

Henry Threadgill's Zooid and International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) attracted a throng of curious listeners to Skirball Center (Dec. 3rd) for the NYC premiere of the Pulitzer laureate's Pathway, performed by himself (alto saxophone, soprano/bass flutes), Liberty Ellman (acoustic guitar), Christopher Hoffman (cello), Jose Davila (trombone/tuba) and Elliot Humberto Kavee (drums), alongside ICE's Michelle Farah (English horn), David Byrd-Marrow (French horn), Josh Modney (violin), Joanna Mattrey (viola), Lizzie Burns (bass) and Levy Lorenzo (percussion), Vimbayi Kaziboni conducting. The hendectet was arrayed in two wide rows, Kaziboni up front, beating out rapidly shifting rhythmic cycles of 3, 4, 5 and 6 beats, or else laying out to let the ensemble find its own course. The suite was organized into a series of solo, duo and small-group improvisations, giving all the musicians room to explore, each usually beginning alone, to be joined by one or more co-improvisers, then dropping out as the joiners carried on. Even the few full ensemble sections retained independence of parts, each instrument a distinct spot of color, isolated yet integrated into the overall composition, like pointillist paintings, best observed at a distance. Threadgill, resplendent in a bright yellow inverted flowerpot hat and somber black vest, knees akimbo, imagination on full tap, set the tone with his singular merging of youthful exuberance with worldly wisdom. – Tom Greenland



Zooid & ICE @ Skirball Center

Outside, five floors below the sky-lighted loft atop the neo-Gothic edifice housing Fotografiska, a 22nd Street photo gallery/restaurant-cum-performance space bordering the Flatiron and Gramercy Park districts, emergency vehicle sirens wailed up and down Park Avenue South, a stark contrast to the subdued atmosphere inside (Dec. 1st), where contrabass clarinetist Josh Sinton sat alone, back to his audience, watching as blurred images played across the behind-stage screen in an unbroken chain of vaguely familiar items-flowerbeds, organisms, bees on honeycomb, a struck matchstick, a boy's face-all superimposed in rotating layers of bright cerise and chartreuse, pulling in and out of focus, slowly increasing or decreasing in tempo. Facing the amplifiers and working his volume pedal, the sound panned across four large speakers spread across the exposed, jumbo-brick front wall, Sinton found and exploited separate pockets of simultaneous electronic feedback: a low register, Sousaphone-like hum, a higher tone resembling, perhaps, an amorous elephant, topped by odd-numbered overtones. He kept each going with circular breathing, feathering the tones with his pedal to effect subtle swells and fades in a sense playing the amplifier more than the horn – achieving in his half-hour meditation a transcendent moment in time, accompaniment, counterpoint, maybe even an antidote, to the relentless sirens and other urgencies of the sleepless city outside.

A celebration of the Greenwich House Music School, combined with a panel discussion about bandleader James Reese Europe (1881-1919) and his far-reaching influence (Dec. 8th), put a spotlight on this muchforgotten man whom Eubie Blake called "the Martin Luther King of music". The panel of Jimmy Owens, Bobby Sanabria and Elena Martinez, moderated by Dr. Paul Austerlitz, revealed a giant who set the stage for all that was to come in ragtime, blues, protojazz and jazz. The largely unknown Latin influence of the era was also addressed. Eight tunes, mostly associated with Europe, were superbly rendered by Dance Clarinets, the clarinet orchestra founded and led by JD Parran. Nine variously tuned clarinets, an alto clarinet and two bass clarinets played in the style of the day, remarkably utilizing harmonies and creative arrangements for a full orchestral sound. A bass saxophone, bass and percussion rounded out the rhythm. Beginning the concert with a whistle blow by Parran, the band offered many familiar tunes, including "The Memphis Blues", "The Hesitation Blues" and "St. Louis Blues", all by W.C. Handy. For contrast, two European-based numbers, which Parran referred to as "gazebo music", were the very Germanic, John Philip Sousa-esque "Florentiner March" (Julius Fucik) and "Toreador Song" (Georges Bizet). "That Moaning Trombone" (Carl. D. Bethel) was notable for the emulation of trombone slides by the clarinet contingent. -Marilyn Lester



Dance Clarinets @ Greenwich House Music School

The wonder of the transformative nature of jazz was front and center in this year's Big Band Holidays, presented by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis at Rose Theater (Dec. 14th). A handful of bandmembers created spirited new arrangements of old-school tunes such as saxophonist Sherman Irby's "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth" (Donald Yetter Gardner) in a fun swing and trombonist Chris Crenshaw's traditional-turnedwhimsical "Deck the Halls". Outstanding was bassist Carlos Henriquez' AfroCuban arrangement of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" (J. Fred Coots-Haven Gillespie) with genius drummer Obed Calvaire outdoing himself with clavé rhythms and other creative percussive ideas. Guest vocalist, bright light of jazz and recently Grammy-nominated Samara Joy, was generously featured, offering "Warm in December" (Bob Russell) paired with an Ella Fitzgerald/Louis Armstrong-inspired "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm" (Irving Berlin). But it was on "My Favorite Things" (Richard Rodgers-Oscar Hammerstein II) that Joy pulled out all the stops, with prime scat and vocalizations. "Heat Miser" (Maury Laws-Jules Bass), from the 1974 animated film The Year Without A Santa Claus, matched the funk approach to "This Christmas" (Donny Hathaway-Nadine McKinnon), with Joy, who added Fitzgerald-style lyric improvisations. Big Band Holidays offered an over-stuffed stocking of eclectic holiday and seasonal tunes.