

Cleveland Museum of Art: drummer Makaya McCraven (Feb. 18)

By Max Newman



On his website, Makaya McCraven refers to himself as a “Beat Scientist.” It’s an interesting moniker, but those who were present for McCraven’s performance at the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, February 18 will know exactly what the spellbinding drummer was getting at. Indeed, his concert was a study of beat-making, an intersection of synthesized and organic sound, a

beautiful amalgamation of the mechanical and the natural. Makaya McCraven was true to his word.

To refer to what was played by the group (McCraven on drums, Junius Paul on bass, and Marquis Hill on trumpet) as a collection of “songs” belies the fluidity of the music. It was more of a shape-shifting sonic voyage, with beautifully craggy melodies melting into one another, ear-tingling lead lines linking together via ambient moments chock-full of electronic bleeps and bloops, rhythms mutating, trailing off, and then exploding once more.

There was a wonderful sense of evolution that night, as though sonic tendrils were organically sprouting from one another, upwards and onwards. And this instinctive feel was paralleled by the actual musical processes of the musicians themselves. From the stage, McCraven revealed that, although some structural tools were being utilized sparingly, the vast majority of what was played was improvised. Improvising, McCraven said, is the “natural state of being” — and therefore this was natural music.

Each musician displayed a remarkable level of prowess on their instruments, and an understanding of the shape of their respective sounds. McCraven himself was seldom heard playing patterns in a simple 4/4 time. Instead, he oscillated between every other time signature under the sun, carving out complex patchworks of rhythm.

At times, he laid it on densely, throwing down snare rolls, cymbal hits, and even the occasional thrum of hanging chimes. But he was equally at home using the drumset more sparingly, leaning upon a delicate structure of hi-hats and rim hits. He played beautifully in tandem with Junius Paul, whose basslines perfectly rounded out the rhythm section.

Paul was not afraid to leave large gaps between notes, but these spaces only heightened the gravity of his stabs and rapid runs, sometimes fleeting and sometimes looping in hypnotic perpetuity.

Marquis Hill also showed terrific versatility as he flip-flopped between mirroring Paul's mind-bending melodies and concocting intricate solos in his own right, his high frequencies standing out starkly as he sang into his horn. He also intermittently held his own on wooden hand percussion, adding intriguing depth to McCraven's stylings.

There were also plenty of electronic elements. Each instrumentalist had hardware on hand to complement their analogue mechanisms. Paul's ambient, synthesized looping tones were brilliant, and McCraven's live sampling of what appeared to be some sort of radio apparatus was equally jaw-dropping. But Hill was the real standout of this realm. With a small electronic keyboard he created alienlike noises with ear-hooking properties, dancing nonchalantly above his bandmates' thrilling beats.

There were rounded, alarm-like bleeps, piercing squeals, and dreamy, blurred chords, among other wonders. One would not expect the sounds Hill was producing to so perfectly mesh with Paul's growling bass, and McCraven's pinpointed lattices of hits and crashes. But opposites seemed to attract here. It's worth noting that Hill also used external gear to facilitate the release of otherworldly sounds from his horn — a reverb pedal rendered his notes into echoey whispers that bounced gently off the Gartner Auditorium walls.

There were many impeccable moments here — thrilling solos from McCraven, duelling runs from Hill and Paul — but the shiniest synecdoche of the performance came in the form of the intro to one of the only “songs” announced from the stage.

“Three Fifths a Man” was a compound of everything that made the night special. McCraven avoided categorization of rhythm at every juncture as he fired off crisp, angular thumps and clicks that laid the bedrock for an unfathomably catchy bassline from Paul, which looped mesmerisingly. And Hill's trumpeting and synthwork were equally sumptuous — the latter, in particular, hung bubbly in the air, a delightful, jolting contrast to the surrounding sound. It was true improvisational bliss, fostered by masters of the spontaneous.

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