

ARTFORUM

THE BEAT GOES ON

On Stephen Prina at the Museum of Modern Art



Stephen Prina, *Concerto for Modern, Movie, and Pop Music for 10 Instruments and Voice*, 2010. Performance view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2025. Photo: Maria Baranova.

[STEPHEN PRINA](#), Anita Pace, and Mike Kelley first staged *The Beat of the Traps* in 1992. I vividly remember the work's premiere at the Remise in Vienna. Now, more than three decades later, it has resurfaced at [New York's Museum of Modern Art](#) as part of “A Lick and a Promise,” a retrospective of Prina's performance work (through December 13). The performance, which was presented September 18, 20, and 21, unfolded as an intricate braid of choreography, music, spoken text, and rock mythology—both elegiac and euphoric, rigorously structured yet unpredictable.

Petzel

Before entering the auditorium, one came upon an internally illuminated clock just outside. Prina had programmed it to chime, every hour on the hour, selected hits from the 1993 *Billboard* charts, a sly reminder of how pop culture marks our lives even as it slips away. Prina has described the clock as “a monument to the ephemeral.”

The structure of *The Beat of the Traps* is modular, consisting of dance movements, spoken parts, drum duets, recordings of *Billboard*'s current number one songs, and live performances of the same. Prina, Pace, and Kelley arranged these in systematic permutations, sometimes in sync, sometimes not.

At MoMA, the performance opened in silence, with dancers Jon Baldwin and Freeda Electra moving to stop-and-start rhythms, setting a pulse that carried over to a call-and-response exchange between Prina and actor Abbott Alexander. Prina stood behind a lectern, reading a staccato litany, one word at a time, to which Alexander (*italics*) responded:

Bonzo,	<i>quiet cartoon pup</i>
Bath salts,	<i>can wired up</i>
Surrogate,	<i>crude snare drum</i>
Idolize,	<i>Moon the Loon</i>

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Half emcee, half leprechaun—and clad in what looked like a garish St. Patrick's Day costume with green sequined vest, bow tie, and bowler hat—Alexander delivered Kelley's fractured texts, stomping all the while to the still inaudible beat.

Then came the first of what would be six drum duets, all played by M. B. Gordy and Butch Norton, both of whom had participated in the original performances thirty-three years earlier. Drums are the throbbing heart of this work. This first section reprised Keith Moon's part from the Who's "Happy Jack," which Prina deliberately scored one beat out of sync to create a massive wall of sound, the acoustic equivalent of a phaser effect. Throughout the evening, doubling and displacement—symmetrical stage positions, mirrored drum kits, staggered rhythms—turned the performance back on itself.



Mike Kelley, Anita Pace, Stephen Prina, *Beat of the Traps*, 1992. Performance view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2025. M.B. Gordy, Jonathan "Butch" Norton, Jon Baldwin, Freeda Electra. Photo: Maria Baranova.

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From the outset, the theme of time was inescapable. In this work, Prina tasked himself with learning, arranging, and mastering the current number one songs in just three or four days, then performing them solo with guitar. Prina's renditions of the current hits "Golden" by HUNTR/X (from *KPop Demon Hunters*) and "Ordinary" by Alex Warren—in stark contrast to his deadpan 1991 Kris Kross cover—revealed a vulnerable, soulful voice that surpassed those on the hit recordings.

Pace's choreography, a stuttering deconstruction of ballet and modern dance, sometimes paralleled the music, sometimes worked in counterpoint, and sometimes functioned autonomously. By the finale, these movements built into a frenetic improvisational crescendo to match the drums' thunder. Asked afterward why, unlike the drummers, none of the original dancers appeared, Pace laughed, "They can no longer do those moves. Neither can I." Her reply underscored the work's confrontation with time and decay.

Memory and mortality hovered over the evening. The drummers invoked in Kelley's texts—Moon, John Bonham, Mitch Mitchell, Paul Whaley—are all long gone, as is Kelley, who was also a drummer. Their absence was palpable, a mute echo of the cacophony onstage. The gleeful odes to rock and its excesses now carried the weight of a memorial.

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And yet the work was neither somber nor ascetic. Alexander infused Kelley's words with dadaist humor and theatrical bravado. The drummers were virtuosic, the dancers precise yet exuberant, and Prina's pop covers shimmered with unexpected poignancy. The performance culminated as euphoric extravaganza, earning a prolonged standing ovation.

By treating dance, poetry, percussion, and pop music as modular components, Prina, Pace, and Kelley produced an evocatively temporal index—tied to the present by the *Billboard* charts, yet haunted by the past. Rigorous and cathartic, cerebral and visceral, the MoMA staging proved *The Beat of the Traps* to be an ongoing encounter with time, transience, and joy. Leaving the auditorium with my ears still ringing, I could not help feeling elated.

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