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MUSIC

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The Ouija Board of Sonic Energy Douglas Henderson: “MUSIC FOR 100 CARPENTERS” at Pierogi Gallery

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by Jamian Juliano-Villani

The Boiler at Pierogi Gallery has no heat. One hundred seasoned volunteers had agreed to come here to freeze their asses off for the love of music and the promise of beer.

Douglas Henderson’s “Music for 100 Carpenters”—in which a hundred laborer/musicians create a live sound-sculpture using hammers, nails, and planks of wood—is a dedication to, as Henderson calls it, the “toolbag days” that many of his artist and musician friends have endured being employed by various odd jobs. My participation in this performance happens to be one of them, except this is one I’m willing to brag about.



Photo by Matt Mancini.

For the Pierogi show, six Head Carpenters conducted small groups of five to six workers each—the participants in the performance. At the sounding of four simultaneous whistles, we began our duty. As the musicians started rustling their paper bags filled with nails, a gamelan tingling washed over the Boiler. The room swelled in a cloud of sonic energy, like an Eastern meditation on Western rebellion. My group of carpenters stood poised, all of us eager to get started. At exactly 1:55 p.m., our Head Carpenter, Kurt Gottschalk, gave us the signal to start rustling.

The meditative chiming of my section was soon interrupted by the rude clanging of 94 other carpenters. Despite an earlier run-through with the composer himself, I wasn’t expecting such an uncouth kickoff, a chaotic distraction that made it difficult to stay focused on my own hammering. Henderson had warned us not to conform to the overall sound of our co-conspirators, to be constantly aware of our specific actions while still mimicking our Head Carpenter, but under the circumstances this was virtually impossible.

Occasionally, the personal indignation or fervor of one carpenter or another would threaten to derail the otherwise controlled composition. That was understandable. As a participant it was very difficult to consider the piece as a whole—the score turned into a set of hurried tasks driven by orders from the Head Carpenters. (The only time I could actually listen was during a tapering-off of the blitzkrieg, when my group was given a 30-second break.) I found myself a couple of nails behind the rest, clumsily grabbing my tool, hacking away at the soft pine, and hoping my disorganized hammering came across as artful. But, disrupting the mostly regular clanging of the group, my untidy noise functioned almost like a guitar heroic, and there seemed to be a lot of those punctuating each



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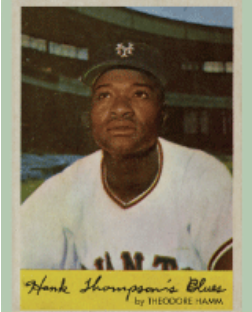
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movement of the performance.

No doubt taking their cue from our own glacial expressions, the audience remained silent and in awed concentration during most of the show. But comic relief made its appearance 15 minutes into the piece, with the arrival of our allotted one-minute lunch break with an apple. A swarm of regimented bites swelled the Boiler like locusts. I almost choked rushing to eat in sync with the rhythm of the hammering. (My Head Carpenter had a much bigger mouth than me.) The nibblings were the eye of the storm, a picnic within a battlefield. This idyllic pause ended fiercely when we tossed our lunchboxes to the floor like cigarette butts. Jettisoning our break, we re-entered the sonic dungeon of nailing.

At some point (I couldn't tell you which measure or movement), the task of nailing was beginning to take its toll on my arms. Hacking away at soft pine sounds remedial, but as it turns out hammers get pretty heavy, and my ergonomic ACE Hardware tool eventually turned into an archaic metallic beast. Spaced-out and exhausted, I was clubbing the nails any way I could get them in. Every 30 seconds or so, I would fuck up the conductor's directions and break a smile, only to receive a quick sympathetic look; then back to business.

Being an artist myself, it's difficult to strip this event of its art sentiment and view it as a classically composed musical performance. I'm no stranger to this school of thought—I was immediately reminded of Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca—but I've only experienced those musicians in a studied way, and from a distance. Being able to approach Henderson's lordly performance—as he calls it, “a Ouija board of sonic energy”—as just a couple of hours of manual labor deflates any pretenses the participants might have. But while Henderson has a Ph.D. from Princeton, he was also a founding member of the punk band Spongehead. An example of the lyrical content from their 1991 album *Legitimate Beef*: “Capitalism is on my dick (get it off).”

Much like the Ouija board Henderson speaks of, risk, belief, and mysticism all played roles in the “Music for 100 Carpenters” performance. Henderson himself risked falling into the pattern of typical avant-garde composer, and we believed him. The seriousness encompassing this type of performance needs the audience to pat its back, which we all did (applauding Henderson with our hammers as an encore). The final product, I imagine, will be unlistenable (or an anthem to be used by Einstürzende Neubauten). But it's nice to feel something so lofty and actually walk away sore.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamian Juliano-Villani is a music intern at the Rail, an artist, occasional writer, and student living and working in New Jersey.