

On Location

Festivals, concerts, clubs

Nilufar Habibian



Four Years Of Chinabot

Cafe Oto, London, UK

Four years ago, Saphy Vong aka Lafidki founded the label Chinabot, in an effort to provide a platform to Asian artists making freewheeling and properly weird electronica, reminiscent of labels such as Orange Milk, on which Lafidki has previously released. This is exemplified by the gamut of frequencies and wrongfooting rhythms of a compilation celebrating the label's anniversary, *Tetra Hysteria Manifesto*. But the corresponding event at London's Cafe Oto – featuring, as far as I could tell, no artists who have released on Chinabot – is strangely divergent from the label's output.

The mellow downtempo electronic music of the opening set by NTS DJ Ony bears little resemblance to the label's usual freneticism, and it seems quite odd that the audience is all sitting down watching

it; presumably in pre-pandemic times it would have provided an unobtrusive soundtrack to general mingling before the actual performances started. Next up is Nilufar Habibian, whose tense performance on the traditional Eastern stringed instrument qanun provides a virtuosic cacophony of caustic scraping and sawing backed with a wall of overtones and the occasional pluck which would otherwise be rather melodic, but in this case gives the impression of a drowning person struggling to stay afloat. Her set is marred only by its quieter passages being subsumed by the moronically pulsating sound of yuppie Dalston leaking into Cafe Oto to an extent not heard before the pandemic, which really is an issue for a venue which is so often host to barely-there free improv.

Habibian is followed by Alaa Yussry aka Cerpintxt. Her performance consists

stupidity under the Trump administration. McPhee is gritting his teeth in passionate fury.

He cues Reid, who plays a mournful music, circling around a consistent tonal centre. McPhee joins in, the phrases rising above and dipping below the tonic, coming back to briefly rest. Individual notes may be fast, but the pulse is stately. It keeps the spirit of McPhee's reading, politically and socially charged impressions in Dorian mode spiritual jazz. There's also a feeling of something ancient, like the medieval mode itself.

After McPhee's introduction it doesn't feel like a celebration. At times, he growls through his tenor while playing, takes the horn out of his mouth and sings out in wordless frustration, or in soft falsetto phrases, or humming. This is music about how hard it's been to get to this day, and about the many who never made it.

Cerpintxt



of Philip Jeck-esque turntable loops of muted choral singing and twinkly piano accompanied by her own whispered and indecipherable vocals, and backed by clips from films by Sergei Parajanov and Maya Deren.

That set is immediately overshadowed by the subsequent performance by Poulomi Desai, who in absentia has provided an aggressive palate cleanser in avowed opposition to the government. Desai's pointedly irreverent sitar improvisation has long made her one of the most exciting stalwarts of experimental music in London, and in her performance she plays the instrument with an axe, producing uncompromisingly abrasive clipping and grinding, giving way to a syncopated rhythm which works up to an all-encompassing maelstrom, ultimately dying down slightly to reveal an enigmatic swing music sample.

The two improvise together, McPhee echoing Reid's pizzicato flurries, or offering the cellist substantial time and space on her own. But his generosity doesn't cut into his charisma, which today is gripping even through the flattening experience of streaming media. His words were outraged and angry, and those qualities remain in his playing. But music, the sheer sound of his saxophone, is so much more complex and expressive than text. The weight of anger is in his sound, and so is the ache of sadness and even the beauty of memories of good things, now lost. Reid plays a short solo passage, fast and near brittle, but articulated so clearly that each note is like a razor blade. Even her moments of silence, concentrating on seeing where the music might go, are intense.

The set is short, but the music is one continuous piece. The feel and focus

Despite the fact that it is prerecorded, Desai's set delivers an assault to the solar plexus which provides infinitely more immediacy than anything which precedes it, completely drowning out the competing noises surrounding the venue and, like all of the best noise music, providing the sense that another world is possible, even if we have to rip it all up and start again.

Last up is Beachers aka Daryl Worthington. With a battery of samplers and transistor radios he conjures a set of skeletal melodies, glacial overtones and, most interestingly, reverb soaked pointillist peaking which occasionally appear as an offbeat take on Gershon Kingsley's electronic standard "Popcorn". It's quite a pleasant concrete performance, but it lacks the force of Desai's set, and begs the question of why the latter isn't headlining.

Daniel Neofetou

are consistent, not just the tonality but the sense of weight and the economy of means. McPhee and Reid use, for the most part, one phrase, circling around it, repeating it with different lengths and starting points, moving around the emphasis. The weight comes out of this repetition and variation – the way the pair are making music seems like they are holding something incredibly precious and delicate and passing it deliberately between them, and onto the audience.

This thing is rare, but not a possession; very powerful but also all too easy to shatter. It only has meaning when it's used, but must be treated with utmost care. Maybe it's so delicate and fraught because it's never been fully realised, so it's mostly an act of imagination and, like faith, can fall apart with no notice. Maybe it's true freedom.

George Grella

Sequesterfest 6: Joe McPhee & Tomeka Reid

Experimental Sound Studio/ess.org

Joe McPhee precedes this live stream duo performance (part of Corbett Vs Dempsey's Sequesterfest series, viewed through Experimental Sound Studio's webpage, with a small audience present at the event itself), with cellist Tomeka Reid, by saying, "Finally, we have national recognition of Juneteenth... today" – the afternoon of 19 June. He then reads some poetic writing, first *Alone Together* about the Covid-19 pandemic, then a piece that recalls his own classic *Nation Time*. It's difficult to differentiate the discrete pieces in this continuous flow of words, but that's superfluous. The writing, which is blunt, brings together decades of justified outrage over racism and injustice, compounded by the unashamed public rise of fascism and murderously thuggish

Jonathan Crabb