

Theaster Gates's Black Chapel, Seven Leslie Speakers and The Organ Man

Theaster Gates Exhibit at The New Museum New York City Features Shedrick Mitchell



Manhattan, New York Jan 27, 2023 (Issuewire.com) - Theaster Gates's Black Chapel, Seven Leslie Speakers, and The Organ Man

Driven by a conscious intent to dive deeper into the mental processes of Theaster Gates, always prepared to stretch beyond reasonable limits, a promenade through the rooms of his current New York City exhibit spanning the entire New Museum, "Theaster Gates: Young Lords and Their Traces," is a theatrical experience itself, revealing a monumental personal curation of historical symbolism. But beyond the visuals, arose a visceral sound, obscure and familiar, penetrated to its destination - the ear to the heart, the soul, and the spirit.

Elevator doors opening on the top floor debunked the mystery behind the sound. There was no staging of any sort, nor any linking dialogue or explanation of the design, and not a word from the man playing the Hammond organ at the center of the exhibit, only the sound that found our common roots. Seven Leslie speakers decidedly placed high on the adjacent wall delivered the nonverbal communication, clear and powerful, amplifying the treble and the bass of its spiritual spectacle. The organist activated his instrument with an unrecognizable, glacially slow organ melody vibing a hint of ominous ballad or transfigured hymn, mesmerizing unsuspecting congregants. He cycled his session through the filters of soul, jazz, Romantic, Black Baptist choral march, atonalism, Baroque, and Gospel praise, as if to make the point of the foundational heritage.

Theaster Gates's Young Lords and Their Traces commutes chapel components on the fourth floor with fragments of spiritual symbolism - named "A Heavenly Chord" apparently by the witness of a mother's prayer closet alternative by the tiles from a bathroom floor in one corner; a salvaged church bell in the other; configurations of church pine adorn sidewalls; a series of Leslie speakers mounted as artwork and in the center the Hammond B3 organ activated by its pied piper Shedrick Mitchell, quickening the space by uncommon assertion behind the 800-pound instrument that ordinarily has never been expressive enough to become art for tourists. Ordinarily.

Shedrick Mitchell was using a familiar instrument, but in an eclectic, much freer, and much more expressive way, flashing some spontaneous complicated rhythms inside popular songs, seamlessly flowing through soul classic "People Make the World Go Round" to a worshipful anthem by Andre Crouch, mesmerizing his audience and entranced himself, by his own rapturous moments. The mysterious intro, later discovered as an original composition by Mitchell called "Meditation" played at the start of each performance to usher him into that space poured into a hymn and in the same spiritual tremor, his soulful erudition, clarity of touch, and rhythmic surety made Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy" a religious locution by exuberant moments of holding notes while sweeping his hand firmly across the upper register.

The organ has extremely specific cultural associations and Mitchell isn't afraid to show its power. In his hands and the walking bass lines at his feet, it becomes an engulfing, screaming instrument. Hints of Gospel undertones foster the anamnesis of the Black church evolved through generations of American culture - a tradition as familiar to believers and nonbelievers as witnessed by the museum-goers represented. Jessica, with friends Kamryn and Kelsey unwittingly drawn by the crowd that had gathered in a semi-circle around the unmanned organ, described the way the music strikes an emotion, "that makes you feel good inside without the musician ever saying a word," each sharing how the sound

transformed the atmosphere and their sensibilities. “We were really confused. When we got upstairs we just saw people waiting around - and we were like - ‘what’s happening?’ Then he came out and he really killed it,” Kelsey began, “it was like church.” They were not alone, three of dozens enchanted by the sound. A handful of guests had traveled specifically to experience Mitchell at the exhibit, Amanda from Chicago, and hometown friends, Dawn and Eric, who traveled from Maryland.

Moving out of the shadows as a sideman - although not so shadowy in that capacity - a long record of tours and production credits with legends (to whom he makes tribute during his museum set), Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Jay-Z as the abbreviated list, Mitchell gives rise to his solo career here at the New Museum as a one-man phenom with a bold announcement to the world - a promising step in his evolution. Mitchell’s fascinating background interrupted his solo pursuit for decades. Highly sought after for session work and touring musicians for top-billed entertainers and broadcasts (maintaining musical director for Maxwell), he turned vigilant on his solo track. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed down business just enough for career clarity, birthing seven solo projects and a national tour of his works. He will perform his most recent project, “What Do You Say?” at Dizzy’s Club Jazz at Lincoln Center, Monday, February 6, 2023, featuring his jazz trio.

The commonality between Theaster and Shedrick, marked instant brotherhood, to be midwestern, Black, and church boys at the foundation - musicians and visionaries - educated and accomplished. Shedrick first learned music in his church and by formal study in his hometown of St. Louis and rounded out his master studies at The New School Mannes School of Music. When the New Museum came calling, Mitchell chiseled the path for collaboration; a series of firsts for both men.

“It’s a journey for me - an hour and ten minutes journey - hearing the sound of the Leslies bouncing off the wall and the acoustics, it’s euphoric for me and kind of takes me on a trip, which takes me a while to come down once I finish playing,” Shedrick explains, “after the first ten minutes I’m caught away.” In celebration of “Theaster Gates: Young Lords and Their Traces,” Shedrick Mitchell will play final performances Tuesday, January 31 through Thursday, February 2, and Sunday, February 5.

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