

Improvisers Collective Still Opens Ears, 10 Years In

By Brian Slattery | Feb 2, 2015 4:08 pm

photos and images by Brian Slattery



Inside Crown Street's [Pacific Standard Tavern](#), three guitarists traded not licks, but textures, wrenching improbable, surprising, and often delightful sounds out of their instruments.

Guitar Trio E — [Chris Cretella](#), [Jeff Cedrone](#), [Bob Gorry](#), and on the final number, Chris Venter — built a pyramid of sound and tore it down again, then sank into a passage of moaning, warbling, and lyrical voices.

Throughout, they sometimes locked eyes or threw each other visual cues. A smile crossed one of their faces when someone else played something they particularly liked. But mostly the communication was aural. They were moving without a map, and the only way forward was to use their ears. A lot.

The group formed one of 10 sets the Sunday before last in an evening celebrating 10 years of the [New Haven Improvisers Collective](#).

"What you're after when you're improvising — or even playing any music — well, this may sound a little silly, or too cosmic, but you're after transcendence," Gorry said. "You listen to people, and you try to respond, and you ask, 'What is this piece doing?' But you're trying to get to where it's just *there*. If you're lucky, you get moments of that, of the real stuff. And when you have people who are really doing it, like Chris and Jeff, it's just a pleasure."

"Even the pieces that fail," he said.

Though 10 years in, few of them have.

The New Haven Improvisers Collective came about when, in autumn 2004, Gorry talked to guitarist, singer, and songwriter [Shawn Persinger](#) and drummer Tom Hogan about the idea of starting a workshop series.

“The idea was just to get together and play,” Gorry said.

The first workshop, in January 2005, had eight or nine attendees. Shortly afterward, Gorry went to New York and did a workshop with [Butch Morris](#). That led to Morris visiting New Haven and versing the NHIC members — already over a dozen by then — in his techniques of [improvised conduction](#). A Morris-conducted NHIC performance followed at Firehouse 12.

From there, Gorry said, “you could say that the NHIC is its own kind of improvisation.” It has grown and developed its own kind of energy, its own gravitational pull. It has sixty members and counting, and has produced ten records to date. It has garnered out-of-town attention from the [New York Times](#) and the [Hartford Courant](#).

In other words, it's *there*.

Early on, Gorry encouraged people who came to the workshops to form groups. Now that happens on its own.



Cellist [Daniel Levin](#) and drummer [Juan Pablo Carletti](#) were strenuous, physical players, shredding bow hair, throwing out ideas as fast as they could. But they were reacting to each other at least as much. They were two people having an intense conversation about something they were passionate about, like minds coming together to build something bigger than themselves.



NHIC members seem to have a way of forming bands that go on to gig all over town and beyond. One such band is the [Sawtelles](#), whose members delivered a set of songs that, at first listen, might have seemed out of place amid the more aggressive experimentalism of the evening. But if you listened harder, you could hear the same concentration, the same energy and inventiveness, the same attentiveness to pushing phrasing and texture, that marked the more overtly improvisational sets that came before them.

“You play music like that,” Gorry said — that is, fully improvisational — “even for a little while, and it changes you.”



Brian Slattery Photo

Over its 10 years, the NHIC has become a corner of the musical polygon that shape New Haven’s scene. Firehouse 12 is another corner. So is Carl Testa’s [Uncertainty Music Series](#), a connection made real by [Testa](#) and [Anne Rhodes](#) performing a set earlier that evening. Rhodes sang, growled, hissed, and clicked into the microphone; armed with his laptop, Testa then captured her melodic, harmonic, and percussive ideas and looped and manipulated them. The result was a conversation of ever shifting textures that sometimes sounded like whale songs (or babies cooing), sometimes like static, and ended with a bed of harmony.



NHIC's longevity also allows a group like [Mayhem Circus Electric](#) to emerge. The full group — [Pete Brunelli](#) on bass, Cedrone and Gorry on guitars, [Paul McGuire](#) on saxophone, [Nate Trier](#) on keyboards, [John Venter](#) on bass clarinet, and [Steve Zieminski](#) on drums — created a dynamic and unholy musical ruckus held together by a key musical ideas and an always-muscular groove.



Meanwhile, a wonderful blend of timbres held the sound of the Apres-Garde Ensemble together, even as its members — Trevor Babb on guitar, Chris Reba on bass, Glenn Stevens on mandolin, Nate Trier on keyboards, and Ben Zucker on vibraphone — diverged into fully discordant territory. The consonance among the instruments made their harmonious conclusion all the more satisfying.

The night ended with a Morris-style conduction, circling back to the collective's early days, but also showing just how far it has come.

So what's in store for the NHIC's next decade?

"I don't know" Gorry said. "And that's kind of the spirit of it. It just runs itself."

The New Haven Improvisers Collective holds workshops on the last Monday of every month. The next workshop is on Feb. 23, from 8 p.m. to about 10 p.m., at Never Ending Books, 810 State St. All who are interested are welcome; as the notice says, "bring your ideas, your instrument, and your imagination."