An annual high point of the city’s free[don] jazz scene, Vision Fest’s 26th incarnation comprised archival film screenings, an academic conference, six nights of music (five at Roulette, one at La Plaza at The Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural Center), movement, poetry, visual arts (installed, improvised or exhibited separately), celebrating lifetime achievements of Wadada Leo Smith and Oliver Lake. Much to ingest, yet deep immersion in these musical sounds/sights/spirits can reward curious listeners with transformative experiences.

Night 1 (Jun. 21st), curated by Smith, showcased the trumpeter/composer’s work in seven unique but overlapping settings. But first, attempting to address the crowd with a silent mic only to hear a chorus of “we-can’t-hear-you’s!” Smith waited until the PA was audible to quip: “It’s ok, just feel me!” And certainly his energy—his feeling—was palpable on the traditional opening prayer, a minor meditation on Albert Ayler performed duo with drummer Pheeroan akLaff. Next a black-and-white film clip showed a young Smith playing a freely structured solloquy. His string writing was featured in three sets performed by RedKoral Quartet (violinists Mona Thian, Shalini Vijayan, violist Andrew McIntosh, cellist Ashley Walters): quartet alone on the pensive “Quartet No. 0°”, with Smith, akLaff and pianist Sylvie Courvoisier and Erika Dohi on the catholic “Flight 93 in Pennsylvania’s Sky”; and with poet Thuilani Davis on her recital of “Billie Holiday, Dark Lady of the Night”. After a break, Smith, half-crouched over, blew fragmentary yet cohesive blasts, muting horn, blew straight-8ths and other rhythms. The second punch, coming after Murray discharging a pair of radicalized solos, Carter (baritone)—delivered deep grooves and colorful chords, Parker (hunting horn) and Drake restively but powerfully conjuring a two-chord vamp, violins/violas all standing/soloing.

Festival Report
VISION FEST
BY TOM GREENLAND

Brandon López, Brown long-winded, calmly ecstatic, López kinetically extroverted, proactively rhythmic. Dancer Davalois Fearon and multi-instrumentalist Mike McGinnis’ duo fused her athleticism and sharpness with his fluid lyricism. The evening ended with a 1-2 punch. With Lois Esby’s paintings onscreen, William Parker (donson n’goni, girimi, gralla), Cooper-Moore (home-made instruments) and Hamid Drake (drums) wowed listeners with a calypso-esque groove that moved to funk—Cooper-Moore tearing up his dixie-dee-bow with nods to Delta blues and Bernie Worrell—to a mercurial closer, Cooper-Moore (electric banjo, mouth-bow). Parker (hunting horn) and Drake restively but sinuously transitioning between swinging straight-8ths and other rhythms. The second punch, taking longer to land, was equally powerful: clarinetist Ned Rothenberg, pianist Sylvie Courvoisier and Drake explored a series of musical scenarios kindled by Courvoisier’s frantic but precise two-handed attack. Rothenberg’s sensitive balladry and Drake’s forceful yet empathetic style, the latter proof positive a fully-imagined imagining isn’t limited by a bare-bones drumkit.

On the 3rd night (Jun. 23rd), choreographer Younga Chuma used archival film footage of 1946 Bikini Atoll A-Bomb tests accompanied by trio (violinist Jason Kao Hwang, cellist Aliya Ulan, trombonist Steve Swell) plus dancers (herself, Miriam Parker, Emily Marie Pope) to pose (silently) those difficult questions arising at the spectre of mushroom-shaped clouds. Vocalist/flutist Leo Chang, trumpet Chris Williams, cellist Lester St. Louis and dancer Parker’s set was more subdued, favoring hypnotic washes and drones, Parker repeatedly falling down then rising from the floor with unflappable stamina and poise. As William Massa digitally painted (offstage but onscreen), tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis, cornet player Kirk Knuffke, bassist Parker and drummer Chad Taylor used blues and gospel as anchor points, Knuffke and Lewis an unlikely but nevertheless well matched pair of soloists, Taylor aggressive, busy, but not to excess. Flutist/vocalist Nicole Mitchell’s quintet (pianist Joshua White, bassist Ken Filiano, electronic violinist Jeff Loeb, drummer Donny McCaslin) played a set of her originals spanning bossa nova, swing and funk, Jeanty overlaying turntable scratches, sampled vocals and other effects onto Carrington’s promethean, John Bonham-esque timekeeping.

By the 4th night (Jun. 24th), many of the same fans returning to the same chairs, the festival’s transformative powers were beginning to sink in. Tenor saxophonist Isaiah Collier, pianist Jordan Workman, bassist Stewart and drummer Holmes played high energy modal-based compositions, hitting that ineffable ‘i factor’ about 35 minutes down. Sparks (pianist Eri Yamamoto, alto saxophonist Chad Fowler, bassist Parker, drummer Steve Hirsh) embodied its name, particularly in the creative friction generated between Yamamoto and Hirsh, intuitively simpatico. Trumpeter Ahmed Abdullah and drummer Francisco Mora Catlett’s décet (vocalist Monique Ngozi Nri; saxophonists Sam Newsome, Don Byron; pianists Butch Morris and D.D. Jackson; bassist Radu Ben Judah; conguero Román Díaz) brought broad sounds and loving vibes, inviting listeners to echo phrases from Sun Ra’s “Enlightenment”, together conjuring a “Space World” of “strange mathematics [and] rhythmic equations”, an extended hearing of Loita Rey Rivera’s “A Place I never been: especially for Malcolm X” before finishing with a cha-cha and boogaloo, the last featuring a bombastic but soulful turn by Jackson. Pianist Angelica Sanchez trio-ed with bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Chad Taylor. Sharp, rapid, crystalline riffs. Two-chord vamp, violins/violas all standing/soloing, Nicholson-Parker mashed spoken word with movements, supported by Ellen Christi and Jean Carla Rodea’s loosely harmonized scat vocals and drummer Mela’s beats/chants (the latter two singing in Spanish) with Tony Malaby’s photo painting cell as the lead scrolled overhead. Swell’s septet (bassoonist Karen Borca, alto saxophonist Rob Brown, violinist Melanie Dyer, pianist Dave Burrell, tuba player Stewart and drummer Michael TA Thompson) developed solos and grime around the countermelodies, achieving a couple stirring plateaus along the way. Music-lyfe partners Ngozi Nri and Abdullah sang a short folksy composition mostly comprised of Sun Ra melodies and Nri’s original poetry, Abdullah adding vocals, trumpet and djembe. The sextet by John Toomey’s sax, unfurled as a long, layered, trance-inducing groove driven by the leader’s girimi, Parker’s donson n’goni, Drake’s frame drum and Mikel Patrick Avery’s stark muffled drumkit while Lisa Alvarado’s harmonium gently drifted out of time, bass clarinetist Jason Stein mostly vamping until his inventive solo turn midway through.

After five nights in Brooklyn, the final event (Jun. 26th), a tribute to Oliver Lake, was held outdoors at La Plaza at The Clemente in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, hot humid late afternoon air slowly cooling as the sun set. It began with a band of 21 tweens and teens, directed by William Parker, playing a couple of extended pieces with recitation and solos, a glimpse at the scene’s future. Tenor/bass saxophonist JD Parran’s sextet (violinist Gwenn Laster, guitarist Kelvin Bell, bassist Paul Morris, drummer Gene Cooper-Moore (home-made drum burble n’goni, gimbri, gralla), Cooper-Moore (baritone)—delivered deep grooves and colorful chords, generated between Yamamoto and Hirsh, intuitively timed. The latest iteration of the World Saxophone Quartet—Bruce Williams (soprano, alto), Greg Osby (alto), David Murray (tenor, bass clarinet), James Carter (baritone)—delivered deep grooves and colorful chords, Murray urging a pair of soundscapes. Carter, holding out a Soulsoup coda. It wasn’t over: returning to ‘reality’ after deep musical immersion, many fans took the festival’s transformative sounds/sights/spirits home with them.