

# Report: San Diego Experimental Gtr Show 2011

*Duct-tape, jingle*

*bells, lit sparklers and H-bomb metronomes: just another night on the town in San Diego, at the Soda Bar, on Jan. 22.*

Text and photos by Mary Leary

Stools are dragged toward the stage. People sit on the floor or stand, waiting for the finale. Intermittent guffaws and grins greet the contraption M.J. Stevens balances on one knee: in a former life it was an ordinary acoustic guitar. Now a waterfall of strings cascades and spikes down and out. A cymbal covers the hole. Jingle bells are attached beneath the bridge. Stevens applies a metal brush, a screwdriver, the bells, and even his fingers. Gradually League of Assholes guitarists Esteban Flores, Marcelo Radulovich and Peter Graves add echoes, peels, and drones. When Stevens likes the scratches, squeaks, or unidentifiable effects he's producing, he repeats the technique unto a cathartic and/or absurdist state as some of us crack up or yell approval. (League of Assholes pictured below.)

It's the second year Sam Lopez, aka Zsa Zsa Gabor, has put this monster together. Profuse publicity and promotion have garnered more bodies than I've ever seen in San Diego for any sort of "experimental" show. So many people are clustered near the stage, documenting (three filmmakers and a ton of photographers, along with lots of folks manipulating smart phones), and

there's such a crush as performers shift between presentations that The Marx Brothers' famous stateroom scene (*A Night at the Opera*) springs to mind several times.

With instrument, device, and set-up shifts beyond those normally attending a multi-performer night, it could have been a mess. With a few awkwardly long gaps, things run about as smoothly as can be expected in such a small venue (Soda Bar's official capacity, including the side devoted to drinking and pool playing, is 230), with sufficient retention of audience interest – even a few drunks wander curiously over from the bar side to the performance area.

What could have presented as a testosterone-charged experimental smackdown turns out to be a thoughtful, well-ordered bouquet of talent. Back from a Tennessee sojourn, Abel Ashes (above) has grown beyond efforts inspired by Frank Zappa or Captain Beefheart and occasional, purely original genius. Tonight he emits spontaneous, rather Asian motifs and slides a broken wine glass along his frets before emitting brilliant poetry: his best pieces parse music with words. His finale is "H-Bomb Metronome":

"Vibrating paper funnels project past molecular spasms into the stagnant air as one thousand decibel imperial gongs announce each second like an H-bomb metronome in retarded lament..."

Per the plan on his blog, Randy Chiurazzi (above, and at top) “create(s) multi-timbral sound clusters by moving an amplified guitar over various string-exciting objects adhered to” a white coverall. Chiurazzi provides the evening’s most accessible conceptual sequence with “Corporate Malfeasance,” Guitarbage Can,” and “Everyone is a gooey dessert for something in the universe.”

Also known as Riververb, Frank Melendez (above) launches his segment by tossing several lit sparklers in a can, then uses one of his self-fabricated (often from oil drums, sheet metal, titanium gaskets, and/or tension springs) guitars to throw a wall of impermeable sound behind the sparks and sulfur. The Locust’s Bobby Bray (below) waxes euphoric over his merging of free-share programs, then throws down an impressive set culminating with him stepping on and off several guitar pedals.

Best known for his role in Black Heart Procession, Pall Jenkins (below) performs solo. It’s the evening’s most cathartic interlude, reminding me of both Rhys Chatham and Pink Floyd circa “Set Your Controls for the Heart of the Sun” with a simultaneously soothing and exciting repetition. Revealing the nuances in the depths of minimalism; it’s a sort of “Louie Louie” for anti-capitalist intelligentsia.