

NEW YORK GUITAR FESTIVAL

**Silent Films/  
Live Guitars/  
Justin Vernon**

Merkin Concert Hall

For the past four years, the New York Guitar Festival has given acclaimed guitarists the task of composing a live score to a series of silent films. It's a trickier exercise than it sounds. The temptation, as guitarist Marc Ribot observed last week, is to create a literal soundtrack – a twang for a punch, a cascading scale for a tumble down the stairs. But this method has a tendency to kill the joke. Better, Ribot said, to take the long view and create a mood.

Justin Vernon, the lead singer and songwriter for US indie band Bon Iver, might not have written a score before, but mood is his strength. *For Emma, Forever Ago* – acclaimed by many critics as an album of the year in 2008 – was written in a cabin in Wisconsin over four wintry months, a collection of songs that absorbed the uplifting peace of a

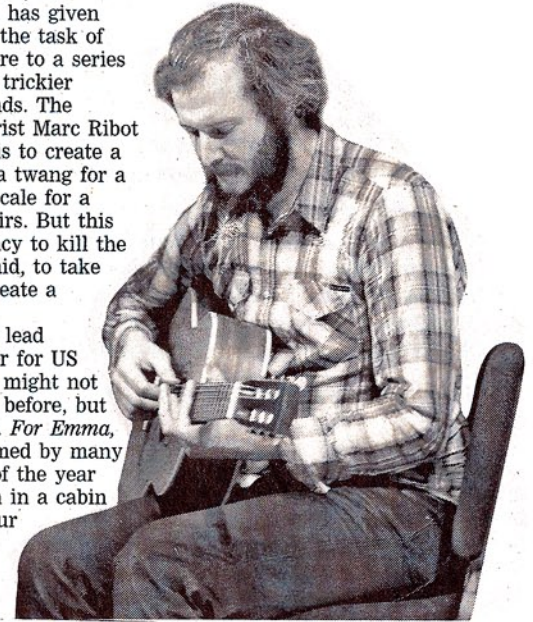
deserted landscape even as they dealt with a messy break-up. No surprise, then, that Vernon's take on two Chaplin shorts should interpret the films as more than mere slapstick.

Gazing at the cinema screen as if playing a video game on his guitar, Vernon – accompanied by his "guitar mentor" Chris Ronenau – first took on *Easy Street* (1917), a film set amid the poverty and domestic violence of the London slums. Their nostalgic, legato accompaniment allowed the serious commentary of the film to emerge, but Vernon's approach was also self-knowing; Chaplin's antics as a flat-footed policeman cut naughtily against the sentimentality of the music, elevating the comedian to new heights of silliness.

In *One a.m.* (1916), Chaplin returns home from a party, drunk. Vernon's score to the actor's acrobatic battle against malevolent props (slippery rugs, rotating tables, stuffed tigers) was an eerily beautiful wall of sound, repetitive as a drunken conversation, trilling with high notes like birdsong at dawn.

Without visuals, the piece might have brought to mind an epic journey – but instead we were given Chaplin's shaky trajectory up the stairs to bed, first via the bannister, then the hat stand, and finally armed with a hiker's stick, rope and backpack. As the throbbing guitars grew to a climax, the audience's guffaws became louder – and they only grew as the adventurer tumbled down to the bottom landing once again, this time rolled in the carpet, but still smoking his cigarette.

★★★★☆

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