



MUSIC

Review: From computers to cassette decks, 'Machine Music' delivered five unique audio adventures



Joe Cantrell makes music with a driver's license and the Audiotronics Tutorette 800DM at Saturday's Project [Blank] concert at Bread and Salt. (Photo by Christian Hertzog)

Project [BLANK]'s 'Salty Series,' performed Saturday at Bread and Salt in Logan Heights, serves savory sounds

By Christian Hertzog

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Those plucky presenters of experimental music, Project [BLANK], kicked off its fifth season Saturday at Bread and Salt with “Machine Music,” a concert that promised — and delivered on — a “night of electronic sound.”

The types of electronic music ranged from computer software to patch-corded/knob-twiddled modular synthesizers.

The concert opened with University of California San Diego composer Michelle Lou seated behind a laptop. Pulses of glitchy white noise accompanied a video projection of jumpy white segments dancing around a rectangular area, with bursts of noise interjecting every now and then. The pulsed noise changed into tweets and burbles, then evolved into deep rumbles and modulated sounded. The music was continuous through most of her performance, but as the projected white lines gradually subsided, the music became sparser, finally sputtering into silence.

If anyone deserved to have the title “Machine Music” assigned to their performance, it was Joe Cantrell and his low-fi assortment of cassette recorders, turntables, effects and other forgotten electronic gear.

Have you ever seen an Audiotronics Tutorette 800DM? Me neither. It’s an educational device from 40-some years ago housed in a hard plastic case. It was apparently used to teach vocabulary with a set of accompanying cards. Run a card with a “Z” and a photo of a zebra through it, and the device would say “Zebra.”

Cantrell slowly swiped driver’s licenses and other magnetic cards through the Tutorette, playing it like an engineer running tape over a playback head to produce a squishy electronic sound. After doing this a few times, the Tutorette even sampled and looped the sound back.

His set opened with tones resembling a buzzy music box, with low rumbling drones. Over the course of 25 minutes, these quiet, introspective sounds accumulated into asymmetrical grooves, with bubbly bass electronic tones, loops of buzzing wood-like tones, and garbled speech from cassettes and records.

Haydeé Jiménez played small bells and shook a bunch of goat hooves, among other acoustic items, into her laptop. The resulting electronic texture uneasily woo-woo-wooded, with distorted pre-recorded vocals occasionally breaking through.

What do unintelligible vocals signify? A message that tries to be heard, but fails? Text without understanding? Or a cheap way to create mystery about something which has no meaning? With no verbal introduction or program notes, it was anybody's guess.

Jiménez's set was unique in its discontinuity and its courage to abandon preceding ideas and push into new sonic territory.

Michael Trigilio's "The Fourth Vatican Satellite" was described as remixes of two of his string quartets. He played a custom-built mix-and-match modular synthesizer. Long tones with diatonic melodic contours slowly became rhythmic, coalescing into a groove. Multiple electronic loops went in and out of sync. This was the least "noisy," most pitch-oriented work of the evening.

Xareni Lizarraga's laptop set focused on field recordings, with an olfactory component of sage incense and a live sampling of what appeared to be the same string of hooves that Jiménez had used earlier. Frogs and birds blended into sped-up Spanish and seemingly randomized diatonic electronic timbres.

All five composer/performers guided my ears to interesting new places, and there was enough musical diversity among them to avoid monotony. Future concerts on Project [BLANK]'s "Salty Series" promise more savory adventures to come, and the admission — \$10 — is a bargain.

Hertzog is a freelance writer.

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