

THE NEW VANGUARD

Is It Jazz? Improvisation? Tyshawn Sorey Is Obliterating the Lines

By [Giovanni Russonello](#)

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NEW HAVEN — “I never listen to music passively,” the musician and composer Tyshawn Sorey said recently, nestled in an easy chair at his home studio here. “No matter what it is — if it’s dance music, or if it’s Tibetan ritual, or if it’s noise.” He seemed to be implying that the philosophy flows in both directions: His own music won’t accommodate your preconceptions, so it demands full engagement.

Mr. Sorey, 37, who is about to release his sixth album, is a preternaturally talented multi-instrumentalist who has built a career in the territory between standard definitions. In some circles, he’s thought of as a jazz drummer; in others, he fits in more as an avant-garde composer.

On “Verisimilitude,” out this Friday, he is both, at the very least. The album features Mr. Sorey’s longstanding piano trio — he is on drum kit and percussion, with the pianist Cory Smythe and the bassist Chris Tordini — making music of furrowed slowness and bodily heave. It may be his most captivating album yet.

What isn’t immediately clear on “Verisimilitude” is where Mr. Sorey’s written music ends, and where improvisations begin. “The idea of what is composed and what is improvised is pointless,” Mr. Sorey said.

It was after dinner on a recent Wednesday evening, and he was wearing all black: a button-down shirt, loose slacks. I’ve never seen him in any other outfit; when he performs, he almost always wears sunglasses. It’s as if he knew that to be seen is to be categorized. To be appreciated on your own terms, it’s best to simply be heard.

When playing with his trio, Mr. Sorey often rearranges his compositions to elicit chancy interplay. He’ll cue Mr. Smythe and Mr. Tordini to play certain measures backward, or in a scrambled order. This stems partly from the limitless ease with which Mr. Sorey handles notation; he can read over a score once and know it by heart.



In July, Tyshawn Sorey demonstrated his ability to devise lengthy, spontaneous improvisations at a residency at the Stone. Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

“He has these almost superhuman abilities to do things like that without error,” Mr. Smythe said. He explained that in Mr. Sorey’s hands, seemingly arbitrary rearrangements can actually make a performance more electric. “Taking a kind of novel path through the material just necessitates invention,” he added.

In Koan II, a septet he started recently, Mr. Sorey guides the musicians with a combination of hand gestures, prescribed material and writing on a whiteboard. As novel as it is, his approach is really an inheritance. Mr. Sorey has been apprenticed to some of the late 20th century’s leading figures in creative music and imaginative scholarship: He completed his doctoral studies at Columbia this year and will take up a professorship once held by his mentor, the composer and saxophonist Anthony Braxton, at Wesleyan University in September. Representing a new synthesis, he is able to compose and dissect his own music at the highest level, and also to detail the historical context of his work.

Unlike most musicians today who pass through the higher-education system, Mr. Sorey doesn’t come from an upper-middle-class background. He grew up in the heart of Newark, attending public schools where arts education was sparse. His father helped foster his affinity for music, playing him all kinds of records and helping him build makeshift drum kits.

Mr. Sorey largely taught himself to play the piano in the basement of his church. He picked up the trombone because it was one of the few instruments available at his middle school. At Newark Arts High School, he was finally able to explore the drums more thoroughly; by the time he was a sophomore, he was playing R&B in area groups.

He entered William Paterson University as a classical trombone major, and professors recognized immediately that he had a bevy of gifts. He often placed out of classes, then used that time to study on his own. When he applied to transfer into an open spot to study jazz drumming, he was accepted over a half-dozen other applicants.

Mr. Sorey soon joined ensembles led by the pianist Vijay Iyer and the saxophonist Steve Coleman, and began an informal apprenticeship with the musician Butch Morris. A cornetist and composer, Morris is known for his system of “conduction,” which involves directing an ensemble of improvisers with a set of gestural cues, the conductor and instrumentalists creating a composition together in real time.

Years later, in graduate school at Wesleyan, Mr. Sorey studied under Mr. Braxton, a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, whose compositions use a colorful notation system that ignores the strictures of standard staves. (The association, founded in Chicago in 1965, aims to nurture visionary black composers without accommodating the classical or jazz establishments.)



Photographs by Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

Mr. Braxton, a longtime academic, has used writing to delineate and defend his own practice, and encouraged Mr. Sorey to embrace his talents as a scholar. “He was saying it’s O.K. to be a black composer in your own way, and to develop your own language, and to also write about it,” Mr. Sorey said. The idea was “to find a way to communicate it to the public, so that you won’t go down in history as being defined by someone else.”

After receiving his master’s degree in 2011, he enrolled in a doctoral program at Columbia, where he studied with the electronic-music pioneer and ethnomusicologist George E. Lewis. For his dissertation, Mr. Sorey composed and performed an opera based on the repertoire of Josephine Baker, and he wrote a critical analysis of the media’s response to the piece.

Mr. Sorey’s ability to devise lengthy, spontaneous improvisations with the tautness and logic of a composition was on display last month during a residency at the Stone, in the East Village. On his final night, he gave a solo performance, stalking around behind a massive setup of bells and drums and other mallet instruments. He stroked a gong, then struck it forcefully, putting his shoulder into it. He tapped and pounded two close notes on the glockenspiel, drawing out its overtones. Things reached a climax about an hour in, when he swept across his electric keyboard in a violent crescendo, using a host of toneless sounds he’d programmed into it: shrieks, crashes, what sounded like dogs barking.

On “Verisimilitude,” that abundant energy hardly ever breaks through completely; it lingers just under the surface. It’s not rare for recordings of improvised music to give a sense of the physical space between instrumentalists, but with Mr. Sorey’s trio, that air seems to be in a state of charged collapse, packed with magnetic density.

Maybe what all this mystery and forbearance is about — where it derives its power — is a struggle to contain something more, something bright and physical. When Mr. Sorey is drumming in more high-action bands, like Mr. Iyer’s, there’s a bursting architecture to his playing that he simply won’t allow into his own trio.

Mr. Sorey isn’t one of the many jazz drummers now who imitate the rhythms of hip-hop or electronic dance music; the negative spatialism of his trio’s work is more obviously affiliated with Mr. Lewis’s electro-acoustic compositions, or the indeterminate music of Morton Feldman, or the ghostly drumming of Milford Graves. Still, there’s an undeniable resonance with the foreboding depths of trap, or the heavy, cavernous sounds of rap experimenters like Shabazz Palaces and Moor Mother.

But Mr. Sorey remains particularly invested in his own self-defined tradition. This summer, ECM Records released “Bells for the South Side,” by Roscoe Mitchell, also a founder of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. It featured contributions from Mr. Sorey, who had

studied Mr. Mitchell's percussion music at Columbia; Mr. Mitchell's vast percussion "cage" — an assembly of bells and cymbals and drums — had inspired Mr. Sorey's own arrangement at the Stone.

During the album's recording, Mr. Mitchell spontaneously invited Mr. Sorey to play from within his old cage, a rare honor. Mr. Sorey's eyes went dewy as he recalled the occasion. Mr. Mitchell, reached by phone a few days later, called it "a special moment."

"He's an incredible thinker, and he takes his time and really has a look at things," he said of Mr. Sorey. "He's the next generation of us, and it's amazing to see that happening."

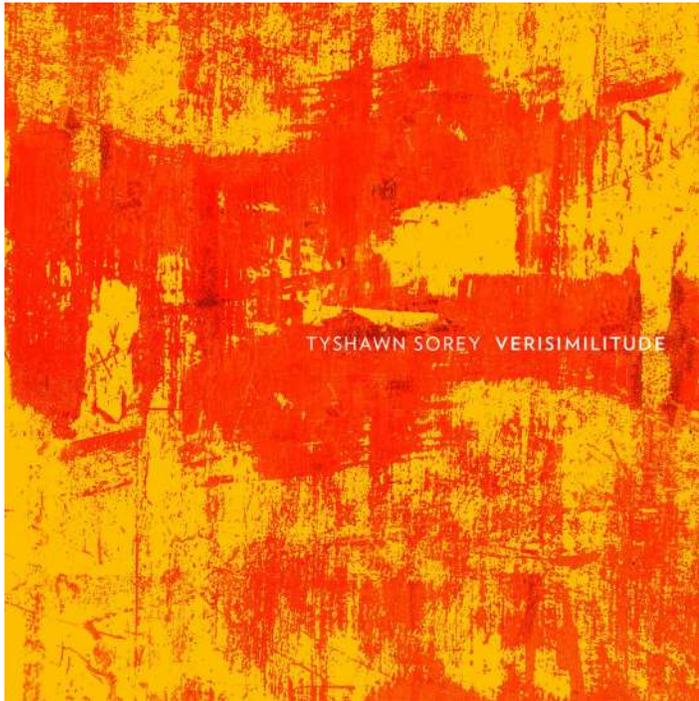
Five Recommended Performances

FIELDWORK "*Door*" (*Pi Recordings, 2007*) Mr. Iyer and the saxophonist Steve Lehman, both slightly older than Mr. Sorey, were two of his earliest confreres in New York City. In original tunes from all three members, the role of percussion, melody and leadership blur. On the drums, Mr. Sorey shows off a sparkling narrative clarity.

STEVE COLEMAN AND FIVE ELEMENTS "*Harvesting Semblances and Affinities*" (*Pi Recordings, 2010*) Mr. Coleman's classic brand of knotty experimentalism is built on a balance of exuberance and severity. With Jen Shyu on wordless vocals, and a three-horn section rendering punchy patterns, Mr. Sorey becomes the fulcrum, holding things together with tightly bound beats and bustling syncopation.

TYSHAWN SOREY "*The Inner Spectrum of Variables*" (*Pi Recordings, 2016*) On his second album with Mr. Smythe and Mr. Tordini, Mr. Sorey adds a string trio to the mix. His lengthy compositions here run a personal gamut of modern classical influences, from Maurice Ravel to Karlheinz Stockhausen; moments of crystalline beauty fracture and disperse, opening onto something broader.

ROSCOE MITCHELL "*Bells for the South Side*" (*ECM Records, 2017*) Mr. Mitchell, a saxophonist, composer and multi-instrumentalist, convened associates old and new for this album, recorded at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago around the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians's 50th anniversary. Mr. Sorey plays Mr. Mitchell's old percussion cage, as well as piano and trombone; on the latter, we get a rare taste of his whispery, secretive tone.



TYSHAWN SOREY TRIO “*Verisimilitude*” (*Pi Recordings, 2017*) Mr. Sorey’s latest and best album is bereft of almost anything resembling a steady cadence. Instead, what’s inside the pulse — resonance, fluid, potential — comes to the fore.