

Parade, improv fusion of media highlight Edgefest

REVIEW

Events at Kerrytown segue into rocking finish by Torn quartet

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As it does every year, Edgefest, Ann Arbor's four-day excursion through creative improvisational music took in element of every kind of music imaginable, combining them in ways that were challenging, yet satisfying and never lacking in surprises.

Even though it celebrates music that, by definition, explores the edges – the edges of composition, of jazz, of musicians' abilities to extemporize in the moment – it's always surprising at just how accessible so much of it is.

That's partly because the musicians's abilities to fuse different styles of music into wholly new creations of sound that, while familiar in some aspects, still challenge in others. After kicking off on Wednesday with a killer set set if scorching free jazz by Trio X (LINK to Thursday's story?), Edgefest carried forth with a slate of artists that fused jazz idioms to just about any other style you can imagine – rock, folk, classical, even worldbeat.

Some highlights:

On Friday at the Firefly Club, Jason Kao Hwang and his Edge Quartet fused classical, jazz and traditional Asian music into a dense, swirling set that took Hwang's compositions and turned them on their heads. The performers – Hwang on violin, trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum, bassist Ken Filiano and drummer Andrew Drury – established a range of emotions from deadly serious to playful as they ad libbed over Hwang's elegant compositional structures.

On Saturday Bynum was far less serious as he led an irreverent, New Orleans-style parade through Kerrytown, which has become one of Edgefest's more-endearing traditions. And in many ways, the parade is symbolic of the festival, which succeeds in part, because of its ability to have fun with what can be very serious music.

The parade was just one one of many Edge events that are free and which offered some of the festival's

One of those highpoints was Saturday's coordinated "Improv Film Meets Improv Music" effort between the Ann Arbor Film Festival and Edgefest, in which several local and national filmmakers made short films on Saturday, then screened them in the Kerrytown shops while a band led by local reedman Piotr Michalowski and trumpeter James Cornish.

This was a perfect fusion of media, with the band's soundtracks playing perfect counterpoint to the films' often playful, occasionally violent and gruesome, images. The band deserves special praise for performing what was one of the festivals few fully improvised sets and pulling it off with aplomb. In a festival that draws top-class musicians from around the globe, it's special that some of the best are from right here in our backyard.

In one of the festival's strongest sets, Dutch saxophonist and composer, Jorrit Dijkstra, and his Flatlands Collective on Friday reinvented American jazz in a way that remained true to its template, while finding new territories to explore. Earthy, meditative and very accessible, the Flatlands Collective was the perfect fusion of composition and improvisation.

The Hamiet Bluiett Quintet performed a remarkable set of bebop-tinged worldbeat Saturday at Kerrytown's V2V store. Blueitt, a veteran of bands led by giants like Charles Mingus and Sam Rivers, was in fine form, coaxing full-throated, soulful runs from his baritone saxophone with fine assists from bassist Harrison Bankhead and guitarist Fareed Haque, while local Congolese percussionist Tito Somba and his local trio provided a bubbling, insistent rhythmic foundation.

Edgefest wrapped up Saturday at the Firefly Club in rocking style, with guitarist David Torn's Prezons quartet tearing through a set of dense, scorching jazz-rock fusion. Although Torn is a fine, inventive guitarist, this set belonged to Edgefest veteran Tim Berne, whose alto sax work infused the set not only with its melodic foundation, but also its heart and soul. Even amid the quartet's busy, sequencer-heavy sound, Berne's organic solos shone through providing an earthy element to the otherwise spaced out arrangements.