

Live from New York

John Zorn brings NYC downtown sounds to Oregon.

John Zorn is the quintessential New York avant-garde musician. His music is so eclectic, so urban, so bleeding edge that it's hard to imagine him outside downtown Manhattan, much less here in West Coast hippieland; he rarely leaves New York. Yet thanks to the Oregon Festival of American Music, on Oct. 3 and 4, we get to see the erstwhile enfant terrible and multifarious composer/saxophonist/bandleader in three of his many incarnations: as a composer of chamber music, as an avant-garde band leader, and as a member of the jazz-influenced ensemble, Masada. This is easily one of the most important musical events to hit town this decade.

ternoon, musicians from throughout Oregon who auditioned for this concert will perform *Cobra*, one of a series of Zorn's "game pieces" in which he sets up the rules for group improvisation, leaving the musicians to interact within those structures. The rules of these games can be pretty involved; basically, Zorn (who plays the "prompter") tells them when to play, not what to play, so the piece never sounds the same twice. This promises to be an on-the-edge concert experience for local musicians and listeners alike, and you can even attend the morning workshop where the players prepare their collaboration.

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Zorn's music often consists of a series of juxtaposed fragments, sometimes lurching in different directions and even genres in the same piece, almost like it has attention deficit disorder. Zorn has compared it to a walk through the hyperactive streets of New York City, leavened by the humor that you need to survive there. His music can quote Debussy, Mozart, Wagner or Brahms and shortly thereafter unleash a raging punk attack.

Zorn's idols include American experimentalists like Harry Partch, Steve Reich, and Charles Ives as well as Stravinsky and Bartok, plus avant jazzers like Thelonious Monk, Anthony Braxton and Ornette Coleman. Zorn abhors distinctions between allegedly high and low art; cartoons and pop culture references abound in his projects, which include tributes to cartoon composer Carl Stalling, film composer Ennio Morricone, film noir, James Bond movies, Kurt Weill, and more. His music, if not always pleasant, is perpetually provocative, and anyone with an ear for musical adventure should check out at least one of these concerts at the Shedd.

The opening concert on Friday evening, Oct. 3, features Zorn's chamber music — a term that sounds pretty stodgy when referring to the music of a guy whose string quartet, "Cat o' Nine Tails," (one of two recorded by the Kronos Quartet) is subtitled "Tex Avery Directs the Marquis De Sade." The show features superb musicians like cellist Fred Sherry and pianist Stephen Drury and includes works for violin (including a world premiere commissioned by OFAM), piano, cello, and combinations thereof.

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amined Jewish identity, forming the group Masada with some of the country's top jazzers, including drummer Joey Baron and trumpeter/composer Dave Douglas (who put on a splendid show with his own group at the Shedd last spring). Probably the jazziest and most accessible of Zorn's efforts, Masada embraces a wide range of Jewish music, from klezmer to Mahler to Bacharach to Lou Reed. Masada rarely plays outside NYC and hasn't hit the West Coast in three years, so however you define it, their show on Saturday evening, Oct. 4 will be one of the best jazz concerts of the year.

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