

The Theatre Of Eternal Music

MELA Dream House, New York, US

Above Church Street, up three flights of stairs, the sign on the door says, "Please Proceed Quietly Beyond This Point." We are asked to remove our shoes upon entering in silence and reminded that out of respect for the music there should be no applause after. The drone of tambouras is alive in the room. This space is home to the first Dream House, established August 1963, and La Monte Young has been hunkered here in this loft for 60 years.

Tonight's hour-long performance is titled *Akash Devi Blues For Marian*, in celebration of longtime partner Marian Zazeela's 83rd birthday and the 180-degree half cycle of Young's 88th birthday. The space is overcrowded with a range of devotees sitting cross-legged on the floor. The five musicians enter, pause before a large photo of Young's guru Pandit Pran Nath and the smaller photo of Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan, then take their seats in a semicircle. Next to me someone whispers, "This is the most New York thing I've done since Covid."

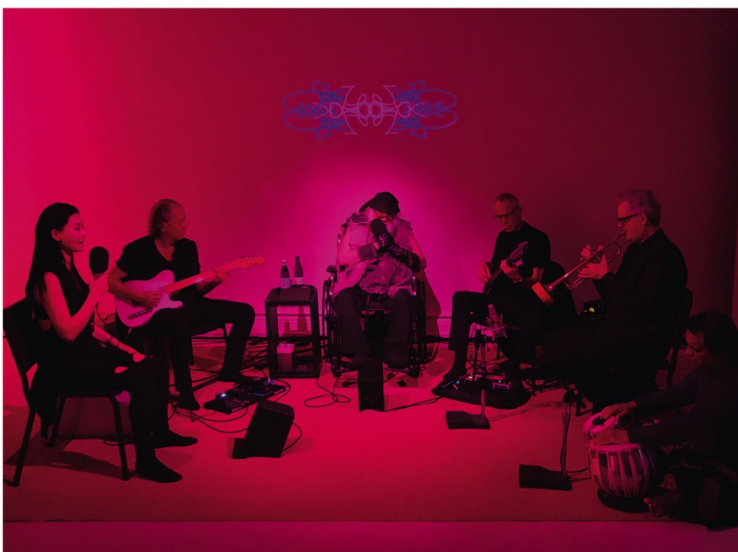
Against the backdrop of the drone, Young begins vocalising with a raga feeling but in a distinctive blues cadence. After a few moments he is joined by his disciple Jung Hee Choi, also singing; Jon Cutler, on electric just intonation guitar; Hansford Rowe, on electric fretless bass, and Ben Neill, playing just intonation trumpet, all reinforcing a pedal drone beneath Young and Choi's intertwining vocal lines. This configuration of The Theatre Of Eternal Music includes Young's collaborators dating back to The

Forever Bad Blues Band, and in the case of Neill, who studied with Young in the early 80s, even longer. It's a full 20 minutes before the instrumentalists begin to open up ever so slightly, offering flickers and gestures in the blues idiom. The programme notes tell us this is a special arrangement of Young's *Blues*, an ever-evolving work dating to his student days in California, a chordal, drone-piano style of modal blues where the I-IV-I-V-IV-I progression is retained but the duration of each chord is improvised to emphasize modal drone aspects of the music. Finally, a fully formed unison line emerges in the group, in a 12-bar blues cadence, while Young is singing improvised solo lines over top.

Heads in the room are gently bobbing, grooving in time. The liquid, languorous feel of the music is hypnotic, especially in the presence of Jung Hee Choi's massive *Environmental Composition 2017 #1* covering one wall like a mandala inspired by the fleeting smoke of burning incense. Under her magenta lights and projected onto the wall directly behind Young is Zazeela's *Abstract #1* from *Quadrilateral Phase Angle Traversals*, a calligraphic drawing changing almost imperceptibly over the course of the performance.

Then as if by telepathy, the group bring the groove to halt, ending with one quiet but virtuosic flourish by Rowe. We are left in the drone of the tambouras once again for several minutes before Young and his musicians depart. The Dream House continues to vibrate as the audience wordlessly find their shoes and go back down the three flights of stairs to the street. For decades La Monte Young has been describing an eternal music, where the silences between performances are not endings but integral parts of the much larger continuous work. How long can this go on? The answer is forever.

Tom Welsh



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