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August 17, 2003

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MUSIC

Playing outside the box

In July, a unique midnight concert kicked up at the Jazz à Vienne festival in France, south of Lyon. For 75 unbroken minutes, two accordionists owned the stage, to the delight of a rapt crowd. Blind Austrian virtuoso Otto Lechner joined French accordionist Arnaud Methivier in a meandering set that navigated through abstract improvisational passages, hit some tuneful landmarks and ended with a breezy encore of "Walking on the Moon."

In a major jazz festival whose highlights included Wayne Shorter with the l'Orchestre National de Lyon, Pat Metheny as artist in residence and the Buena Vista Social Club, an accordion duet might have seemed like an esoteric footnote. Instead, it was a surprise hit.

It was also business-as-unusual on the fringe accordion scene, a small but passionate subculture where musicians are seeking to expand, redefine and lend experimental credibility to an instrument with strong roots in the roots music field.

Lechner himself was a key member in an all-star group called Accordion Tribe that released an album on the Intuition label in 1998. That group brought together mostly genre-bending accordionists from Europe, birthplace and still a haven for countless accordion traditions. The sole American in the Tribe's original lineup was Guy Klucevsek, widely considered America's most adventurous accordionist. He has long mixed the high, low and middlebrow cultural applications of his instrument.

Another renowned American accordion iconoclast is Pauline Oliveros, for whom playing the instrument sounds as natural as breathing. This breath-like aspect is key to her drone-oriented, minimalist work. Oliveros, who appeared in the Schindler House's "sound." series two years ago, says: "I've played the instrument since I was 9 years old. It's my instrument. But because it doesn't have a place in the classical canon, I think it's important to push it."

Despite such crusader zeal, Oliveros admits to approaching her instrument with a certain individualism, like Rüdiger Carl. "I'm not an accordion-world person particularly," she says. "I'm just a free-floating maverick, in all fields."

Observes Carl: "I must say, I don't push [my instrument] in the foreground and say, 'OK, this is the accordion world and this is my part, and I'm really interested who else is doing things.' I just take the information as it comes."

Thus, in tribal packs, duets and singular, self-defining ways, free-minded accordionists are pushing their culture forward, just out of earshot of mainstream music.

— Josef Woodard

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