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## Art review: Los Angeles Free Music Society at the Box

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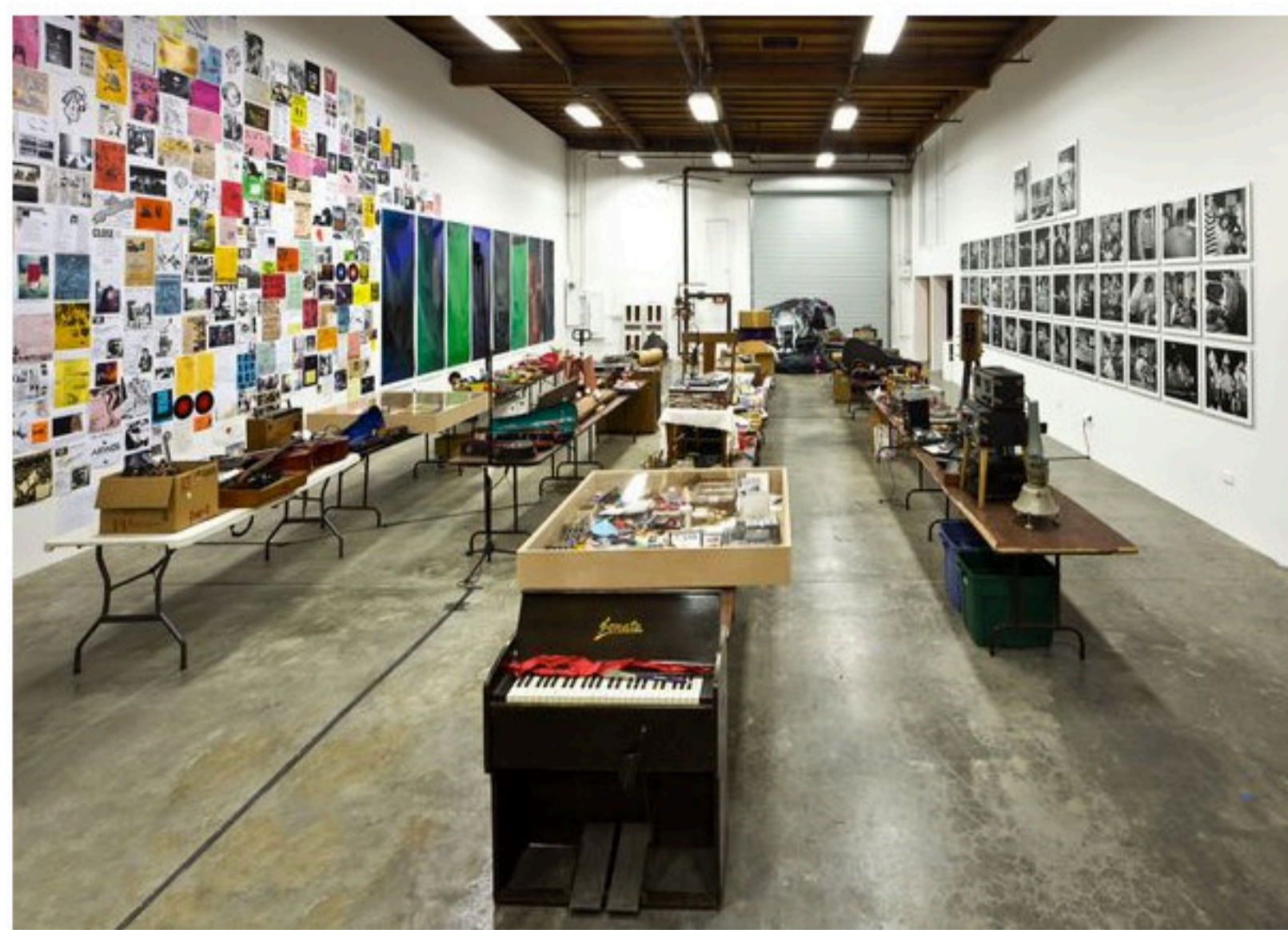


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Walking into "Beneath the Valley of the Lowest Form of Music," an ebullient survey of art, ephemera and artifacts charting the 30-year history of the Los Angeles Free Music Society, is like walking into the garage of a cool, eccentric uncle. In the cavernous main space of the Box's new Traction Avenue location, one wall is plastered floor to the ceiling with concert posters advertising the many bands affiliated with this loose collective of experimental musicians (Le Forte Four, Doo-Dooettes, Smegma, Extended Organs and Airway, among others).

On another wall, an immense grid of black and white photographs introduces viewers to the musicians themselves: a gaggle of gangly, often goofy young men (and the occasional woman) — a dozen or so in the core group, many more, it would seem, in the extended circle — who came together in the pre-punk days of the early 1970s to explore the outer reaches of rock, using instruments, electronics and just about anything else they could find.

Filling the room are several long rows of tables loaded with stuff: scores of instruments (some real, some toy, some roughly improvised from other materials), speakers, amps, aged recording equipment, record players, video monitors, records and cassette tapes, masks, a pair of mannequins, various items of hardware, shoes, bottles, a shopping cart and an electric toothbrush, among other things.

From time to time — and quite jarringly the first time — one or another of these piles, triggered by a motion sensor, springs to life: a pair of record players rigged with tinker toys begins to spin, emitting a jarring, discordant wail; a portable fan nestled among dozens of empty glass bottles in the shopping cart flips on and begins to blow against them, producing a lovely, crystalline rattle. It's a nice touch, one that animates what might otherwise read as an inert, anthropological collection of artifacts, underscoring the capacity of the society's DIY ethos to transform what looks for all the world like a shabby garage sale into a teeming pool of potential sound.

The music itself, which can be heard on recordings and videos planted throughout the gallery (several live concerts were held earlier in the run of the show), is sure to strike many as an acquired taste. While the character varies from band to band, the general tenor is droning, grinding, non-melodic — an interrogation, in some sense, of the nature of noise.

What is perhaps most striking about the exhibition itself is the glimpse it offers of the role of the visual arts in the development of that sound, whether in the form of crossover individuals like Paul McCarthy and the late Mike Kelley (both were both involved in the society's bands) or the wonderfully energetic and inventive visuals gracing album covers, posters and other ephemera. Even their concerts, judging from early photographs featuring boxy, handmade instruments and whimsical costumes, resembled sculptural installations.

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-- Holly Myers

**The Box**, 805 Traction Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 625-1747, through Feb. 25. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. [www.theboxla.com](http://www.theboxla.com)

Above: "Beneath the Valley of the Lowest Form of Music" installation at The Box. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen