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Schrift Joins c-NHIC For Traditional Gig Of Improv At Firehouse 12



Electronic is c-NHIC plus one: from left: Bob Gorry, Brett Bottomley, Peter Riccio, Paul McGuire, Jeff Cedrone. (Courtesy of Electronic)

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Improvised music is alive and well in New Haven.

On Saturday, Dec. 10, [Firehouse 12](#) welcomes two groups: c-NHIC, a quartet formed by guitarist Bob Gorry, multi-instrumentalist Jeff Cedrone, saxophonist Paul McGuire and drummer Peter Riccio, all core members of the long-running New Haven Improvisers Collective; and Schrift, guitarist Chris Cretella's new-ish trio, with bassist Zach Rowden and drummer Dave Parmelee.

For Gorry and other members of the NHIC, the Firehouse 12 gig is a yearly gathering, a tradition stretching back to 2005, when the group was founded.

"It just seemed like if there was something that was easy for people to find, where it was non-threatening to get together, it would foster the community," says Gorry. "There were things that were happening, but they were out in smaller cliques or fringes."

Early NHIC workshops took place at Never Ending Books, a gathering place for experimental music and community. Soon Gorry was approached by the late cornetist and conductor Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris, a giant in the improvised-music world, about staging a performance in New Haven.

Nick Lloyd had recently opened Firehouse 12, an intimate performance space and recording facility, and agreed to host the show. It was a success.

"He's been a huge supporter of NHIC," Gorry says of Lloyd. "He's absolutely a patron, a great guy and a good musician himself. He's got a great ear and he cares about the music. He made this great place [Firehouse 12] for the music. When you visit, you know how special it is."

Cretella, no stranger to Never Ending Books or Firehouse 12, holds a master of music degree in contemporary improvisation from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. He studied music with Joe Morris and Anthony Coleman.

Before that, Cretella played in thrash metal bands. He worshipped Metallica, Slayer, Pantera and Megadeth. After Parmelee, a high school friend (and now Schrift's drummer), dragged him to John Zorn's Knitting Factory in New York City, Cretella got hooked on experimental music.

"The nut cracked open," Cretella says. "There was a similar energy to the more extreme music I was into. There was a resonance, that DIY punk-rock ethic."

Morris taught Cretella the importance of creating your own technique.

"I was stumbling around that kind of thing, but having someone say that to you, and then trying it for a year, was the catalyst," Cretella says. "It was taking what I knew and doing something with it that was unmistakably me."

Earlier this year, Cretella and Rowden released "[Mutual Glancing](#)," a collection of free-wheeling, noise-based duo improvisations. The two became fast friends; Cretella knew Rowden and Parmelee, his high school co-conspirator, would gel.

"I started thinking about how much fun it would be to have them as a rhythm section, playing behind me, over me, beside me," Cretella says. "The idea was more that it would be fun to hang out, but also to play."



Schrift, left to right: Zach Rowden, Chris Cretella, Dave Parmelee.

Forming Schrift also encouraged Cretella to get his composition chops back in shape. He's a fan of late-20th-century classical composers, particularly ones who embraced open forms: Witold Lutosławski, Leo Brouwer, John Cage, Morton Feldman. "Some information is given, but there's room to maneuver," Cretella says.

Improvising musicians, Cretella says, should consider themselves lucky if, "a couple of times a year, you hit the spot where things click together, where what you're doing hits what you're hearing in your head. A few months later, you'll play a gig where you think, 'Oh god, I suck.' Then you start building again, to get to the next level. Little things crystallize, but then other things seem like a mess."

Small-group improvisation, Gorry explains, involves a wide range of modes. Players might respond to written instructions or maps. If total freedom is the goal, they'll listen closely and react to what others are doing, moment by moment. The presence of a conductor (like Morris) greatly affects the music's overall shape and impact, "especially when it's someone with the power that Butch had," Gorry says.

"He's playing you. He's listening to you, and he's saying, 'You do this,' like you're an instrument. You're still listening, but he's telling you what to do, and you're reacting to what other people are doing. But he's very much trying to get you to fulfill his vision."

Electronhic, Gorry's quintet with his c-NHIC bandmates and Chapman Stick player Brett Bottomley, started with the idea of making quiet music with big instruments. For a while, it was low-key, "then you couldn't contain it," Gorry says, "but because we did that at first, there's still a sense of space."

["Reaching Out,"](#) Electronhic's most recent album, was recorded at Firehouse 12. The music explores parameters that were well-honed by '70s jazz-rock fusion groups: driving, groove-based vamps; wide-reaching dynamics; recognizable tonal centers, meters and melodies; and, of course, electricity. Pieces are largely built around the drums and Bottomley's Chapman Stick, a fretted, electric guitar-like instrument. (Players create sounds by tapping on its 10 or 12 strings with both hands.)

As Electronhic's volume increases, listening becomes harder. "Sometimes that's fun," Gorry says. "With some groups, we're just making a racket, seeing where it goes when it gets so thick, finding all the other textures within that. It gets more difficult, but it just presents something else."

Saturday's concert, Gorry says, showcases what the different members of the NHIC are doing right now.

"So far, it's been an annual event," Gorry says, "so we'll see how it goes." The group continues to host [workshops](#) on the last Monday of every month, where musicians of all stripes drop in to play with a featured group.

Schrift will perform a mostly composed-out new work with three competing titles (in order of descending seriousness): "Theatre or Factory," "Higher and Drier" and "Better than Def Leppard." (Rowden and Parmelee share Cretella's fondness for extreme metal, and also his sense of humor.)

Improvised music responds to the times — the political, social, cultural and environmental events of the day on which it's made. In post-election New Haven, that could mean a number of things.

"It's very much affected by how you're feeling," Gorry says. "You don't have a map of what you're going to play, and even when you do, or if you're supposed to be playing happy music, it brings a different feeling to that. The one directive is to face it: 'What are we up against now?' Whatever it is, we're not going to run away from it."

CHRIS CRETELLA'S SCHRIFT + c-NHIC perform at Firehouse 12 in New Haven on Saturday, Dec. 10, at 8:30 p.m. \$15. firehouse12.com