

The Art of Listening

IMMI Fest brings improvising musicians to DIVA

Way back in the mid-20th century, when abstract art was just beginning to smear and squiggle its way onto canvases in New York and Paris, a common response to, say, a Jackson Pollock drip-sterpiece went something like, "Geez, my kid could do that!" Now, in our less Philistine, more enlightened times, it's "What! A million bucks?! My kid could do that!"

Some listeners new to free jazz and other improvisational music might have a similar reaction. How hard can it be to just make up sounds? And why would anyone want to listen to them?

"I believe that free improv is an essential expression of a group's collective talent," says **Daniel Heila**, who directs the annual **Festival of Improvised Music and Moving Image**. "The best of everyone emerges in unusually satisfying forms." Heila, who also co-founded the ear-tingling Hundredth Monkey ensemble at the UO music school, is a multitalented musician (flutist, composer, blues guitarist) and filmmaker who created IMMI Fest to showcase free improv music and experimental video. This weekend, Dec. 8 and 9, the third edition brings two of the West Coast's most accomplished free improv groups to DIVA. The Oregon/British Columbia based **Knotty Ensemble** and the Bay Area's **Three Pipes** will be accompanying classic silent films (Friday, F.W. Murnau's 1931 *Tabu*; Saturday, Yasujiro Ozu's 1934 *A Story of Floating Weeds*). IMMI Fest also includes short videos by local media artists.

Your kid couldn't do this. In the hands of experienced players, free improv is no more random splashes of notes than Pollock's paintings were of colors. At IMMI Fest, "everyone will be working hard

to follow the group's intuitive responses to each other and to the moving image," Heila says. Sounds will range "from melodic soloing to group noisemaking to intense harmonic exploration, all done with an ear to form, phrasing and color."



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Heila distinguishes jazz, in which musicians strive for transcendence by starting from rigorously defined forms, from free improv, in which the players "seek the forms to hold the sounds together." More experienced improvisers display "a sensitivity and willingness to defer to the emerging form," Heila says. "Listening is the key to quality improvisation of all types," Heila explains. And the players' success also depends on the audience's willingness to "strive to recog-

nize the form the musicians are conjuring." It can be like staring at one of those colored-dot puzzles and finally seeing the hitherto hidden picture come into focus. Far from the chaotic screech fest you might expect (and which, admittedly, plagues too much self-indulgent improvising), IMMI Fest performances are often more about mood and texture and can be surprisingly gentle and moving. They can also get pretty fierce, but, with

voir, I think that audience members have a heightened response to the moving image when the music being created at the same time is unique to the time and place. It will never sound the same way again."

Improvisation has a history as long as that of music itself; Bach and Beethoven and many other classical composers were renowned improvisers. But the art reached its pinnacle in American jazz, and jazzers are still improvising new ways to make it up as they go. In recent years, jazz and jam band music have been edging toward each other in variously fruitful ways, with Medeski Martin & Wood being among the most prominent fusioneers. One of the finest jazzy jammers hails from the birthplace of jazz itself. New Orleans drummer **Stanton Moore** joined jam-funk pioneers Galactic in the early 1990s and has worked with masters such as Charlie Hunter, Skerik, the Meters, John Scofield and more. His groovy trio plays the WOW Hall on Dec. 12.

For more than seven centuries, the members of the Mevlevi order, a mystical Turkish Islamic sect, have frequently celebrated the Sema ceremony to become vessels for divine blessings. Silently chanting the name of Allah, dozens of these white-clad semazens — better known here as Whirling Dervishes — continuously spin counterclockwise, their long skirts billowing around them. The dancers are accompanied by musical settings of the poetry of their spiritual ancestor, the great 13th century Mevlevi mystic poet, Rumi. The Sema ceremony can be one of the most ineffably magical experiences you'll ever witness, and on Tuesday, Dec. 12, you can see and even participate when the **Mevlevi Order of America** sponsors one at the UO's EMU Ballroom. This is a rare treat for Eugene and features master musicians from Turkey as well as local semazens, all directed by Postneshin Jelaluddin Loras. **ew**

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