transmitted a powerful energy that only those who have reached a place of mastery can evoke. Threadgill's career spans some forty years. As an innovator and major contributor to the evolution of jazz music he has earned a significant place in history. Peter Watrous of the *New York Times* described Threadgill as "perhaps the most important jazz composer of his generation." Having received numerous commissions and

placed on the altar/stage one by one until they were done. There was very little space in between movements, just enough to allow the cosmic dust to settle and allow for some appreciation from the audience. During the course of the magic that was being created in the moment, the artists wove, painted, hammered, twisted, and manipulated their tools into designs while simultaneously respecting the space they occupied as a unit, handing off lines and exchanging positions, alternately supporting, and leading. There were interesting beginnings, finely constructed solos and precise unpredictable endings—another hallmark of Threadgill's music—he keeps the audience captivated and in suspense until he's finished. The Music of Threadgill's Zooid is an experience you don't want to end. He takes you to another galaxy, an imaginative and intriguing place with lots to discover.

The compositions presented in order were:

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awards over the years he is more than deserving of receiving the MacArthur, the Guggenheim, and, every award out there today, and I and many, many, many others would agree on that. Enough cannot be said about this incredibly gifted artist. But, in a word, Henry Threadgill is an American "Treasure." As one would expect, all those fortunate to be in attendance for this concert were profoundly moved by what they heard. Every time I have witnessed a Threadgill performance, I've walked away, uplifted, inspired and amazed, this one was no exception.

As with all of Threadgill's music, movement is key and the moment the musicians went into "play" the aural visuals began to materialize and their development continued until they were fashioned into resonant artifacts and

"Chair Master," "Tomorrow Sunny," "To Undertake My Corner's Open," "A Day Off," "Not the White Flag," "Ambien Pressure Thereby," are expertly constructed architectures of rhythm, atonal harmony and melodic angularity each uniquely designed and strategically connected by a unifying overall sound structure that was maintained throughout at a very high level of proficiency by the extraordinary musicians that comprise Zooid—Jose Davila, tube/trombone; Liberty Ellman, guitar; Elliot Kavee, percussion; and, Christopher Hoffman, cello—all extensions of Threadgill's mind, moveable pieces

that fit together to make a multi-dimensional machine.

Ellman has a lot to say on his instrument. His playing was articulate, percussive and fluid. Kavee is an absolute engine. He drove the machine and set the mood for every piece with his large palette of funky, quirky, primal grooves and colorful cymbal work, bells and gongs. "A Day Off" was burning with ritualistic fervor. Davila played with remarkable facility, agility and versatility. The underpinning of the unit, he often played in tandem with Kavee, and his lines bubbled beneath the surface like lava, percolating upward, stoking the engine, his solos were artful on both tuba and trombone where he demonstrated an array of dynamic syllables speaking in a descriptive tongue. Hoffman played pizzicato bass lines on and off and there were times his cello sounded like a tuba when he and Davila traded positions, he kept up the groove effortlessly and the transitions were smoothly executed. His technique, tone, emotional focus and driving forceful bow work was impeccable on every piece.

The mixed metered set consisted of compositions in 5/4, 4/4, 6/4 and 3/4 *however*, from start to finish, the time signatures were expanding and mutating, defying definition, as if they were being controlled by some force of nature, building off of themselves as each musician poured their particular sonic element into the magic potion that was developing in synchronicity like the internal mechanism of a finely tuned watch, taking shape everywhere on stage. It was like peering into Threadgill's imagination at work—superb.

On "To Undertake My Corner's Open" while the group was playing fast and furious and bars were flying by, suddenly Threadgill breaks in with a precisely placed intricate line that he blew like a dart from his alto, taking control, followed by more complicated lines (which I'd like to see notated by the way) punctuated by a series of fast paced rests, then, like mist dissipating into the ether, he fell silent as the musicians came forth in varying configurations beautifully choreographed and keeping the ever shifting steady grooving/moving pulse.

Henry Threadgill owns the sound highway, and his voice has a frequency all its own on all three instruments: flute, bass flute and alto saxophone. He plays with vitality and intention—he's totally tapped into the source. With the ferocity of 1,000 lions roaring, he was transcending on "Ambien Pressure Thereby" when he picked up the note with his soaring alto precisely where Hoffman's cello handed it off commanding a thrilling response from the audience. I was told after the performance that Threadgill's playing brought a woman down on one knee in the back row as if she were having a religious experience and I think that about sums it up for the rest of us who found ourselves in some form of euphoric rapture at the end of this concert. The transformation was a success.

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