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SUBTROPICS: UNIQUE EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC FEST RETURNS FOR A 24TH EDITION
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Photo: AlbaTriana 'Microcosmos'

WRITTEN BY: GEORGE FISHMAN (/OUR-WRITERS/GEORGE-FISHMAN)**ARTICLE RATING**

Gustavo Matamoros' beard has gone gray, but his passionate promotion of listening as a way of engaging the world remains fresh. Whether bats in the Everglades, shrimp in Biscayne Bay or the normally inaudible resonances of a bronze sculpture, Matamoros records these kinds of sounds, then combines and transforms them into unique musical compositions. Acute curiosity about how we perceive the world through our ears also underlies his role as impresario.

Since arriving in Miami in 1967, Caracas-born Matamoros has initiated a range of public performance programs to showcase the adventurous work of colleagues, local and far-flung. Best known is Subtropics Festival for Experimental Music, now beginning its 24th edition.

The three-week festival offers a unique mix of conceptually based music, sound art installations and freely improvised music from these genre's most advanced practitioners, explained Matamoros. The program also features a series of films by Charles Recher, a respected colleague and frequent collaborator who died in January.

"LISTEN," a sound installation produced in partnership with HistoryMiami Museum exhibition designer Freddy Jouwayed, opens the festival on July 5 in ArtCenter/South Florida's Project 924 gallery on Lincoln Road. It pays homage to the original Listening Gallery at the ArtCenter's flagship home sold several years ago, that surreptitiously presented nine original sound art compositions by multiple composers through speakers mounted under the Center's storefront awnings along Lincoln Road. This re-interpretation "is a chance to experience these pieces in a more contemplative environment," Matamoros said. Jouwayed has created concentric rings of colorful translucent walls that surround a central listening chamber. His intervention filters the bright window walls of the gallery space, leaving a circular array of speakers visible, but shielded.

Nearby, in Studio #209, Colombian-born Alba Triana will unveil her sound sculpture, "Microcosmos," which remains on view through September 3. In this new piece, combining the sensibilities of a poet and scientist, she explores the fundamental properties of sound and light waves in a mounted brass cymbal. "Here is a musical instrument," she says, "but nobody plays the instrument." Instead, she activates it via electronic signals. The generated vibrations, intuitively programmed as an elegant eight-minute looping composition, are audible - and simultaneously visible as a shimmering "aura" around the disc.

Hands-on (or ears-on) workshops, led by prominent scholar-experimenters in sound art, Jennie Gottschalk and Christoph Cox, will guide participants in focusing on the sound environment and then teach them practical strategies for collecting sound and creating their own pieces. Many works of sound art explore the ambiguous boundaries between private and public, interior and exterior spaces, noise and music.

The 45-seat, acoustically balanced Audiotheque space in the 924 building serves as a sound art lab and cozy presentation venue for Subtropics concerts and follow-up discussions. Live performances will include works by internationally known Olivia Block, John Driscoll, Richard Garet, Barbara Held and Matamoros himself. They range from multilayered compositions, including works by guests from Spain's Association of Electro-acoustic Music, to extravagant improvisations by solo saxophonist Jack Wright, who will also lead a workshop.

Veteran percussionist/band leader and martial-arts aficionado, Abbey Rader, delivers a classic melding of jazz arrangements with spontaneous responses by ensemble members to the spirit of the moment.

John Driscoll's kinetic DIY instruments combine sophisticated miniature electronics with household odds and ends. Joysticks and other devices allow the performer to whimsically tweak various programmed tones, warbling feedback and other sounds.

Olivia Block's immersive sonic installations derive from her processing of sampled radio broadcasts, fragments of found microcassette tapes and instrumental music. She composes these elements to create sound experiences, customized to specific performance spaces, such as Audiotheque.