**Zorn, John (1953-)**

Dustin Garlitz

John Zorn is an American avant-garde saxophonist and composer. Zorn performs on alto saxophone and is one of the leading figures in New York City’s ‘Downtown music’ scene. Zorn has recorded on major record labels and releases music on his own independent experimental record label, Tzadik. His piano-less jazz quartet Masada, using instrumentation first made popular in 1959 by avant-garde jazz alto saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman, was considered one of the leading small bands in jazz in the 1990s and 2000s, and has recorded dozens of his compositions on many volumes of album releases. Zorn has focused on East Asian influences in new music, especially traditional Japanese influences. These influences were evident in his work as early as the early 1980s. He has also spent time producing albums by contemporary Japanese noise or sound artists, and has performed and recorded with them on those musical releases as well. He has devoted time in his artistic career to composing music for independent films, and more notably, has released many volumes of film-inspired musical works, mostly on his own record label.

John Zorn was born September 2, 1953 in New York City. He was brought up in a traditional Jewish family in the New York City borough of Queens. He attended Webster University in St. Louis, where he first studied composition. He discovered the avant-garde jazz of alto saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman there, and Coleman soon became a major influence on Zorn’s musical orientation. Zorn returned to New York in the mid-1970s and settled in the East Village of Manhattan. There, a fledgling Downtown Music scene had developed from an earlier Jazz Loft scene in nearby neighborhoods such as Soho, begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the likes of Coleman. Zorn released albums of his solo saxophone and reeds work, *The Classic Guide to Strategy* (Volume 1, 1983). Zorn’s early career of free improvisation in small group settings featured improvisers and sound artists like Christian Marclay, as documented on Zorn’s album *Locus Solus* (1983). Zorn devised abstract, improvisational game pieces on *Cobra* (1984) and other releases from a similar time period. *Ganryu Island* (1984) documented his engagement with traditional East Asian musical influences.

Zorn recorded an album of Ornette Coleman’s compositions in a punk rock setting, *Spy vs. Spy* (1989). His band Naked City performed avant-garde music with hardcore punk and thrash metal influences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a self-titled release in 1989 and other major releases in 1989, 1992, and 1993. Zorn was one of the founding members of the band Painkiller, originally formed in 1991. Painkiller combined avant-garde jazz with experimental rock and death metal. They were active from 1991 to 1995, with albums released in 1991 to 1994.

Zorn’s Downtown New York arts peer, playwright Richard Foreman, set a new work of avant-garde theatre to Zorn’s musical compositions in 2009. New music composer Laurie Anderson and famed New York musician Lou Reed both worked with Zorn. Zorn opened his own new music venue, the Stone, in New York City on Manhattan’s East Side. The club worked exclusively on an artist curatorial basis, but in 2013 it switched formats and began offering a series of artist residencies.

In the 2000s, Zorn started publishing and editing volumes of writing on avant-garde music written by musicians, and new volumes are still being published. He has composed for strings, and such compositions have been commissioned and performed by symphonies at concert halls including the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center. His musical works were performed at New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 2008. Classical spans in Zorn’s musical career began as early as the 1990s, notably in his release of *Aporias: Requia for Piano and Orchestra* (1998). He has composed and recorded chamber music as well. Zorn has dedicated and titled avant-garde compositions for a wide variety of leading figures in modernism, including Marguerite Duras, Marcel Duchamp, Artonin Artaud, Paul Celan, Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire and Arnold Schoenberg.

Zorn’s artistic engagement with radical Jewish culture was documented as early as his release *Kristallnacht* (1993). His Jewish themed jazz quartet Masada gained wide acclaim and popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, and he has also composed for a Masada String Trio, and a Bar Kohkba Sextet that features the Masada String Trio accompanied by percussion and electric guitar. Zorn’s Masada String Trio and Bar Kohkba Sextet released a noted double album for his independent label Tzadik, *The Circle Maker*, in 1998. Zorn has recently turned to an Electric Masada project, in which he continues to perform the Hebrew titled compositions he first recorded with the acoustic Masada jazz quartet beginning in the early 1990s. He has recently also focused on composing, recording, and releasing numerous volumes of ‘Filmworks’.

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