

MusicNow 2008 Festival, Cincinnati, OH

A unique and inspired festival, with the likes of The National, Bill Frisell, the Dirty Projectors, Padma Newsome, Sufjan Stevens and Benjamin Verdery among others.

<http://www.musicnowfestival.org/info/musicnow-2008-april-2nd-5th-line-up-announcement/>

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## MusicNOW 2008

### Night 2: An Evening of American Guitar

Day 2 of the MusicNOW festival at Memorial Hall was billed as "An Evening Of American Guitar." Avant Garde Jazz guitar legend Bill Frisell was the headliner, but Classical guitarist Ben Verdery stole the show with his opening set.

Choosing to begin his set with a three-song Jimi Hendrix medley arranged for solo acoustic guitar, Verdery immediately set the bar high as the moon. The fingers of both his hands gracefully leapt about the strings like cracked-out spiders as Verdery played "Ezy Rider," "Little Wing" and "Purple Haze" with effortless grace. He tossed in teasers of a few other Jimi tunes in a blurry flurry of notes, harmonics, and rhythmic slaps on the body of the guitar. My jaw pretty much stayed on the ground for the duration of Verdery's set.

Performing primarily on the standard nylon-string acoustic guitar, Verdery also toyed around for a few minutes on a tiny Brazilian ukulele. Using an Ebow to coax ghostly howls from the diminutive instrument, he interspersed skronky chords full of open de-tuned strings in a hauntingly beautiful, quirky piece that was all too brief.

All around the hall I saw many of Wednesday's performers in attendance including The National's Dessner brothers and Aussie composer Padma Newsome cracking clever one-liners as he waited in line for one of the few, closet-sized restrooms. Up in the balcony, I noticed that Super-8 enthusiast Sufjan Stevens was not the only one filming Verdery's performance. Verdery closed out his set proper with an amazing opus called "Be Kind All The Time," performed on what he called "treated guitar." "Treated" is, I believe, a musical term for an instrument that has been altered in some way. Like playing a trumpet with a wet sponge shoved down in the bell. Or dunking the end of a didgeridoo in a coffee pot full of water, for a different sound. (The sound of the latter can be heard on Frank Zappa's "Civilization Phaze III," by the way!).

For his closing number, Verdery employed the use of a digital delay pedal, capturing certain passages that would repeat so he could accompany himself. In the middle of the song he looped a hypnotic passage then laid the guitar flat in his lap. Then he grabbed a chopstick from his music stand and jammed it up under the guitar strings, creating a makeshift bridge about halfway up the guitar's neck. The stabbing, scratchy sound this made joined the trance-inducing loop, as did the sound that was generated when Verdery stuck a handful of paperclips on the strings around the area of the guitar's sound hole. (Follow me so far?) Then he grabbed another chopstick and began to lightly tap on the guitar's strings creating a bell-like sound that reminded me of Buddhist chanting. The bells echoed for a few moments until Verdery skillfully removed the chopsticks and paper clips, then returned the guitar to its original upright position in his lap to close out the piece. This was one of the most insanely original guitar performances I have ever witnessed.

It made me realize that even the most educated Rock Guitar Connoisseurs among us are just Scholars Of The Great Hackfest. In just 5 minutes, Verdery creates more mind-numbingly original excitement and virtuosic fire than Jimmy Page has since 1969. Or anyone else for that matter. Tonight I watched Verdery expand the vocabulary of guitar playing right before my very eyes. Literally unbelievable.

That being my personal take on Verdery's set, even an established giant like Bill Frisell didn't hold much hope of blowing me away. Granted, his performance with The 858 Quartet - Frisell's guitar augmented by a three-piece string section - was unique and impressive. Their first tune went on too long frankly, but was saved by a flawlessly smooth segue into an upbeat carnival Blues that elicited a goofy boyish grin from the grey-haired and bespectacled Frisell.

A Mad Scientist of Jazz guitar, Frisell too has taken the guitar into previously uncharted territory repeatedly and consistently throughout his long and illustrious career. It was a rare treat to see a musician of his caliber in The Queen City. But this night belonged to Ben Verdery.

- Ric Hickey

