



Music

Time Out New York / Issue 633 : Nov 15–21, 2007

Zs the day

The brainy quartet's influence is felt everywhere, from the DIY scene to *The Howard Stern Show*.

By Mike Wolf

OUT OF DARKNESS, LIGHT Zs brighten any space with the energy of their playing.

Judge the Brooklyn band Zs by appearances and you could get the wrong idea. The quartet performs sitting down; it uses sheet music; all four current members—and in fact, everyone who has ever been in the band since it formed in 2000—have studied music (though “not necessarily composition as a function of European classical,” clarifies tenor saxist Sam Hillmer); and its sound has been described variously as chamber music, avant-garde and jazz (not always accurately, but hey, Hillmer does play saxophone).

But wait, there's more: During a challenging and fun conversation with Hillmer and guitarist-keyboardist Charlie Looker—a talk in which I am the third smartest person and it isn't even close—topics range from understanding Zs through Venn diagrams to certain advantages of the pre-Enlightenment mind-set over that of today's world.

Given all of this, you might assume that Zs' music is dry as talc. But it just isn't that way. The pieces on *Arms*, the group's debut full-length (after several EPs and compilation appearances and a passel of side projects), are indeed rigorously composed, employ repetition and atonality, and are undeniably avant-garde. But what characterizes the quartet and its sound is a ferocious of-the-moment energy that shares a vibe with punk more than anything else. Repeatedly, Hillmer and Looker insist that categorizing Zs is less a matter of sound than of the DIY spirit.

Venn diagrams notwithstanding, the most telling statement in the interview comes when Hillmer, 29, describes the period about two years ago when the band members realized that the standard way of doing things, both as a band (ambitiously climbing the scene ladder) and as composers (writing grant proposals), was just not happening. “We were coming out of a phase which was about attaining to something that was out of grasp, and it wasn't even fun. We realized that the DIY community was where we belonged, and we thought, We know all these awesome people and bands—let's just throw a bunch of parties and get psyched about what we already have going down.” When asked how that shift in attitude has been working out, Hillmer's eyes go wide and he nods in small, quick motions: “We're *amped*.” Adds Looker, 27, cheerily, “*Fucking* *amped*.”

You can't walk into a record store and search the *amped* or DIY sections, though. But there are ways of discussing Zs that blend sound and theory. For one thing, each member—drummer Ian Antonio, 27, and guitarist Ben Greenberg, 22, round out the lineup—seeks to recontextualize his instrument away from its shackling associations. “People see sheet music and a saxophone and they think they know what to expect,” says Hillmer. “I can't come out and play a melody, because people will just call it jazz. The first Zs pieces were written by saxophonists, and they were all about being able to play in a band and escape the stigma of jazz.”

Looker moves the discussion toward a core philosophy of Zs. “Identity is important to us,” he says. “When I was 12, I was into punk but I was also into being a good, serious musician. Those were different things but they weren't at odds with each other. Yet they were different enough that it took a while for me to get the two to not just coexist, but to become one thing.” Hillmer explains it in a word: “The vibe is *and*,” he says. “Not *but*—and. It isn't that Zs are this, but they're also that. It's additive: We're like this *and* like this *and* like this. The way people get into a lot of music is through a pastiche vibe; we're not down with that shit because it's all about showing the ‘shocking’ differences between things. Like [*Adopts a tone of mock amazement*], ‘Oh my God, I'm jazz and I'm classical and I'm punk rock—how fucked-up is that?!?’ ”

It'd be interesting to hear Hillmer put that question to Zs' newest and unlikeliest admirers. In one of those flukes that could happen only in today's media culture, the *Howard Stern Show* got ahold of *Arms* earlier this month and immediately fell in perplexed love with it. "It sounds like guys falling onto their instruments," said the show's Richard Christy between laughs from Stern and Robin Quivers. Though their tone was initially mocking, they played several songs from the disc over a few days, and the staff even cobbled together their own "avant-garde" performance on November 8's show in purported honor of Zs, and talked about trying to open for the group's upcoming Knit appearance. "The bottom line is that something about the music stood out," says Hillmer about the unexpected attention. "As a result, well over 5 million people have heard these sounds on the radio for the past three days. Butt of the joke or not, this is amazing—we even instigated a discussion about Cage! On *Howard Stern!!!*"

Zs play [Maxwell's](#) Mon 19 and [Knitting Factory](#) Tue 20. *Arms* is out now on Planaria.
<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/articles/music/24203/zs-the-day>



[Music](#)

Time Out New York / Issue 639 : Dec 27, 2007–Jan 2, 2008

The best albums of 2007

Chosen by: Hank Shteamer, music writer

6. **Zs** *Arms* (Planaria). This fearsome local avant-chamber crew captures its hyperevolved methods on an ecstatic debut.

<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/articles/music/25134/the-best-albums-of-2007/2.html>

dusted

Artist: Zs

Album: *Arms*

Label: [Planaria](#)

Review date: Jan. 31, 2008

In a now legendary November broadcast of his Sirius radio show, Howard Stern played a few tracks off of a copy of Zs' *Arms* that the band had sent to him. Expectedly, he and his peanut gallery spent a solid chunk of airtime offering their opinions, irreverently abusing the underground art scene in the process. This provoked reverberations throughout the internet, as a few savants of all-sounds-cerebral went *en guard* against Stern and Co.'s apparent blaspheming of the musical fringe.

New Yorker New Music critic Alex Ross, whose blog links to clips from the show, takes brief (and, alright, justified) umbrage at the show's unsurprisingly brash contention that John Cage's "4'33" is "horseshit." He then references Stern's (later abandoned) plan to show up at the Knitting Factory before a Zs show and perform with his cohorts as a faux-avant ensemble. With an air of chivalry toward the unjustly maligned Zs, Ross assures his readers that Stern's plan to clown the avant-garde will fail, as the "downtown crowd will give him a warm *Rite of Spring* welcome," and show Howard Stern precisely what everyone thinks of the cut of his jib (or something). Ross was implying was that, had Stern taken the stage, a riot – the unbeatable high – would have ensued.

But even had Howard Stern made good on his promise, no bloodthirsty riots in defense of the avant-garde would have been necessary. Ross, in his well-intentioned (if only partially informed) defense of Zs, managed to miss a few important elements of what's great about *Arms*, elements that were revealed by the militantly low-brow antics of the Howard Stern show.

In an interview with *Time Out New York*, Zs member Sam Hilmer is keyed into this; discussing how blown away he is at the semi-surreal experience of having instigated a conversation about John Cage on the Howard Stern show. What's more exciting than having brought up Cage, though, is that *Arms* inspired on the show an impromptu exploration of a list of theoretical questions about what constitutes "music" and why we listen to it, not to mention the kind of gut reactions you might not even expect from die-hard fans of experimental music. If the false dichotomy between "high" and "low" culture is one that Zs flaunts alongside plenty of other DIY avant-gardists, it was entirely disassembled on the Howard Stern show.

In the broadcast, as the first awkward skronks of "Woodworking" play, Howard's first response is to say, "It's mood music... if you're in a mental home," unintentionally providing a tagline so catchy and evocative the band should have it screened onto their merchandise. As Stern and Co. listen through the song, their reaction to its spacious, cartoon-ish jerkiness, the seemingly random horn honks and percussive thumps, is first to hesitate perplexedly, then break out into laughter – sincere laughter, as if they can't quite believe what they're hearing. Despite not being aficionados of "difficult" music, the cast of the Howard Stern show manage to give pretty dead-on, evocative descriptions of "Woodworking," appropriately delivered with the show's characteristic assholeishness. They remark that the track makes them feel like they're waiting to see if something happens, and that it sounds like Bugs Bunny tip-toeing in a cartoon, which is exactly the aesthetic impact it's meant to have. "Do they write this stuff down? Can this be repeated? How do you tell when something's 'good'?" These were the questions Stern's cast was asking – ones entirely germane to the most high-minded discussions of musical experimentation.

Then, in a move decidedly Duchampian (though not identified by Alex Ross as such), Stern and his cast decided to put together their own ensemble, calling into question what distinguishes composer-ship from just blowing into an instrument; an idea as Dadaist as it is demotic.

Arms, for all the discussion it sparked about experimental music on Stern's show, is hardly impenetrable. That's part of the reason why it *could* be discussed; out-there as it seems to the unprepared ear, it offers a way in. Baring little resemblance to aggressive noise or its relatives that pepper the punk landscape (No Wave, and other genres characterized by blaring grit,) *Arms'* closest historical antecedents can be found in the Rock in Opposition movement of the late-'70s.

Bands like Aksak Maboul shared members with major acts of the early-'70s Canterbury Scene, and did Canterbury a notch or two better in terms of experimentalism. If Soft Machine and its descendants (Gong, Caravan, Hatfield and the North, etc.) pioneered psychedelic rock that incorporated prog complexity while maintaining infectious melody, prominent RIO bands experimented with the idea of what could even constitute melody in rock music. In doing so, they employed a range of avant-compositional, world, and free-jazz elements; either pulling avant-gardism down from the academic heights, or elevating pop music (in the absolute loosest sense of the term) to its most cerebral extreme.

This kind of experimentation in search of new melodic understandings is precisely what Zs do with *Arms*. "B is for Burning" starts out with a staccato horn-heavy roll that sounds like it's been clipped out of another song and looped. The repetition doesn't end, making for three minutes of Steve Reich-and-Roll waiting for a crescendo that never arrives. "Nobody Wants to Be Had" churns with the same broken-record reiteration, but about half way in, explodes into a Faustian (band, not epic poem) fury of monotone vocals, mimicking the previous part in an onslaught of frenetically delivered syllables.

Even at the points when *Arms* is at its most aggressive, herky-jerky and erratic, it's never noisy. When it's mellow, in tracks like "Balk," it sounds almost like the leitmotif of a classically arranged children's story, bringing to mind a track on Aksak Maboul's *Onze Danses Pour Combattre La Migraine*. The lullaby-like "Z is for Zone" finishes out the disc quietly, using the same looping technique found in the disc's more forceful tracks to create an entirely different atmosphere, repeating its titular mantra over twinkling chimes.

It says something about the unique impact of Zs, that the band has been the focus of discussion by both the *New Yorker* music critic and the Howard Stern show. Populist in outlook while lofty in its approach, Zs are the perfect

kind of band to receive the range of reactions they did from both. In an age where it's incredibly rare for a piece of music to actually shock anyone without being aurally crippling or having a scatological gimmick, *Arms* has proven able to evoke visceral reactions with only vigorous experimentalism. With absolutely no concern for what's high-art or low-art, *Arms* is as artful, evocative and addictive as its stratospheric prog-progenitors, and depicts a band that promises to have a lasting impact on the difficult side of DIY music, or the DIY side of "difficult" music, which may very well be growing closer to being the same thing.

By Matthew A. Stern

<http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/4010>

TINY MIX TAPES

Zs

Arms [Planaria; 2007]



I've often felt that the 'minimalist' movement, typically associated with the trio of Reich, Riley, and Glass, has had a profound effect on modern music. In many ways, the early minimalist form paralleled the outward simplicity of rock 'n' roll, which it burgeoned beside in the '60s. Both genres stripped the last remaining flourishes of Romantic music and the complex atonal theories of the early 20th century into something more basic: a pulse. Once that musical center was established, a rebirth of sorts, the movements exploded outwards, rapidly shedding most early preconceptions about what rock or minimalism could be. But the rhythm, or the pure tone, usually remained the center of gravity, providing a natural connection between seemingly disparate styles, between the notions of 'high' and 'low' art. Perhaps because of the minimalist expansion, in all its facets, that distinction between 'high' and 'low' has become harder to discern with each passing year. I find the echoes of Steve Reich unmistakable in everyone from King Crimson to Sufjan Stevens, from Can to Jim O'Rourke, and certainly in a myriad of 'post rock' outfits. Repetition, drone, pulse, short themes and variation: the new common musical language is constantly expanding and being taken over in the context of small ensembles, or rock bands.

But a barrier still exists between the Victorian theaters, the opera houses, and today's bars and rock clubs, even if the music being hosted at these sets of establishments is constantly reaching across the aisle in a clamorous attempt to converse with the other side. Bands like Zs, as made doubly clear by their press release, are standing somewhere in the middle of the aisle. And they do represent a newer strain of classical minimalism's marriage to rock, one that favors Reich's brand of rhythmic repetition performed by a small ensemble of guitar, synth, sax, and drums. The stripped-down lineup is inviting, and transforms music that might seem steely and distant in a larger setting into a more personal, human performance piece. In a world where most bands favor sustained chords and saturated recording styles, it's nice being able to pinpoint exactly what each player is doing at any given moment. Zs' sincerity and dedication to pure composition is also immediately recognizable, and elevates them above similar artists who are content to merely flirt with the spiraling aspects of early minimalism. From the first note on *Arms*, which begins a long strain of rhythmic hits that lasts roughly the entire record, a sort of musical pointilism is established. The drums consist of singular jabs, often syncopated with other instrumental dots that carve out an underlying, implied pulse. It's that rhythmic insistence married with the complete lack of a traditional drum beat that both supports Zs' claims to concert hall acceptance and separates them from superficially similar math and prog rock acts.

In fact, the singularity and restraint of *Arms* are its most endearing aspects, similar to Orthreim's minimalist-shredding workout album *OV*, from 2005. The consistency of method allows for Zs' basic, nearly live recordings to sound at home, and, despite the relative lack of density, never thin. It's the sound of four instruments, and the occasional vocal line, delivering continuous rhythmic counterpoint, an early musical technique, but performed and presented here in an unmistakably modern way. The approach is most successful, and most simple, on the track "I Can't Concentrate," which lets sets of eighth notes build and breathe for seven minutes before slipping into a fast pulse of close, dissonant harmony. The sudden shot of blatant, repetitive dissonance, even with a limited amount of tones, is enhanced by the relative consonance preceding it. It's as if Zs took snippets of King

Crimson tracks and decided to perform expanded meditations on them. That pervading sense of mediation and repetition allows *Arms* to exist as an overarching work, but also as a commercially viable record. It opens a fresh path to the past while continuing the modern trend of erasing musical boundaries in the name of rock 'n' roll.
by [Keith Kawai](#)

<http://tinymixtapes.com/article5015.5015>



Zs

The Hard EP
(Three One G; 2008)
Rating: 84%

Consisting of one house-burning fifteen-minute composition, *The Hard EP* by Brooklyn trio Zs initially comes off as a diatribe of considerable defiance. Releasing music in such a stand-alone and iconic format is the territory of relatively few artists these days. Single, continuous tracks are often the stuff of label-sponsored DJ mixes, live music bootlegs, or pastoral experimentalism. Genre bending free-music like Zs' is usually segmented into communicative fragments in the recorded format, bookended by lullaby-grade intro and outro compositions. However, this particular piece of music could only be this long and it could only be given to its audience in the form of one song. As the title plainly states, this is music done the hard way.

It's true, I freely admit it; there are a million other bands playing louder and more viciously than Zs today. You or I could probably name five bands right now that are tearing open gaping holes in the sonic atmosphere. It's really not the volume or the degree of dissonance in the music that ultimately makes a difference in the scope of progression. In recent years, close Brooklyn contemporaries of Zs like Gang Gang Dance, Animal Collective, and Little Women have succeeded in bringing dynamic, challenging sounds to the surface of eccentric pop. By melding an experimental/melodic middle ground with radical song-form conceptualizing, these acts have challenged the comfortably situated indie avant-garde status quo in ways that few have since Sonic Youth began recording for Geffen back in the early nineties. With a stated "concern for pushing the mental and physical limits of their audience and themselves as performers" Zs find themselves ahead of this troupe, transcending the haze of middle grounds with a controlled squawk; aiming to take things back to a grueling square one.

In many ways, *The Hard EP* works as a wordless narrative, following the trio as they travel through some of the darker realms and decisively nameless places in musical structure. In the beginning tenor saxophonist Sam Hillmer, guitarist Ben Greenberg, and drummer Ian Antonio emerge suddenly from thin air, barking wild unison howls of purposeful mirth. This madness is contained, however, by the near-mechanical timing of the trio and an apparent will to follow a more arduous path. Surging statement after surging statement bleat out admissions of regret, led in an ever-diligent manner by Hillmer's prominent high pitch notes.

Eventually they do reach the sea. Nearly halfway through, a welcome tide of melodic dissonance stops the trio dead in their tracks, taking hold of their sound and manipulating it with a coy theme. Despite its easy nature and warm invitation to complacency, this respite doesn't last long. Just moments later, the trio are urged to resume their odyssey, deciding to risk running off into a thicket of dense anti-harmonies that are even more relentless and unpredictable than their first trials. Momentum builds once again; there are grunts of war-weary exertion amidst Greenberg's meticulous string tweaks and Antonio's drum roar. Then, rather suddenly, the carnage stops and an elevator for the undead appears. After the tumult the three emerge into yellow morning light with nothing to say, save for a small funky coda of a moody jazz song. Is this heaven? Could it be hell? Maybe some kind of music consumer purgatory?

Judging by their composure during a recent Vancouver performance, Zs aren't the type of guys to make snide cultural protest or cold comment out of their music. It is highly unlikely that *The Hard EP* was meant as an ante up to their Brooklyn peers or creative music in general. However, this record *could* serve as a footnote of the evolutionary progression of its scene in 2008. While releases like these don't easily find a wide audience in the byways of the pop underground, they do push those who listen to them to reconsider notions of sound and to question who is doing the heavy lifting in the grand scheme of things.

http://www.cokemachineglow.com/record_review/3856/zs

ZS
The Hard EP
(Three One G)

A four-piece made up of some of Brooklyn's finest in the fields of free jazz and noise, Zs excels with high marks across the board in the philosophies of verbatim repetition and seething mechanics. The group unleashes those two principles perfectly on *The Hard EP*, as each member vents ballistic impulses into one giant movement of astounding precision. Throughout its 15-minute sprawl, the four are so accurate in their delivery that you start to question the laws of memory and begin to wonder if some telepathic device factors into the outfit's formula.

Extreme ferociousness marks the EP's single composition, and at times Zs' performance almost seems competitive: I'm picturing the four sitting in a square, egging each other on with taunting eyes and piping their collective animosity into crushing blows. Fussy electric guitar and piercing keys join with sax squawks and bashing snare drum in split-second bursts while tense silent moments of various lengths and spasms of noise alternate. About a minute into the track, the drummer punctuates the hush with a syncopated cymbal thwack, and the piece suddenly evolves into skronked-out rhythms that'll grab and hold your attention for the rest of the chaotic romp. (Chris Sabbath)

http://www.sfbg.com/entry.php?entry_id=6909&catid=107

LEFT HIP MAGAZINE



The Hard EP
Zs
Three One G, 2008

Bizarre album that sounds unlike anything else, ever. Members of Dirty Projects and also many other bands I haven't heard of. Reference points would be fairly bizarre -- Arnold Dreyblatt, The Locust, Ahleuchatistas, Ornette Coleman, Matthew Shipp, contemporary classical, noise....

Uhhhh.. if you're getting a sense that this is its own world then you're getting the idea I'm trying to convey. On the one hand it sounds like punk/noise rock, on the other hand it sounds like a full-fledged contemporary music composition, with a healthy dose of free-improv thrown in.

Tenor sax, keyboard, guitar and drums in a vital, frenetic explosion of sound with tons of synchronized parts making it abundantly clear this isn't just a random free-improv session but something more akin to a kind of through-composed free-jazz. Fans of free improv, skronk, noise, and contemporary music should give this a listen - it's completely original and totally awesome.

Gordon B. Isnor
<http://www.lefthip.com/albums/1044>



Zs at the Comet: Holy Shit

By Dave Cantor Wednesday, August 13th, 2008 @ 8:51 AM

Zs is in a constant state of flux and their music aptly represents it. Beginning with the '05 disc *Karate Bump*, the purely instrumental group struck out beyond math rock and whatever other variation or sub genre one would care to construct. Incorporating flamboyant compositions into a group that might listen to as much Mission of Burma as Albert Ayler, it yielded the '07 release of *Arms*. The compositions were staggeringly complex as on previous efforts, but the release was bolstered by a newly recognized penchant for vocals. A bit shocking at first, but the group's ability to lock into complicated timings and progressions so far superseded any potential criticisms - in the end the change was charming.

Their latest release, the *Hard EP* on Three One G showcases the newest configuration of the band: Sam Hillmer (saxophone), Ben Greenberg (guitar), and Ian Antonio (drums). At the Comet, Greenberg's clear guitar may have hinted at the Flamin' Groovies classic *Teenage Head* while Antonio's set, lacking cymbals but sporting electronics pointed towards electronica. The squall of the next thirty minutes was unpredictable.

In past performances, with two or more additional members, the interplay of the group depended on the swell of each player locking in step with one another to create a tremendous layer of repetitive figures. Lacking an additional guitar and saxophone suggested that Zs' sound could become thin, not necessarily less cacophonous, but not as dense and full.

But the trio burst forth with noise, playing their set ceaselessly. Hillmer performed with a music stand slightly off to his left, but Greenberg and Antonio seemed to fall into a sort of swaying musical trance as their bodies reflected the variegated sections of the composition. If there was a break for applause, there would have been a great deal, but at every turn that seemed like some summation to a musical statement, there was more. Watching Antonio stretch prior the band beginning made sense. In addition to the vast mental stamina put into writing this piece, the endurance required for such a performance seemed tantamount to running a marathon. It was more than appropriate for each member of the trio to be seated.

The only disappointing aspect of the evening was that crowd which formed for the local acts filtered out to smoke cigarettes, mill around with their pals and ostensibly ignored Zs. The ten or so attentive fanboys - and the one young woman who somehow figured dancing was a good idea - were privy to a performance that seemed out of place at the Comet. Where was the Seattle avant-jazz crew? Why wasn't this show sought out by the folks that book the Chapel (no, not the bar in Capitol Hill, the venue in Wallingford) or Gallery 1412? Perhaps there's an answer and maybe we'll find out if Zs visits the NW again. Maybe.

<http://www.seattlesoundmag.com/2008/08/zs-at-the-comet-holy-shit/>



DESTINATION OUT
EXPERIMENTAL & AVANT-GARDE REVIEWS

SEP 2008

Zs

The *Hard EP*

By Josiah Hughes

Formed in 2000, Brooklyn-based avant-noise trio Zs have stayed relatively low-key. Now, with the release of *The Hard EP* on the Locust's Three One G imprint, the band should get some much-deserved attention. Meeting at a complex crossroads of free jazz, prog-rock and noise, the band build chaotic soundscapes that unfold slowly.

The Hard EP's sole untitled track opens with a start-stop skronk jam where the saxophone fights the guitar like *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*-era Zappa jamming with Ornette Coleman. In its 15-minute run time, the track produces passageways of sludgier dynamics that erupt, leaving room for the subtler piano finale. It's an impressive run that invites a deeper look into Zs' catalogue. (Three One G)

<http://www.exclaim.ca/musicreviews/generalreview.aspx?csid1=125&csid2=847&fid1=32989>



Zs

Thursday, August 7

By [ANDREW MILLER](#)

Published on August 06, 2008 at 5:02am

Zs' Sam Hillmer blasts his saxophone with scarily urgent volume, approximating a runaway semi's warning horn, or an air-raid siren announcing the impending apocalypse. The Brooklyn-based trio magnifies this discomfiting intensity with strangely syncopated rhythms and glitchy guitars. On the group's just-released *Hard EP*, Hillmer squawks with extreme prejudice over erratic drum rumbles, producing a confrontational din. During their quieter passages, Zs translate electronic minimalism into aggressively repetitive jazz. Largely an instrumental act, Zs make sporadic, rewarding forays into the vocal realm, producing the anarchic rant "In My Dream I Shot A Monk" and the pummeling psychedelic epic, "Nobody Wants to Be Had." Eventually, Zs push listener endurance past its usual threshold, reaching a transcendent stage at which "challenging" finally becomes "mind-blowing." The group's mesmerizing live performances accelerate this process.

Thu., Aug. 7, 9 p.m., 2008

<http://www.seattleweekly.com/2008-08-06/calendar/zs/>



SUICIDE GIRLS

Notes From The Underground

WEDNESDAY JUNE 18 2008 10:00 AM

Submitted by [Hunter](#). Edited By [erin_broadley](#).

Something is afoot in the dank D.I.Y. venues of New York. It seems like almost overnight, the stupid-happy, rainbow-colored, Sesame Street-themed, keyboard party punk thing is dying down and being replaced by its exact opposite. This new experimental stuff is tough to categorize, but much of it incorporates some kind of metal influence, either in sound or spirit. Metal at its best, as you know, is neither stupid, nor simple, nor happy, but dark, evil, and really tough to play. For this reason, it lacks the ironic delivery that's upped the obnoxious factor of many Brooklyn musicians; who in their right mind is going to practice their finger work ten hours a day to play music they consider a joke? Not this guy.

...I know most of these bands are hard to describe, but this one takes the cake. At present, it's a three-piece consisting of Sam Hillmer, Ian Antonio, and Ben Greenberg (the same Ben from Little Women). Out of all the bands I saw this past weekend, I think Zs is the most likely to end up in the curriculum of a Western music class; though they're a part of the Brooklyn rock scene, they have more in common with modernist composers like John Cage and Phillip Glass. Shifting time signatures, invented scales, and long, oddly structured pieces give them an academic feel, but I don't want to imply that they're at all stuffy. These are still dirty Brooklyn kids after all, and they attacked their composition with an energy not usually found in the halls of academia. Howard Stern just spent a week hating on them after somehow getting his dirty hands on their last album, so I expect that they're about to get a lot more famous. I think Robin secretly liked them, and I will not be surprised if she follows through

on her joking promise to use Zs for the intro to her news segments.

So there you have it: all types of weird shit to blow your fucking mind. Move over, Matt and Kim. It's nothing personal. Your paper-thin party songs might beat cold, lifeless indie rock, but there's a little guy named scissors headed your way, and we all know what he's made of.

<http://suicidegirls.com/news/music/23197/>



Zs

Arms

Posted on Thursday December 20th, 2007

Planaria, 2007

Author: [Chris S.](#)

Score: **7.9 / 10**

I was lucky enough to see Zs live on tour with The Locust, and I must first mention how badly my ears hurt during their set. I felt for a moment that I might fall apart right where I was standing. But upon the conclusion of their set I realized that this was more than just something that made my ears shatter. My first hint was introduced simply by the way they set up. All facing each other in a square with sheet music in front of them. This was not any ordinary band. There was more to this than just explosive noise, there was talent.

Zs takes post minimalism to a new level. They explore an immense range of musical approaches. Each approach speaks for itself in saying, "We know how to play, and play well." Ranging from rock, to jazz, to noise and back to rock again, Zs has a unique way of grasping the listener. Where to some their post-minimalist approach may come off as annoying, it tends to balance itself in an amazing manner. While listening, it is almost amazing to consider that they are holding themselves together. The songs range from well constructed, to random outbursts barely holding melody. Yet still, it creates a compound of immense musicianship. Explosions of energy are tangled within every song, yet their sound ranges from epic journeys to almost chaotic doomsday messages, particularly in "No Body Wants to be Had Balk." This unique sound allows them to communicate in a wide range of environments. It is not hard to imagine Zs in an orchestra hall, while at the same time seeing them in a basement or loft; mainly because their song verity is so wide. They can be soft for one song, and totally ear damaging on the next.

Their sound is bass less, adding another significant challenge. Many bands have approached the no bass task; however, Zs takes it into a new level. Bass is no longer necessary.

As you might have guessed, Zs may not be for everyone, but it is certainly meant for any musician to hear. *Arms* is an incredible display of musician ship, and a incredible taste of the direction music is getting its mucky hands into. Where once power chords were the main focus of good music, now the technically is more than just showing off. It's an art yet to be explored by the masses.

Arms is one of the most unique and under appreciated albums of the year. If you are blessed with the chance to see them live or pick up their album, do it. It will be an experience of a lifetime, and one to never be forgotten.

<http://www.scenepointblank.com/reviews/1726>



Zs

Sunday, February 18, Rhinoceropropolis, 303-641-9809.

By [Jon Solomon](#)

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Like Eskimo, the Zs have a quirky playfulness about them that is confounding and amazing in equal measure. Part rock band and part chamber ensemble, with a whole lot in between, the Brooklyn-based act displays a frenetic dexterity that evokes a sense of controlled chaos -- like pistons pumping furiously, trying to break out of the engine block. The band, which issued its debut EP on Troubleman Unlimited's outsider-music series, recently appeared alongside Merzbow, Ikue Mori and Mark Feldman, among others, on the Tzadik tribute to experimental genius Earle Brown. The Zs' last few discs, however, including the hot-off-the-presses *Arms*, have all been released on the Planaria Records imprint. If that's too much to remember, just look for the group in the Z section. Shouldn't be too hard to find; after all, there aren't many artists filed under Z. Let's see, there's Zappa, Zorn, and...come to think of it, the Zs would fit nicely between both of those cats.

<http://www.westword.com/2007-02-15/music/zs/>



Zs:

Arms

[Planaria; 2007]

Rating: 7.8

Without paying close attention, it's easy to assume Brooklyn avant-chamber crew Zs spends *Arms* opener "B Is for Burning" playing the waiting game: Two saxes and a lone guitar peel through six minutes of revisionist phrasing, while lines double back over themselves, making only the tinniest alterations at each pass, merely filling two fixed points with errant squirts and wild squibs. Depending on taste, the defiant strains of "Burning" either hang in the air like a big ball of exhilaration or a knot of frustration. Complicating matters (for those on the fence, at least) is the tauntingly spare drumming of Ian Antonio, who supports the staccato playing with only the most reserved sort of aggression, letting a feigned backbeat or an oddly-placed tom flutter suggest an entire dimension to the song that only half-exists. Sure, for a few blissful seconds, Zs are a rock band. But anyone aching for 60 minutes of that stuff, or hoping to find out where those backbeats and tom flutters might, you know, go, oughta look elsewhere. After all, Zs offer no illusions of conventional rockness. They stare through reams and reams of sheet music when they play live, and, taken as a whole, *Arms* is a lot more ephedrine Earle Brown or Mark Feldman than, say, Mick Barr or Don Cab.

Remember: This is the kind of band that takes the buckshot vocal melody of "Nobody Wants to be Had" and commands its instruments to follow, tit for tat. In choral music, unison voicing spreads a single melody wide, creating a singular, massive voice. Here, Zs use unison to achieve the opposite effect, hammering identical (or rigidly contrapuntal) melodies out on strings, reeds, and skins, all delivered with a fervor that splinters and sharpens the phrases into razor-y points. Tracks like the 11-minute "I Can't Concentrate" aren't one massive voice-- they're a scary-sharp mouth of fangs.

But, counterintuitively, it's when the band reins things in that its at its most compelling. In the last minute of "Concentrate", Zs-as-rock-band hit their stride when the collection of stair-step sax passes suddenly turn into a squealing, skronking Luttenbacher jam, complemented by the album's only conventional drum beat. Then Antonio's rolling tom figures extend Charlie Looker's guitar part underneath the hissing brass, and usher in the record's quietly rewarding homestretch. There, the bubbling brass micro-rhythms of "Except When You Don't Because Sometimes You Won't" resemble the lassoed moments of Storm and Stress, before uneventfully disappearing into the wind chimes of "Z Is for Zone". It's this smartly placed reserve, a beautifully smooth valley after a harsh peak, that makes a decent case for *Arms*.

- Robbie Mackey, January 25, 2008

http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/48081-arms