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MUSIC REVIEW

Budd leaves with an evocative swan song

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Special to The Times

Extra layers of poignancy are bound to grace a performance announced as a veteran musician's swan song, and that was the case with celebrated ambient-minimalist musician Harold Budd's evocative concert at the REDCAT theater Saturday.

Whether the disappearance is real or just a Sinatra-esque feint remains to be seen.

The bittersweet situation is compounded when the retiree is a willfully mysterious character, musically and personally. He has gone missing from the local scene for long stretches, making each Budd sighting something special.

But a full house showed its high regard for Budd's hypnotic, spacious, more-with-less music, a palette that has won him favor in avant-pop circles as much as the established new music scene.

A year ago, Budd showed up in a rare club performance at Largo, mostly on solo piano and with a cameo by producer-pedal steel guitarist Daniel Lanois. The REDCAT evening was a more elaborate affair, presented by a new music organization, the Society for the Activation of Social Space Through Art and Sound. A cast of many musicians performed, including a string quartet and longtime minimalist ally Jon Gibson, but the mood of the evening was prevaillingly intimate and meditative, keyed by Budd's uniquely painterly way with music, chords and freeze-frame emotionality.

In aptly contemplative yet conceptually quirky Budd fashion, the evening opened with a simple gong piece, 1970's "Lirio," not with a bang but an elongated drone, triggered by Alex Cline's soft mallets.

The string quartet, amplified and bathed in reverb, played recent fragmented writings that Budd hadn't originally intended as concert pieces, but which worked beautifully as such. The brevity of the miniatures energizes them, while they typify Budd's distinctive flair for cooking up glassy melancholy.

By contrast, guitarist Clive Wright's modal noodling, over prerecorded loops, started nowhere and continued in that direction.

After intermission, Gibson, also a longtime ally of Philip Glass, played bass flute and soprano sax against Budd's spare broken chords and skeletal arpeggios on piano, in the almost-jazz piece "Islander with A J is Jill Sander."

Left to his own devices, technological and poetic, Budd's solo section at the end proved to be the concert's pinnacle. He led us through pieces using prerecorded electronic parts and a snatch of poetry recited in his soft but compelling voice (like his music). It boiled down to just Budd and his piano, working the desolate spaces and ringing tones and chords he so eloquently paints music with.