

TheWire

On Location: Abasement #78 by Erick Bradshaw

Since beginning in 2015, Abasement has provided New York with a dose of freeform mayhem on a near-monthly basis. Booked by musicians Joe Frivaldi and Rob Mayson, it combines world class talent (Phill Niblock, Ikue Mori, Fred Frith, Arto Lindsay) with NYC avant upstarts and scene mainstays alike.

In its first era, Abasement occurred below street level at Lower East Side bar Max Fish, which subsequently closed during the pandemic. Non-profit organisation Artists Space's new site in the Financial District provides a perfect new basement location. The entrance to Artists Space sits in an alley that ends just a few steps away at the former location of The Mudd Club, nexus of the city's bohemian vanguard during its late 1970/early 80s hedonistic and creative peak, underlining Abasement's connection to previous generations of cutting edge NYC art.

Inspired by the media-mixing pioneered by The Exploding Plastic Inevitable and later practiced at The Mudd Club, each edition of Abasement spotlights different visual creators working with analogue, modular and digital experiments. For this edition, Jim Spring live-mixes his kaleidoscopic animations and fractal images while longtime Downtown artist Bradley Eros projects his work on the facing wall. Between performances, veteran drummer Ryan Sawyer spins disco, dub and hard rock records while the crowd mingles. Abasement is the closest thing the New York experimental scene has to a regular social gathering and that aspect is as important as the artistic goings-on.

The bill of this 78th instalment covers a gamut of experiential approaches and avant techniques. Phantom Honeymoon, a duo of Alexandra Beneski (theremin) and Steve Holtje (synthesizer and trombone), open with a hypnotic set that builds to a final number where the quavering tones coalesce into something resembling an ambulance siren, reminding the audience that the city is still in perpetual motion outside the venue. As the crowd grows, the humidity rises. Loren Connors, the maestro of solitary guitar who is dressed impeccably in a dark suit, takes advantage of the setting. Connors always makes the guitar transcend its own limitations, he plays tonight like steam billowing out of a Manhattan manhole, gentle but pressurised. Next, Vorhees, the solo guise of professional audio engineer Dana Wachs, utilises her set-up of grooveboxes and controllers to sculpt ambient pop that has the depth of drone music as her E-bow guitar tames the glitched-out samples she teases from her gear.

A legend in his native Japan, Morio Agata is on hand to make his third Abasement appearance, following performances in 2016 and 2018. As scenes from a tour documentary play on the wall behind the stage, Agata, holding an acoustic guitar, emerges playing the same song that he is strumming in the larger than life video. As his young band take up their instruments - electric guitar, bass, drums, violin - the video continues to play. When the band kick in, the way the music merges between real and recorded versions is uncanny, a simple but effective sleight of hand. Agata is a Pied Piper-like figure, leading his band and the audience into the heart of this music.

As the set progresses, the documentary fades out and Spring resumes his trippy visuals. Next comes a trio of Gryphon Rue (tapes/effects), Alex Waterman (cello) and Edwin Torres (voice). After Waterman and Rue establish a warped, springy atmosphere, Torres steps to the mic and exhales a series of deep growls that sound like a new language being formed, before he settles into more traditional recited poetics. As the set draws to a close, Waterman and Rue blend their sounds into a keening bagpipe-like drone, a fitting conclusion to another exceptional Abasement event.