

ARTslant New York

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Downtown Sound: Rhys Chatham at the Kitchen NYC

I had a vaguely patriotic feeling going out on the eve of the tenth anniversary of 9/11. The papers had done a good job conveying a maddeningly nebulous public threat, running front-page pictures of our boys-in-blue armed and on the ready. Terrorism, to many, is purely psychological and images are rightly and widely considered among its most effective weaponry. This being the tenth anniversary was, predictably, a big deal; there were major memorial services and an extensively articulated program of pictures organized for commemoration.



I spent the evening ringing in another, older, anniversary; one geared to the ear instead of the eye. The Kitchen, a legendary alternative art space in New York, celebrated its fortieth birthday by inviting Rhys Chatham, founder and director of the Kitchen's music program, to curate two nights of shows. Chatham followed suit and invited a number of composers who had also been part of the Kitchen's earliest musical programs.

Jokes were made about the old days, when the floors were hard wood and that's what you sat on. Most of the audience was, like me, too young to have been there, but laughing politely at the jokes of older generations is just one way of paying your dues, so say certain elders of mine anyway. The house, by the end of Chatham's welcome, was full.

Chatham titled the event, "Pioneers of Downtown Sound." My sense of the downtown sound in New York right now comes from disc jockeys in skinny jeans and is for dancing. The pioneers, it turns out, may have been amongst the earliest to produce music with a synthesizer, looping and sampling in the most elemental of ways, but it sure as hell wasn't for dancing. In fact it fit somewhere between the atonal structures of Philip Glass and the anarchic sound energy of the Ramones.

ARTslant New York

September 18, 2011



Laurie Spiegel, a short wiry woman with long brown hair, opened with a recording of her first performance, *Harmonic Rhythms*, at the Kitchen back in 1971. To create that piece Spiegel used the Buchla 100, a beastly analog synthesizer, rumored to be able to stop a heart if tuned to a certain setting. The recording was raw but potent, like a buzz saw orchestra. Chatham followed with *Echoes 1*, playing a cornet in Bb and making tremendous use of pedals to loop and warble. The sound had a seventies flavor evocative of Eastern mysticism. It created an atmosphere of alternative movements: skittering, chopping, droning. The sounds seemed to recede and then swell up like a great wave. Chatham called it “biodegradable and macrobiotic.”

Spiegel closed the first set with a piece called *A Harmonic Algorithm* that fused her favorite bars of Bach with pure Spiegelian sound textures. Despite the fact it all came out of a synthesizer the music had a distinct naturalness to it. Sweeping patterns evoked small birds in flight; extended chords became whale calls. The music didn't seem to progress so much as sway back and forth like the limbs of a great tree in a heavy gale, until a haunting note crept in and the piece boomed with an erumpent closure.

The second set belonged to Tony Conrad. Conrad, a tall fellow with thin-rimmed glasses and tightly cropped snow-white hair, was accompanied by Eli Keszler on drums and Karen Waltuch on viola. Their song, *Untitled Performance in D*, moved through so many sonic topographies that if mapped it would be more varied than the landscapes of Colorado. Conrad alternated between his violin and a homemade instrument clamped to a table that he referred to only as “the long sting instrument.” This instrument was electrified and playable with a bow or a mallet. At times Conrad plunked away at this deep metallic instrument with his violin still under chin.

The piece began and ended with a pulsing pattern, driven by Keszler, which Conrad and Waltuch seemed to slide around. As the song progressed Waltuch emerged as its backbone, while Conrad plucked and scrapped scumbling notes out of his instruments. Keszler shifted from a dirge-like pound to a pace quicker than a cricket's heartbeat. At one point he put down his sticks and played the side of his snare drum with a bow, drawing splinters of sliced sound out of his percussion

ARTslant New York

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instrument. There was clearly a pattern the trio was moving through, but it was porous, with lots of space to improvise.



Afterwards I rode my bicycle down the west side highway, pedaling in the direction of the big blue memorial beams and listening to this dissonance of passing traffic and lapping river water. The Twin Towers were opened in 1973, two years after Rhys Chatham debuted his musical program at the Kitchen. Forget about forty years ago, Chatham had said, think about forty years from now. What images, what sounds, what stories will survive?

-Charlie Schultz, a writer living in New York.

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