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Guitars Gone Crazy: the Celestial Septet

The Celestial Septet at The Windup Space

By [Evan Haga](#)

The Celestial Septet

The Windup Space; Baltimore, Md.; Feb. 27, 2011

".... The following Sunday at Baltimore's Windup Space, guitar effects *were* frequently manipulated at a gig by the Celestial Septet, a combination of the Nels Cline Singers and the ROVA Saxophone Quartet. The set, challenging and discordant but also often beautiful, seemed to buck the usual disparagement leveled at the jazz avant-garde while wholeheartedly occupying the genre. This was organized, ambitious music, full of freewheeling improvisation but also strategy and composition. (A series of avant-freakouts this was not: The program consisted of a democratic mix of music by individual ensemble members, who conducted via hand signals and gestures.) "César Chávez," with its blend of fuguelike melody and harmony and *Ascension*-style fracas, acted as a telling opener, foreshadowing the mix of tumult and grace that would mark the rest of the night.

There were typical out-jazz moves mastered: Singers drummer Scott Amendola provided timpani-like timbres with mallets and spent plenty of time circling the kit in Sunny Murray-mode. Singers

bassist Trevor Dunn used arco technique dynamically, conveying cello-like melancholy and adding sonic scrim by bowing above and below the bridge. Cline was virtuosic on a couple fronts, in both the speed and agility of his legato-heavy playing and the audacity of his noise experiments. (He manipulates a stompbox like an expert turntablist tweaks his mixer.)

The ROVA quartet—Larry Ochs, Steve Adams, Jon Raskin and Bruce Ackley—blew with chamberlike eloquence on some section parts but also gave a clinic in the extended techniques of the avant-garde: slap tonguing, squeaking, over-blowing, long tones and the like. The compositions had a clever knack for breaking the larger ensemble down into sub-bands, which at one point allowed ROVA to disappear and then re-emerge among the audience, horns in hand. With his affecting Ayler-like vibrato, tenor player Ochs was the most distinctive stylist, though ROVA was certainly a unit: On tunes like the fractured, stunted postbop of Adams' "Trouble Ticket," it was difficult to attribute each blip and bleep to the individual horns.

This set was something to write home about from start to finish, and it was just a portion of the action in Baltimore last weekend: There was also a duo gig featuring Lafayette Gilchrist and William Parker with guest multireedist John Dieker, as well as performances by the Matthew Shipp Trio and the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. Thanks to some strong grassroots promotion, Baltimore is happening."

(note: this review started with a review of a Bill Frisell concert that took place one week prior to C7 concert)