

## 30 Years of New and Experimental Music

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# STEVE SWELL INTERVIEW

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by plwn



*“One of the most adventurous and prolific members of the New York free-jazz community” according to Ed Hazell of Signal To Noise, Steve Swell’s reputation, work ethic and commitment to excellence has kept him in the forefront of improvised music and a leading voice on his instrument for more than 20 years. On [February 27th at Roulette](#), Swell presents a concert featuring his new ensemble with some of improvised music’s finest contributors: Rob Brown, alto; Chris Forbes, piano; Hilliard “Hill” Greene, bass; Michael T.A. Thompson, drums, percussion. It will feature Swell’s writing along with his unique, on the spot direction of incorporating this group’s rich improvisation abilities along with his compositions.*

**R:** Tell us as about the work you’ll be doing at Roulette.

**STEVE SWELL:** The project I will be presenting at Roulette is a very new group. This will be our third performance. I think our first gig was in December 2009. I’ve either played with everyone in their own projects and/or in my own. I really wanted to shake up what I’ve been doing the last few years, kind of make a change

and focus on a new direction and the best way to do that is to have a different mix of people that you know can handle the written and improvisational material you give them and how I direct it all in performance. Everyone in the band knows all my neuroses and can handle that too. That's a huge plus. What I've focused on here is getting some more intricately woven written material into the improvisation mix. Also, by having new people the direction of the group improvisations will shift and that's exciting because you don't know exactly where it will go and I like taking that unknown and figuring out what to do with all that information at the same time as we are actually doing it in performance. So basically I'm adding a little more complexity to the written material and adding some different improvisation sensibilities at the same time and taking it all and shaping it into a performance that adds another layer of improvisation on top of it. Rob Brown and I have working together in various groups for a while now and I think he is one of the most interesting improvisers I know. I can really say that for everyone in the band but I think Rob and I have the most history here in this situation. Hill Greene is really a unique bassist in that his time is impeccable but his ideas and fearlessness with his instrument is something I can really relate to. He has a huge classical sense as well which just widens his palette. Chris Forbes plays in my Nation Of We Ensemble and constantly amazes me. He is well versed in jazz, R&B, classical and the avant garde. A true, searching, eclectic spirit who incorporates all those areas and makes it musical. Michael Thompson is so much more than a drummer. I can't even begin to describe the many aspects he brings to a group dynamic. His conversations are both empathetic and challenging which simply translates musically into that rare musician who knows his humanity is linked directly to his musicianship. Feeling the way I do about these musicians as people has made it very easy for me in terms of my ability to put this project together. I think if there is any imagery besides the technical aspects of the project, I would say, trust.

**R: Are there working artists today with whose work you identify, or rather, who do you consider to be your peers?**

**SS:** Well there are several. I've been working with Ken Vandermark the last 2 years and am really impressed at his work ethic. He takes it all seriously and knows he is truly fortunate to work as much as he does and doesn't let the opportunities in front of him go to waste. I am constantly aware of that myself and I like the way he also, as I like to do, incorporates the written with the improvised and have it an equal voice of the band. I've been doing a lot of playing with Jason Hwang recently and with him being in New York I get to see and talk to him about music too and that's really been great, having a support system like that to be part of. There are so many musicians I've been fortunate to have worked with or would like to work with I wouldn't want to seem presumptuous about who I thought were my peers. They just might not think so. I also have so many interests in the different ways to improvise it might not make sense to say who I identify with or are my peers. I've been playing with a wonderful group, Ziv Ravits and Joachim Badenhorst and they are younger than me but we have found what I think is a very unique way to improvise together. I'm really enjoying it. So basically what I am saying, like the improviser I am, I tend to "identify" with who I am making music with at the moment. I think that is the only way to really become someone's peer.

**R: What are some defining characteristics of the musical scene you would fit yourself into? What elements of your scene differentiate it from what has come before, or what is happening now?**

**SS:** For me personally I think this is impossible for to speak about. I was part of the Knitting Factory "scene" and didn't really know it until it was basically over. For me it was a club, a time, a group of people. I think if you are serious about yourself as a musician and person, you're not thinking about those things. You are thinking about how do I want to make music. Who do I want to make music with. That includes a lot of factors where a so-called "scene" by its definition would have what I believe to be limited factors. I don't want to limit myself. I want to explore what I am pulled towards, explore it and make interesting music. Plus there is so much going on and so many scenes, its impossible to decide unless you really are concentrated on a few musicians but my curiosity is little larger than that. In the last few years I can probably say that I'm somewhat part of the "Chicago scene" since I've played with so many musicians from there but I don't think anyone in Chicago would say that.

**R: What was the last music you listened to?**

**SS:** As I'm answering these questions I'm listening to Roswell Rudd's "Inside Job" recorded at Sam River's Studio Rivbea in 1976 with Enrico Rava, Stafford James, Dave Burrell and Harold White.

**R: Chocolate, Vanilla or Rocky Road?**

**SS:** All of the above and all the others you didn't mention.

**R: What is music?**

**SS:** Life.

**R: Do you consider yourself more a composer or a performer?**

**SS:** If you're doing it the way I like to, you are composing when you perform and performing when you compose. I think the ability to compose is the same as improvising and I enjoy doing both. They are both areas that interest me and I continue to learn to improve on both those abilities.

**R: Is there an event or experience that led you to start in experimental media?**

**SS:** Listening to Roswell Rudd in 1970.

**R: Who do you see as instrumental in your development as an artist?**

**SS:** Well I was lucky to have had some great teachers from the very beginning. When I first started trombone in elementary school in New Jersey, I was 10 years old. My first teacher, Albert Schmidt, was a dead ringer for Jimmy Durante. Bow tie and all. He did something that was quite extraordinary which was, without telling us, had us improvise. I think that was very key because I have been improvising ever since and its not the big obstacle that it seems to be to a lot of musicians who have struggled with it. Also I was lucky to study with Roswell Rudd, Grachan Moncur III, Jimmy Knepper and Makanda Ken McIntyre who really got me to think about what it was I was doing. Also, I really believe this, and its not a cliché, that you don't ever stop developing as an artist the same way you don't stop developing as a human being. I have had this belief from a very young age, and I really don't know where it comes from, but I could be listening to the worst, sleazy lounge act that ever performed at a Motel 6 and still come away with something. I always do. Of course I'd rather listen to Cecil Taylor and grab something that I didn't hear before from him. Also you are learning from those you play with too so fortunately I've been lucky to have a kind of openness that allows me to find something in every listening experience. Now they are not all epiphanies, its not all glorious and life changing but I find things and say "yeah, that was cool, how would that work on the trombone" or "how would that approach sound with a different group of people." I think most musicians, when they are listening, tend to think along those lines.

**R: What is interesting to you about your own work?**

**SS:** What I find most interesting about my own work is that it is not just work. Its a lifestyle. Its life. I get up in the morning, I have my breakfast, shower and I'm practising for an hour. Then I'm listening to different music from the web. You can find almost anything now. I think I'm listening to more music now than I did in the 80s. Then maybe I will write a bit or alot. I enjoy it all so much, being able to this and not go to an office or somewhere that you have to punch a clock. I've managed to construct my life in a way that allows me the wealth of free time let ideas percolate and then take the time to execute them. What I like specifically about what I do is how I put a group of musicians together within a certain parameter and when the results are more than what you envisioned, that's when I am most satisfied. I also like the unexpected. I like to go and try to play with people I think will improvise well with me and when the group dynamic is really unique, then I'm in heaven. I'm also still very very curious about the possibilities of sound on the trombone. The places you can go and the colors that you can extract from this almost primitive hunk of metal still fascinates me and I love listening to it and following it in my head especially when everything works.

**R: Do you do other things aside from music?**

**SS:** I write some poetry, paint a little. I love camping and reading.

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