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Jazz in Ramadan and other jam sessions

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On Aug. 9, saxophonist İlhan Erşahin blew dulcet tones with his bandmates in the courtyard of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum for the conclusion of Hakan Erdoğan Production's series Jazz in Ramadan.

The series began during the İstanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture, so this year marked the third summer for Jazz in Ramadan, whose four-concert schedule began on July 19 with pianist Ahmad Jamal.

Erşahin's evening, in which he performed with his İstanbul Sessions project, with Alp Erşönmez on bass guitar and Turgut Alp Bekeoğlu and İzzet Kızıl on drums and percussion, began with a hypnotic near-East flavored drumbeat before it launched into modalities with Anatolian colors. Erşahin played several tunes from his latest albums, including "Freedom" and "Aşk" (Love) wherein his favorite template is to set up a lengthy bass groove, often only two or three notes, and then build layers on top of it. Often Erşahin's contributions on the sax aren't necessarily melodies, but little fluttery riffs to add to the atmospheres he constructs. Sometimes he plays off-mic to let others take the sonic lead, an effective and musicianly gesture. Kızıl definitely adds the most audacious element; his fiery fingers on various skin drums provide electricity and innovation to the mix.

Earlier in the series, The Trio of OZ played at Santralİstanbul on July 31. They take their title from the letters in their names: Omar Hakim and Rachel Z, drummer and pianist respectively. Joining them was bassist Solomon Dorsey, whose musical contribution was the most interesting of the three. Not content to do the expected, Dorsey continually surprised us with creative ideas all evening.

Does İstanbul have a musical underground?

Definitely. Even in the oppressive heat of August, when all the major performing arts series are on vacation, live experimental music is finding and creating its niche. They are often in basements of old houses tucked away on hidden side streets -- where curious avant-garde creations take place and/or one can catch foreign touring musicians who want to jam while passing through town. There is often the element of slight secrecy; no one knows until the last minute who will play or at what time.

These niches generally are not a concert hall atmosphere that eschews ambient noise-making. They're friendly (and definitely non-trendy) bars where people freely walk around, leave if they feel like it, whisper in the background, clink their drinks, and, still politely listen and yell "bravo" at the end. The general gemütlichkeit gives the feeling of complete freedom for musicians and listeners alike.

Kooperatif, on a back alley behind the Ağa Cami on İstiklal, is one such place. On Aug. 10, Dutch drummer Robbert van Hulzen informally presented his "Elephant Songs in Istanbul" with cellist Duygu Demir and saxophonist Meriç Demirkol in the first set. It was basically 30 minutes of total improvisation -- each listening intently to each other for cues to wind up or wind down a particular groove. The way they started reminded me of the beatnik cafés of yore where often the tiniest sounds were earnestly infused with significance, then allowed to develop into a charming chaos involving noises that are not necessarily considered standard practice.

Van Hulzen told the audience he was passing through İstanbul on a long experimental journey he calls "Elephant Songs." He is toting his drum set on the back of his old motorcycle, traveling 20,000 kilometers through 14 countries, from India to Amsterdam. Speaking in jovial terms ("If you don't understand my English, just elbow your neighbor to give you a translation"), Van Hulzen explained his mission was to make stops in cities along the way to hook up with like-minded musicians for an evening or two of jamming. I suspected that the presence of a camera crew recording the first set was part of the documentation of his unusual project.

For Van Hulzen's second set, he played with violinist Özlem Kaya and New York guitarist John Plenge, whose collective improvisation took on a completely different color than the previous trio, who, taking the cue from Demir, maintained a more or less steady, almost endless stream of consciousness. Kaya, however, likes to plunge suddenly into feverish and dramatic wordless melodies, then opt for some soft and ticklish effects with her bow. Van Hulzen was glued to his colleagues' instantaneous changes of mood and accompanied them with energetic punctuation.

The underground music scene is in Asia too. Arkaoda, on Kadife Sokak in Kadıköy, plans a monthly mixed buffet of post-modern, punk, reggae, electronica, soul, Cumbia, DJ, alt, and evenings of some serious new music. Aug. 1 hosted Hakan Dedeoğlu's acoustic project with a duo of Icelandic cellist/singer Gyda Valtysdottir, Shahzad Ismaily on moog and bass, and solo drummer Ryan Sawyer, capped with a final jam session. (See www.arkaoda.com for more information on this project.)

Flutist/author Eugenia Zuckerman's "Sailing Into the Future," a feature article published on www.musicalamerica.com, comments on the underground music scene in New York City and how it harkens back to the very spirit in which music that has become standard repertoire was originally created. She quotes David Handler, a violinist and composer who founded a concert series in a former Italian restaurant. His Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village has become the hotbed of the cutting edge, but, importantly, it is also a venue for food and drink alongside the adventurous programming he offers there. "When you consider that premieres in classical and romantic music took place in spaces where there was a social component -- flirtation, vibrance, revelry, drinking -- you realize we've lost the spontaneity with which the art was once invested," says Handler.

So why is underground music something to pay attention to? It's usually the hip birthplace of the next trend. But aside from its commercial potential, it's where the creators can experiment totally unhampered by anyone's expectations or limitations but their own.

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