

Philadelphia Laptop Battle 2

Silk City, Philadelphia
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Fidget

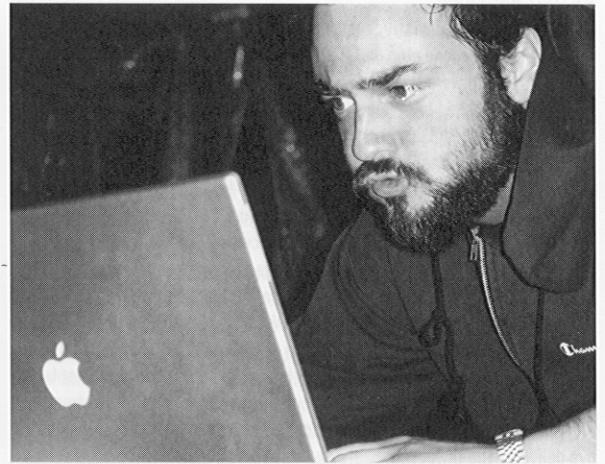
Following up on the success of Philadelphia's first laptop competition in February, organizer and promoter Gair Marking (of Seclusiasis and Dev79 fame) put together 10 contestants for a second go at eternal fame and fortune, or at least a chance at winning generous hardware, software, and music prize packages from event sponsors M-Audio, Ableton, Propellerheads, and the local Zenopolae label. Judges included Alex Welsh, who reached the third and final round of the first laptop contest, Adam Porter (as Botany 500), manager of Philadelphia's Cue Records, and—full disclosure—this writer, representing *Grooves*.

As in the first event, battle contestants are whittled down through a three-round process of attrition, leaving a sweaty, scarred victor at the top of the pile. We three judges scored each performance for overall song quality and its live vibe, and for how well or poorly the crowd reacted, tallying scores to see who would survive to entertain us in the subsequent round.

The first round opened with Vytear's manic, Squarepusher-like drillcore programming. Much like the extroverted winner of the February battle, Nintariman, Vytear's stuff was ballsy, bassy and full of crazed energy, and he easily made his way to the second round. Unfortunately, Starkey's slowly growing, soft introduction lost the crowd to some extent, even with the arrangement building a clicky, hypnotic cadence. Clayton the Chemist took awhile to get his set going with a taut, jazzy bass line, and DJ PE's tight rhythm-and-piano theme became slightly repetitive, losing the crowd.

Ill Cosby fared better with tight and bouncing sampling, while Erin Anderson took a stylistic left turn as Fidget, leaving behind the speedy rhythms of fellow contestants and playing a pad-heavy ambient set, at turns harsh and smooth. Enough of the crowd caught on to her distinctive vibe to get her past the opening round, and Bilwa's tasty dub-heavy beats also earned him passage to the next rotation. Variati's Autechre-like beats displayed a hard DSP edge, scratchy and minimal, but did not seem to connect as well with the audience as William Fields' huge opening beat sequences, which quickly grabbed everyone's attention and grew into a winning arrangement of lovely melodies and dry rhythms. Closing the first round, New York City's Lance Blisters nailed together an equally crowd-pleasing hyperactive drill n' bass set that carried him on.

by Alex Reynolds
photos by Alex Reynolds



Vytear

Bilwa opened the second round with massive, feedback-laden dub, its huge beats towering over the ears. Unfortunately it did not seem to vary much and the standing-room crowd did not follow the vibe fully. William Fields' noodling opening to his set twisted and morphed into a knob-twiddling exercise in Proem-flavored IDM that got everyone quickly hooked.

Fidget stepped in with more leftfield work: a beautiful soundscape that drew one into a hypnotic trance, even as its less energetic style left the head-nodders cold. But Vytear and Lance Blisters quickly took care of that, as Vytear opened with a hard-as-fuck set that somehow had two drunken gentlemen eventually do-se-do-ing in the front. Lance Blisters threw in some hardcore shit, interjecting distorted vocals with topical politics and a short feedback experiment. These last three performers had what it took to make it to the next round.

Of these three, Vytear closed the final round with what was seemingly a clear winner crowd-wise. With feverishly complex beats and melodies, his relentless and manic style lost live and crowd points only perhaps due to going on a bit too long. Lance Blisters' set was short and sweet, a DSP experiment layering Attorney General John Ashcroft's crooning into a head-banging drillcore session. Lots of energy there, but chaotic past the point possibly where listeners could follow along.

Some debate resulted over the final selection of Erin "Fidget" Anderson as this event's winner. But her unique, trance-inducing ambience was different enough to separate her from the rest of the night's frenetic, testosterone-heavy drillcore playlist. For a few brief, beautiful moments, a couple found a way to pull together in front of the stage for a casual, carefree, sensuous dance, a result that I think sums up what was special about Fidget's set.

Scoring creative work can be exceedingly difficult when you only have a few minutes to hear someone play, the crowd's fickleness aside. Nonetheless, all the musicians played with their heart on their sleeve and the crowd had a blast, and there is little more one can ask for than that. ■■