

Review: Tyshawn Sorey Forges an Immersive Soundworld on the Category-Defying 'Pillars'

The drummer/composer's new, nearly four-hour experimental work feels like falling into a sustained trance



By **HANK SHTEAMER**



Tyshawn Sorey, one of the most acclaimed jazz drummers of his generation, ventures far beyond genre on his new three-disc opus 'Pillars.'

John Rogers

More than a decade ago, Tyshawn Sorey, then best known as a rising-star **jazz** drummer, informed listeners that he had no intention of playing it by the book. “The usual expectation of a recording of compositions by a drummer is that the drums will be featured throughout,” Sorey wrote in the liner notes to his austere, challenging 2007 double album *That/Not*. “This album runs contrary to such a notion.” He went on to say that “the technical aspect of the music is beside the point.”

In retrospect, Sorey — who also plays trombone and piano, and who **won a MacArthur “Genius Grant”** in 2017 — was writing a manifesto for his career as a composer and bandleader. His individualistic streak reaches its latest apex on *Pillars*, a sprawling, mysterious and at times thrilling new three-disc set that runs to nearly four hours.

One reason Sorey’s reluctance to spotlight his drumming on his own albums has been so surprising is because of how central it’s been to the work of his peers and collaborators. His discography as a sideman during the past 15 years — including work with saxophonist/composers Steve Lehman and Steve Coleman, as well as the pianist **Vijay Iyer** — reads like a digest history of gamechanging contemporary jazz. In each case, Sorey’s high-tech virtuosity behind the kit has been a key element of these groups’ dazzling impact.

But while the music of Coleman, Lehman, Iyer and other Sorey associates thrives on complexity and kineticism, *Pillars* is all about stillness, gradual shifts and the skillful use of negative space, closer to Sorey’s work alongside legendary Art Ensemble of Chicago member **Roscoe Mitchell**. Even more than past Sorey efforts like 2016’s strings-heavy, contemporary-classical-leaning *The Inner Spectrum of Variables* or 2017’s lovely, expansive piano-trio effort *Verisimilitude*, this record resists any kind of genre-based interpretation. Is it exploratory improv? Electro-acoustic ambient? Ritualistic drone? Maybe all or maybe none; the album simply unfolds — sometimes with Sorey’s own playing featured but very often without — revealing its brilliance in moments of deeply dialed-in interplay.

Eight musicians appear on *Pillars*. Like the leader, who also conducts, almost everyone plays more than one instrument, with a palette ranging from the familiar (trombone, trumpet, guitars, double basses) to the exotic (melodica, **alto horn** and Tibetan **dungchen**). But you’ll rarely hear the full ensemble at once. For much of the album’s three long, episodic pieces, smaller subgroups are featured: for example, Sorey, in a rare moment on conventional drum kit, and acoustic guitarist Todd Neufeld in a poised, intimate duo near the beginning of “Part I”; or bassists Mark Helias and Zach Rowden in a conversational, highly attuned dialogue at the outset of “Part II.” Sometimes, a single player is heard unaccompanied, as in a gripping section of “Part III” where trombonist Ben Gerstein plays hushed, breathy phrases punctuated by silence.

Parts of *Pillars* sound pre-planned: the lengthy snare-drum roll that opens the album, the repetitive bass-and-guitar pattern that kicks off “Part III.” Sorey has **spoken of** his indifference to the distinction between composition and improvisation, so it’s hard to know how much of the album was plotted out and how much arose spontaneously. But what unifies the whole piece is a sense of intense, patient concentration, as if rather than reading from the same score, all the members of the ensemble had instead fallen into the same sustained trance.

The album's climaxes are few and far between, but when they arrive, they do so with almost supernatural force. "Part II" ends with foghorn blasts of dungchen and deep percussive thuds that sound like ghostly reverberations from an underwater shipwreck. A similar passage surfaces in "Part III," with tinkling bells accenting the otherworldly sound palette. Near the end of "Part III," howling brass, glitchy electronics (courtesy of another one of the group's bassists, Carl Testa), scratchy electric guitar and rumbling percussion swirl together in a weird exorcism of sound.

Moments like this seem to have little to do with jazz, contemporary classical, drone or noise, though they'd likely appeal to an open-minded fan of any of those styles. The art-metal horror-scapes of a group like **Sunn O)))** or the bass-heavy ensembles led by the late avant-garde trumpeter/composer **Bill Dixon** might be better reference points.

In the end, though, the most impressive thing about *Pillars* is how its diverse, gradually unfolding structure encourages the listener to let go of any kind of easy generic framework and simply relish the strange and epic journey. With its enormous length, the music can't help but meander, and Sorey has even said in a press release that he encourages listeners to "dip in and out" of the full three-disc presentation. But the work deeply rewards what you put into it. *Pillars* doesn't just defy "usual expectations" about drummers' albums; it creates its own sonic universe and invites you inside.