

Nomads no more

Southend Musicworks finds a home on Wabash

By John Litweiler

At last, the nomads have found a home. Southend Musicworks, the self-styled "nomads of modern music," after 15 months of wandering from oasis to oasis, are pitching their tents at 1313 S. Wabash Ave.

Southend's spring concert series begins this weekend, during which American trumpeter Dennis Gonzalez, exiled South African drummer Louis Moholo, and others will play Friday and Saturday.

Sunday will be a Bill Smith festival, featuring the Canadian clarinetist playing during the day with a changing cast of musicians and at night showing his movie, "Imagine the Sound," which won a Hugo Award at the 1981 Chicago Film Festival.

Clearly, Southend's dedication to free improvisation, contemporary classical music and "outside" jazz hasn't diminished during its wanderings. In the organization's three years of existence, it has been a major force in Chicago music and an important stop on the international underground music circuit. Southend's status is all the more remarkable considering its noncommercial orientation.

"We're an all-volunteer organization of about 20 people," said Leo Krumpholz, who books the music for Southend Musicworks. "We make decisions by consensus, and people are not afraid to voice dissenting opinions."

"We've turned the commercial equation upside down. We put the music foremost, then we do everything we can to get somebody to come see it."

Why have the Southend volunteers persisted through their nomadic years? As one of them, Aaron Gurner, said: "I really enjoy finding something I haven't heard before that grabs me emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, something that reflects the creative spirit of man. I remember a quote from Ornette Coleman, that in his music he tries to inspire people to be creative in whatever they do with their lives. That's what I look for."

The organization began in embryo as long ago as 1985. Volunteer Davida Fineman recalls: "When I started going to concerts in Chicago, I kept running into the same people, and we got to know each other. It got to the stage where whoever got to the concert first would save seats for the others. We got to complaining that a lot of the music we wanted to hear wasn't coming here."

The solution? Produce music themselves. Because some of the



Trumpeter Dennis Gonzalez will be among the performers when Southend Musicworks begins its concert series Friday.

friends were University of Chicago students, they formed a campus organization and presented a solo concert by the brilliant alto saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell. A campus Outrageous Music Festival followed; then the group helped start the Links Hall concerts on the North Side. Finally, in 1987, came the formation of Southend Musicworks.

The group offered important concerts by minimalist composer Terry Riley, jazz artists such as Mal Waldron, Sonny Sharrock and the String Trio of New York, leading European improvisers such as the Schlippenbach Trio and Peter Brotzmann, and a mini-festival of Chicago musicians.

But the nomads were without a home. The concerts were staged at the Fine Arts Building, art galleries, Columbia College, a near-Loop loft, and a restaurant, The Elbo Room. Some events were held in conjunction with the Jazz Institute of Chicago.

Southend Musicworks has made cultural history several times. "When the classical music community in Chicago wasn't interested in the Arditti String Quartet, we put our necks on the chopping block and brought them here," Fineman said. "Since then, the Arditti has come back to play at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University and Ravinia."

Last year, while Czechoslova-

kia was still under Communist Party control, Southend presented the Czech rock band Plastic People of the Universe. "They'd been outlawed over there," Krumpholz said. "When I mentioned that they'd recorded an album in the playwright Vaclav Havel's barn, everybody said, 'Vaclav who?'" Havel, of course, is now the non-Communist president of Czechoslovakia.

"We'd like to break the wall down—the wall that divides Chicago into two cities," Krumpholz said. "We'd like to serve South Side and North Side audiences equally. Well, all roads lead to downtown. We've got a lease here, so this will be a permanent, central location where we'll be able to achieve our goals."

Krumpholz hopes visitors to the Southend Musicworks location will mix and match their musical tastes.

"Basically, listeners are separated, and people identify with one particular genre," he said. "Well, rock fans will come to hear Fred Frith, for instance, or jazz fans will come to hear Steve Lacy or the Ritual Trio, and we encourage them to find something else on the program that piques their interest."

Said Fineman: "Particularly in a city like Chicago, where there is so much national, racial and intellectual separation, I see part of our mission as being, in a small way, to break down those walls."