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JAZZ REVIEW; Improvisation In a Structure Of Philosophy

By **BEN RATLIFF**

The Center, a former gym next to St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mulberry Street in Little Italy, turns into a kind of free-jazz convention hall this week. The occasion is the ninth annual Vision Festival, a series of evenings based around a group of improvisers (as well as artists, dancers and poets) in New York and spreading to their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere.

The bedrock of the festival, which ends on Monday, is a hard-line, cathartic free jazz -- particularly from New York and Germany -- which crystallized in the 1960's and 70's, and continues today with some modifications. But this is not a festival about severe aesthetics, because aesthetics are only half the picture. The statements of purpose surrounding the festival, many of them coming from its director, Patricia Nicholson Parker, emphasize peace and community building, with art as a means.

Now, with Halliburton and Wal-Mart so much in the news, it seems particularly apt to stress that small-audience, high-emotion art like this comes from interconnections of individuals, free from commercial interest: the small world, the preglobalist world. If a soft-drink or electronics corporation, for instance, were to sponsor this festival and give it an infusion of cash -- which in some sense it could use -- the whole enterprise would be nullified.

There are many things about the Vision Festival, musical and philosophical, that seem stuck in an outdated leftism, but that is partly the point. It is a seven-day mode of resistance.

This year's festival is anchored by loss: it is dedicated to the bassists Wilber Morris and Peter Kowald, who both died in 2002. The schedule on Wednesday, the festival's second night, put another bassist in its prime-time slot, Henry Grimes. Mr. Grimes, one of the great jazz bassists of the 1960's, disappeared for three decades. Since he resurfaced last year in California, he has melted into the New York free-jazz contingent, playing an olive-green bass given to him by William Parker, the lodestar of that group.

Mr. Grimes played in a trio, with the pianist Marilyn Crispell and the drummer Andrew Cyrille, and he held forth in a style that is close to Mr. Parker's. It involves lots of clumped notes, as close to chordal playing as you can get while plucking individual notes; the sound is dense and percussive, and once in a while a melodic line extrudes from it. In two pieces, one lasting an hour and one 20 minutes, the group used the time-honored dynamic of rising (in volume and intensity) in the middle and subsiding at the end, but everything else about it was improvised and chaotic.

Mr. Grimes and Mr. Cyrille saved structure for their solo spots: in the bassist's case, a seven-note motif slid through different keys, and in the drummer's case, a series of short, slapped rhythmic patterns. Ms. Crispell, after hammering and pecking around the keyboard, led the group out of its longer piece with effusions of ballad playing, smoothly performed.

The evening featured four bands, starting with a trio: the bassist Mark Dresser, the saxophonist Ned Rothenberg and the koto player Michiyo Yagi, who ruggedly manipulated her instrument's horizontal strings using a notched stick and hard strikes of a plectrum. It also included Equal Interest, a trio with the saxophonist Joseph Jarman, the violinist Leroy Jenkins and the pianist Myra Melford.

But the most meaningful contrast to Mr. Grimes's trio came with the evening's final performance, a duet with the Belgian pianist Fred Van Hove and the German trombonist Johannes Bauer. This was a softer, more lucid kind of free improvisation: Mr. Bauer kept moving his head and body, making mouth sounds even when his lips were away from the mouthpiece, and Mr. Van Hove stroked the keys, coaxing abstract murmurs.