

Review: Experimental Sound Studio offers another Option for devotees



Ned Rothenberg plays a shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute, during a solo set at Experimental Sound Studio on March 6, 2017, in Chicago. (Alyssa Pointer / Chicago Tribune)



By **Howard Reich**
Chicago Tribune

MARCH 7, 2017, 12:24 PM

A lone musician stepped to the front of the room, brought his traditional Japanese flute to his lips and began crafting mystical sounds.

Pitches bent flat and sharp, notes wafted gently into the ether, melodies dipped and rose and changed course without warning.

Though it was standing-room-only Monday night at Experimental Sound Studio on North Ravenswood Avenue, the house was silent but for the sound of Ned Rothenberg's art.

True, the room was rather small, seating about three dozen people. Still, performers dream of this kind of setting: raptly attentive audience, exquisite acoustics, no artistic compromises asked for or given.

The occasion was significant because ESS' Option series, which went on hiatus toward the end of last year, was bouncing back into action. As always, the event would feature two parts: a performance followed by a conversation, both unfolding in an unusual setting. For the event was taking place in a recording studio, the warmth and vibrancy of the room closer to a concert hall than a club, but more intimate than either.

MOST READ ENTERTAINMENT NEWS THIS HOUR

After Rothenberg finished his first solo improvisation, he turned to clarinet to produce an intensely lyrical performance that embraced inventive sonic effects and echoes of klezmer. Then he switched to bass clarinet, creating the illusion of multiple lines emerging at once. Finally, he launched an avalanche of sound on alto saxophone while maintaining a melodic core at the center of it all.

"So you probably noticed, we're advancing from soft to loud, and maybe some other things," Rothenberg told the audience. "But I can discuss that with Mr. Vandermark."

Rothenberg referred, of course, to Chicago reedist Ken Vandermark, a MacArthur Fellowship winner who organizes the Option series with fellow Chicago musicians Andrew Clinkman and Tim Daisy. Vandermark, who recently performed alongside MacArthur recipient Jason Moran and the Kenwood Academy Jazz Band

at the [Kennedy Center](#) in Washington, would serve as Rothenberg's interlocutor.

Vandermark wasted no time in posing a question to Rothenberg that's vital to traveling musicians everywhere: How do you get all those horns on the plane?

"This is really nerdy," Rothenberg said, with a laugh. "I thought this was going to be about philosophy, creativity."

Soon it would be, but in the meantime Rothenberg explained how he divides his instruments between those he carries onto the plane in a knapsack and those he packs into "a hard Samsonite suitcase. I use Samsonite exclusively. Can I get an endorsement contract?" he quipped.

Soon enough, matters turned serious, Vandermark asking his colleague how the music scene in New York had changed during the decades Rothenberg has lived there.

"People talk about artistic trends, and certainly it's there," Rothenberg said.

"But for me, when you're in the middle of it, it's about the individuals and who you're dealing with. ... So much of it comes down to economics.

"People would say: What happened to the loft jazz scene? What happened to the loft jazz scene is that lofts became expensive."

Economics, in other words, can shape the musical landscape as much as artistic concepts.

Later, Vandermark asked Rothenberg about the solo material he just had played and how he developed all that musical material.

"I should of course credit Evan Parker, who I heard for the first time not solo but with Globe Unity (Orchestra)," said Rothenberg, referring to the innovative saxophonist.

"While I never took a lesson with him, there were things I was working on that, when I heard him, it just made me realize I can do this.

"I've never believed in the books," Rothenberg added, citing instructional tomes.

"It's not about any single sound. It's about how you get to the sound, and how you move away from the sound, and how you find a context for it."

Consider the solo set that Rothenberg had just played.

"If you take a snapshot of any sound, it's nasty, and it's out of tune," Rothenberg said. "But you create a home for it."

Context, in other words, tells the story.

"It's an interesting goal to say: I'm trying to be 'free' every time," added Rothenberg, meaning to try to create something thoroughly new every night.

Realistically speaking, that's impossible.

"When you see Cecil Taylor playing solo," said Rothenberg, citing the creative pianist, "he's totally improvising, but you know 90 percent of the shape of what he's playing. You know it's Cecil.

"I would love to wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and say: Oh, it's Eric Dolphy," continued Rothenberg, referring to a singular improviser who died in 1964.

"But I wake up, and, no, it's Ned Rothenberg. So you have to deal with yourself.

"I liken it to mining. You're trying to find a new vein of gold. ... We're all gold miners, rather than coal miners."

How much gold did Rothenberg feel he turned up on this night?

"I will admit to you that tonight I didn't — I don't think I surprised myself," he said to Vandermark.

"And it happens. But I thought it was a pretty good concert.

"So what I'm saying: Yes, I'm an improviser, but I don't have to reinvent the wheel every time I play. ... My main ambition as a soloist is to create a unique idiom."

Judging by this far-reaching performance, he surely has done that.

The Option series continues at 7:30 p.m. every Monday, NH with Fred Lonberg-Holm and Phillip Sudderberg on Monday; Chad Taylor, March 20; Dee Alexander and Miguel de la Cerna, March 27; Rob Mazurek, April 3; at Experimental Sound Studio, 5925 N. Ravenswood Ave.; \$10. Subscriptions, which include access to a video library of past events, also are available; for more information, ess.org.

Rothenberg performs at 8:30 p.m. Wednesday, with Hamid Drake and Joshua Abrams at Constellation, 3111 N. Western Ave.; \$10 (18+); www.constellation-chicago.com

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune

A version of this article appeared in print on March 08, 2017, in the Arts + Entertainment section of the Chicago Tribune with the headline "Sound creativity and conversation - Edgewater recording studio's Option series explores musical experimentation - My Kind of Jazz" — Today's paper | [Subscribe](#)

This article is related to: [Reviews, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts](#)