Art of the Improvisers



Springtime in Tallahassee offers a glut of high-caliber creative offerings that puts our little town, if only for a few weeks, on equal footing with the most celebrated cultural capitals. This weekend (April 12-14) , the Word of South Festival hosts its annual takeover of Cascades Park with a terrific lineup of music and literary heavies that I previewed for Tallahassee Magazine. The FSU School of Dance is kicking off a week-long celebration of the 100th birthday of the legendary Merce Cunningham. And just last weekend, the Tallahassee Film Festival mounted a well-attended series of films, panels, and performances that attracted broad notice well beyond anything their modest budget should have allowed.

But the hands-down highlight of this season for me is the leaderless trio of guitarist Nels Cline, saxophonist Larry Ochs, and percussionist Gerald Cleaver, landing at the terrific listening tavern 5th & Thomas in Midtown on Saturday, April 13.

This trio, which recently released its first album, *What is to Be Done*, on the visionary Clean Feed label, is running a short tour of the deep southeast to showcase their approach to structured improvisation. Aside from Atlanta and Nashville, all the stops on their agenda are smallish college towns like Gainesville, Chattanooga, Athens, and our own little outpost in the Panhandle.

I realize most folks do not follow the ins and outs of the improvised music world like I do, but I’d bet that most of you

recognize the name Nels Cline from his work with rockers Wilco over the past 15 years. Most Wilco fans may not realize that by the time he joined the band, Cline had been in the biz for 25 years and was widely recognized as one of the alt-jazz world's most prominent players. Cline calls himself a "near-jazz" guitarist, which seems about right while also underplaying his considerable technical abilities. He's a modest guy, even after *Rolling Stone* named him one of the top 100 guitarists of all-time.

But if you come out to 5&T expecting anything that sounds like Tweedy, you are in for something of a surprise. Cline and his trio partners Ochs and Cleaver are intrepid sonic explorers, musicians who cultivate the sound ground to generate surprise ecstasies and audiophonic epiphanies. There will be no verse/verse/chorus/bridge at this show, though it will likely incorporate elements of rock, jazz, folk, classical, and Oliveros-style Deep Listening in combinations you might not have imagined before.

I cannot stress enough: You really should be there to see what happens when three players of this caliber and collected experience set a framework and go to work. Contrary to conventional wisdom, structured improvisation is not an anarchy of everybody playing whatever they want whenever, especially when a guy like Ochs, founder of the legendary Rova Saxophone Quartet, is on hand. The guy is a wicked composer and conceptualist who establishes working paradigms – think of rules in a game – that serve to both spur and constrain the group. He also is a master of the circular breathing technique that allows him to play for extended periods without appearing to take a breath.He is actually pulling new air in as he plays. I do not really understand how it works. You might find yourself holding your breath during one of his sustained flights. Personally, I recommend that you breathe, but you do you.

Cleaver is an endlessly inventive drummer who has played with

the best musicians of the past 40 years, including Roscoe Mitchell, Taylor Ho Bynum, Matthew Shipp, and Craig Taborn. Prepare to have your sense of time and dynamics turned inside out.

How to listen to such a thing? First off, prepare to be mildly confused, maybe even utterly lost. Just hang with it. If you listen to them as closely as they will be listening to each other (listening being the prime directive and single most important skill an improviser can bring to the table), patterns will emerge. Conversations between musicians take shape, sometimes among all three at once, sometimes just two of them as the third steps back. Occasionally, one player will command the floor to make a statement, and not necessarily forcefully; the manipulation of dynamics is another of the improviser’s key tools. A whisper to draw you closer, perhaps?

What is quieter than a whisper? Silence, perhaps. As in any great music, the space between the notes is as important as the notes themselves. The contrast between loud and soft, the emphasis a suddenly created space places on what came before or will come next: These are the building blocks of any conversation of depth. And in the end, that’s what you are witnessing when you attend a show like this.

So come to 5&T (or to the other shows on the tour) and catch a glimpse of what another approach to music might have to offer. Our world is filled with infinite variety. It’s nice when our musical diet is, too.