



Free Jazz Festival Saarbrücken

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By [Martin Schray](#)

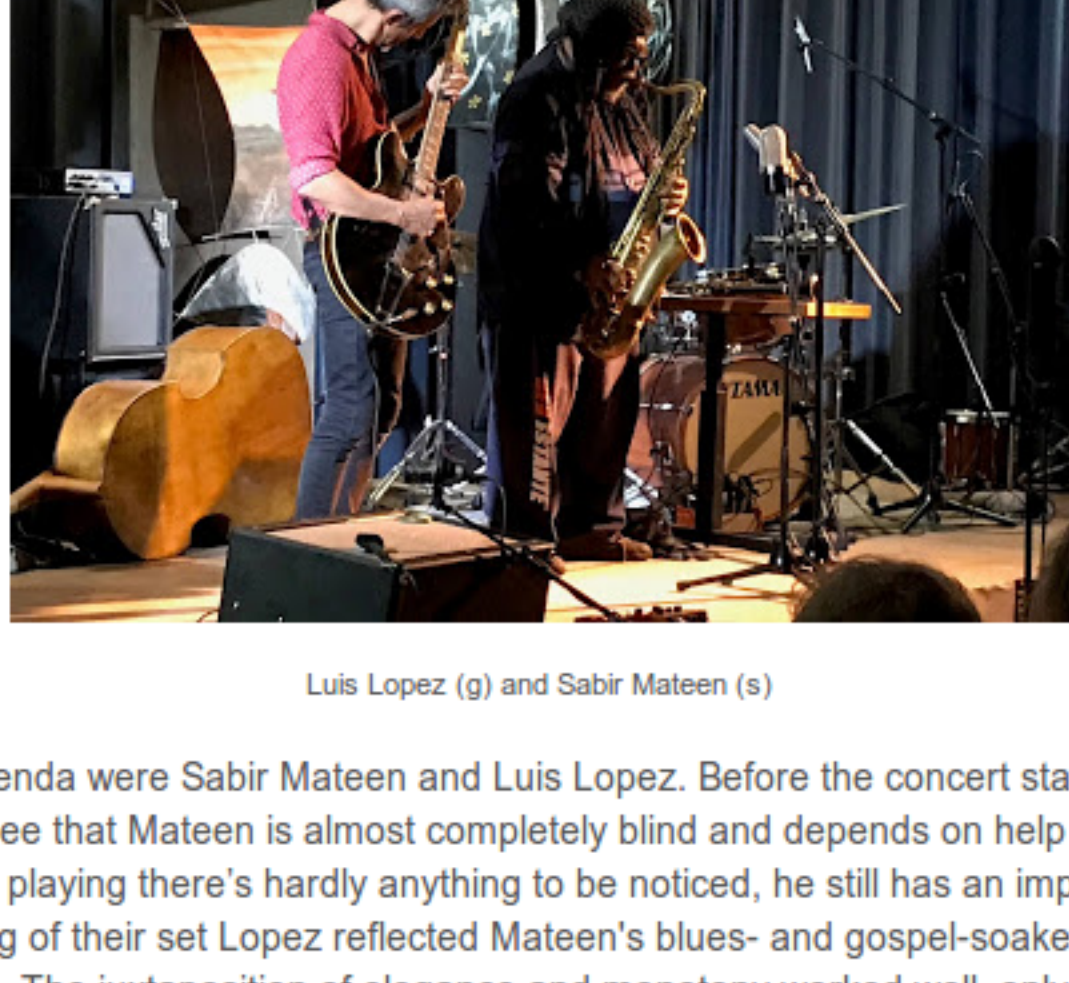
For the fourth time, Stefan Winkler and his team succeeded in organising an exquisite free jazz festival in Saarbrücken (located on Germany's border to France and Luxembourg). Last year they were supported by the Bundesstiftung Kultur with 20,000 Euros and there was a feature article in the big German weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT, which also drew attention to the festival. This year, it was more difficult to raise money because the federal funding was cancelled and local and private donors had to secure the financing. There were also other imponderables to overcome in the run-up to the event. First of all, the Lithuanian guitarist Juozas Milašius had to cancel his appearance in a duo with Sabir Mateen. However, the festival organizers were quickly able to find a very suitable replacement with Portuguese guitarist Luis Lopez. But when two days before the festival start Charles Gayle had to be hospitalized, it became difficult*. The fact that the FMP legend Michel Pilz could be engaged for the festival program spontaneously speaks for the improvisational talent of the organizers, because the actual motto of the festival ("Celebrating the 80th birthday of Charles Gayle, Trevor Watts & Joe McPhee") could at least partly be salvaged - Pilz is actually already 83.

As always, the festival began with some preliminary events, among others with the wind quartet of Nils Fischer (baritone saxophone, bass clarinet, double bass clarinet), Hartmut Oßwald (tenor saxophone, bass clarinet), Frank Paul Schubert (soprano and alto saxophone) and Andreas Krennerich (sopranino, soprano and baritone saxophone), and the NuBand, the quartet around the legendary 83-year-old saxophonist Mark Whitecage, with Joe Fonda (bass), Lou Grassi (drums), and Thomas Heberer (trumpet).



Trevor Watts quartet

The festival properly began on April 5th with Trevor Watts' quartet with Veryan Westan (piano) and the rhythm twins John Edwards (bass) and Mark Sanders (drums). And to anticipate it: the first concert was already one of the highlights of the festival. In addition, a leitmotif of the presented music became clear, namely the eventful playing with intensities. Watts' quartet intensified their improvisation just to let it go again, something which happened almost imperceptibly. Above all, Mark Sanders was the driving force here, he almost playfully shifted up a gear and then back again. Watts, on the other hand, was leading the improvisation towards small highlights that worked like cliffhangers - the audience was always curious to see where the whole thing would go. Even quiet passages were extremely intense because the rhythm section literally disassembled the melodic and harmonic material. Especially Edwards's springy double pizzicati (he plays them on the upper and lower part of the bass neck simultaneously) harmonized excellently with Westan's tonal clusters and Watts' squeezed runs. The whole set resembled an accumulation of mass, which was then taken apart again. Here, European Free Jazz tradition became transparent, capturing a state of the art moment of music situated between new classical musical influences and traditional free jazz.



Luis Lopez (g) and Sabir Mateen (s)

Next on the agenda were Sabir Mateen and Luis Lopez. Before the concert started it was almost sad to see that Mateen is almost completely blind and depends on help with orientation. However, while playing there's hardly anything to be noticed, he still has an impressive power. At the beginning of their set Lopez reflected Mateen's blues- and gospel-soaked runs with isolated chords. The juxtaposition of elegance and monotony worked well, only towards the end, when Lopez switched to Thurston-Moore-like sounds including the use of extended techniques, the tension eased.



Michel Pilz (b cl), Stefan Scheib (b), Frank Paul Schubert (s), and Klaus Kugel (d)

The day ended with a newly arranged quartet with the aforementioned Michel Pilz (bass clarinet), Frank Paul Schubert (saxophone), local bassist Stefan Scheib, and Klaus Kugel (drums). Pilz and Kugel already had a trio with Christian Ramond on bass (there is a CD from 2003), but haven't played together for a long time. Nevertheless, the chemistry between the musicians worked surprisingly well. Pilz's lyrical playing connected very well with Kugel's meditative rhythms. The music had some outstanding moments, e.g. when Schubert's overblown lines met Pilz's relaxed drone. The different playing attitudes of the two wind players collided directly with each other and here again it was striking how structural contrasts were used to force intensity. Schubert's solo in the first, long piece of the set was a highlight of the festival.



Kay Lübke (d), Jan Roder (b), Christoph Thewes (tb), and Anna Kaluza (s)

As in previous years, the festival has always been an opportunity to present local musicians. In the saxophonist Anna Kaluza's quartet this was trombonist Christoph Thewes, supplemented by the Berlin musicians Jan Roder (bass) and Kay Lübke (drums), the latter two also the rhythm section in Silke Eberhard's trio. Kaluza founded the Berlin Improvisers Orchestra and regularly plays with international guest musicians. Compared to the partly harsh free jazz outbursts of the previous day, the quartet's music was almost tender, especially at the beginning of the set. Nevertheless, they could be found here as well, mainly pushed by Thewes. Kaluza endured this almost calmly, she contrasted them in a very controlled way and remained focused on her improvisations. A decent start to the day, no more, but no less either.



Klaus Kugel (d), Joe McPhee (s), and John Edwards (b)

The expectations for Joe McPhee, John Edwards, and Klaus Kugel were high, and McPhee immediately issued a call to arms on his pocket trumpet. From the first minute the music was also a statement: 1960's soul power, accusation, blues, melancholy, anger, devotion, attitude - all in one! McPhee made the audience freak out with spiritual blues riffs on the tenor saxophone, mercilessly driven by Kugel and Edwards. This band also represented intensity - namely through contrastivity. At a moment when this intensity was almost impossible to increase, McPhee let his emotions out, he sang, he screamed, he howled, and answered himself with little melody lines - typical, classic call-and-response, a proverbial rollercoaster ride. Moreover, McPhee, the last great man of pain in free jazz, was congenially supported by John Edwards, who scattered several incredible solos, in which he attacked the bass more than actually playing it, and Klaus Kugel, the wonderful mystic behind the drums (in contrast to the day before with his whole arsenal of cymbals and gongs). As if that wasn't enough, McPhee addressed the audience at the end of the regular set and reminded them of Albert Ayler, who said that "music was the healing force of the universe". He then wanted to send this healing force out to Charles Gayle, so that he could get well again. In the last part of the set he let the audience chant Gayle's name again and again. That was close to kitsch, but McPhee never let the whole thing fall over, on the contrary, it was a moment of goose bumps. The set was a single triumph.



Dominik Blum (o), Marino Pliakas (b), and Lucas Niggli (d)

Actually, nothing could come after this concert, but nevertheless it was a wise decision of the festival management to let Steamboat Switzerland play after McPhee (originally they were scheduled before him), because the band represented a complete contrast to all the other formations. Dominik Blum (Hammond organ), Marino Pliakas (bass), and Lucas Niggli (drums) are something like a heavy metal/improv version of Emierak, Lake and Palmer, their music is characterized by an uncompromising spirit. As usual, the trio made no compromises. Out of this clear attitude their specific sound developed: a mix of prog-rock, new classical music, noise and metal, energetically charged and virtuosically interpreted. For their set the band had a strict form and dramaturgy: pulling it through without interruption and without breathing. Several pieces were woven into this sound bath, composed works alternated with improvisations. As you might imagine, the reactions in the audience were very mixed. The hall emptied itself constantly.

The organisers are making plans for another festival next year, even though the financing is not yet certain. Names mentioned in the game are Ken Vandermark and Akira Sakata. Two suggestions for improvement could be considered: the festival definitely presents too few women, this year just one with Anna Kaluza and younger musicians could also be interesting. There were also some sound problems this year, especially on the first day. Despite the precarious financial situation one should work on it. But all in all the festival was excellent. It remains to be wished that it can take place again next year.

*Gayle collapsed on the way to the plane to Europe but he has been released from hospital in the meantime. He's on the way to recovery.