

The Silent Treatment

During this past winter's New York Guitar Festival, master guitarists gave classic silent films new acoustic guitar scores.

By Adam Perlmutter



Chris Rosenau (left) and Justin Vernon (right) scored Charlie Chaplin's *One A.M.* at the New York Guitar Festival.

The concept of pairing silent films with live guitar accompaniment might seem incongruous—after all, most original scores for silent films were written for the piano or for orchestras. But during the Silent Films/Live Guitars events at this year's New York Guitar Festival (January 8 through February 4 in New York City), the two mediums interacted brilliantly. For four different concerts, each featuring two or three films, a diverse collection of guitarists—David Bromberg, Marc Ribot, Justin Vernon (Bon Iver) with Chris Rosenau, members of Chicha Libre, Gyan Riley, Alex de Grassi, and James Blackshaw—wrote new scores for silent classics by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harry Smith.

Since 1999, the New York Guitar Festival (newyorkguitarfestival.org) has brought together some of the world's most accomplished players in boldly original programs at New York City establishments like Carnegie Hall, the 92nd Street Y, Merkin Concert Hall, and other venues. (A nice sampling of the NYGF can be heard on *Harvest*, Vol. 1, a mostly acoustic two-CD set culled from some of the festival's greatest moments, featuring Bill Frisell, Alex de Grassi, Andy Summers, and more). As the programming suggests, the primary aim of the festival is to present the exceedingly broad technical and stylistic range inherent in the guitar. "Sometimes I like to say, 'Forget English, guitar is the international language,'" says the NYGF's cofounder and artistic director, David Spelman, a conservatory-trained classical guitarist who also apprenticed as a luthier with Jeff Traugott.

PHOTOS BY GREG NOTCH

The Genesis of Silent Films/ Live Guitars

Spelman is always on the lookout for extra-musical sources like film, art, and literature that can be used as a binding theme for a guitar festival. He developed the idea for Silent Films/Live Guitars (the festival also included a concert of Hindustani guitar music by the slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya, as well as an all-day Bach marathon featuring Ana Vidovic, Eliot Fisk, Jason Vieaux, and more) when he was in the process of rediscovering some classic Chaplin films, whose creative eccentricity seemed like a cool source of inspiration for new guitar music.

Early on, Spelman ran into some obstacles. Chaplin himself composed the music for some of his silent films, music he intended to be performed by live musicians, and there are still stipulations that preclude new musical interpretations of these works. "Some of the obvious choices, like *City Lights*, wouldn't have been possible to use in the festival, because the films are only allowed to be publically shown in conjunction with the original music," Spelman says. Luckily, Chaplin had a particularly fertile earlier period, and those films—such as *Easy Street* and *One A.M.*—are free of restrictions. Similarly accessible were some works of Keaton and Smith.

When it came time to select guitarists to participate in his project, Spelman approached players he found striking and had each one choose a film to score. (Justin Vernon, Chicha Libre, and Alex de Grassi each ended up scoring two—for a full lineup, see "Improvising to the Silver Screen" below). He granted the guitarists total freedom to create whatever kind of musical interpretation they liked—through-composed (music that isn't

composed of repeating sections), improvised, or a combination of approaches—limited only, of course, by the duration of the films.

Given the logistics of their availability, Spelman came up with the most logical pairing of guitarists for each concert. "I put David Bromberg and Marc Ribot on the same bill because they're two masters of the acoustic guitar, one [Bromberg] firmly in the 'trad' world, and the other [Ribot] pushing against the boundaries of genre," Spelman says. "With Justin Vernon [with Chris Rosenau] and Steve Kimock, I hear something of the psychedelic in both of their approaches, with Kimock having more of a virtuoso technique and Vernon a more atmospheric approach to the instrument. James Blackshaw is coming from a similar set of influences as Alex de Grassi, but I sensed that their respective audiences might not know the other's playing, so it would be an evening of discovery for both sets of fans. I can't quite explain what led me to have Chicha Libre and Gyan Riley together, but it just seemed that it might work somehow—and it did."

The Creative Process

One of this year's most anticipated NYGF concerts was held on January 21 at Merkin Hall and included a pair of scores played by Justin Vernon, the man behind the indie-folk project Bon Iver, and his guitar mentor, Chris Rosenau. On 2008's critically lauded *For Emma, Forever Ago*, Vernon accompanied his own falsetto mostly with gently droning acoustic strumming. On the other hand, Rosenau, who has been influenced in equal measure by contemporary composers like Steve Reich and heavy metal bands like Slayer, is known for a more technical and heavier approach. Vernon and Rosenau merge

their somewhat disparate styles in their Wisconsin-based post-rock group Collections of Colonies of Bees, which released the album *Birds* in 2008.

Kicking off the evening's sold-out program was the guitarist Steve Kimock, best known as the founder of the San Francisco band Zero and for his work on side projects of various members of the Grateful Dead. Along with his son John Morgan Kimock at the trap kit and the occasional melodica, the senior Kimock (solid-body electric in hand) improvised an appealingly skittering modern jazz soundtrack to one of the festival's few films not by Chaplin, Keaton's 1922 *Cops*.

The Kimocks' angular and electric approach contrasted nicely with Vernon and Rosenau's interpretations of *Easy Street* (1917) and *One A.M.* (1916), which were darker and less playful. Vernon explained to the audience that he and Rosenau labored for the greater part of a year on their contribution to the festival, spending many long evenings viewing the films and playing their guitars.

In composing their score to *One A.M.* (in which an inebriated and frustrated Chaplin stumbles through his house in a vain attempt to find his bed), Rosenau and Vernon could have easily gone for something programmatic—music directly mirroring the protagonist's many slips, trips, and falls. What they came up with instead was a bit more nuanced, a score that evoked an overall mood of loneliness that they sensed in the film and which allowed for spontaneity within each section. "We improvised a bit together and arrived at a loop-based theme to represent Chaplin's character as a whole," Rosenau says. "That brought a sense of coherence to the score; we adjusted the loop slightly for each scene, and in the performance we improvised a bit within each loop."

The bleak mood of *One A.M.* inspired a pair of alternate tunings that were new to the guitarists: Rosenau, on a Martin 000-15S, tuned to D A E G# B E, and Vernon played a nylon-string La Patrie Etude tuned to E A C# E B E. Rosenau and Vernon used these uncommon tunings in tandem to evoke a sound world that was "very mysterious and kind of Reichian, neither major nor minor," says Rosenau. The resulting score, informed equally by minimalism and Americana, shifted the focus of *One A.M.* from Chaplin's high jinks to his enigmatic nature. At the same time, the film steered the guitarists toward new instrumental territory. "I was definitely inspired to seek out something not in my normal bag of tricks," Rosenau says. **AC**

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IMPROVISING TO THE SILVER SCREEN

Charlie Chaplin films featured in Silent Films/Live Guitars included live performances by David Bromberg (*The Immigrant*, 1917), Marc Ribot (*The Kid*, 1921), Justin Vernon with Chris Rosenau (*Easy Street*, 1917, and *One A.M.*, 1916), Chicha Libre (*Pay Day*, 1922, and *The Idle Class*, 1921), and Alex de Grassi (*Shoulder Arms*, 1918, and *The Vagabond*, 1916). Films not by Chaplin included scores by Steve Kimock (*Cops*, directed by Buster Keaton, 1922), James Blackshaw (*Fall of the House of Usher*, directed by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, 1928) and Gyan Riley (shorts from Harry Smith's *Early Abstractions*, 1946–57).

A common thread through these performances, which covered a great expanse of stylistic territory, was improvisation. Riley, a contemporary classical and electric guitarist (and son of the great American composer Terry Riley), started with bare-bones musical sketches, along with some words and pictures. "I precomposed only the basic harmonic ideas and set up a series of loops," Riley says. "My performance was more than 50 percent improvised."

Steel-string fingerstylist de Grassi took a similar approach in scoring *Shoulder Arms* and *The Vagabond*. "I was asked to do *The Vagabond* at the last minute and there wasn't much time to write out the themes," he says. "So I just made myself some simple cues—play in A major for this section, play a slow waltz for that section, and so on. I relied on my improvisational instincts, which worked really well in this context."

