

Jessica Sligter & Sarah Hennies

Kafé Hærverk, Oslo, Norway

A series of blasts of white noise resonates through the small audience in Oslo's Kafé Hærverk. Jessica Sligter applies some lip balm and adjusts her synthesizer. The blasts become crunched and metallic, then stop, replaced by a queasy warbling drone. Sligter sings overtop: "*We're sinking now/Sinking/I've seen my city/It's over the hill/Such is all around/Dilapidation/Moving towards the underground*". She is performing "The Finest Hour", the opening track of her recent EU-catastrophe themed album *Polycrisis.Yes!* (reviewed by Louise Gray in *The Wire* 417), in this instance with percussionist Sarah Hennies.

Despite the wintry cosiness of the capital of non-EU member Norway, the all-round uneasy times are hard to ignore, and even Sligter's onstage banter reflects

that theme tonight: "It's actually an EU record, so, sorry Norway, you're not allowed at the party. But maybe you can laugh about it anyway... what shall I say, the dream is dead..." Which is her way of introducing the second song on the set list (and album), "The Dream Has Died". As a drone swells under pulsing vibes, she sings, "*Broken/frozen/bloody flavour...*", leading us back into a cold, dystopian soundscape.

Hennies's deft percussion work on vibraphone and drums underpins Sligter's vocals with nuance and economy, sometimes pushing the compositions along, other times ping-pong like a sonar or countdown. Sligter's singing is almost overpowering – like a flat palm smacked into the middle of your chest – so much so that it renders my experience of the instrumental segments as being oddly

polite and verging on bland, when they're not at all.

Near the end of the set "Solidarity" features Sligter singing-shouting the title repeatedly as Hennies pounds mallets on vibes. I can't tell if it is ironic or sincere in the moment, but I'm moved nonetheless, and when I look around the audience – listening intently without any chattering – it feels as if we're all experiencing that familiar word becoming ever stranger, jargonistic and distant from us, even as it's being repeated in our faces.

When I hear a good vocalist it often feels like they are singing just for me, that I can project myself into their words and voice. I get that feeling tonight and I'd guess that others in attendance feel the same. But despite that sense of intimacy, there's still an overall cerebral feeling of distance and irony to the concert.

One bit of banter stuck with me on my way home, where Sligter introduces "The Endless End": "This one's about austerity and dystopian politics... so maybe if it all goes to hell it can still be enriching in a way..." Her wry comic timing in the face of catastrophe prevents the music from falling into a depressive hole. Indeed, it creates enough distance for it to be an enriching journey. But it also serves as a reminder that there's a lot of quasi-therapeutic pep-talk currently about, saying seize the possibility in chaos and catastrophe, be it Brexit, climate change or culture related. But this notion already has a long history in power and perception management. Whether *Polycrisis.Yes!* redeems that pernicious tactic is besides the point. It's engaging and beautifully executed.

Nathan Budzinski

PRAED Orchestra!

Calligraphy Square, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Pulling from an unprecedented pantheon of musical influences, PRAED Orchestra emerge spontaneously out of the ether above Sharjah's Calligraphy Square. Led by longtime collaborators Raed Yassin on synthesizer, beats and vocals and Paed Conca on clarinet and bass guitar, the 13-piece ensemble blend and bend the boundaries of genre and geography in the debut of their nearly two hour set that combines precomposed and improvised music. With jarring moments of unpredictability, the orchestra suture together references from Egyptian cinema with trance inducing shaabi music loops and leftfield electronics, while flirting with free jazz, space jazz and psychedelia. It's noisy, thick and unrelentingly hypnotic.

Working together since 2006 under the hybrid moniker of PRAED, Yassin and Conca have just released their fourth album *Doomsday Survival Kit* on French label Akuphone. Three of the seven pieces

performed here are reprised from the album, the duo continuing to define their inventive genre-busting methods, while exploring themes found within Arabic and particularly Egyptian popular culture.

Through a commission by the Sharjah Art Foundation, the duo present their most daring work yet for a 14-piece ensemble drawn from the global free jazz and improvised community and selected specifically for their "unique musical character". They include Christine Kazarian (electric harp) and Alan Bishop (vocals, saxophone, acoustic guitar), alongside many familiar faces from the Arab avant garde including Radwan Ghazi (buzoq, vocals and modular synth), Nadah El Shazly (vocals, keys) and Maurice Louca (many of whom were featured in *The Wire* 413).

In Calligraphy Square, this sundry orchestration of musical characters comes to life when Ute Wasserman opens up with a vocal solo articulated in her self-contained sound language. Within seconds, it becomes difficult to

tell if its source is human or machine, as Wasserman's operatic vocal modulations quickly break down into seemingly inorganic drone calls. It often sounds as if she has swallowed a modular synthesizer, and chased it down with a theremin.

Titled "The Last Invasion", the fragmented, sonically invasive piece is eventually joined by tense Lynchian electronics, and the cacophony of unsettling orchestral noise, a sound that later finds resolution in an ominous oud solo by Sam Shalabi. In the next piece "Doomsday Survival Kit", we experience the first of many tectonic sonic shifts with the jolting, deployment of a raucous shaabi sample, looping rhythmically while hooking us into the downbeat. This earworming sample is joined by polyrhythms played by Khalid Yassin on percussion and Michael Zerang on drums, layered and blended to evoke primordial frenzies.

By the time the rest of the orchestra join in, namely the horns of Hans Koch (soprano saxophone), Martin

Kuchen (baritone saxophone) and Conca on clarinet, the sound bubbles like a volcano on the verge of eruption. Deep within the molten ooze is a coalescence of synths and keys that boil and build until the orchestra's sound becomes so opaque, the only thing left to do is surrender to the downbeat at the core of the sample.

The delusory downbeat found in most shaabi music, often played out like a steady rhythmic pulse, feels like a central theme running through many of the seven pieces. Ultimately it holds together this mélange of musical styles. While multiple improvisational interventions combined with dense orchestral layering often create a disjunctive musical collage, there is something psychologically pleasing in the radical and unexpected shifts from one section to the next. Somewhere in this synthesis, the orchestra bust through the limitations of genre and break free of the parameters defining the hallucinatory references at the root of the music.

Maha ElNabawi

Rune Grammofon 20th Birthday Concerts

Nasjonal Jazzscene, Oslo, Norway

Since its conversion into a theatre, the former cinema housing the Nasjonal Jazzscene has hosted cabaret shows, and it's now Oslo's premier jazz venue. It's a fitting place to host two nights of 20th birthday celebrations of the Rune Grammofon label, whose wideranging, mainly Norwegian roster has germinated in the cracks between genres, producing some remarkable musical hybrids.

The opening night begins in an uncompromising manner with a set by Maja Ratkje. It starts with her cooing prettily to the twinkling sounds of a musical box mechanism, but then she begins to loop and distort her voice, and five minutes in she unleashes a series of baleful yells over disintegrating electronic signals and vocal patterns. It's a visceral, disturbing

combination, with her theremin adding an extra queasiness to the cacophony, before a lullaby-like finale brings a resolution – of sorts – to her performance.

Trying to pin down Motorpsycho via their records has never been straightforward, and the same applies live. Tonight they are joined by Lars Hornthvedt of Jaga Jazzist on keyboards, guitar and flute. Most of their songs start off like hairy 1970s heavy rock, with chorus harmonies that nod further back towards early Grateful Dead. Then they suddenly veer off in another direction completely, maybe a lengthy and relentless monochordal rock mantra with freakout guitar pitched somewhere between Neu! and Ash Ra Tempel, then back through a maze of time changes into verse three – which arrives about ten minutes after verse two. You could make two separate sets out of these different approaches, but the tension created

between them is dramatic.

Baritone saxophonist Mats Gustafsson plays free jazz with a rock attitude in The Thing; conversely Fire! – appearing on night two in their trio form – play a brand of rock with a free jazz attitude. The trio improvise around their favoured two-bar bass riffs, Andreas Werliin is a particularly physical drummer, and Gustafsson runs through his gamut of purrs and blats, while his terse repeated single notes and rhythmic phrases punctuate the music like guitar power chords. He also plays electronics that remind of the untamed sounds of Pan Sonic, and Fire! demonstrate an empathetic sense of dynamics throughout their set.

Jazz rock can mean a lot of things, sometimes combining the worst aspects of each genre, but Hedvig Mollestad Trio take the spirit of, say, Led Zeppelin and John McLaughlin as the basis for an

individual new style. And although the group are all jazz academy graduates, they avoid the overtight, overplayed approach of some of today's highly trained young players as they explore space, shape and dynamics. Mollestad's playing also shows a post-psychedelic approach to texture and timbre, favouring single notes and hanging chords as much as speedy lead work. Bass player Ellen Brekken's ebullient lines have a solid centre, as she plays harmony on their serpentine riffs or races off with drummer Ivar Loe Bjørnstad on the middle section of "Bewitched, Dwarfed And Defeathered". The set peaks with the ecstatic "Lucidness", its free jazz rock recalling Scorch Trio, with everyone playing around the One. It caps off one of the most exciting sets that this writer has witnessed in a long time. The audience clearly concur.

Mike Barnes