

The vitality of Chicago's jazz and improv scene is celebrated via a new six disc set

By Bill Meyer

The Bottle Tapes: Selections From The Empty Bottle Jazz & Improvised Music Series (1996-2005)

Various

Corbett Vs Dempsey 6xCD/DL

My memories of The Empty Bottle's Jazz & Improvised Music Series include mismatched chairs, cheap beer, staying up too late in the middle of the week, and signs on the bar that forbade conversation while the music played. What I got there was a profound firsthand musical education about the roots and branches of free jazz and other variants of improvised music without which it's an open question whether I'd be writing for *The Wire*.

The impact of the series was not merely local. Last month at Jazzfest Berlin, I sat next to someone who spoke of The Empty Bottle with such presence and vigour that you'd think the series was still ongoing, not something that had ended 20 years ago. Those weekly Wednesday concerts, held at a venue that was otherwise (and still is) mainly a rock club, pressed a deep and enduring thumbprint into the consciousness of improv heads around the world. They introduced a new audience to free music, inspired the sort of cross-genre collaborations between musicians on the stage or in the audience that made Chicago synonymous with genre-transcending music, and established a US beachhead for UK and European improvisors so robust that some are still coming back here, current visa fuckery be damned.

Speaking personally, here is where I first witnessed performances by Joe McPhee, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Axel Dörner, Thomas Lehn, Eric Boeren, Peter Kowald, Milford Graves, John Butcher, Daniele D'Agaro, Paul Rutherford and Anthony Coleman, all of whom are found among the more than seven hours of music on this six disc box set.

The Empty Bottle's owner Bruce Finkelman tapped a pair of transplants from the East Coast, reeds player Ken Vandermark and author John Corbett, to book weekly Wednesday jazz concerts at the beginning of 1996. It got off to a slow start. But the show that Corbett and Vandermark thought would be the swan song of the series – the Chicago debut of Joe McPhee – sold out the club.

The series went on to maintain a schedule of weekly concerts and annual festivals until 2005. They were documented by superfan, anti-war activist and licensed stationary engineer Malachi Ritscher. His presence, seated at a small folding table

that held a succession of recording devices as he upgraded his gear and skills, was one of the most reliable things about the series. Local musicians could count on receiving a CD-R from him the day after their gig; out of towners got their copies when they next came to town. *The Bottle Tapes* is actually a misnomer, since Malachi always recorded digitally and everything on it is from his archive. The recording quality is not perfect; while the clarity improved with time, the bass is a bit anaemic. But the vibe of unrepeatable music coming to life before a receptive audience comes across throughout.

That quality manifests again and again over the six discs, sometimes in excerpts and sometimes at length. A one-off encounter between UK saxophonist John Butcher and US electronician Kevin Drumm is represented by two brief concentrations of abstract shape and coarse texture which together add up to just under seven minutes. And a resonant, slithery exchange between German double bassist Torsten Müller and Alabama electric guitarist Davey Williams clocks in at under five. But two titanic sets are included in their entirety.

One is "Chicago Quartet" from 1998, when trombonist Conrad Bauer joined Alexander Schlippenbach Trio, with Paul Lytton subbing for Paul Lovens. It's nearly an hour of highwire invention, with an especially thrilling moment when Bauer transitions from solo multiphonics to bluffly sluicing through Lytton's splattering attack. And Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet +1's "Stone/Water" captures how that ensemble would break into sub-sections, some unrepentantly complex, others simply mad. The music's sustained power recalls how validating it felt at the time for folks on the Chicago scene to hear the local players mix it up with the Tentet's heavy figures from Europe and New York.

The series curators indulged in some dream team combo construction, especially during festivals. There's Chicago tenorist Von Freeman's face-off with the Amsterdam duo of Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink on Charlie Parker's "Confirmation", during which the instantly besotted drummer and saxophonist leave the pianist in the dust. And the squalling, fractious birth of Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson's rapport with guitarist Thurston Moore can be heard here. The half-German, half-Chicagoan sextet of Vandermark, Hamid Drake, Kent Kessler, Axel Dörner, Thomas Lehn and Johannes Bauer intrigues as a mash-up of personalities as well as an early snapshot of Vandermark's compositional ambitions.

Other inclusions attest to the depth of the Chicago scene. It's a gas to hear a twentysomething Josh Abrams demonstrating his early mastery of old school walking basslines in the company of tenor journeyman Ron Dewar and veteran Sun Ra drummer Robert Barry. And the familial connection between Drake and tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson enlivens a dedication to the late Fred Hopkins, recorded just three weeks after his death. One sobering aspect of this set is how many of its participants are now gone. ●



John Corbett (left) with Steve Lacy at The Empty Bottle