

VISION FESTIVAL

BY ARIELLA STOK



Roscoe Mitchell @Vision Festival

The Vision Festival occupies a hallowed place on the NYC concert calendar. Since 1996, it has drawn devoted audiences from across the globe for a weeklong communion of free/avant garde jazz, interdisciplinary performance and spiritual resistance. But for all its prestige, the festival maintains an uncommon intimacy. To attend is to step into the world of festival founder and artistic director Patricia Nicholson Parker and husband-bassist William Parker, where the schedule runs on “spirit time” and art is not a product but a sacred practice. Now in its 29th iteration (2020’s virtual edition respectfully disqualified), this year’s Vision Festival (Jun. 2-7), at Brooklyn’s Roulette, was themed “HeArt to Resist.” That ethos was threaded throughout, as the audience was urged to join upcoming demonstrations. “Evil is not something that just goes away,” Nicholson Parker declared. “You have to fight evil every day.”

Since the pandemic, Arts for Art—the organization behind the festival—has become more than a presenter of free jazz. It has grown into a refuge for community, creative freedom and political urgency. This year’s programming made clear that the stakes are no longer just aesthetic—they’re existential. As Nicholson Parker told me: “Right now, to be joyful is almost an act of defiance. It’s an expression of courage. Through staying in touch with our creative spirit, with art, we can find our way through this time.” This year marked this listener-reviewer’s first time attending Vision Festival in its entirety—a transformative experience. Each set felt essential. The opening invocation from Nicholson Parker, William Parker and Hamid Drake, unfolded solemnly, gently quieting the outside world. From there, Night 1 honored AACM co-founder Roscoe Mitchell with a Lifetime of Achievement Award and an evening of music honoring his legacy.

Roscoe Mitchell defied the evening’s program by shifting the order of scheduled ensembles on the spot. As he later explained, “I try to check out what’s floating around the room in the moment and I try to hook up with that, because that way I’m in rhythm with what’s going on.” He began with a quartet featuring Dave Burrell (piano), Parker (bass) and Tani Tabbal (drums), exploring the extreme ends of the sonic register, moving between soprano and bass saxophones and an array of percussion. The music was spacious, exacting. He then brought out his Space Ensemble—Thomas Buckner (vocals), Robert Dick (flutes) and multi-instrumentalist Scott Robinson—who together offered pure sound

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JAZZTOPAD NYC FESTIVAL

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK



Michiyo Yagi @Jazztopad NYC Festival

The Polish Jazztopad festival has built a name as a forum for cultural exchange, for over 20 years inviting artists from New York and around the world to its November series in Wrocław. But the festival also takes its programming to New York, Vancouver and elsewhere. The 2025 NYC edition (Jun. 13-18), at venues in Manhattan and Brooklyn, brought Polish artists for six days of polyglot encounters with musicians and traditions from India, Iraq, Japan, Korea and Mexico—all steeped in the sensibilities of jazz and improvisation.

The first two nights, held at Lincoln Center’s David Rubenstein Atrium, featured **Waclaw Zimpel**, a musician comfortable at cultural crossroads and in the spaces between acoustic and electronic music. On Friday, he shared the stage with the remarkable koto player **Michiyo Yagi**, making her first NYC appearance in 17 years, and the more frequently seen, equally welcome percussionist **Hamid Drake**. Yagi started the evening solo, then played in duo with Drake. Her koto seemed floral and fresh as spring, but once joined by Drake she pushed, they pushed, through varying atmospheres. She then moved to a second koto, outfitted with electronic effects, while Drake picked up his frame drum, and the duo engaged in a deep, slow chant, a prayer perhaps, between two lands. It was more than a quarter hour before Zimpel joined them onstage and shaped a new sound with his bass clarinet playing, processed and echoing, building in leaps, floating until Yagi looped a heavy bass line and Drake fell into a solid groove. The first-time trio then played for an uninterrupted half hour, shifting slowly between moods and modes, filling the atrium and receding again, Zimpel setting reed drones atop the mix. He started another piece with a gritty funk against steady rhythms as Yagi demonstrated once more that the koto need not be considered a delicate instrument.

On the second night at the atrium, Zimpel was joined by violinist **Arun Ramamurthy** and members of **Brooklyn Raga Massive**, along with **Amir ElSaffar** (trumpet, Iranian santur). An extended placid intro was led by the trumpet of ElSaffar and re-shaped by the forceful blowing of Zimpel’s alto clarinet. But the South Asian instruments were 2/3 of the ensemble and commanded much of the proceedings as the members of Brooklyn Raga Massive took their turns in eloquent solos. It was by virtue of ElSaffar’s santur, though, and Zimpel’s electronic tone beds, that the assemblage melted into a sextet. Undercurrents found direction, multiple lines emerged, solos were swapped, all mirrored and

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SARATOGA JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY THOMAS STAUDTER



Cassandra Wilson @Saratoga Jazz Festival

An indication of just how beloved the Saratoga Jazz Festival (SJF) (Jun. 28-29) is, at least to this first timer, was evidenced by the many attendees wearing commemorative festival t-shirts from years past—some vintage tees going back well over a decade. Proud partisans could be found everywhere on the grounds of the 5,200-seat amphitheater, Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC), as well as around the less formal but hive-busy Charles R. Wood Discovery Stage or across the popular lawn seating areas—pointing toward a reason why this festival continues to succeed: it’s a timely acknowledgement that summer has finally arrived in upstate New York, more specifically in Saratoga Springs and Saratoga Spa State Park, where escapees from Gotham and other populous environs have long come to relax, socialize and be entertained.

First presented in 1978 by George Wein as an adjunct to the Newport Jazz Festival (it was then known as the “Newport Jazz Festival at Saratoga”), and long-sponsored by the Freihofer’s bakery brand, SJF last year announced a new, five-year corporate partnership with GE Vernova, a General Electric spin-off focusing on the transition to clean energy, and which has a key facility located in nearby Schenectady, NY. Did the new sponsor inject new vigor into the festival? To this first timer, the easy answer is “yes.” The festival was flawlessly executed and supremely organized, with smiling attendees throughout the superb two-day lineup on a weekend complemented by partly cloudy weather that kept temperatures in a comfortable 70 to 80-degree range. With over 20 different acts and musical artists spread between two days on competing stages, SJF offered a remarkable variety of styles and sounds—from vocal and instrumental stars to ensembles that ran the gamut between traditional and straight-ahead, hard bop-inflected jazz to fusion, zydeco, salsa, blues rock, funk and “beyond category.” Over 12,000 people gathered at SJF and left their worries behind to share in the celebratory communal joy and appreciation of live music.

This joyous sense burst forth in the festival’s first performances, starting with a morning set on the Discovery Stage by **The String Queens**. The near-decade old Washington, D.C. trio boasts three virtuosos: Kendall Isadore (violin), Dawn Johnson (viola) and Élise Sharp (cello). They began with “Til

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Victory Is Won", a patriotic medley, which included "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (aka the Black National Anthem) that roused the audience. Utilizing fast tempos, slow jams and outstanding improvisations, the Queens rode regally through their repertoire, finishing with Michael Jackson's "Human Nature", a sing-along crowd pleaser. At times the combined plucking sounded like African mbiras, and their inventive counterpoint and vigorous bowing and striking of strings kept the audience in awe.

Alto saxophonist **Kenny Garrett** also roused his audience with a sextet on the amphitheater stage, digging in with his swirling "Haynes Here". The original (dedicated to former employer, the late drummer Roy Haynes) was aided by Michael Shekwoaga Ode's propulsive drumming, which launched the leader into a long, Coltrane-esque solo with a harmonizing push from vocalist Melvis Santa. The seemingly ageless Garrett, his energy and enthusiasm brimming, kept the tempo bouncing and the joy palpable on "When the Days Were Different". His long, declarative solo on "Chasing the Wind" gave way to a wildly imaginative piano solo from Keith Brown, a powerful presence throughout the set, which concluded with a satisfyingly expansive "Happy People" (the title cut to Garrett's 2002 album).

Dominican-born pianist **Michel Camilo's** trio immediately followed on the amphitheater stage, readily sustaining a level of exuberance and improvisational fire that featured one thrilling moment after another. In recognition of the 25th anniversary of the landmark Latin jazz documentary *Calle 54*, Camilo played his "From Within" before exercising his bravura pianism on his tango "A Place in Time". With Ricky Rodriguez (electric bass) and Latin rhythm maestro Mark Walker (drums) joining in on the pyrotechnics, the leader lit up "A Night in Tunisia", resulting in a standing ovation.

Along with Camilo, the international tinge was represented by the **Al Di Meola** Acoustic Group, in which the legendary guitarist was joined by Italian master and longtime collaborator Peo Alfonsi (guitar), plus Sergio Martinez (percussion) and the renowned Amit Kavthekar (tablas) for a thrilling set that featured serious interplay, the six-stringers seamlessly trading dizzying solos and chordal comps within thick grooves and tight melodies. Closer to home, peppery rhythms abounded at the end of both days at the Discovery Tent, where attendees hoping to work out their dance steps were not disappointed: zydeco scion **C. J. Chenier** had the crowd two-stepping and New York City salsa band **La Excelencia** (now in its 20th year) combined irresistible rhythms, a superb horn section and great vocals from three salseros.

Among the more dedicated purveyors of the improviser's art were two wholly entertaining trumpeters who also showcased their singing—**Keyon Harrold**, a questing, soulful performer and composer, who dug mostly into his music from last year's *Foreverland*; and **Bria Skonberg**, a time traveler to the heyday of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. At the end of her set, she took a turn into modern times with her song "Blackout", urging listeners to "get off the grid"—not unlike Harrold ending his set with a stirring song called "Find Your Peace" and imploring his audience "to stay grounded." The versatile, powerhouse singer **Veronica Swift** offered a winning set that proved she can tackle every popular music idiom imaginable, even channeling Bessie Smith on a sultry cover of Queen's retro "Dreamer's Ball".

The most compelling performances belonged to two other vocalists—**Gregory Porter**, as well as **Cassandra Wilson**. Both connected with their

audiences and created an intimate sense of purposefulness, sharing their musical art with an implicit understanding of how necessary that art is, especially in the here and now. Porter's bluesy baritone was smooth and reassuring; some of his l-o-n-g notes illustrated his vocal command, much to the audience's delight. His soulful, R&B-inflected sound grew dramatic and intense, with intermittent breaks from saxophonist Carlos "Scooter" Brown cooling things down some, but it was a throwback Temptations dance move as part of his "Musical Genocide" that offered a touch of levity just where it was needed.

Marking the 30th anniversary of the release of her GRAMMY-winning album *New Moon Daughter*, **Cassandra Wilson** was a regal presence onstage, and she showed fawning appreciation to her band members, most of whom had played on the original album—Brandon Ross and Marvin Sewell (guitars), Lonnie Plaxico (bass), Cyro Baptista (percussion) and Charles Burnham (violin), along with special guest Grégoire Maret (harmonica). Starting with "Until" and following with other album highlights—"Last Train to Clarksville", "Love is Blindness" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry", before finishing with Son House's "Death Letter", here in a chugging rendition—Wilson took ample liberty with the arrangements, giving her instrumentalists lots of soloing space and letting her own instrument, sumptuous and honeyed as ever, twist and turn through the melodies. It was an utterly sublime and exquisite performance.

Other acts and artists rose close to this level, including harpist **Brandee Younger** whose trio gave a dreamy, virtuosic reading of Alice Coltrane's "Turiya and Ramakrishna" before paying homage to harpist-composer Dorothy Ashby on yet another peerless cover, this time a solo take of Stevie Wonder's "If It's Magic" (Ashby performed on the original recording). Younger's notes floated through the air, an otherworldly experience. A day earlier, **ARTEMIS** closed out its set with two songs from this year's *Arboresque* (Blue Note), confirming how formidable this quintet has become. "Sights Unseen" by Ingrid Jensen (trumpet) and the arrangement by Renee Rosnes (piano) of Wayne Shorter's "Footprints" were veritable idea incubators in which the rhythm section—Noriko Ueda (bass) and Allison Miller (drums)—along with Nicole Glover (tenor) offered contributions before Jensen and Rosnes lifted off on awe-inspiring solos. Meanwhile, the veteran jazz artists and educators who made up the seven-member **Skidmore Jazz Institute Faculty All-Stars**, guided by Todd Coolman (bass), separately acknowledged a prime musical influence before the outfit played each tune, each from an inspiring figure. To wit: Dave Stryker (guitar) chose George Benson's "My Latin Brother", and Bill Cunliffe (piano) chose Tommy Flanagan's "Eclipse". A gaggle of students sat in the front rows, watching and admiring carefully how it's done.

But it seems action gets the most traction, and performances by **DJ Logic & Friends**, the Boston-based funk band **Lettuce**, plus **Cory Wong** and **Trombone Shorty**, provided unbridled, over-the-top energy and entertainment that couldn't be beat. The spirits of Miles Davis circa 1970 and James Brown with the J.B.'s were summoned readily in varying degrees by these artists, a tacit understanding that at some point people over the course of a day in the audience want to get up and move. By the time the charismatic Trombone Shorty launched "When the Saints Go Marching In" near the close of the festival and then snaked through the delirious amphitheater crowd, attendees had replaced their vintage Saratoga Jazz Festival t-shirts with the 2025 edition.

For more info visit saratoga.com/summer/jazz-festival

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experimentation: vocal textures, bowed waterphone and extended flute and wind techniques. The Metropolis Trilogy followed, pairing a baroque ensemble with alto saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins' quartet in a Mitchell commission that merged historical textures with visionary modernism. The night ended with a final surprise set, a cosmic encore featuring Robinson on exotic instruments including the contrabass sax and normaphone (a saxophone-shaped trumpet with one bell).

Interdisciplinary vision remained central. Dance, video and poetry were not embellishments but essential, integrated voices. **Miriam Parker** opened Night 2 with a movement meditation joined by Warren Trae Crudup III (drums), before violinist **gabby fluke-mogul's** Thread (with Charles Burnham, Ava Mendoza, Luke Stewart, Tcheser Holmes) took flight in a blistering set inspired by a James Baldwin quote about collective responsibility. **Amirtha Kidambi's** Elder Ones followed with a politically charged set invoking anti-colonial struggle and mutual care. Vocalist **Ellen Christi's** *Flux in Chaos*, with Cooper-Moore and Nicholson Parker, spiraled through blues, chants and abstraction. **Nicole Mitchell's** Black Earth Ensemble closed the night in glorious uplift, fusing Afrofuturism and collective improvisation into a message of Black brilliance.

Night 3 brought **Yoshiko Chuma's** dance conduction in the multimedia "Unfinished Symphony, Suite New York" with dancers and musicians surging through a filmic cityscape. Next, **Ava Mendoza** summoned a ritualistic clang by ringing and hammering bells that she pressed to her guitar strings. A glorious, snarling racket followed—her trio a unit of power and precision. Bassist Henry Fraser locked in with drummer Chad Taylor to drive the whole affair forward. Mendoza shredded, her lines jagged and feverish, invoking the ghosts of no-wave and avant rock cacophony. **Devin Brahja Waldman's** Radical Reversal, featuring Anne Waldman's spoken word, was fervent and fearless while **Hamid Drake's** Indigenous Mind summoned a shared spiritual current. Drummer-percussionist **Pheeroan aKlaff's** Robeson Rise ended the evening with a politically incisive suite, blending spoken word, gospel samples and firebrand groove. **Davalois Fearon's** Up/Right opened Night 4 with a danced rebuttal to Eurocentric expectations of form. **Matthew Shipp** and **Ivo Perelman** followed with the debut of *Armageddon Flower*, a set of improvised piano/tenor chamber jazz with Mat Maneri (viola) and William Parker (bass), who elevated the proceedings into rare telepathy—each a master of nuance, delivering a sound that teetered between modernist abstraction and ecstatic lift.

Oliver Lake recited searing, incisive poetry accompanied by his son, DJ Jahi Sundance Lake on turntables, adding dramatic textures that amplified the texts' resonance. **Michael Wimberly's** Spirit World revived a 2005 performance alongside Parker, Lisa Sokolov, Oluyemi Thomas and JD Parran. **Mary Halvorson's** Canis Major Quartet closed the night with her latest book of music. It was thrilling to be in the presence of such unpredictable, intricate, singular music that so effectively pushed outward the boundaries of form, composition and expression. On Night 5, Boston's **The Fringe** trio levitated the room with tenor titan George Garzone, John Lockwood (bass) and Francisco Mela (drums) taking, redirecting, even expanding, the role of the late Bob Gullotti (1949-2020). Garzone's infinite prowess conveyed the feeling of all possibilities being open. Nicholson Parker's **Shamanic Principle**, with Val Jeanty, Melanie Dyer and Miriam Parker invoked sacred transformation. **DoYeon Kim's** blistering set on gayageum referenced the Gwangju Uprising, a cry for justice as much as a performance. **David Murray's** Birdly Serenade ended the night with joy and abandon—significantly more out-reaching than his residency at Blue Note earlier this year.

The final night offered a benediction. **Marilyn Crispell's** opening solo set was profound, building upon slowly unfolding harmonies that suggested a quiet storm gathering its center. **Gerry Hemingway's** How The Dust Falls trio, with Izumi Kimura (piano) and Earl Howard (alto, synthesizer), presented subtle interplay supplemented by Beth Warshafsky's live visuals. **Fay Victor's** Trini Collective brought diasporic warmth and a personal reclamation of her Caribbean roots. Alto saxophonist **Rob Brown's** trio carved intensity from minimalism. And finally, **William Parker's** Healing Message from Time and Space multidimensional octet, with dancers and chants, served as the festival's closing prayer.

Vision Festival's insistence on joy, experimentation and collective expression felt not just timely, but necessary. The sense of purpose ran through every set, every invocation, every gesture. At Vision, sticking around—and sticking together—is the point.

For more info visit artsforart.org/vision

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multiplied by Zimpel's real-time looping and doubling back. At times the music verged on jazz fusion, but, after all, what was it if not that?

A matinee on the third day paired saxophonist **Maciej Obara** with NYC-based vibraphonist **Patricia Brennan**, playing a set of compositions by each. Both of their instruments sounded lush, filling the small, warm back room at Rizzoli Bookstore near Madison Square. (Books, unsurprisingly, make for great acoustic baffling.) It's always a pleasure to hear Brennan play and the duo gave her room to apply quick lines and thoughtful dynamics to Obara's sonic images of Polish winters. On her own pieces, she played wonderfully within the pulsations of her instrument. From there, it was off to Barbès in Brooklyn for another audience with **Michiyo Yagi** and another first-time trio, with percussionist **Satoshi Takeishi** and **Ned Rothenberg**. He's a strong wind player all around, but especially on the too-often poorly played shakuhachi, germane perhaps given his bandmates heritage. Employing wooden rods to bow and bounce off the koto strings, Yagi laid down some genuinely funky bass lines. She was inventive and intensely responsive to a pair of eminently deft players. They covered a lot of ground, resolving with some gritty old-school downtown funk.

One of the highlights of last year's Wrocław edition was Zimpel's session with a group of Indian musicians during an informal afternoon concert. Those "living room concerts," hosted in the homes of supporters of the festival, are a Jazztopad hallmark. The tradition was carried through to the NYC edition at an invitation-only concert held at ElSaffar's Sunset Park Maqam Studio. Opening was 2025 MVP Yagi with Obara and bassist Kuba Dworak. That was followed by a succession of one-off encounters featuring ElSaffar, Zimpel, Joel Harrison, DoYeon Kim, Brooklyn Raga Massive and other guests, accentuating the communal Jazztopad spirit. The run ended with two nights at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Dizzy's Club. The first again featured **Maciej Obara**, joined by **John Patitucci** (bass), **Dominik Wania** (piano) and **Nasheet Waits** (drums) in another first-time encounter. They played impromptu ballads and Obara's compositions, recalling the falling snow of the bookstore duet but lacking the push and pull Brennan brought to the scenic vista. They were at their best in sweet serenity.

The festival has a history of commissioning works by an American soloist to be played with the famed **Lutoslawski Quartet**. Recent years have employed pianists Kris Davis and Craig Taborn; this year it was alto saxophonist **Immanuel Wilkins** who was called upon to compose for himself, plus strings, for the final night. He crafted a long piece simply titled "Peace" that seemed

to underscore connections between the Second Viennese School and Roscoe Mitchell's chamber works. But Wilkins coined his own lingo, immersing himself deep within the strings, then giving himself a wonderfully sparse, extended solo and, as it escalated, adding layers upon layers of multiphonics, seeming to suggest a road map for the rest of the piece. It was exciting, demonstrating a harmonic sophistication and sensibility. It was full of surprises too, maybe undercooked and arguably all too long, but reconfirming Jazztopad's cultural contribution in facilitating the meeting of musical minds.

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