

## On Location

Festivals, concerts, clubs

Tommy Wright III



### Cropped Out 8

American Turner's Club, Louisville, US

While its size, location and the raw eclecticism of its programming have combined to keep the annual Cropped Out festival below many people's radar, it is one of the most excellent music showcases going. The folks who run it seem genuinely interested in the music they book, the physical set-up and scheduling are both on a manageably human scale, the setting is weirdly cool, the sounds are great, and the overall heft of the event is friendly and casual. It's a far cry from ever more corporate-feeling festivals on the US coasts, and everybody seems to have an actual (as opposed to virtual) good time.

The venue is an outdoor facility run by a social organization founded by German immigrants interested in promoting physical and spiritual wellbeing. For the purposes of Cropped Out, this includes one small stage on the banks of the Ohio

River, two more stages with roofing and open sides, and another inside a bar in the clubhouse. I'm not sure how many tickets they sell for the event, but the feel is intimate.

My favourite stage is Spooky Beach down by the river. In the daytime, the backdrop of water rolling by is meditative; in the nighttime, the buzz and whirr of insects create an otherworldly accompaniment for whomever is playing. This year that included the always gorgeous Texas duo Charalambides (now with Christina just singing), Oregon roots genius Michael Hurley (a natural ally of all insects), Graham Lambkin and Bill Nace doing guitar shenanigans underneath wraps (the fest's most theatrical set), Anthony Braxton in duo with harpist Jacqueline Kerrod (playing new music explorations with some unexpected use of broken glass) and more.

On the big stage, highlights included

legendary Swedish prog band Träd, Gräs Och Stenar (who began slowly and built towards a wonderfully thuddy climax), Seattle's Shabazz Palaces (creating a loungey hip-hop arc with glittery Arkestral threads despite tech glitches), Brooklyn trio Honey (mixing up scum-punk readymades with classic tension moves), Chicago drummer Quin Kirchner (leading a sextet through changes with a distinct post-AACM vibe) and New York City's thunderous Endless Boogie (whose one chord choogle is simultaneously transcendent and stupid).

The smaller stages hosted amazing sets by Boston's Major Stars (free rock overload at the apex of high), Philadelphia's Taiwan Housing Project (wiggled-out psych-splat led by Kilynn from Little Claw), the eternal Half Japanese (Mick Hobbs matching Jad Fair's every jitter with his own cracked guitar work), Columbus Ohio's Sex Tide (usually a duo,

playing as a trio, with some of the same orgone-drenched wildness as Magik Markers) and Louisville's own Sadie (a pre-teen beatboxer with attitude to spare). Only complaint was that we tried to catch the final set, by Memphis gangster Tommy Wright III, but he had some comedian opening who would not shut up despite the fact the crowd was visibly flagging. Fully tuckered we opted to pack it in.

Regardless, Cropped Out is a fun festival for the whole family. The food trucks are good and reasonably priced. The crowd is strangely pleasant and polite. It's hard to figure exactly how the organisers manage to assemble such a heavy underground line-up each year, but they do. Further testament to the fest's quality is the fact that most of the musicians hang around to catch the other acts. Which is dang cool. I'm already packing my bags for the 2019 edition.

Byron Coley

### Abdullah Ibrahim

Het Depot, Leuven, Belgium

Abdullah Ibrahim's solo piano music can be so powerful in itself that it seems as if it was there before Duke Ellington discovered the South African pianist, before the Cape Town native formerly known as Dollar Brand converted to Islam, before his composition "Mannenberg" became an anthem for the anti-apartheid struggle and before Nelson Mandela referred to him as "our Mozart".

At his solo concert in Leuven, three days before his 84th birthday, Ibrahim weaves his compositions in one continuous improvisation, remaining concentrated on the Steinway grand piano and allowing no frills in the small concert space and no applause aside from the encore.

While on his early 1970s albums his trademark sprawling solo improvisations can be entrancingly repetitive affairs, over the years his playing has become

increasingly quiet and intricate; here, his expression mostly remains confined to his fingers and his dynamic pedal work. Ibrahim's deeply melancholic opening phrases evoke a sense of loss befitting his age and his experiences during the apartheid years, when his community was forced out of District Six in Cape Town, fragmenting into townships.

"District Six" appears paradoxically as one of the more hopeful sounding tunes: it comes alive with the rollicking major key sound of the local Marabi folk music which taught Ibrahim to blend the various musical traditions passing through his hometown, even gospel hymns with Islamic chants. Continuing, he revisits an anthemic melody that over the years has appeared in his improvisations, titled with variations of "Salaam-Peace-Hamba Khale", the same message in three languages.

In his variations Ibrahim not only reflects cultural dynamics, but also reacts to the performance space. While

earlier solo recordings stand out for their loud, reverberating quality, with notes blending and creating overtones, recent albums have a more intimate sound like the performance here in Leuven, where the dampened, dry sounding space allows for close listening. Alongside newer pieces such as "Green Kalahari", in its current suite-like form, and earlier pieces such as "Did You Hear That Sound" and "Whoza Mtwana", there are many familiar sounding, but not immediately recognisable passages, providing insight into how Ibrahim develops compositions out of crossing certain phrases.

Tugging between melancholic, yearning themes and more open ended ostinato phrases, Ibrahim constructs passages that evoke the spatial, scattered quality of piano pieces by Messiaen and Bartok, occasionally punctured with tone clusters akin to Stravinsky or, more obviously, Thelonious Monk.

Monk and his other kindred spirits,

Ellington and John Coltrane, remain present in Ibrahim's performance, although references mostly relate to composition, not style or rhythm. Ever since his years in exile in New York, Ibrahim has clearly developed his own unique changes and phrasing, more in line with his Cape Town roots than with any jazz tradition.

While his improvisational style has served as cathartic in the past, in its current form it appears as inquisitive, challenging the listener to sharpen the senses. That corresponds with Ibrahim's current involvement in scientific education projects in his homeland, aiming to revitalize ancient traditions through new technology. Ending the gig in the university town of Leuven with a time-out gesture, following a standing ovation, Ibrahim seemed to suggest not only that his music will continue to develop, but his futuristic mission into other realms as well.

Marinus de Ruiter