

WIRE

**THE WIRE
TAPPER 31**

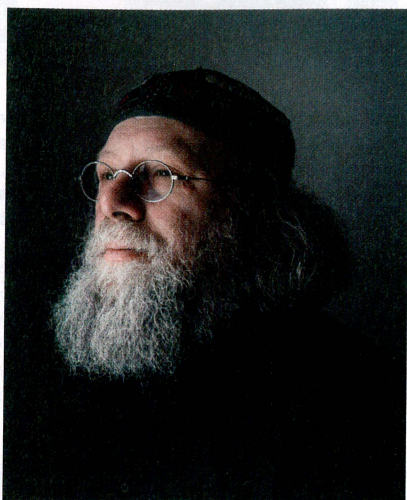
Free 20 track CD

**JAKOB
ULLMANN**

**MIKA VAINIO
STORYBOARD P
ASHLEY PAUL**

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Tuscaloosa

Kevin Nutt discovers experimentation of biblical proportions at Alabama's Sonic Frontiers series



The Raudelunas (left to right): LaDonna Smith, Mark Lanter, Reverend Fred Lane, Davey Williams, Lee Shook

The American South – stubborn bastion of conservative reaction, but also the cradle of much of the country's music, literature and folk art – tolerates an equally contradictory mix of experimentation and creative weirdness. Here, everyone goes to church and is encouraged to sing or testify before an audience, even if what results is warbles, uncomfortable silences or inarticulate screams. Tune in to the local gospel radio station and you will hear out of tune and off-time guitars, discordant yelps, and someone's baby screaming for a toy in the background, but all of this is tolerated and accepted because it's for the glory of God. Stereotypical Southern characteristics and habits are precisely the foundations of ingenuity and tolerance. What is a backwater anyway but a fecund soup of single-celled microscopic monsters swimming about, away from the main stream, waiting for natural selection to make its move?

Tuscaloosa, Alabama might not be the first place that comes to mind when one thinks of experimental and improvised music, but even a cursory look reveals intriguing signs. When composer/musician Andrew Raffo Dewar arrived at the University of Alabama in 2008, he began to seek out other musicians and venues. Since then, by his own count, Dewar has organised and performed in several dozen concerts of experimental and improvised music, including the Birmingham Experiments series, and at the Alabama Art Kitchen in Tuscaloosa. Other recent shows featured Eugene Chadbourne and Tatsuya Nakatani, Thirteenth Assembly, Ken Vandermark and Tim Daisy, and Jason Kahn and Brian Eubanks. A highlight was the 2010 Music And Movement At Moundville performance held at the 800 year old Native American archaeological site just south of Tuscaloosa, with Dewar, LaDonna Smith, Evan Lipson, Jill Burton and Claire Elizabeth Barratt braving the intense August heat.

These performances and collaborations encouraged Dewar to formally inaugurate the Sonic Frontiers series in February 2012, beginning with a concert by percussionist/composer Harris Eisenstadt's Canada Day Quintet. The free concerts are held during the

University of Alabama's spring and autumn semesters at venues on campus and around town. By the end of the second season there will have been 12 concerts. Peripatetic free saxophonist Jack Wright played at the Alabama Art Kitchen in March 2012, joined by Dewar on several pieces, muting his sax against the bare flesh of his thigh. His horn squawks and bleats resonated through the room and out onto the front porch, sounding perfectly in tune with the surroundings. An intriguing surprise during the first season was the concert by Ghanaian saxophonist and artist Nii Noi Nortey. Nortey, who builds his own instruments, participated in a question and answer session during one of Dewar's classes. Nortey's enlightening comments touched on his theories of colonialism, politics and pan-African history and art. I recalled his words on the symbolic spiritual significance of water as Nortey began his performance – accompanied by Dewar and percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani – by immersing the bell of his handcrafted sax into a bowl of water and softly blowing bubbles with his first notes.

The autumn season of Sonic Frontiers featured outstanding performances by Ullman/Swell 4, led by Gebhard Ullman and Steve Swell, and a superb performance by percussionist Tim Daisy's Vox Arcana. Experimental contrabassist George Cremaschi began the spring 2013 series with a performance on a freezing night at the Paul R Jones Gallery in Tuscaloosa. Alabamians do not know how to deal with snow and ice, which render the highways empty, yet 60 folk turned out for the performance at the Paul R Jones Gallery on campus. Sound travels differently in dry, cold air, of course, and Cremaschi's manual thumps on the body of his cello, bowed string strikes and other electronic tomfoolery had a crisp, immediate effect throughout the space. Afterwards, as the crowd wandered out into the quiet, peacefully desolate and resonant landscape, the echoes of the performance were complemented by the rhythmic sounds of squeaking automobile brakes, distant industrial booms and the ambient, mechanical hum of the freezing city.

Although presented by Sonic Frontiers, the reunion performance in February by the legendary Raudelunas collective was conceived, organised and directed by the Birmingham based writer, musician, DJ and now official Raudelunas member Lee Shook. The Raudelunas were an influential 'pataphysical art, media and music collective that came together in Tuscaloosa in 1973, featuring LaDonna Smith and Davey Williams, sculptor Craig Nutt, composer Anne LeBaron, drummer Mark Lanter and the Reverend Fred Lane. Shook worked tirelessly and obsessively for the last five years to put together a month-long Raudelunas art and media retrospective at the Ferguson Student Center Gallery. A one-off musical performance was held on the final day of the exhibition in the Ferguson Theatre, which began with The Raudelunas trundling down the aisles in parade formation, playing everything from toy instruments to a Laotian khene. Things settled into an inspirational evening highlighted by a performance of composer Anne LeBaron's *Concerto For Active Frogs* and a surprise appearance by Reverend Fred Lane himself. Backed by Smith, Lanter, Williams and Shook, Lane channelled a dada-addled Frank Sinatra. For the final song, Smith appeared with a noisy vacuum cleaner; electric drills, sanders and a singing cooking bowl materialised in the others' hands, and for the next five minutes the audience drowned in a cacophony of mechanical drones and whizzes. Then The Raudelunas exited as they entered, parading up the aisles and out into the night. The audience rose to leave only when a voice shouted from the foyer, "It's over!" Amen.

Throughout Sonic Frontiers, Dewar has partnered with various university and community organisations; all the shows have been free of charge and well attended, including quite a few attentive children, who can make the best experimental music enthusiasts. Sonic Frontiers appears to be moving the boat out of the backwater and a little into the current. □ Sonic Frontiers continues this month with three more performances including Holland Hopson and Justin Peake. sonicfrontiers.ua.edu