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Charlotte Street is a foundation that loves to throw happenings

By STEVE PAUL



Mark Southerland, creator of "Urban Noise Camp," on one of his unusual saxophones

The folks at the Charlotte Street Foundation like to throw parties. Their event schedule dominates the social whirl of the downtown art scene.

They're proud of what they do, and with good reason. Describing itself as an "organization that continually evolves in response to artist input and in relation to the city's larger cultural ecosystem," the foundation distributes tens of thousands of dollars a year to artists.

Without even thinking about it last weekend, I spent three nights in a row at Charlotte Street-related events.

A Friday evening opening of the Charlotte Street Awards exhibit spread the love all the way to the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Johnson County. The exhibit of four Charlotte Street fellows (and they *are* all men) spotlights the foundation's decade-plus effort to boost the fortune of Kansas City's emerging artists.

It was a jam-packed affair, with a nice buffet downstairs and artworks filling two galleries on the second floor with wildly varying styles. Beniah Leuschke's elegantly surreal sculptural contraptions, for example, shared one room with a series of bright and beguiling paintings (of sofas) by Adolfo Gustavo Martinez.

On Saturday night the party moved to the Paragraph Gallery on 12th Street, one of the storefront exhibit spaces Charlotte Street Foundation fostered through its Urban Culture Project to transform the once-decrepit city scene.

Kansas City artists mingled with a contingent from Austin, Texas, who were represented in two separate shows, though the crowd-swarm made the distinction hard to see. One room presented an installation by the Okay Mountain collective, juxtaposing a multicolored picnic table, a painted-on-the-wall tableau of a cartoony menagerie of animals and a pyramid (or was it a mountain?) made of Lone Star beer cans.

Well, OK. Collectives are all the rage these days, especially as poised against the machines of convention, commercialism and/or capitalism. All that group energy leads to big, sprawling ideas and seems to want to push art more and more toward the realm of performance. (For further evidence, see the Charlotte Street-supported Whoop De Doo productions.) In another day, some of these kinds of activities were called Happenings.

Sunday at the RecordBar brought a happening-style blend of art, music and conceptual performance. And talk about a menagerie.

This was not a Charlotte Street show per se. It was part of the jazz series that bassist Jeff Harshbarger curates two Sundays a month. The show presented the work of Mark Southerland, an influential musician and sculptor here, a big, scraggle-bearded and soft-spoken guy who swims a bottomless pool of invention.

Southerland this year landed one of the first “generative performing artist” grants from Charlotte Street.

When the foundation showed off its grant recipients a few Fridays ago at the Copaken Stage downtown, Southerland presented a 20-minute compression of a musical spectacle in progress called “Urban Noise Camp.”

Some of those who saw it there were dazzled.

So here was the scene in the dim light of the RecordBar last Sunday night, when Southerland’s playful epic got its full-blown treatment:

Four camping tents stood on and around the stage. Colored lights spun. A crew of eight women in colorful Lycra bodysuits sat in the tents, whittled sticks and wandered around.

Southerland and five fellow musicians, a musical outfit he calls Wee Snuff, wore wildly patterned, priestly robes with hoods or faux-elaborate headpieces.

It was colorful, edgy and bodacious. And it went on for 90 minutes.

“Urban Noise Camp” was all very anti-rational dada. And, in a retro kind of way, the dada could be misinterpreted as paternalistic, with all those writhing women surrounded by all those hard-working musicians.

Yet. The music opened in a primordial cloud of exploratory notes. Southerland sat hulking over a small harp. The women awakened as if slithering from a tidal shoal.

Tonal chaos and inspired improvisation followed.

A costumed photographer and a videographer wove throughout the scene as the music and action unfolded, capturing every key moment.

Partly scored, mostly improvised, the music alternated explosive energy and brooding, interstellar messaging. It was brainy and fearless, with dissonant tentacles no less disturbing, say, than the echoing collapse of the global financial order.

But if the work contained much heart, I found it elusive.

The music felt most alive when Southerland played one of his hybrid saxophones, dialoguing at times with Brad Cox at the keyboard or with Harshbarger thrashing on electric and acoustic bass.

Another highlight: Very late in the show, nectar-voiced Shay Estes, in purple bodysuit and red lights on her head, sang two moon-worshipping ballads. *The moon’s out during the day. What’s it trying to do, what’s it trying to say?...*

These songs apparently were narrative plot points. The women, I learned later, represented a lunar cult that would go to war to save the moon’s dominance from commercial exploitation of the night sky.

I think it will be Southerland’s challenge, if he continues to develop “Urban Noise Camp,” to make the songs feel more organically connected to the energy fields preceding them and to chisel away at the raucous impulse that otherwise overpowers the narrative.

But hooray for trying. And hooray for Charlotte Street for funding an art party and an urban ecosystem that pushes the boundaries all the way to outer space.

