

# THE KITCHEN

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## on music / Artists on the 'fringe'

By Wayne Robins

It's not always easy to pigeonhole artists, especially when they're at the fringes of their respective disciplines. But watching certain "fringe" artists perform often can be exhilarating, since the goal is to transcend the limitations of audience expectation and to stretch the boundaries of music, dance, or even comedy.

Two such artists are in New York this weekend. Zora Rasmussen is a comedian who, perhaps too often, also happens to sing. She performs very late Saturday night (otherwise known as very early Sunday morning) at 12:55 AM at Reno Sweeney. Meredith Monk, meanwhile, is a choreographer-dancer-composer who performs her vocal and instrumental music at the Kitchen, a loft-like space at 484 Broome St. (near Wooster) in Soho tonight and tomorrow night at 8:30.

Monk's vocal music is an odd but engaging blend of repeated syllables, yodels, naturalistic and seemingly industrial sounds. At times (especially during "Procession from Quarry," her opera-dance-theater piece) during a recent performance, the music was very jazz-like, somewhat similar to the yodeling flights of Leon Thomas when he sang with sax player Pharoah Sanders.

"Vessel Suite" was derived from "Vessel: an opera epic" based more or less on the life and death of Joan of Arc. It was the first New York performance of this piece arranged for a trio (Monk, Andrea Goodman and Monica Solom), and it displayed a slightly different side of Monk's art.

The highly rhythmic intensity of "Vessel Suite" went through a number of changes. The phrasing at first reminded one of the high-speed electric hum of Morse Code. But at the same time, those syllables fit the pattern of 1950s ballad rhythm and blues, also known as "doo-wop."

The ambitiously imaginative listener could hear that theme develop throughout "Vessel." There was some staccato phrasing that could have been

derived from the stuttering style of soul singer Billy Stewart. And, in the dynamic shifting of emphasis among the three voices, there was some of the passion of a group like Labelle, if Labelle were singing party music in the 15th Century.

There is a strong religious undertow to Monk's music. Sometimes, the source seemed Hebraic. Parts of "Dolmen Music," which had its premiere Wednesday night, seemed to echo the mix of voices one hears in a synagogue during the Mourner's Kaddish. Other parts of the same piece reflected the Islamic call of the muezzin, Gregorian chants, and yogic meditation music.

Six singers, accompanied by Robert Eon on cello, perform on "Dolmen Music." The voices: Eon, Monk, Goodman, Solom and Paul Langland and Julius Eastman, cover a wide range of timbre and texture. At times, the combined voices sound like reverberations of a giant rubber band snapping; and other times, it has the feel of Chinese trance music. Whatever the case, Monk succeeded in creating visual images that matched the spirit of the music. A dolmen is an ancient stone monument thought to be a tomb. One could make a case for "Dolmen music" being a recently unearthed form of prehistoric rock and roll.

You shouldn't have any illusions about Monk's work. Despite the associations it is possible to make, this is far across the spectrum from pop music. Nevertheless, it is not terribly distant from the more artfully experimental new-wave music. The audience for Talking Heads, Devo or Patti Smith might not be ready for the uncompromising intensity of this wordless music, but it's not an implausible thought to consider. Meanwhile, if the Kitchen is out of reach (or, more likely, sold out) this weekend, those curious about Monk's work can look for the revival of her opera with dance, "Education of the Girlchild," which begins previews at the Leperq Space of the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Feb. 7. Regular performances begin February 9, and Feb. 25.

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