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# JOHN ZORN'S MASADA

By [Tim Bugbee](#)

Monday, Oct 16, 12:17 AM

live at 92nd Street Y (New York, NY) Sept. 10th, 2006.



(pics courtesy of Marc Urselli / 4NI Media)

For those rock-centric types not tipped into the downtown jazz/avant scene, **John Zorn's** been about as a solid an icon in terms of creative and collaborative forces as Thurston Moore. He's played with various luminaries of the noise, improv, and jazz scenes (Haino, Marclay, Douglas, Patton, Frisell, Chadbourne, Horvitz, etc; a veritable all-star cast) and created a massive and impressive body of work via his Tzadik label. For me, though, his crowning achievement is the creation of the Masada songbook and its music played under various guises. Ostensibly a fusion of post-bop Ornette Coleman and traditional Jewish melodies, its breadth, power, beauty, and impact are unparalleled in a very auspicious career, and I jumped at the chance to head down to NYC for the kickoff of the Oyhoo festival, where Zorn would assemble four Masada configurations for a historic evening. This evening's content consisted of the second prodigious Masada output, *Book of Angels*, 300 additional compositions created in the second half of 2004.

First up was Masada String Orchestra, conducted by Zorn, and the selection they played was "Kol Nidre." From the Aramaic, it's translated as "all vows" and is traditionally the leadoff prayer in synagogues during the evening service of Yom Kippur. As such, it set the appropriate tone, and the dozen or so strong players (including familiar faces Greg Cohen [bass] and Erik Friedlander [cello]) did service to the solemn nature of the piece. After the 10 minute piece, they departed, fulfilling the role an "amuse-bouche" does for an elaborate dinner course.

Next was the quartet: Joey Baron on drums, Greg Cohen on bass, Dave Douglas on trumpet / cornet, and of course John Zorn on sax and hand signals. Always an explosive force, they are not strangers to subtlety or out and out playfulness. All these elements were on display: cutting masterfully between hard bop, sputtering and squawking noises (had to just about shield myself from stray sput and ultra tight playing (seriously, is there a better drummer than Baron?), both intuitive and directed (Zorn would play with one hand and direct surges or stops with the other). Most refreshing was the sheer exuberance the players unabashedly exhibited throughout; if you are looking for po-faced academic types in yr jazz ensembles, look elsewhere. This aspect was consistent across all of the groups of the evening: plain and simple, they LOVE playing this music and it certainly shows.



The string trio (Cohen and Friedlander, joined by Mark Feldman on violin) was next, with Zorn crouching down in front and conducting. Again, the virtuosity on display was breathtaking and engaging; I'm no musician, but I had to wonder if the scores they were reading were accurately transcribing the variety of sound they coaxed from the instruments (such as the whispery, whistle-like strains of "Azazel" to the strummed chords and finger picked strings Feldman and Friedlander employed ["Uriel"]). The playful sense of humor was also clearly communicated via the co-opted and mutated usage of Beethoven's famous motif from the 5th in "Rssasiel." The trio's enthusiasm was infectious, the playing brilliant: a clear highlight from an outstanding program.

Last up was the eight-person strong living / breathing / throbbing beast known as Electric Masada. Baron's joined by Kenny Wolleson on drums, Cyro Baptista was manning all manner of things which made noise when struck, and also used Gibby Haynes' megaphone on one song. Trevor Dunn handled electric bass duties, Jamie Saft on electronic keyboard (has he ever shaved his chin? Longest beard I've ever seen, remarkable on someone who looked no older than 25), Ikuo Mori on laptop, Zorn again on sax and cues, and the incomparable Marc Ribot on guitar. After some meanderings and Ribot futzing about with his pedals and effects (to the point where Zorn eventually walked over to and told him "fucking plug in and play"), the collective took off and never looked back. Again, the sheer joy of playing was apparent in all members, and while the heights of the Trio weren't topped, this was certainly no letdown. About the only incongruous bit for me was the electronic noise patches from Mori: they seemed a bit forced and didn't flow with the general swing of the collective. Ribot in particular was a treat to watch and listen to. After they played for about 35 minutes or so, they called it quits, and audience applause only prodded them to come out and take bows again. "If you want to hear more, you'll have to come downtown. We don't get up this way that often" was Zorn's closing comment. I hope people in the audience take his advice and support Zorn and colleagues in the smaller, more adventurous settings like Stone and Tonic.

[www.tzadik.com](http://www.tzadik.com)



Tim Bugbee

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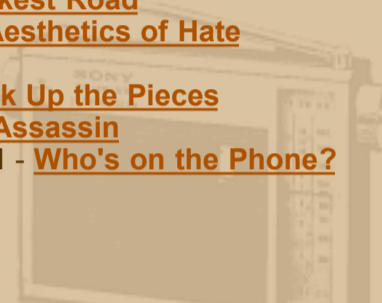
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