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## Looking Beyond a Milestone, for Some More Cans to Bang

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By Steve Smith



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Bang on a Can's founding members are David Lang, left, Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon.

CHANGE has run rampant in the East Village during the last few decades, with curvilinear high-rises now dotting an urban landscape that once seemed flatter and more human scaled. But at B&H Dairy, a cheery lunch nook on Second Avenue just south of St. Marks Place, you could imagine that time had stood still. The service was friendly, the fare simple and hardy.

Tucked in around the sole table for four one recent morning, the composers [Michael Gordon](#), [David Lang](#) and [Julia Wolfe](#) mused over the changes that had transformed the neighborhood since they had sat around the same table 25 years earlier, plotting revolution. As the founders

of [Bang on a Can](#), an industrious, influential collective, the three whiled away many an hour over scrambled eggs and kasha, forging an agenda that would help reshape the new-music scene in New York.

A quarter-century later their impact has been profound and pervasive. The current universe of do-it-yourself concert series, genre-flouting festivals, composer-owned record labels and amplified, electric-guitar-driven compositional idioms would probably not exist without their pioneering example. The Bang on a Can Marathon, the organization's sprawling, exuberant annual mixtape love letter to its many admirers, has been widely emulated, for better and for worse.

Bang on a Can has celebrated its milestone anniversary in various ways this season, including national and international concerts by its premier ensemble, the Bang on a Can All-Stars. A two-CD album, "Big Beautiful Dark and Scary," came out in February on Cantaloupe Music, the collective's house label; before its official release the label gave away digital downloads to anyone who had posted a Bang on a Can memory on its [Web site](#). And the organization's younger performing group, the avant-garde marching band Asphalt Orchestra, has taken up newly-minted repertory.

The festive season reaches its peak with three coming events. Foremost is a characteristically ambitious concert featuring the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the Asphalt Orchestra and Gamelan Galak Tika (run by the clarinetist and composer Evan Ziporyn, a longtime collaborator) next Saturday at Alice Tully Hall. Staging the concert there, Mr. Gordon said, was "fitting karma," since Jane Moss, the vice president for programming at Lincoln Center, was an early supporter.

The admiration is mutual. "For those of us who were concerned about the new-music scene in New York 25 years ago it is unrecognizable to me now in terms of the quantity of new-music activity that's going on," Ms. Moss said in a telephone interview, acknowledging the rise of indie-classical ensembles and alternative performance spaces.

"The new-music scene in New York is in an incredibly vital, interesting era," she added. "And I think Bang on a Can absolutely can take credit for that, because everybody needs models."

A benefit concert follows on May 1 at City Winery, and the Bang on a Can Marathon will be held in the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center on June 17. For many organizations of similar status and longevity, the events might present an opportunity to assess past victories.

Instead, the Lincoln Center concert includes nine new, thematically linked pieces for the All-Stars and a first-time collaboration between the Asphalt Orchestra and Tatsuya Yoshida, the drummer and driving force behind the long-running Japanese prog-rock band [Ruins](#).

"We're always concerned about looking on ahead," Mr. Lang said. "We're not particularly nostalgic people."

The three shrugged off a proposed stroll past the places where they used to work and play, apart from a visit to the Connelly Theater, formerly the RAPP Arts Center, an early outpost that Bang on a Can had to leave in 1991. "I think we've all seen Manhattan," Mr. Gordon said, chuckling dryly.

Still, the Bang on a Can founders eagerly reflected over what had lured three young, ambitious Yale graduates to the East Village during the early 1980s. "This area was the hot arts center for the

Pyramid Club and punk bands and CBGB,” Mr. Gordon said. “Philip Glass lives two blocks down, and we used to see Allen Ginsberg walking around the neighborhood.”

A proliferation of Lower East Side art galleries meant that concert space could be negotiated cheaply. “We started out at Exit Art gallery, and did one marathon there,” Mr. Gordon said. “Even then, in 1987, Broadway and Prince was pretty funky.” From there the marathon migrated through a series of alternative spaces, including the RAPP Arts Center and La MaMa E.T.C. Presenting music in places where it was not usually encountered, Mr. Lang asserted, also freed Bang on a Can from the historical and cultural contexts intrinsic to conventional institutions like Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

Naming their fledgling organization after an offhand remark by Ms. Wolfe (“a bunch of composers banging on cans”), the three composers handled all the labor for their presentations, personally: typing and copying fliers, selling beer, cleaning bathrooms, paying musicians. Rather than maintaining an ivory-tower distance and waiting for opportunity to knock, or not, Bang on a Can rolled up its collective sleeves, compelled by urges its founders deemed utopian.

“Our teachers told us that nobody likes this music, no one wants to hear it, and no one is interested,” Mr. Gordon said. “And when we started doing this, those first two, three, four years, it was amazing. People were showing up, they were having a great time, and the performers were going through the roof. It was like everyone was waiting to say, ‘Hey, we want to listen to this.’ ”

That suspicion has since been confirmed by Bang on a Can’s steady growth, from a scrappy upstart that produced its [first marathon](#) for around \$10,000 and sold 400 tickets, to a respected institution that budgeted more than \$1 million for last year’s event, a free performance that attracted 5,000 audience members.

Beyond its success at home, for 15 years the organization has maintained the Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival at Mass MoCA, in North Adams, Mass., a seasonal institute through which dozens of artists now prominent have passed. In [OneBeat](#), a new initiative announced in January, Bang on a Can works with the State Department to foster international diplomacy through artistic collaboration.

Still, it’s ever onward. “There’s a huge amount that’s left to be done,” Mr. Lang said. “Until every single person on the planet knows and loves a contemporary composer, our job will not be finished.”