



Shock therapy: Barry Schwartz with Tesla Coil sound-sculpture



Electric Eclectics Festival of Modern Music and Irritainment The Funny Farm, Meaford, Ontario 8/3 – 5/2007

Driving through the rolling countryside and the cattle pastures, Napoleon XIV's "They're Coming To Take Me Away, Ha Ha!" seemed to be on infinite repeat on the media player inside my mind. After all, if you're going to stage a three-day experimental music festival at a farm on the outskirts of a small village in Midwestern Ontario, who knows what sonic craziness might be lie ahead? With an impressive lineup of local, national and international artists, this second edition of the festival encompassed all aspects of multi-media, from installations on and off site to performance art to video projections to a hypnotist and to music that spanned that the gamut of experimental music: funk, noise, dub, indie rock, techno, free improv, electronic free jazz, abstract laptop and avant hip-hop.

Still, most concertgoers were probably unprepared for the unusual welcome to the Funny Farm, the home of long time experimental sound composers Gordon Monahan and Laura Kikauka, managing director and artistic coordinator respectively, of the Electric Eclectics festival and the location of the festival itself. At the entrance, you're greeted by a pole with a plastic toy horse with antlers tied on top, and beside it, a '70s Malibu muscle car, covered in green webbing. Then you notice the baby doll heads lining the

steep, winding driveway. Indeed, this kitschy display foreshadowed the playful sense of absurdity and adventure that permeated the entire festival.

The stage itself, shaped like a hockey stick (how Canadian) and perched on the crest of a hill, provided the perfect vantage point for performers to gaze out at the sprawling magnificence of the gently sloping landscape, and in the evening, to spectacular sunsets. The artists seem to feed off the beauty and splendor of the view, as well as the festival's casual vibe. This was apparent throughout the weekend: Toronto free jazz improvisers, Bitchin' Quick Thinking ended their AACM-like set, in midstream, upstaged by a trio of bitchin' canines engaged in their own sonic dialogue as they chased each other through the crowd. Aggressive, punk/prog Toronto outfit Rozasia spontaneously decided to eschew the stage altogether and play on the grass in front of it, to ensure that the audience would make direct contact with their Gogol Bordello-like flailings. In fact, the whole weekend was full of these delightful contrasts and coincidences, such as when the jet engine-like blast that capped the Mego-inspired set of Montreal laptop/guitar duo Blube coincided with a jet passing, high above them, its long white trail, stretching across the blue sky. Or when one of the members of the Toronto punk noise duo, Gastric Female Reflex, who impressed with their own set of analog circuit bending, ran across the stage during Disguises' set and planted a plastic Danger sign on the table where the Toronto guitar/drums/bass/vocals/electronics group were pummelling and abusing out their generators, filters, pedal effect boxes and instruments into the red zone in a fierce, cacophonous display. Or when Viennese vocalist and Theremin maverick Dorit Chrysler, in a red dress and gloves, opened her suave set of standards and experimental compositions by trying out a Moog Theremin live for the first time. Would it work?

After a minor adjustment, it did.

In fact, each night's schedules seemed to be designed for jarring juxtapositions in sound and approach, such as Saturday's program where the London, Ontario's legendary noise improv outfit, Nihilist Spasm Band, joined by Einsturzende Neubauten bassist Alexander Hacke for a muscular yet strangely, ethereal cocktail of chugging caterwaul, was followed by the spontaneous, whimsical conceptions of Toronto songstress Mary Margaret O'Hara, whose improv set assiduously avoided any song-based material from her classic *Miss America* album. She, in turn, was followed by Hacke (dressed in top hat and tails), and his partner Danielle De Picciotto (clad in a nurse's outfit) whose multi-media performance of their "The History Of Electricity" project, mixed '50s-style classroom videos with the Renegade Soundwave-style, big beat hip-hop.

Friday's line up benefitted from the same kind of odd pairings. The hilarious set by multi-tasking, Los Angeles performance artist, John Kilduff, the host of *Let's Paint TV*, a public access TV show in his hometown, who simultaneously painted a landscape, played a game of chess, and took questions from audience, all the while, walking on a treadmill, was abruptly counter pointed by that of violinist Tony Conrad, whose rapturously abrasive harmonics and drones soared and wailed with a profound insistency.

Other highlights included the seamless transition between the magical sets of two local Grey County electronic groups As Is and Clock Din on Sunday; and the gaseous drones, internal feedback and musique concrete of Hamilton's clarinet/trumpet/prepared guitar threesome Fossils. They were preceded by New York's Hallicrafters- Eric Hubel (Glenn Branca) and Algis Kizys (Swans, Foetus). Taking their name from the vintage radio receiver and transmitter company, the pair sat with their backs to the audience,

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facing stacks of old skool analog equipment. With the cool precision of lab coated researchers, the two, slowly turned knobs and dials, while the equipment's luminous dials glowed, issuing a barrage of Morse Code blips, short wave frequency modulations and oscillations and sine waves, that whooped and whirled with the force of a Sikorsky, that in doing so, imitated their namesake.

The minimal techno and astonishing laser show of Rotterdam's Edwin Van Der Heide gelled with that of Toronto dub funksters, Brian Fudge, and the soothing Raster-Noton/Ryoji Ikeda-inspired improvisations of Toronto laptop ensemble I/O Media complimented the majesty of New Yorker Lary 7's ambitious set, who improvised on a keyboard that was connected to 32 pitch-selected old car horns and powered by six volt batteries that had been placed in the farm's silo.

While the massive resonances of this car horn fugue, like J.S. Bach on acid, were impressive, Monahan, like all good curators, left the best to the last.

Barry Schwartz's electrifying installation was exactly that. Curiosity surrounding Schwartz's large high-voltage Tesla Coil installation had been building all weekend as the San Francisco performance artist tinkered with his Futurist-like sculpture of coils and wires on the far side of the stage. Indeed, up to the last moment, his attendants were still attending to preparatory details, as the crowd watched a hilarious 1950's training video on the dangers and hazards of electricity and snacked on "shocklick delights", small, portable batteries dipped in chocolate. Dressed in a white tuxedo, Schwartz's bravura entrance was

combination of hip-hop and Broadway showmanship, as he walked through the crowd, scratching and playing his customized steel turntables. Once on stage, he donned large rubber gloves and flippers. Then, in a bizarre fusion of electrician and musician, he began, systemically, checking the flickering and sparking wires and coils, while, simultaneously, caressing them, as if they were parts of a towering instrument, with each test, following the current higher, as he moved up the installation. When Schwartz reached a tiny, smiling, Buddha sculpture at the top, he banged out a nursery rhyme on a toy piano to a round of gleeful applause. It was a fitting, climatic performance that was truly lived up to the festival's name. **Richard Moule**