



# AMN Reviews: FIMAV 38 Part 1

by Irwin Block, May 21, 2022

VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – Organizers of the 38th Festival International de Musique Actuelle kicked off their most varied and extensive lineup since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there were a few bumps in the road.

Still, there was a major buzz among fans of this highly-regard showcase for bold and innovative music at opening night, free of mandatory restrictions such as mask-wearing and well-spaced seating. The city is 98 miles northeast of Montreal and over the years has featured a who's who of innovators, from Cecil Taylor and Anthony Braxton to John Zorn and Evan Parker.

While trumpeting more international content than in last year's all-Canadian program, one of the star attractions – the six-member Ukrainian “punk cabaret” troupe called Dakh Daughters – had to be cancelled at the last minute because of a visa issue and a family illness affecting one of its members. They had been living as refugees in Vire, France.



The festival program had been printed, but with only a day's notice, festival artistic director called bassist William Parker in New York City to sub, along with Cuban expat drummer Francisco Jose Mela, who flew in from Boston, and drafted electric guitarist Ava Mendoza, who was here for another gig, to perform as a trio.

With almost no rehearsal time, the Parker trio presented what turned out to be an engaging free-jazz and improvised music session for a full 80 minutes – the opening night highlight.

After an exploratory beginning, driven by Parker's big sound and forward drive, the group developed a cohesive attack propelled by the relentless and varied drumming of the Cuban-born and trained Mela. In mid-concert, Mendoza emerged more prominently injecting avant-rock riffs into the mix.

Thinking of the massacre of mainly Black shoppers in Buffalo, N.Y., one could have expected a note or two of protest, but Parker put down his bass, picked up an Indian sounding flute and played some simple melodies, then chanted repeatedly, “Joy, joy, joy,” then repeated the enigmatic phrase, “His hands were like sandpaper...He doesn't want to sand my table.” He invited spectators to his dressing room for an explanation, but this spectator declined, eager to get a coffee before the last show.

The first show featured the vocals of Egyptian-born Hadah el Shazly, now a Montreal resident, in a session of ambient Arabic experimental music, backed by a four-member string section of Sarah Pagé (harp), Jonathan Fortune (bass), Radwan Ghazi Moumneh (buzuk), and Sam Shalabi (electric guitar).



Most of the pieces were moody and mournful, delivered by el Shazly with emotion yet also projecting a sensory aspect. The last song was called Sweet Lullaby, played with a haunting sweetness.

The midnight show featured the American electric guitar quartet called Dither – Taylor Levine, Joshua Lopes, James Moore, and Gyan Riley. They played a series of originals by band members, including Curling for Four, composed by John Zorn, built around long tones.

My favourite was Renegade by Taylor Levine – a fast-paced, intense, and multi-layered piece that even at 1 a.m. captured our full attention.

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