
splendid > reviews > 8/17/2004

It's nice to see media arts collective Free103point9 continue to release interesting, DIY-style projects that explore transmission arts, a genre they've coined to cover broadcasts (AM/FM radio, walkie-talkie, etc.) as a means of creative expression. The sixteenth release in their long running series is a live radio theatre project merging the traditions of 1940s serial radio shows with modern day audio explorations.

The concept is pretty solid. Noise Noir's main characters, Helen Tremble and Mike Sharpie (played campily straight by Heidi McElligott and Ryan Holspopple, respectively), guide us through the tongue-in-cheek script: Sharpie, a crossword-solving detective, obsesses over Tremble, a nightclub singer, while murder and mayhem lurk, apparently, in the background. As we listen to the dialog unfold (a small chore in and of itself), we're treated to the drama's simultaneous, ever-present ambient soundtrack. This comes in expected form: we hear a gale howl on a windy day, impacts of footsteps, creaking doors, etcetera. Unexpectedly, there are also periodic interludes by a rock band, on hand to add terrific tension (sludgy guitars pound incrementally as two characters discover a dead body in a drawer) during key moments, but also dropping brief fish-out-of-water intermissions between scenes. All the while, a nod to clichéd old-style noir flows through the performance in the form of steamy sax solos and beatnik beats (lifted from some obscure record, probably). Juxtaposed against the strange rock atmospheres and experimental sound effects (at one point, a squiggle of analog noise simulates a character slugging down his drink), this amounts to one strange, novel listen.

Noise Noir was performed in front of a live audience; you can hear the added din of crowd reaction (including some distracting coughs in one part). Overall, it's a fantastic idea, but something subtle is lost in translation, and it kept me from truly enjoying the disc on the intended level. I don't think the show was recorded all that well, for one thing. Tinny quality won't please audiophiles, but hey, this is a broadcast, and a faux-old-time broadcast, to boot. What do you expect? The lightweight storyline also takes effort to follow, much less care about. That said, this is an art form whose time has come. I hope we see more stuff like Noise Noir, with even better execution.

-- Walt Miller

REVIEWS:

12/31/2005: Ladytron
Brian Cherney
Tomas Korber
UHF
The Rude Staircase
Dian Diaz
12/30/2005: Helloween
PTI
The Crimes of Ambition
Karl Blau
Holsopple
Gary Noland
12/29/2005: Tommy and The Terrors
Blacklisted
Bound Stems
Gary Noland
Carlo Ato Dato and Baldo Martinez
Qzaturo Bizzoni
12/28/2005: The Positions
Comet Gain
Breadfoot featuring Anna Phoebe
Secret Mommy
The Advantage
For a Decade of Sin: 11 Years of Bloodshot Records
12/27/2005: The Slow Poisoner
Alan Sondheim & Ritual All
770 Davenport
Beaumont
Five Corners Jazz Quintet
Cameron McGill
Drunk With Joy
12/26/2005: 10 Ft. Ganja Plant
The Hospitals
Ross Beach
Big Star
The Goslings
Lair of the Minotaur
Koji Asano

FEATURES:

Grizzly Bear's Ed Broste probably didn't even know that he'd be the subject of Jennifer Kelly's final Splendid interview... but he is!