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Wayne Horvitz and Royal Room Collective at the Stone

Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

On Tuesday at the Stone, Wayne Horvitz started a six-night run with the Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble.

By BEN RATLIFF
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The keyboardist and composer Wayne Horvitz lived and worked in New York City for most of the '80s, when combining jazz with other kinds of popular or experimental languages, American or otherwise seemed exciting and almost imperative. There was a lot of the shock-of-the-new going on back then, and a lot of deference and homage to the history of the early '60s New York avant-garde.

But Mr. Horvitz stood apart. He had an evened-out, coherent composing voice that contained bebop and rock, gospel hymns and country, free jazz and funk and midcentury film music and Charles Ives. There was very little posturing or provocation or wackiness in it. It didn't feel like a stretch.

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He moved to Seattle in 1988 with his wife, the composer Robin Holcomb: our loss. But he's done valuable work there, alone and collectively. About a year and a half ago Mr. Horvitz, now 57, became a partner in a music space and bar called the Royal Room, in Columbia City, in Seattle. He books it, more or less. (He was the first booker at the Knitting Factory in New York in 1986.) And he plays there with his own group, the Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble, twice a month.

The group plays his compositions and he reorders them, sometimes radically, using some of the hand signals developed to conduct improvisers by his old New York friend Butch Morris, who died this year. Mr. Morris called the process conduction. On Tuesday at the Stone, where Mr. Horvitz started a six-night run of his 13-piece band — its first New York performances — the music sounded like a formal acknowledgment of Mr. Morris's method and a demonstration of Mr. Horvitz's freedoms within it.

Mr. Morris tended to use very little written music in his conductions, working from scraps. Mr. Horvitz, by contrast, is using his own themes and pre-existing pieces, some riff-based and directly out of the jazz tradition, but blowing them apart, making them judder and flash and fold in on themselves. His is an excellent band of nearly all Seattle residents — the soloists included the trombonist Naomi Siegel, the clarinetist Beth Fleenor and the saxophonists Kate Olson, Craig Flory and Briggan Krauss — and its had an efficacious start. What I heard in Tuesday's early set was tighter and stronger than a live recording the band was selling at the club, made in Seattle only a few months ago.

Parts of "Prepaid Funeral" evoked Thelonious Monk and late-'50s Charles Mingus; "Daylight," with modal harmony and single-chord vamps, suggested Coltrane's "Africa/Brass." The themes generally stayed intact, but then Mr. Horvitz would quickly start rearranging, directing some musicians to play and some to stay silent, encouraging counterpoint, summoning a repetition of the last phrase or note a musician played, redistributing levels of volume as if he had his hands on a mixer. There were free-improvised solos, altissimo saxophone squeals and loud, surging sections, but nothing became chaotic; a sense of space and order subsumed everything else.

And in the stomping "A Walk in the Rain," what he was able to express through the band reminded you of something from the New York improvising scene in the '80s that wasn't a language or a sound but a disposition: concision, bordering on impatience. Mr. Horvitz kept his attention on the band with microscopic focus, quick-cutting between contrasts, putting something free or rippling against a fixity. It held your attention, and when it was perverse, it was just perverse enough.

Wayne Horvitz performs through Sunday with the Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble and other groups, at the Stone, Avenue C and East Second Street, East Village; thestonenyc.com.

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