



**Saxophonist Coat Cooke directs the sprawling, 15-piece NOW Orchestra.**

# NOW festival a hothouse for the avant-garde

**Hear It Now Festival**

Featuring Marilyn Crispell

Western Front, Nov. 25 to 27

**BY GREG BUIUM**

**T**he New Orchestra Workshop's annual series of new and improvised music began Thursday as it almost always does — with a performance by its flagship big band, the NOW Orchestra, and a famous international guest, pianist Marilyn Crispell.

And once again this year, the Hear It NOW festival acted as a snapshot of the organization's reach, with each of the other nights devoted to a different member's group.

Yet if the programming seemed self-evident, the course of events produced something far more subtle.

Indeed, over three rainy November evenings, the Western Front became a kind of hothouse for the avant-garde, where the hazy space between improvisation and composition seemed to make perfect sense.

Certainly the NOW Orchestra, under saxophonist Coat Cooke's direction, set the tone on opening night with its two sets of large, multi-layered compositions.

At times, the sprawling 15-piece group can be unwieldy. It specializes in a wild, supersonic rumble — thanks largely to the trombonist, Brad Muirhead, and a pair of bassists, Clyde Reed and Paul Blaney.

Melodic clarity often eluded

then Thursday and ensemble passages were sometimes quite ragged.

But with NOW, that's nearly beside the point.

Cooke exerted a quiet, and sometimes coarse, control over movement, working with a menu of cues, as the group splintered, gathered and subdivided once again.

Things crept up on you. A duo tore out of the ensemble — saxophone and drums, perhaps — and soon a trio formed and a collective improv began. Passages that were fractured and oddly out of sync could create an immense swirl of shifting textures before coming together in a bit of beautifully crafted writing.

Crispell, the Woodstock, N.Y.-based guest, took up this challenge with a piece she composed for the event, *Yin Yang*, a structured improv where alternating groups emerged from the ensemble.

In such a small room, this microscopic network of sounds proved particularly intense and pleasurable. Even the furthest seat was just a few metres from the band.

This intimacy certainly wasn't wasted on cellist Peggy Lee's band Friday night.

If NOW's work can sometimes feel a shade cerebral, Lee's music is more broadly appealing; she's practically incapable of writing an unattractive line.

And her approach to composition and improv is entirely fluid, too. Pieces are often tied together in pairs, with a long opening improv dissolving into a line, another improv, before a different melody finally appears. Despite a series of short breaks the music had the inner logic of a long suite.

Indeed, this six-year-old sextet is hitting such a high level of interaction that it's absorbed a new member (guitarist Ron Samworth) without a hint of discomfort.

That kind of understanding is something granrojo, the festival's final act Saturday night, only found in spells.

The four-piece electro-acoustic group, with NOW's Blaney and Cooke plus two laptop artists, still feels like an experiment. Parts were terrifically powerful, with a variety of reed and string instruments turned inside out by electronic loops; other pieces, however, desperately needed some shape, paralyzed, as they were, in ambient self-absorption.

*Greg Buium is a Vancouver music writer.*

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