

# GET LOCAL

## PIONEERING SOUND AT SONIC FRONTIERS by Lee M. Shook Jr.

**A**lthough it may come as a surprise to many, Tuscaloosa is considered something of a legendary outpost when it comes to experimental music. As the one-time home of such avant-garde heroes as internationally acclaimed harpist/composer Anne LeBaron, free improvisation pioneers Davey Williams and LaDonna Smith, and deranged Dada-big band leader the Rev. Fred Lane, Tuscaloosa has a rich history of radical music-making that goes back to the early 1970s and has been quietly on the radar for more than four decades.

In fact, during the late 1970s, it was one of the few places in the South where experimental music was happening at all, and was known for being a small but important oasis among traveling musicians.

Having hosted everyone from composer, saxophonist and MacArthur "Genius Grant" recipient John Zorn (on his first-ever tour of the South), to famed European improvisers like guitarist Derek Bailey, saxophonist Evan Parker and percussionist Andrea Centazzo, Tuscaloosa has played a vital role in nurturing a global network of artists looking to connect with the world through art and music.

Although interest in experimental music has waned in Tuscaloosa since its 1970s heyday, the tradition appears to be in an exciting period of reinvigoration. Having experienced something of a decline in experimental music performances in the past decade, in no small part due to the demise of legendary dive bar/music venue The Chukker, which presented artists like Sun Ra and Eugene Chadbourne, Tuscaloosa is once again at the forefront of Alabama's experimental music scene with a new concert series at the University of Alabama dubbed Sonic Frontiers, kicking off tonight with a concert from Vox Arcana.

Curated by Andrew Raffo Dewar, New College assistant professor and assistant director of Creative Campus, the series — now in its second season — aims to bring some of the world's leading avant-garde musicians to town in hopes



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Chicago's experimental music trio, Vox Arcana, is made up of virtuosic clarinetist James Falzone, left, percussionist Tim Daisy and cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm.

### VOX ARCANA

**What:** Performance by experimental trio, as the kickoff of the Sonic Frontiers series

**When:** 7:30 p.m. tonight

**Where:** Moody Recital Hall, UA campus

**Cost:** Free

**More:** 205-348-9928. [www.creativecampus.ua.edu/project/sonic-frontiers](http://www.creativecampus.ua.edu/project/sonic-frontiers).

of inspiring both creativity and dialogue among students and citizens alike.

"The motivation is to create a situation for the circulation of interesting ideas and approaches to making music," Dewar said. "By providing these free concerts of adventurous music to the community, I hope to stimulate and encourage appreciation and curiosity for this music, which is commercially irrelevant and resists commodification, and yet is full of infinite possibilities, in part because of its anti-commercial nature.

"In addition, I hope to spark interest amongst Alabamians for this

work and encourage them to enrich the fabric and diversity of this music with their own voices and ears in the future."

After a first season that saw the likes of maverick New York City jazz quartet Endangered Blood, dynamic percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani, and Ghanaian saxophonist/instrument maker Nii Noi Nortey performing on campus, this year's lineup aims to keep the momentum alive by bringing another robust group of artists.

As a longtime participant in the new music scene in the United States and abroad, Dewar — a composer, saxophonist and ethnomusicologist

who studied under such towering figures of contemporary music as Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy and Alvin Lucier — wanted to bring some of his peers to town in hopes of tapping into the artistic heritage.

"Upon my arrival here in 2008, I noticed that the music I have been deeply involved in for nearly two decades did not have a foothold in Tuscaloosa," Dewar said, "though there is a history of it happening here that has its roots in the 1970s intermedia arts group Raudelunas, and the many experimental musicians that performed at The Chukker before it closed its doors. I also noticed that many of my musical colleagues from all over the world were passing through our neck of the woods while on tour, so I decided to hold out a net to catch them."

Hosting world-class composers, jazz legends and homegrown prodigies, this year's series will offer a wide range of sounds and sonorities

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to challenge and engage those willing to let the music take them where it will.

Starting things off with a proverbial bang, the fall season of Sonic Frontiers will find two powerhouse groups presenting two nights of startlingly original music. Both shows will take place at UA's Moody Music Building Recital Hall, beginning with Chicago's Vox Arcana trio today.

Among the leaders of the Windy City's post-jazz/new music underground, Vox Arcana is one of those rare groups whose dexterity with both compositional elements and improvisation is something to behold. Led by percussionist Tim Daisy and featuring virtuosic clarinetist James Falzone and cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm — who has also collaborated with well-known indie-rock groups such as Wilco, US Maple, and Superchunk — the trio's unique approach to structure and improvisation, chaos and control, melody and noise make them a great starting point for anyone interested in the here-and-now of modern music.

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The group is touring behind a new album, "Soft Focus."

"The unusual clarinet/cello/percussion format used in Vox Arcana gives the trio an opportunity to exploit unique timbral, textural, and melodic qualities that are rare in modern improvised music," Daisy said. "In addition, the strengths of the individual improvisers, compounded by the deep well of influences, including the 'New York School' of modern composers and the pioneering work of Chicago's AACM, makes for a truly original and exciting sonic experience."

Following the opening event, Sonic Frontiers will present the Ullman/Swell Quartet Oct. 17, featuring legendary jazz drummer Barry Altschul, who has performed with Paul Bley, Art Pepper and as a member of the seminal quartet Circle with Chick Corea, Dave Holland and Anthony Braxton. Fronted by German saxophonist Gebhard Ullman and trombonist Steve Swell and rounded out by upright bassist Hill Greene, the quartet's kinetic improvisations and compositional chops make for a powerful combination.

After that, there's a significant break until the new year, when the series returns with a performance by visiting Czech Republic-based composer and bassist George Cremaschi on Jan. 17, followed by a one-night only reunion of the Raudelunas art collective — minus Fred Lane — on Feb. 2. Among the most exciting events on the Sonic Frontiers calendar, the "Raudelunas Revival" will be staged at the Ferguson Center Theatre as part of a group retrospective being presented at the Ferguson Art Gallery throughout the month of January, which will feature visual art and archival materials from the group's activities in the 1970s.

Following the Raudelunas show, Sonic Frontiers will conclude its 2012-2013 season with performances by UA School of Music professor Tim Feeney's experimental percussion trio on Feb. 25, Holland Hopson's electro-Appalachian banjo and Justin Peake's electro-percussion music in March, and a very special outdoor performance of New York composer Aaron Siegel's "Science is Only a Sometimes Friend" for eight glockenspiels by UA's percussion ensemble, led by Feeney, on April 8. ■