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A&E [MUSIC FESTIVAL]

February 23, 2006

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Spark Festival highlights musicians, kindles new interest

Meet the electronic music nerds leading the revolution

By Keri Carlson

In the 1980 film "Fame," Bruno Martelli stands apart from his fellow musician classmates. The others play traditional orchestral instruments such as violins, cellos, trumpets, clarinets and pianos. But Bruno lugs around electronic keyboards and synthesizers and drum machines. Electronic music, he tells his grumpy, old professor, is the future!

The professor only frowns.

The University's School of Music still largely focuses on classical music. Ferguson Hall usually is filled with the sounds of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or Vivaldi; but the school is not without a Bruno of its own. Or a few.

Since 2003 professor Doug Geers, who teaches electronic composition classes, has directed Spark Festival of Electronic Music.

Spark celebrates electronic artists from avant-garde composers to club DJs and even goes beyond just the music to include dancers and video installations.

This year Spark brings in artists from Hong Kong, Japan, the United Kingdom, France and all corners of the United States as well as local artists and musicians from the University.

The director

Geers said he was hired "to make things happen."

He understands that the festival is not catered toward everyone.

"I don't expect classical musicians to put down the Bach and Beethoven," he said, but he does hope that Spark encourages students to explore unfamiliar music.

"My intentions were to bring people together to show what can happen in the broad term of electronic art and show the diversity of the art," he said.

Beyond trying to attract new students to electronic music, a lot of which is avant-garde, much of Spark is dedicated to musicians already interested in the form.



Brie Cohen

The band Electropolis' Tuesday night performance to a 1920s silent film kindled the Spark Festival of Electronic Music. Electropolis member Kelly Rossum plays the electrumptet during the band's performance

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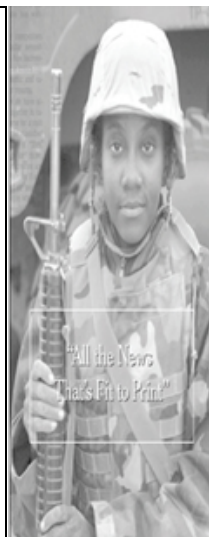
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"One of the problems of teaching this field is that it evolves so fast," Geers said. "It's important for me and students to keep up with what's happening and stay up on trends."

The annual Spark Festival allows these new technology and computer programs to be featured. Many of the musicians performing will also give lectures on how they create their music.

One of the keynote artists that Geers is especially excited for is Alvin Lucier. Lucier is regarded as a pioneer in electronic composition.

"He uses electronics to measure human brain waves and turns that into music," Geers said. "He uses scientific knowledge to create music."

The musician

Graduate student Marc Jensen plays several instruments including piano, mandolin and accordion and he writes compositions for acoustic, electronic and found instruments.

At Spark, Jensen will play a piece on Friday night titled "Music for Accordion" in which he will play his accordion accompanied by a recording of pure tones that move up and down. Jensen said that when he plays the same pitch as the pure tone, it creates a beat.

"It's really beautiful and strange," he said, "and a sound I doubt many people have heard before."

Jensen said he likes working with electronics because "it's a powerful tool for manipulating sound.

SPARK FESTIVAL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

WHEN: Through Sunday
WHERE: University
TICKETS: Most events are free except for Sunday night
MORE: For a full list of events, go to:
www.spark.cla.umn.edu

It's a different framework that's much more free."

The panelist

Professor Arun Saldanha will discuss rave culture Saturday. Saldanha teaches a class this semester, "Music in the City," in the geography department. Cultural geography studies how places relate to cultural forms and Saldanha is interested in how rave/house music emerged in Detroit but did not get big

until it crossed over to Europe.

"Rave music in America became a precise term that was demonized. It meant this sort of music with these sorts of people. That hurt it a lot," Saldanha said. "But in Europe the music was everywhere in advertising, on the radio, in coffee shops ' it became mainstream."

Another major difference between rave culture in America and Europe, Saldanha said, is the drugs. "In Europe, the music is so diffused in society, the drugs are not as intertwined and they're much less connected," he said. "In America, it was as if you had to take drugs and it was also anti-alcohol, which excluded some people."

Saldanha will examine the reasons behind electronic music's stunted growth in America and tie those problems into issues of space, community and race.

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