

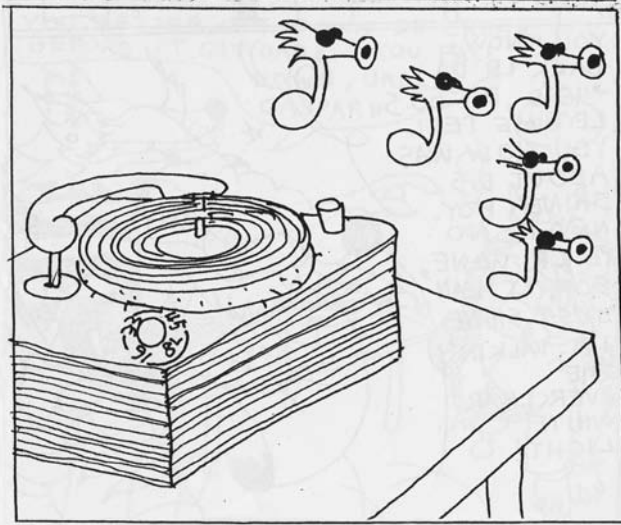


M I C R  
O G R  
O O V E

FORAYS  
INTO OTHER MUSIC  
**JOHN CORBETT**


M I C R O -  
G R O O V E







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G R O O V E



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IN MEMORY OF FRED ANDERSON ,  
ORNETTE COLEMAN , VON FREEMAN ,  
STEVE LACY , BERNIE MCGANN ,  
AND KOKO TAYLOR





I hate music, what is it worth?

Can't bring anyone back to this earth.

Filling the space between all of the notes,

But I've got nothing else, so I guess here we go.

- SUPERCHUNK, "Me and You and Jackie Mittoo"



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## PREFACE

### Tympanum of the Other Frog

The moon was a drip on a dark hood.

Dad hit the brakes as we drove up to the water's edge, grinding gravel, dust rising in the dusk air. The sound of the car silenced the nightlife, but only temporarily. Arms folded on the windowpane of the Ford LTD station wagon, we waited for the frogs to crank back up.

I was eight years old. My family lived up the street, in a suburb of Virginia Beach. Inlynnview Road bisected the larger waterway into two parts: a pond that opened out onto an even larger body of water, and a smaller pond lopped off on the other side, fed by a viaduct, surrounded by overhanging trees, a bit swampy with algae and lily pads, but with a clean and flowing water supply that kept it fertile, green, and full of critters. For a few years, this was my preferred playground.

Engine off, night on the horizon, my father and I awaited the first frog, a scout who would croak bravely into the abyss. A regular pulse, sometimes like the pluck of a tenor banjo. Very soon others would join, first a few, tentatively, then louder, then more, until the pond was transformed into an amphibian amphitheater. A cacophony of belches, a vortex of peeps, several species of itchy animals bellowing longingly into the night in hopes of finding a hookup, depositing eggs or sperm, then paddling or hopping off into the dark having accomplished the one-night stand, froggy style.

When the full chorus was singing, my father whispered to me that I should pick out one particular frog and try to listen only to it. It was more difficult than I expected, but I found that with some effort I could differentiate the sound of a specific animal—I suppose I recognized its voice—and isolate it from the others. Now, he said, *keeping that one in mind, try to hear another one at the same time.* Struggling, I did. But the rhythm of the first one was a bit faster than the other, so they kept coming together and then moving apart, cyclically, drawing me away from the first one. Croak, croak, croak, croak-croak, croak-croak,



croak-croak, croak, croak, croak. Listen to the new voice in relation to the first one, he said. I did, and the first frog became the base from which the second frog veered, like when the blinker in the car doesn't match the blinking of a street sign. OK, now if you can, switch them. This was even trickier, but when I managed, it was like a door opened up in my head. Suddenly, the second frog was the baseline, the original one was the variable. And right away, I could do this with any of the hundreds of frogs bleating in the dark.

My dad was teaching me about polyrhythms. Setting me up for Steve Reich and jazz. That's already pretty mind-blowing for an eight-year-old, but there was more. I couldn't put a name on it, but I also understood that he was showing me something deeper, a principle. If I was able, by shifting my focus, to change the rhythm I was hearing, then listening must be a relative activity. A listener has to make decisions about how to listen. It's not just a passive thing. And in order to do that, to put yourself into the right space to be able to make informed listening decisions, you have to pay attention.

During many nature trips, frogging or birding or fishing, my dad instilled a sense of this fundamental respect for paying attention, using eyes as well as ears. It probably saved my life a couple of times when I nearly stepped on poisonous snakes, noticing them just in time. If you don't pay attention, you don't notice the snakes. But attentiveness is a luxury in our lives; the focus is so often made for us, to optimize and economize our experience. I guess it's one of the pleasures of watching Orson Welles, his love of the long shot and deep focus, his avoidance of the close-up and the cutaway. There's plenty to notice in one of those shots, but you have to pay attention; nobody will point at it and say, "Hey, nimrod, look over here, this is the important thing."

Try this: go to a pond and look at the water. Stay there. Keep looking. Wait longer. Bored? Stay there. At some point, you'll start to notice things. Maybe a turtle's head will pop up, a dark area will turn out to be a lurking fish, you'll see the googly eyes and bulbous nose of a frog. They were there already. You hadn't noticed them. I did this once when I was in junior high, outside Philadelphia. There was a stream I'd been walking past regularly for a couple of years. I stared at a clump of leaves submerged against a rock in the bed of the stream. Zoned out in adolescent daze, but armed with my beastie attentiveness training, I was amazed to realize that the leaves were alive and were in truth a hellbender salamander. No doubt, that will be the only time I see one in the wild. Glad I noticed.

The trick to being attentive is one thing: still thyself. This is the ultimate message of the frog pond. Before you can become an active listener, before you can explore the tapestry of croaks, you have shut down all the stuff in your

head. Get over yourself. Forget all your fancy ideas, your elaborate plans. This recognition has an ironic component—you have to be receptive, all ears, in order to get to a place where you can choose how to hear. That's one of the most profound aspects of John Cage—in order to become a critical listener, his music often suggests, you have to dispense with your ego. If you are in the woods and all you have in your brain are thoughts and conversations and preconceptions, over that din you'll never notice anything new. Nothing will surprise you; you will only continuously confirm your suspicions.

Consider the time-honored cliché of the classic western—the observant Native American notices the broken twig, sniffs the dirt, says *he's been here*, the *ground is still warm*, locates the outlaw to the awe of the flat-footed honky posse. There's something to it. The world—natural or cultural, no matter—is there already, waiting to be observed. In order to do so, you have to be patient and humble and get yourself out of the way.

It's a different frog pond these days. The prevalence of electronic gadgets in our daily lives makes deep observation even more difficult; our attention is ruthlessly interrupted by other messages claiming greater importance. Those gadgets should become part of the landscape, something that we have to pay attention to, to place among the other sounds, so that we can hear them for what they are, and, in the long run, so that rather than reacting to them automatically, we can make decisions about how we hear them.

Imagine we're there in the dark, back on Inlynnview Road, froggies singing, and the cell phone rings. OK, no judgment, I'll let it ring, try to hear it in relation to the other sounds, see what it adds to the chorus. Perhaps I won't choose to defer all the others to the phone's tones, making it the baseline frog. I'll strip it of its singular urgency, neutralize it, just for a minute. It's a sound, no more or less, mingling with other sounds, not only frogs but toads too, trilling and chirping in the warm evening air.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has had four different introductions. In 1999, I began to assemble material for a new collection as a follow-up to my book *Extended Play* (1994). This period found me writing extensively for music magazines, contributing liner notes, and essaying periodically for academic publications. There seemed to be ample work to choose from, and the emergent document seemed to have a shape and substance complementary to the previous book. It began to feel like *Extended Play Volume 2*. I put the manuscript together, wrote an initial introduction, sent it off to the press, got positive feedback and a contract.

Then I put it aside.

At the time I wasn't sure why; now I know. It wasn't ready. It needed a scrupulous chopping. Moreover, something had started to shift and deepen for me. I had to give it more time, work more, build it up and take things out. Think of ceramicist Ken Price: layer upon layer, then the sanding down, accumulating in order to reveal what is underneath. About five years down the line, I revisited and reworked it, and out in the woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, I wrote a new introduction. Then I put it aside, again. This time, it was on the shelf for a shorter period; I went back to it again about two years later, but at that point, in the mid-oughts, I had embarked on a new, very time-intensive adventure opening an art gallery, and I once again put the collection, as well as its third intro, on ice.

Late in 2013, I opened up the manuscript again and found it newly exciting. This time, I was brutally honest, extracted many earlier parts that didn't make the cut, and added a batch of newer chapters including a series of writings linking music and visual art. On a writing retreat in southwest Wisconsin, I composed the final version of the introduction and put the pieces in a definitive order.

A book that takes fifteen years to assemble is inevitably indebted to many colleagues and associates. I would be hard-pressed to name (or remember)

all of them, but a number require acknowledgment. I've learned immensely from the guidance and insight of editors at several periodicals, especially Kiki Yablon, Philip Montoro, Jason Koransky, Ed Enright, and Aaron Cohen. Kevin Whitehead, who lived in Chicago for some time, was and continues to be a bright light from whom I have drawn as much illumination as possible. With the brilliant Lloyd Sachs, Whitehead and I hosted a radio program, *Writer's Bloc*, on WNUR, also very inspiring and informative for me; later the show added two more great journalists, Art Lange and Peter Kostakis. That rich environment contributed immensely to this endeavor. I miss the Lightning Round.

Fundamental appreciation goes to all the interview subjects represented in this volume. Several of the musicians and artists are now close friends, and for their comradeship, constancy, and trust, as well as the way they challenge me, I thank Peter Brötzmann, David Grubbs, Joe McPhee, Albert Oehlen, and Christopher Wool. Mats Gustafsson is the best buddy a vinyl freak could want (shhh, be very quiet!), an open ear whenever needed. Several artist-friends not in the book were deeply inspiring to its completion: Josiah McElheny, Phil Hanson, and Charline von Heyl. For twenty years of return visits to his basement, where I have learned so much, I bow to my friend Milford Graves. Over the course of a decade starting in the '90s, I was fortunate to work closely with Ken Vandermark, and I thank him for many insights into the stressful world of a working musician. In the same period, I benefited greatly from time spent with Bruno Johnson of Okka Disk records. I wish we saw more of one another these days; in spite of family and entrepreneurship, he too has felt the irresistible gravitational pull of the music. My *alte freund* Kurt Kellison, cofounder of the Unheard Music Series, is another key inspiration for *Microgroove*. Many colleagues and pals have aided me directly or indirectly, including Bruce Finkleman, Pete Toalson, Scott Black, Malachi Ritscher, Lou Mallozzi, Anthony Elms, Susanne Ghez, Hamza Walker, Susannah Ribstein, Brian Ashby, Ben Chaffee, Julia Hendrickson, Emily Letourneau, Nicole Sachs, Judith Kirshner, Ihno van Hassalt, Mitch Cocanig, Mike Reed, Dave Rempis, Josh Berman, Michael Orlove, Frank Alkyer, Rachel Weiss, Sheryl Ridenour, Adam Abraham, Kate Dumbleton, Bob Snyder, Pam Wojcik, Rick Wojcik, Scott Nielsen, and Leslie Buchbinder. Props to my wonderful and supportive extended family: James, Joyce, Jack, and Jennifer Corbett; Jayne Hyland; and Tim-Bob Fitzgerald. Most recently, I have been engaged most pleasurably working alongside Jim Dempsey, the master of analogy, whose style and humor are undergirded by his sensitivity and intelligence.

For waiting it out with such supportive good spirit, I thank my editor at Duke, Ken Wissoker. My dear amigos Katie Kahn and John Sparagana have

given me invaluable feedback on the manuscript. They are as responsive and spontaneous as creative souls could be, and they helped nudge me to excavate the book. Dinners with them and Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish are a staple measure of sanity in an unclear time. Likewise, trips to Grafton, Wisconsin, to visit Gina Litherland and Hal Rammel, trusted sources of counsel and inspiration. Most of all, my better half and editorial conscience, Terri Kapsalis, who patiently endured abandoned titles, discarded chapters, and all four introductions—the world is falling down, hold my hand.



## INTRODUCTION

Everything starts as an encounter.

As abstract as thinking and writing and talking about music can be, it all begins with something concrete, material. The bump of Pusha T's *My Name Is My Name* as its soundwaves enter my aural canal and meet my eardrum. The surprise of a fateful afternoon jaunt to a neighborhood record store on which I happen upon Michael Hurley's *Blue Navigator*, marveling at the Hurley-penned comics on its jacket. The rush of picking up Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink from the airport in my vw bug—long, tall Han, feet on the dashboard, pummeling them with a stray drumstick. Encounters with sounds, objects, people.

The sense of encounter, a basic exchange that music engenders as a social activity, is reflected in conversation, dialogue, argument. Think of the notion of a “band,” “ensemble,” or “group”—social convergence is encoded into the very words we use for fundamental musical units. I'm sure this is why I remain committed to the question-and-answer format in much of my music writing. Sometimes in an encounter you hit a vein, other times it yields only a nugget, a shard, a precious memory perhaps too small to build around. In a Parisian flea market, casual discussion with the vendor, and suddenly a box of white label test-pressing 1970s African singles appears. A ride across Boston interviewing Ornette Coleman from the backseat of someone else's car in which he shares a magical experience with Thelonious Monk. Thai food one-on-one with Cecil Taylor talking about his favorite divas.

Now and then, an encounter backfires. In 1986, I arranged an interview with On-U Sound guru Adrian Sherwood. His work seemed to me to be the most advanced production around; I loved how he manipulated voices, layered sounds, truncated melodies, toyed with dynamics, and brought an aggressive dada-esque sensibility into post-dub mixology. We met at a café during a lunch break from my day job. He invited two guests: singer Mark Stewart and drummer Keith LeBlanc. I was starstruck and delighted. LeBlanc was the



legendary force behind the Sugar Hill Gang, and then later was Sherwood's go-to for all things nonreggae. Stewart's were the most explosive and exciting of Sherwood-produced efforts, his William Burroughs-like vocal paranoia infused into dance music defaced by an IED. More important, Stewart had been the singer in the Pop Group, the British post-punk band that, truth be told, had introduced me to freely improvised music; improviser Tristan Honsinger ornamented their 1979 single "We Are All Prostitutes" with trademark cello and mumbling. Gateway drug for this lifelong user.

We all sat down for a coffee. I broke out the tape recorder and kicked off with a question about the politics of production. Sherwood knitted his brow and explained that he didn't prescribe politics to the artists he produced, they could say anything they wanted. Stewart and LeBlanc stared at me. I made another pass at the idea, but Sherwood was already put off. "Man, you gotta come see these sneakers I found down the street," exclaimed LeBlanc to anyone who would listen. "They're totally silver and white!" Stewart chimed in that he wanted to make sure to hit all the thrift stores, that American secondhand overcoats were not to be believed. "C'mon!" they both said, and leapt up, ending the interview before it had started. I went to see the sneakers, just out of curiosity. Stewart sought his coats alone. That night, Mark Stewart + Maffia played an incantatory set, the singer's snarled rant dropping in and out intermittently while LeBlanc and Doug Wimbush laid down an irresistible g-force beat.

• • •

Out of hundreds of interviews, a few others have gone south. Aborted diner lunch with Mayo Thompson where the conversation looped unnaturally—I think he was just messing with me. A phone interview with organist Jimmy Smith that turned from belligerent into buddy-buddy as soon as I mentioned being a fan of barbeque—I swear to the god of soul-jazz. As in its precursor, *Extended Play*, the bulk of *Microgroove* is predicated on the encounter. In *Microgroove*, there are a greater number of interviews, fewer academic essays. That, in part, reflects shifts in my own orientation, a move away from an investment in the language of poststructuralism coupled with a long engagement with the production of CDs and the presentation of live music. Having explored the theory/practice divide, I guess I've come up on the practice side. Or maybe the service side.

The twenty years since *Extended Play* are evenly split between music and visual art. I had started organizing concerts in 1985, but in the period between 1996 and 2005, it was my primary occupation (never my main source of income). For a decade I presented live music, nearly a thousand concerts

altogether: a weekly series and annual festival (co-organized with saxophonist Ken Vandermark) at the Empty Bottle, Chicago; a yearlong stint as artistic director of the Berlin Jazzfest; lots of independent production. At the same time, with Kurt Kellison of Atavistic Records, I inaugurated the Unheard Music Series, releasing around seventy CDs of creative music, as we put it in an early press sheet, “scouring the dustbin of history.”

Then, in 2004, Jim Dempsey and I opened an art gallery together, a move that confounded some of my musical colleagues but one that grew directly and organically out of the work I’d been doing in music. In 2000, with Terri Kapsalis, I became involved in saving a large cache of Sun Ra artifacts from oblivion, eventually donated to the University of Chicago Library and Experimental Sound Studio’s Creative Audio Archive. I’m still deeply engaged with those materials, and, along with a concurrent stint as chair of Exhibition Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I think this provided the natural transition from live music to visual art. At Corbett vs. Dempsey we still periodically present live music in the gallery, and now we have a record label; I’ve organized musical programs at the Guggenheim in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago, curated exhibitions of Brötzmann’s artwork and Sun Ra’s archive. These worlds turn out to be more connected than you’d think. And fronting the music you love is a hard habit to shake.

For many years, I subscribed to Laura Mulvey’s statement of intent, “the destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon,” all along feeling that there was an underlying ellipsis in this profound dictum. To disrupt the pleasurable consumption of mainstream narrative cinema, to interrogate its secret methods, to break the comfort zone of continuity—these activities felt right, they seemed so good. But there’s the rub: the destruction of one kind of pleasure often creates another kind of pleasure. The joy of creative critique. The glee of deconstruction. Much of the music I was interested in was already engaged with something like that kind of interrogative practice. I recall my first conversation with guitarist Derek Bailey, in which he told me that he couldn’t imagine any reason that a person would come hear him play unless they were attracted to the sound of what he did. Wow, I thought, you’ve got to be pretty deep down the rabbit hole to find that sound *attractive*. To say it’s an acquired taste is perhaps wrong. I think it’s music that demands a different mode of listening, and when heard attentively, seriously, and critically, it reveals a whole system of pleasures, some predicated on the destruction of conventional musical norms, some operating in their own autonomous zone of attractions.

There are still several essays rooted in poststructuralism and deconstruction in *Microgroove*. More than providing specific references or terminology,

at a formative stage in development an immersion in poststructuralist and critical theory and cultural studies helped shape my thinking. I feel that it actually changed neural pathways. One does not need to write the word “text” to approach an object of study with circumspection. In Deleuze’s widely cited phrase, theory has given me a tool kit. Then again, so has dub reggae and freely improvised music. So has hip-hop, which I rarely write about, and Greek rembetika. And jazz. And vinyl. And Christopher Wool’s paintings. These are all lenses, kits, to me equally valuable. If theory is a source, bury the source. Let it grow anew.

• • •

In the introduction to *Extended Play*, I waxed lyrical about the radical potential of shuffle play. It was a new thing then. I had no idea how central it would become to my way of listening. At the time, I could shuffle between five discs; now I have an iPod with forty thousand tracks, and I can randomly access music for months without repeating.

I’ve been thinking about jukeboxes lately.

Strictly in terms of musical selection, my iPod now does the job of a jukebox. A sort of hyper-juke. I can let my little selector do all the work, keeping me entertained for hours at a stretch, consistently teasing my brain by introducing impromptu blindfold tests into my day. But shuffle only really works for me, I now realize, if I pay attention to it. If it’s just background, it takes all the interest away and can homogenize even the greatest music. If I need background, I prefer to listen to something more concentratedly programmed, like an album or an artist or even just a genre.

On the other hand, by shifting my attention, the activity of shuffling can take on a different significance. In recent months, I’ve taken to pretending that my iPod is a deejay. That way I can judge its performance. Sometimes it’s in the zone, and sometimes it loses the thread. But when I attend to the iPod as a sort of miniature disc jockey, there’s something at stake in its juxtapositions, transitions, good choices, and fumbles. My colleagues think I’m a bit weird, I suspect, when I blurt out: “iPod is on fire today!” But that’s how I feel when it abuts two things that really somehow work, but would never have seemed like a conscious match.

I’m old fashioned by now, with my grandpa iPod. Most youngsters are streaming, or they use algorithm-based programs like Pandora that choose songs based on some initial personal preference data, like Amazon does—if you like this, then you’ll probably like this. I’d rather have a means of access that doesn’t assume what I’d want, that’s not trying to please me. Those per-

sonal preferences require a static subject, but I'm on the move, always curious; I want to learn new things, make unexpected associations. I might be interested in something that the little algorithm would never know, might think I'd hate. That's why I'm a sucker for the chance aspect of shuffle. I love the notion, attributed in philosophy to David Hume and in biology to Lamarck, that chance is but our ignorance of causes. It suggests that there's some reason beyond our grasp. Maybe that's as close as I get to metaphysics. But I like it because it's not the product of a corporate investigation; my interest is not predicted exclusively according to music I've liked in the past and superficial affinities it might have with music I don't know. I want curveballs thrown into the mix. That's why chance is my deejay.

Looking through my singles recently, I thought about how much jukeboxes were like that, how they were harbingers of the possibility of random play, the idea that a machine could make cool decisions. Here you have a format, the seven-inch single, which is a standard unit. Anything could be put on it; wildly divergent music could be programmed using the same automaton. Two record covers in my singles collection caught my attention, and I immediately imagined them played back-to-back on a jukebox. Here's Red Garland Quintet, with the beautiful graphic of a record in cross section, nifty arrow pointing down into the groove like a stylus. Superbad hard-bop, with a top-flight lineup, Blue Mitchell's trumpet, Pepper Adams's baritone sax, and the Joneses (bassist Sam and drummer Elvin) on rhythm along with their leader. It was, quite literally, music made for jukeboxes, a black-and-white picture juke sleeve released alongside the color LP version.

Now switch radically to a beautiful, extremely rare single by the British improvising group AMM. This gem, which, like the Garland, has been reissued on CD, features short excerpts from a forty-five-minute performance by the duo version of the group, with Lou Gare on tenor sax and Eddie Prévost on drums. I love the idea of a groovy jazz jukebox session interrupted by a spacious, noisy spate of improvised music. It's the kind of thing that my iPod might kick up, but there's the added thought of the actual vinyl whirling around in the juke, the heavy tonearm slapping down on the disc, the vinyl living its ephemeral existence, serving its life's purpose, to make us listen, to entertain us, maybe to make us think and feel something we haven't thought or felt before.

• • •

Why micro?

Microgroove. Smaller grooves. Grooving in small places by small assemblages with small audiences. (Makes me think of an early Pink Floyd title: "Several

Species of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together in a Cave and Grooving with a Pict.”) A celebration of things content to stay small or resigned to the fact that without changing their underlying principles or aesthetics they will not grow all that much larger. No barrage of PR will make improvised music a pop commodity. It is a subset of a fraction of a portion of a minoritarian activity we call music listening, buried within the entertainment industry; the very fact that it’s of almost no value unless you actually pay attention to it automatically means it will never be especially popular. For that matter, an avalanche of radio coverage could not possibly make Helmut Lachenmann’s delicate “Dal Niente” into a hit, even in the already rarefied world of classical music, itself a rather unpopular micro-environ. Cat Power may have covered Michael Hurley’s songs, but that didn’t fling Hurley’s surreal lyrics and lemon drop intonation to the top of the charts.

The music in *Microgroove* is not all small. PJ Harvey and Donna Summer and Liz Phair couldn’t be classed that way. But I think, in their variances of enormity, they can still be shoehorned into this title in a sense of finding little meanings in big music—reading against the grain is an activity that loosens classificatory borders, making transit from small to big and back more tenable, enjoyable even. Some of them actively engage in what Martin Scorsese has referred to as “smuggling”—the illicit bringing of unwarranted ideas or images into a mainstream work.

This writer certainly has his straight-up, dead center mainstream passions, even if they’re not the ones he writes about most often. The twenty years represented in this collection reflect but hardly exhaust my interests and preoccupations in that period. I listen to pop and rock, entertainment music plain and simple. Lately, I’ve gone back to Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, and Cheap Trick, discovering things in them I’d missed when I first loved them. Albert Oehlen turned me on to neo-soul artists like Van Hunt, Bilal, and Omar, suggesting that if the world made any sense these artists would be on the radio, which reminds us that in the ’70s, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye were on the radio. They were huge. And incredible. When I have found myself writing about majoritarian musics, it is often in search of aspects at their periphery. As a reviewer rightly observed in reference to *Extended Play*, I’m never particularly interested in getting to the “essence” of a music; that would be hypocritical coming from someone who takes pleasure, as a listener, in the details, the surfaces, the contradictions, the texture, the edges, the forgotten or repressed or ignored or discounted or discarded components in excess of any music’s essence. The inexhaustible margins of audio activity.

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The specific term “microgroove” refers to a new technology introduced in 1948 and patented by CBS Laboratories that advanced the development of LP albums by cramming more music into each square inch of disc surface, allowing the standard twenty-minute side to take shape. In my private semiology, this is a reminder of how much my own experience of music is filtered through recordings. I am, as is virtually every contemporary person, a child of the microgroove revolution. This micro was the vehicle for the initial explosion of the popular music industry, an irony that is never far from my mind.

The title *Microgroove* is also a link to *Extended Play*. Only a few months after the microgroove technology was introduced, RCA debuted the “extended play,” or EP, the direct result of which was the emergence of the seven-inch single. These two books are closely related, carrying some of the same themes and some identical interview subjects. Anyone familiar with the former book will perhaps notice that where there were individual entries on Fred Anderson and Von Freeman (both dearly departed in the meantime) and Peter Brötzmann and Evan Parker (now very active septuagenarians), in this book the same musicians are found conversing with each other—an interview strategy I have enjoyed deploying for *DownBeat* and other publications. Thus, I hope these discussions can profitably be read in relation to the ones in *Extended Play*. Han Bennink and Sun Ra reappear, and Mats Gustafsson, who is just a glimmer in the introduction of the earlier volume, is now one of my closest friends and a verified free music superstar.

I have tried to approach certain artists from different angles. Brötzmann, for instance, appears three times here: in conversation with Parker, in a tour diary, and also in a reflection on his work as a graphic artist. A profile of Sun Ra’s Chicago period is augmented by a specific look at the graphic design approach of his El Saturn label. I was a third wheel in two conversations, separated by four years, that involved singer Liz Phair; it’s fascinating to see the differences in tone that arise over that span, and the ones that might be attributed to the gender of Phair’s other interlocutor, in one case Lou Barlow, in the other Kim Gordon. Several figures are considered solo and with another musician. Ken Vandermark appears in successive chapters—a personal reflection on nearly thirty years of knowing him, and in conversation with Joe McPhee. Steve Lacy’s ambulatory lifestyle is the topic of a profile written a few years before his tragic death, based on a weekend spent with him and Irene Aebi at their apartment in Berlin; another chapter written in a less personal manner considers Lacy’s highly collaborative nature as it manifested in his

work with writer Brion Gysin. My interview with Misha Mengelberg proved too rich for the article I originally published, and I have opted to reproduce the full conversation, contrasting it with a three-way dialogue adding his career-long compadre Han Bennink. Two of the most important and influential contemporary painters, Albert Oehlen and Christopher Wool, each make a pair of appearances in *Microgroove*: Oehlen in question-and-answer interviews, one free ranging, one based on a specific body of work; Wool in two essays, one considering the musical currents in his paintings, one based on a specific set he designed for a dance troupe and composed at the request of choreographer Benjamin Millepied. In all these cases, I was interested in presenting multiple points of view, to suggest how a different vantage in time, place, modality of writing, or circumstance of interview can yield new ideas. My experience tells me that such a notion is arguably most fruitful when dealing with rich works and complex artists. It's a shakier proposition to approach superficial culture from different viewpoints.

Some new and expanded areas of orientation appear. I dedicate a full chapter to contemporary classical music, and elsewhere I explore contrasts and continuities between music and painting, graphic arts, poetry, and fiction. If there is a deep difference between the two compilations, it is mostly felt in the way they are organized; while I chose to segregate the chapters according to writing mode in *Extended Play* (academic, journalistic, interrogatory), here I've let the literary as well as musical genres freely mingle, grouping the chapters into rough thematic zones. This time out, I'm the deejay.

The "other" of the subtitle has two tributaries. First, from the academic side, it's a holdover from the 1980s, when the notion of "the other" had achieved something of a pandemic reach into the critical community. (It became the discursive fetish that Jean Baudrillard had so pointedly observed in the word "fetish" as it was deployed by Marxists a generation earlier.) A student of semiotics, I wrote on otherness as it related to psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxian critique, and subaltern studies. "Other" was a dialectical term pitted against the dominant center of the social map—white, middle-class, male, heterosexual, and any combination of the above. It was a useful, if much too versatile, concept, but after a period of overapplication it has gone the way of terms like "apparatus" and "suture"—supple, seductive terms that eventually lose their frisson. (At one point in grad school, my friend Jalal Toufic and I joked about writing something titled "Why (B)other?" to poke a bit of fun at this and another insufferable theory tic: witless parentheses.)

In "other music," the "other" comes from a less tony place as well. On undergrad afternoons when I should have been reading Wittgenstein or

Barthes or Mulvey, I often went AWOL to Boston, where the record stores were numerous and well stocked. One feature not exclusive to Beantown that I especially liked was the existence of a catchall for uncategorizable music. A white plastic separator card proclaimed: OTHER. Not this, not that, but the other. Something that doesn't fit. I found myself burrowing into that inexact section, truffling for the odd Fred Frith item or Borbetomagus rarity. A long-lived store in New York City now bears the name Other Music. A fine store with a fine handle.

The intervening two decades between these two books have given me added confidence in one aspect of my endeavor. I believe that we will one day understand improvisation to have been a paramount contribution to culture in the twentieth century. Maybe the central contribution. It is a feature of many contemporary artistic practices, and its philosophical implications are yet to be fully grasped, but there's no doubt that improvisation has been explored most richly in music. This, of course, is the topic for a more focused argument, one that I'm beginning to formulate. When I look at the choices I've made of who to interview and write about, I am convinced that it's because Ornette Coleman, Milford Graves, Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, Peter Brötzmann, Joe McPhee, Carla Bley, Steve Lacy, Anthony Braxton, and George Lewis are among the greatest artists of our time, their work roughly equivalent in significance to the radical innovations of cubism or abstraction in painting. In the company of equals, they are more equal than the rest, their obscurity in the mass ear notwithstanding.

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There are record collectors whose entire focus is on the esoteric. Scarcity and unknownness are taken to be signs of quality, perhaps confirmation of a conspiracy in mainstream culture to hide the really great stuff. These guys dig up some of the most astonishing things, genuine lost treasures. There's a whole pecking order of them, a rare record royalty. I feel an affinity for this way of thinking, I recognize, because I distrust the popular filters through which most cultural productions must pass in order to be registered in the mass imagination. If history is written by the victors, sometimes the victors have dull taste, hence the singular importance of the cratedigger. But there has to be more than raw rarity at play. The records must reward the observer, somehow, some way. For me, this normally means the music has to be compelling. Sounds obvious, but some collectors are not interested in the sound of the music—if it has a weird cover, was issued privately, and fits into some oddball category, like new age free jazz or Native American cowboy music,



that's more than enough. From the standpoint of music as affirmation of the spectacular diversity of human endeavor, no doubt it is. I recall finding an early '70s seven-inch with a picture sleeve in a going-out-of-business Lisbon record store by a Portuguese band called the Korean Black Eyes—five ultrahip Korean women leaning over their guitars and saxophone, playing a version of Sly & the Family Stone's "Higher" that is a testament to the creative possibilities of cross-cultural misunderstanding. I dig this kind of wild-world wacko-ness. It can be a brilliant demonstration of the poetics of failure or the positive potential of geographic isolation. A night listening to records with ne plus ultra cratedigger David Hollander is like a trip to another planet. With a gleeful smile he'll drop the needle on a delightfully inept soul track, rock back on his heels, take a beat, and finally, with a maniac's intensity, blurt: "Do you realize we're in the freaking twilight zone?!!"

On the other side of the fence, I know well-informed and critical people who have absolute faith in the mass cultural filtration system. And lest we be blinded by our enthusiasm for the little known, the fact is that the system has shaped some sensationally fantastic music. In the soul realm alone, the productions of Stax, Atlantic, and Motown are among the great achievements of *Homo sapiens*. Many of the hen's teeth singles that diggers have excavated are in truth made by people trying to replicate the best-known artists. James Brown in particular has been mauled by several generations of near-miss imitators, sometimes to wonderful or hilarious effect. Anyone who offhand dismisses JB, Ray Charles, Sam & Dave, and Otis Redding on the basis of their stature is little more than a sanctimonious ideologue. Sometimes things left by the side of the road deserve to stay there, and sometimes things that stand the test of time are the Darwinian champs. Now and then, nothing scratches the itch like Sam Cooke or the Drifters. But if you believe that the whole soul diva story is covered in Aretha Franklin's greatest hits, go get yourself some music by Betty Harris or Jean Wells and prepare to have your mind changed.

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Micro. Other. It's too crude a formulation to pit Big Bad Big-ness against Scrappy Li'l Micro-Otherness in some imaginary timeless epic battle. There are subtler forces at work, a mottled topography of independent and institutionalized artistic interests, intricate and submerged lines of distribution, unevenly cast webs of information. But sometimes a well-placed reductive dichotomy can help clarify things, and in this case it holds true enough: the large/small divide in cultural production and consumption is a gap that must be reckoned with.

Obviously, technology has altered everything about how we access and utilize music, for better, for worse. Downloading dominates. People wear headphones all day, every day, making listening into an asocial activity. Amateurism flourishes on YouTube, as does a vast repository of historical clips. Head over to Ubu Web for a holy shit moment of free vanguard fun. (Gotta hand it to a once preposterous-sounding Friedrich Kittler, who prophesied a central bank of cultural productions linked to users by some sort of fiber network. Introducing . . . the Interweb.) Observe the demise of magnetic tape, the waning years of compact disc. We hear regularly about the death of the music industry, how the online marketplace has destroyed independent record production, how centralized the music world has become.

That's not my experience of it. A restructuring of the major label model does not signal the end of recorded music or the last gasp of music itself. There are certain places where losses can be detected: I find fewer venues, even online, where really incisive writing on music happens in the journalistic realm. But thanks to musician-theorists like George Lewis, David Grubbs, and Vijay Iyer, creative music is taken seriously in academic circles, enhanced by the experience of practitioners. There are more small labels than ever, attending to all sorts of wee little musics. And the microgrooves of the past are being incessantly mined; Dempsey and I recently spent hours in a London store obsessively specializing in obscure rockabilly and the wildest, weirdest R&B. In Chicago, multiple venues present improvised music on a weekly basis. Worldwide, the audience for creative music has grown exponentially, with folks taking regular trips down some of its culs-de-sac. Via podcast, anyone can hear almost any kind of music they're curious about. A whole generation of hipster rock bands has grown up plumbing the mysteries of microgroove via previously unimaginable research tools—listen to the way that Grizzly Bear and Dirty Projectors integrate their innumerable influences. These are salad years for music fanatics and omnivorous musicians.

Maybe the divide between micro and macro is falling apart. That would be a positive development. Or maybe everything is just scaling down. Expectations are changing. In terms of CD sales, no question, what constitutes an acceptable number has been reduced. And why not? Ten thousand people is a lot of people. We sold about that many copies of Peter Brötzmann's *Nipples* when the Unheard Music Series reissued it. That's plenty. I fondly recall March 10, 1996, 10:00 PM, at the Empty Bottle, when two hundred people crowded the club to hear Joe McPhee play in Chicago for the first time. Vandermark and I both looked around in disbelief. There will certainly never be a mass audience for McPhee's music, it won't top the charts, which is OK. McPhee's

finely etched, unvoiced wind sculptures on pocket trumpet wouldn't work in a stadium setting. His music requires the sort of concentrated, close listening that giant crowds can't tolerate, even on some physical, squirmological level. No matter that it's not a household music. There are still people who *would* want to listen to McPhee and other "others"—we can infer that from just this single event and from the nine more years of concerts Ken and I presented at the Bottle. Curious people, people who would give the work the attention it deserves without concern for the fact that not a soul who's friends with anybody they know had ever heard of Joe McPhee. Open people who *want* to know about the music. Ones who merely haven't found it.

Yet.

It is to the encounter with that patiently unaware listenership, as well as to the fortunate folks who have already discovered other music in all its manifestations, that *Microgroove* is dedicated.



**ONE**

ON THE ROAD, INTO  
THE CUL-DE-SAC



## JOE HARRIOTT AND BERNIE MCGANN

### Flying without Ornette

How unfair, the “great men” approach to cultural history. It condenses trends and tendencies into single names and complex webs of interrelation into cursory place markers in a chronological Rolodex. In this highly rational universe, everything evolves through simple cause and effect: new ideas are introduced by a single figure; others come to try the new concept on for size; some reject it; some embrace it, either varying it or imitating it outright, until the next big thing comes along. Culture is reduced to successive exclamations of “Eureka!”—the history of ideas as pearls on time’s string.

Nothing in American culture so thoroughly debunks this awful linearity as jazz. The real stuff of jazz is interactive, relational, communicative, and social, its products often improvised, fleeting, open-ended, and time-bound. It’s recursive, looking deep back into its past, and futuristic, skipping ahead several steps on the time line. And players are constantly stealing from one another—you might call it “learning”—making ownership of an idea a mighty tenuous claim. Simplistic “lone ranger” and “march of progress” platitudes don’t mesh with the jazz aesthetic, yet to few other art forms are they so consistently applied. In the very first sentence of his biography *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*, John Litweiler engages in this kind of historical telescoping: “There are four artists whose music and presence were major turning points in the course of jazz history: Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Ornette Coleman.”

Pow! Four great men. So much for Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis (who “simply extended the evolution of the bop era into its final stages”). So much for Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster, or an outcast like Thelonious Monk. Litweiler goes on to argue for the position of Ornette in a very limited register of movers and shakers, insisting that the particular perspective on jazz offered by the alto saxophonist was singular and significant enough to place him in their ranks.

Incredibly, this is still daring on Litweiler's part—in the ever more conservative jazz community Coleman's place in the pantheon is not yet a given. But the sweeping generalization still stings.

There's no question in my mind about Coleman's significance or singularity. His influence on players from Sonny Rollins to Roscoe Mitchell is undeniable, and he had a profound impact on the shape of jazz to come, not so much by inventing free jazz (the bulk of which was worked out by other figures) as by exploring the music we might now more strictly speak of as freebop (also sometimes referred to as "postbop," though in my opinion the profusion of "posts" in art categories makes the term too vague to be useful). Bebop derived its melodic lines from the standard-issue harmonies it cannibalized from pop—the much-favored changes from "I Got Rhythm," for example—but Coleman and associates emphasized linear melodies without directly relating them to a conventional functional harmonic framework. (Don't let anyone tell you his music is "atonal"; listen to one of his records a few times and you'll be able to whistle the melodies, sure sign of a tonal center or two.) The rhythm section continued to build on bop's time-oriented tradition, unlike subsequent free jazz rhythm teams (Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray, Alan Silva and Milford Graves, Jimmy Garrison and Rashied Ali), which completely interrogated the roles of the bass and drums. Lay the free over the bop and you've got a recipe for melodic exploration driven by swing. That's what allows Coleman to be Lincoln Center's token out musician, the only one Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis still feel comfortable calling "jazz."

Coleman's blithe creativity certainly inspired many young players, and his approach to the saxophone no doubt produced a horde of rip-offs for every subsequent player with something original to say. But independent of Coleman, other inventive folks were coming up with similar solutions to the artistic, formal, and expressive challenges that emerged in jazz in the mid-'50s. He wasn't the only one to machete his way through the mounting chords in search of a less centrally planned jazz schema. It didn't take a genius to see that the music was shifting, and more than one genius helped push it along. So perhaps it's not so much that Coleman is solely responsible for the change—Litweiler's "turning point"—as that he suitably represents a point in the course of jazz history when things were changing.

Coleman is the freebop figurehead, but in the late '50s and early '60s other players were growing restless, too—Sun Ra and tenor saxist Joe Daley, to name just two from right here in Chicago. The late Hal Russell, who drummed with Daley, once told me explicitly that in 1959, when both Daley's group and Coleman's jettisoned their pianists and began to tinker with the conventions,

none of Daley's players had yet heard Coleman's music. On "Red Cross," a track recorded five years earlier in Sweden by drummer Roy Haynes and alto saxist Sahib Shihab, Shihab blows pure harmolodics past the virtually inaudible piano and bass as Haynes anticipates future percussionists' more expansive use of space. And around then, somewhere half a world away from American and European shores, a young Bernie McGann was firing up his own alto saxophone.

Ornettocentrism is the latent topic of the twenty-fifth issue of the British magazine *Rubberneck*. Editor Chris Blackford has dedicated the issue in its entirety to Joe Harriott, whom he labels the "forgotten father of European free jazz." Harriott, an alto (and sometimes baritone) saxophonist who was born in Jamaica and died in 1974, began playing what he called "free form" and "abstract" jazz experiments in London at roughly the same time Coleman was making his initial recordings, around 1958. Like anyone—but particularly alto saxist bandleaders—messing around with the formal protocol of jazz at that time, Harriott was quickly compared to Coleman and usually wound up tagged as an imitator. In fact, Harriott's *Free Form* was recorded in 1960, begging the question of how immediately Coleman's *Something Else!!!!*, released late in '59, could have been received and digested by even the keenest English follower—which Harriott reportedly was not. In *Rubberneck* writer Jack Cooke recalls: "It seems to me beyond doubt, particularly if you add in Joe's complete indifference to what was happening in the USA, that his 'abstract jazz' was a wholly original conception. He resented any assumption that it was anything else."

To track out a more precise Harriott genealogy, one would have to look back at the bands of Charles Mingus, which contained an imposing cast of forward-blowing saxophonists like Jackie McLean, Hal McKusick, Lee Konitz, John LaPorta, J. R. Monterose, Shafi Hadi, Joe Maini, Booker Ervin, John Handy, Yusef Lateef, Roland Kirk, and, starting in that magical year 1959, Eric Dolphy. Coleman dispensed with the piano after his first record, but, like Mingus, Harriott hung on to it, and one of his accomplishments is to have found a way to make adventuresome freebop quartet constructions that released the pianist from the conventional role of laying down harmonies for others to solo over.

In biology, this might be attributed to something called convergent evolution, the idea that organisms with absolutely different primitive ancestors respond to the same environmental pressures by developing similar adaptive features—a moth and a bird sporting the same camouflage pattern, for instance. Convergent evolution isn't unheard of in the history of ideas. Consider Leibniz's and Newton's near-simultaneous discoveries of calculus. Their respective roads brought them from separate worlds to the same notion. So





Joe Harriott at the Marquee Gardens, 1960s (photo: Terry Cryer)

while Coleman may have been extricating Charlie Parker's mercurial lines from the prison of formulaic chord sequences, and Harriott may have been looking closely at the formal abstractions uncovered in Mingus's Jazz Workshop, various inherent and environmental factors may have led them to strikingly similar adaptations.

If, in the big American tally book, all freebop beasts must relate back to Coleman, how then Bernie McGann? Starting in the mid-'50s emulating Paul Desmond in Sydney, Australia, McGann developed his own maverick style, getting banned from clubs and kicked out of groups (just like Coleman) and eventually exiling himself to a little outback village south of Sydney called Bundeena, where he was a postman for most of the '70s. McGann, too, was compared to Coleman, and like Daley and Harriott he insisted that he'd come up with his way of playing before hearing Coleman's records, which may well have taken even longer to find their way down under.

“McGann had already established himself in the very early 1960s as a highly original voice,” reports McGann’s drummer of forty years, John Pochee, in John Clare’s *Bodgie Dada & the Cult of Cool: Australian Jazz since 1945* (University of New South Wales Press, 1995). “Not everyone understood it. They specially didn’t understand where it was coming from. I have tapes of that stuff and you’d be amazed to hear what McGann and [pianist Dave] McRae were doing together.”

These days, the sixty-year-old McGann is enjoying an international surge in interest in his music. Two recent records, licensed from their Australian label by the Californian Terra Nova company, offer an excellent entrée into his personal version of freebop. McGann sits his alto alongside James Greening’s lithe trombone; along with a look back at his delivery days called “Mail” and a version of Monk’s “Ask Me Now,” it features one of McGann’s earliest compositions, a pert, soulful nod to trumpeter Clifford Brown called “Brownsville,” and “Lazy Days,” a Steve Lacy-ish vehicle from the mid-’60s. In fact, besides a vocal tone and a penchant for lilting melodic lines, McGann has very little in common with Coleman stylistically. The Aussie has a bigger, fatter sound, more tenorlike, and his phrasing tends to dive directly into the piece’s aggressive rhythms rather than float over them. A more apt description might compare McGann to Sonny Rollins—his fragmented shapes at the tail of “Brownsville” certainly have the Newk feel.

But McGann is without a doubt an original voice. With tenor saxophonist Sandy Evans contributing five of nine compositions, McGann’s *Playground* also has a classic freebop air about it; dynamic support is provided on both records by bassist Lloyd Swanton, who’s played with the saxophonist for the last fifteen years, and Pochee. The rhythm section handles mean tempo changes with aplomb, adding Latin touches to McGann’s burning “Southerly Buster” and punchy accents to his odd waltz “Sergei’s Dance.” Evans’s “Snap” dissects a melody the way Monk’s “Evidence” did the standard “Just You, Just Me.” The themes to her buoyant “Skedaddleology” and cowboy blues “One for the Road” recall Coleman much more willfully than anything McGann does on either record.

Freebop—a point of convergent evolution, not the result of a single visionary’s long day’s journey into flight. No doubt there are linear aspects to cultural history, as responsive artists react to the innovations of genius types. But if it were all that simple, we could resort to statistical historiography, which, based on the sheer number of imitators—flocks and flocks of soprano saxophonists blowing derivative “sheets of sound”—would certainly lead us to conclude that John Coltrane, not Ornette Coleman, was the most influential saxophonist of

their generation. Jazz is peopled by personal stylists crafting their own special sounds; it's far more interesting to appreciate the variety, not the singularity, of its practitioners. "Great men" accounts give props to the most forceful voices, but they often do so by eliminating the sense of spectrum that is the music's birthright. Maybe it's a pain to remember all those names, but it's much more satisfying than taking the past of least resistance.

[1997]

# MICHAEL HURLEY

## Jocko's Lament

John Corbett: You have an extensive knowledge of the blues and country music. How did you get to know about all of that?

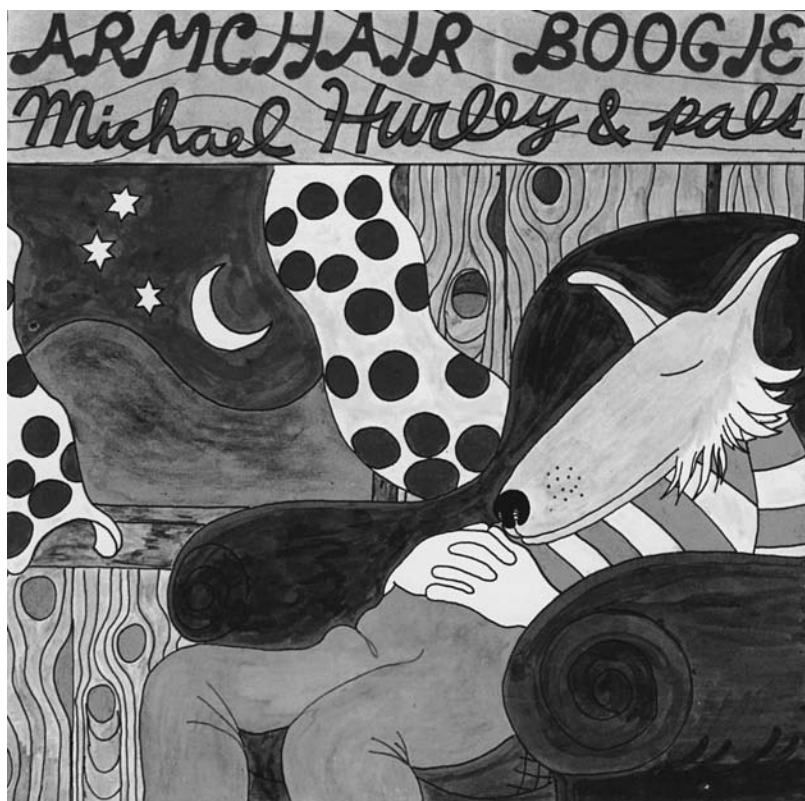
Michael Hurley: When I was a kid I would learn songs and sing them. They were the songs my parents would sing, from their records. Music was going in me and out of me in a way I didn't even realize. In my teenage years I got more obsessive about it and knew I had an interest. The first things that I obsessed over were Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Ray Charles. Then I realized they were blues, what I liked was the blues. In the blues you had Howlin' Wolf, Lightnin' Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker. So I picked up their records. A lot of my friends around Bucks County were partying, and they'd play the records at their parties. Jimmy Reed record parties.

JC: Great group of people you knew.

MH: Yeah. It wouldn't be that many records, a couple of Jimmy Reed records would do a party. After that I was very interested in every blues artist I could find out about. In the early '60s you couldn't find that many, they weren't in the record stores, you had to look around. There was Lead Belly. As years went by, I found more and more. Then somewhere along the big reissue thing came along, 1962 I think. When I first heard Blind Willie McTell, on this record RBF 1, the first compilation blues record I'd ever heard, blew my mind. It had Blind Lemon, I already knew about him. Robert Johnson, Blind Willie Johnson. The Willie McTell was "Statesboro Blues," and I think that kicked every folk singer in the country doing blues. He had this song that was the ideal song for Jerry Lee Lewis to do. I don't know why he never did. Sounded like "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On."

JC: A lot of great rock 'n' roll was covers of blues.

MH: The reissue thing started to churn things up. I picked it all up, got every Yazoo release.



JC: Belzona Records.

MH: Yeah, still got 'em.

JC: Were you already drawing comics at the time?

MH: When I was about seven or five or something, we used to have a little opaque projector, made out of metal, really boxy, had a little brass telescope thing, lightbulb inside. I used to get all my brothers and sisters to get under a bed, and I'd have my cartoons there and we'd have a movie, crowd under the bed to have it dark and have a movie. I also did story-books, mostly comics, throw them on the wall. That's when I started making cartoons and stories, to show to my brothers and sisters. In high school I passed them down the aisle, passed them around. They got more elaborate, and I didn't use the opaque projector anymore. Then I started a little radical publication. I got kicked out of high school for that. A book called *Outcry*.



Michael Hurley

JC: What was the content?

MH: Poetry, sex, philosophy. There was three *Outtrys*. Then I got out on the street, changed it to *The Morning Tea*. By that time I was twenty-one. I sold *The Morning Tea* on the street for ten cents a copy. I sold *Outtry* for five cents a copy. When I was doing *The Morning Tea*, I was in Cambridge. I'd go out and sell six dollars' worth of *The Morning Tea* in a day and get my dinner. A lot of dimes! Sixty people.

JC: How did you print them?

MH: On an old-fashioned mimeograph at a place where I used to work. Steve Weber got kicked out of his school for selling *Outtry* too. I gave him a supply to sell.

JC: How did you know those guys?

MH: I met them at parties in Bucks County.

JC: So it was all this Bucks County blues/folk thing, 1960-61?

MH: It was 1959 when I met Weber.

JC: And Stampfel?

MH: He's from Milwaukee. They met in the Village in '62, got together, and that was the Holy Modal Rounders, the duo.

JC: Fredric Ramsey Jr., how did he “discover” you?

MH: I was hitchhiking, had my guitar with me, which is why he picked me up. He said: “What kind of music you play on that guitar?” I said: “Mostly blues.” He said I should come up to his house, that he had a lot of blues records. I didn’t go, but later on I met a wino in New York, Guitar Slim. There’s millions of Guitar Slims. But I thought: “Fred should record this guy.” So I called up Fred and told him I had a guy who was as good as Lead Belly. Fred recorded all of Lead Belly’s last sessions. I told him he should make a record with Guitar Slim. Brought him to our farm, put him up for a few days, and then Fred got sick, had to blow off the session. So we never made a record with that guy. A couple years later I got sick.

JC: Hepatitis?

MH: Yep. And some friend of mine was then hanging out at Fred’s drinking beer and listening to blues records, and he put it together that Fred would record me and take it into Moses Asch, and Moses Asch might put out a record. And that all happened.

JC: Was Robin Remaily in school with you?

MH: He was a local yokel. We palled around for a lot of time. Used to go sleep in abandoned houses. Didn’t hop freights, but we had a way of getting on passenger trains, hiding in the bathroom till they took off, going to New York that way. We’d hang around New York, go to the Bowery, talk to the winos to try to learn songs, get lyrics for blues songs from the winos. Friends of ours had pads in New York, East Side, and they weren’t there much. Places weren’t usually furnished, and it was OK for us to use the rooms and bring winos up there for the purpose of gleaning folklore. Didn’t cost much. It was an inexpensive project.

JC: A little Thunderbird.

MH: Yeah. They didn’t want much. But then they didn’t give us much, either. After a while we got tired of that.

JC: You were always involved with what the Holy Modal Rounders were doing, at some level. Writing songs for them.

MH: You might say that. I was just part of the scene with them, pretty much.

JC: Did you live in New York? Peter Stampfel told me that he thought your most brilliant cartoon was an image of Boone or Jocko elatedly leaving New York.

MH: I know he remembers that. He says I had a list of reasons to get out of New York. He remembers them, I don’t. One is you step in dog shit all the time. Two, you spend too much money. I don’t remember the rest.

JC: “Sweetiedee” is a reminder of that time, right?

MH: Yeah, early '60s.

JC: When did you start spending so much time in Vermont?

MH: Late '60s. I was living in Boston. I migrated from Bucks County to Boston in the mid-'60s, then to Vermont, where it was my headquarters until 1987. Then Virginia.

JC: How did what you were doing in the mid-'60s relate to psychedelia? That one ESP record of Holy Modal Rounders takes them pretty deep into psychedelia and out of the more traditional folk sound. How did that work for you?

MH: You don't see any evidence of my psychedelic period on records. I was supposed to do an ESP record. It would have been a lot like *Armchair Boogie*, with more professional musicians. Actually, *Armchair Boogie* happened the year after I was trying to do this ESP record, but it didn't happen like I was trying to do the ESP one. I had drums, horns, guitar lead, pianos. I had a whole bunch of things lined up. I didn't do as much of a production as I wanted to do for the other record.

JC: When did the characters of Boone and Jocko enter your world?

MH: I think the first picture I ever drew in my life was the face of a fox. I was about five years old. After a while, Boone and Jocko were based on these collie dogs we had. My friends and I used to sit around and make up stories based on their actual characters and deeds. We'd make them talk, build on their characters. The first Boone and Jocko—Boone the dog used to pull this number in the kitchen, raid the garbage, and he'd go throw it all over the floor. We'd find him in the morning lying on his back with his legs sticking up. The first cartoon I ever did of Boone and Jocko was Boone lying in the middle of the kitchen floor with all the garbage. Second was his head in the garbage pail. The rest, the ones I would pass around at school, were pure fantasy. Those old cartoons I still have, the Boone Tunes.

JC: Have you been writing more songs that have included them?

MH: They only made it into one or two over the years.

JC: "Code of the Mountains," "Jocko's Lament."

MH: There's one that never was recorded: "Jocko, you jack off too much / you'll wear the bone to a frazzle / That's OK Boone, I wear the bone wherever I go / frazzles, weddings, balls." That song, no one ever wanted to record it yet.

JC: How did you see yourself in relation to the folk scene? On the outside? How did you feel about the more "legit" take on folk songs, Peter, Paul and Mary, stuff like that?



MH: Mostly what I liked was not folk singers. I liked country singers. I got into Hank Williams before I knew about Jimmy Reed. That's what I liked. Rock 'n' roll in the '50s. Blues. Country. But I liked the folk songs. "John Henry."

JC: What was it about the blues that appealed to you?

MH: Blues got to me. I was really excited about the blues. It was inspirational, encouraging to hear an alternative viewpoint in the world. To hear someone saying something other than "If you don't finish high school, you'll never amount to anything." It was encouraging to hear the logics of an alternate world. To hear people that were respectable coming out of a completely alien lifestyle. The music itself was really exciting, satisfying, worthwhile to chase after and hear and learn and play. I'm really glad I hit that and that it was around.

JC: Were you a Tampa Red fan?

MH: Yeah.

JC: Sometimes I hear a little Tampa Red in your voice.

MH: I learned one of his songs a while back, still do it.

JC: I found a copy of a Reverend Gary Davis doing "Dices, Dices."

MH: I never heard him play that one. The reverend, it's not one of his spiritual numbers, I guess! I'd like to hear that. I know Big Chief Ellis's version.

JC: What do you make of the music scene these days? There seem like there are more recording possibilities for you now than there have been.

MH: Not really, no. A lot of people are starting labels. It's a big fad. Everyone has a label, but it doesn't really amount to much. I even have a label now, but it doesn't really amount to much.

JC: There was a period in the '60s where that seemed to be happening too.

MH: Not like this. Back in Vermont, in the '70s, there were one or two recording studios there. Now there's probably two thousand. It's a natural thing that if that happens in a small area like that, then the number of labels that exist goes up proportionately. In the alternative scene, the carrot is there for all these people. How many are getting the carrot, I don't know. But the carrot has to be there, otherwise there wouldn't be so much action.

JC: Do you think the carrot is getting up the ladder, getting a big label?

MH: Yeah, yeah. Obviously the alternative scene has some meat to it.

JC: You sound skeptical about the whole thing.

MH: No, not too skeptical. I have a label myself, reason I have it is, suppose I died tomorrow, then my wife could still say: here's his latest song on this tape, ten dollars. Also, I get all these off-the-wall contacts, happens all

the time. People call me up. One guy from Hollywood, one from Minnesota, desperate to get material, can't find it anywhere in stores, somehow got my phone number. Good news for them, I've got tapes. Everyone that's got a band should have a cassette to sell at a gig. They're starting to realize this. I sold seventeen cassettes in the last two days. I've made more money with Bellemeade Phonics than I ever did with seven albums. Negligible royalties. Only got a sizable chunk of money for the song that Jesse Colin Young covered called "Your Lovin' Hobo," back in '77.

JC: How did you support yourself over the years?

MH: I always worked. When I look back on the '60s, when a lot of my friends were looking to be professional musicians, I never considered that a possibility for me. I always worked, sometimes I ripped stuff off, sometimes I was on welfare. But one job after another. I raised my kids for a while. For about six years I was a workaday married man, from '65 to '71. I always continued to make music, write songs, record them. But I never much considered doing gigs in the '60s. In 1970, when Jesse made *Armchair Boogie*, after he finished recording it and it was a sure thing that it was coming out, I decided to get some gigs. Right around that time, the bar scene changed. It was alternative bars for hippies, there started to be hippy bars in the '70s, where you could get a gig. You didn't go into bars much in the '60s. That was like an Indian going into a cowboy bar out west. You go into a bar for a drink, you'd expect to get some shit. Suddenly, hippies started opening up their own bars. A lot of other people would tell you that they played in redneck places, but I didn't. My whole drinking scene in the '60s didn't go into bars. It was out of the question. Too expensive, drink by drink. But it wasn't like that in New York City. Could always go into bars in the Big Apple. But out in Pennsylvania, you weren't wanted in bars. Weber and Remaily and me, our presence wasn't wanted in those bars.

JC: I heard that Martin Mull was in a band you had. What did he play?

MH: The ESP band. He played skin flute. And swinette, which is a piece of hair stretched over a pig's asshole. No, he was a guitarist.

JC: Who else was in that group?

MH: Eddie Wise, Mull's main piano player, a fantastic keyboard man. Remaily. Lenny Capizzi, who cowrote "The Monster Mash." I was getting a lot of them out of Capizzi's jazz band, he had a jazz operation in Boston. He's dead now. At the time this ESP thing came, I used to hang out with his band, go to their gigs. I pulled out his bass player, Michael Kane, who later became one of the Youngbloods, and his drummer, Bill Elgart.

And Lenny himself, for piano. We were practicing all this stuff, ready to record, and at least we wanted expenses, but they didn't want to pay. They would put the album out, but they weren't going to give us any money. I couldn't do that with these guys. I decided, forget this. The only thing that got recorded was me solo doing my songs. I sent that for a demo, and that's what got me fired. That's where Bernard Stolman got an earful of my stuff. Up till then he was listening to Peter Stampfel and Robin Remaily and believing them that he needed to record me. I remember meeting Stolman in Central Park. Remaily said to him: "I know he doesn't look it, but this guy is a big-time genius of music." Stolman said: "I believe a friend of a friend, good to meet you Mike!" Everything was great until he received the demo, and then he complained to Stampfel.

JC: What were the songs?

MH: One of them was "Johnny Irvin." Another got on *Armchair Boogie*, "Open Up." It's still one of my standards. The others haven't surfaced much. I still have the demo for ESP. I kept the master and sent a copy. Karen Dalton was around then, playing in the Village. Stampfel, after the ESP project, he tried to get me to be a writer for Karen Dalton. She made two albums, two labels. She's a mystery. Her voice is really neat. She's like an Okie from Oklahoma. I met her as recently as 1980, but now nobody knows where she is. We're looking for Wilbert Harrison, too. I would really get excited about doing a Wilbert Harrison album. If we could just find him.

JC: What's your favorite of the records to listen to now? *Armchair Boogie*?

MH: That's one of them, yeah. That wasn't too bad. I think one of my favorite records is *Blue Navigator*, it's relaxing to me. Most people don't like it too much, but I like it more than the others. It is my favorite. It's the rarest, too. Rooster Records went out of business, had a fire, lost a lot of masters, sold their recording equipment. Saved the master to *Blue Navigator*. People are always calling me up wanting the old records, wanting me to do a drawing or painting for them.

JC: How do you like that?

MH: I keep up with it. Part of my daily routine, answering correspondence, mail, phone. A lot in the mail, too. It's part of my life. When I don't know what to do, I know what to do: deal with correspondence. *Snocko News* helps that a lot. Usually I put it out every time I have five gigs in a row.

JC: What do you find yourself listening to?

MH: I'm getting into Top 40 Nashville a lot. That's about where I'm at. I still listen to Chicago blues, contemporary blues, like Eddie Clearwater, one

of my favorites. I like Lucinda Williams, Michelle Shocked, and Victoria Williams. That's about it. Leo Kottke.

JC: Do you know Eugene Chadbourne?

MH: Yeah, we do gigs together sometimes. But I like these people as people, I don't listen to their records that much. I like music to be like this tabletop: smooth, wonderful, colorful, pretty. I can't get off on all this noisy, obnoxious shit, like punk, or whatever. I don't like that. If Bellemeade Phonics was very successful, with its own studio, issuing records by the thousands, I would try to produce records that were competitive in Nashville. I'd use female singers, because that's my favorite instrument, a woman's voice. Whenever I listen to music, the tapes I travel with, certain women's voices, and when I get high, it's women's voices that egg me on into the clouds. So that's the propeller for me. It's just the voice. Like war cries, ritual singing—the human response to the human voice. I'm down to that point. I don't respond to the electric guitar, to the drum, to the synthesizer, to the harmonica. I respond to some cool piano once in a while, but what can always get me is a woman who can sing well. Like Lucinda. One of the prettiest voices is Crystal Gayle. Emmylou Harris, I like her, have all her records.

JC: Women blues singers, too?

MH: Not so much. I prefer with women a sustained one-note kind of thing, like a fiddle has. In the blues you have to move around too much. And I tend to like the sweeter and clearer voices. Blues are gravelly and rough. Carlene Carter is the best country singer in America today. She doesn't sound like she smokes ten packs of Camels a day.

JC: Can I ask you about the origin of a couple of songs? "The Werewolf," what was the impetus for that?

MH: Background is, when I was about fifteen, in high school, I did an essay for English class. I was moved by two things, the story of the werewolf in the movies, traveling in twilight scenes, in a stagecoach, with horses. And he was sad, looking for someone who could put him out, destroy him. But he was indestructible. It was Lon Chaney. And at that time Clyde McPhatter's "Lover's Question" was out. Between thinking about Lon Chaney going around in the middle of the night looking for a way out and the song of "Lover's Question," they melded together in my mind. I remember I had to write about why I love America or something. I said Lon Chaney, Clyde McPhatter—these people are meaningful! Years later, when I wrote the song about the werewolf, I was with Weber and Remaily, and we were in New York. There was this coffee shop called the Blind Lemon. We had

a band, the three of us, the Blues Doctors. We went to New York to do a guest set at the Blind Lemon. We ended up at the owner's loft, where the street people could party endlessly. We were doing that. I think we played all the songs we knew for two days, ran through every song we knew. Had a lot of smoke, beer. At the point where there weren't any more songs to sing, I said we'll just have to make up a song, and just came out with "The Werewolf." It came out complete, never struggled over verses, rhyming, melody, words. It just came out. The next day we had to tow a car back to Bucks County, my brother's Pontiac which had died in the city. We were there to pick it up. Somebody had to ride in the Pontiac, to man the brakes, because we didn't have a tow bar, just a chain. We go through the Holland Tunnel and all through New Jersey on Route 22, so I was in the Pontiac and Remaily was with me, and after the tunnel he said: "That song you sang last night, 'The Werewolf,' that's a pretty good song." We pulled out an envelope from the glove compartment, and he wrote all the words down on the envelope. We towed the car nearly to Philadelphia, had another jam session and played "The Werewolf." At the time we were always looking for another song to play. I'd tried to learn all the folk songs. But somewhere along the line that stopped. We used to jam like that, the songs were very important to us, everybody would be glad that we had "The Werewolf" now. Weber, Remaily, they were honestly glad we had a new one to enjoy playing.

JC: That seems like the real folk attitude. Hanging out, playing together. Not a style, but a way of being together. I remember traveling in Eastern Europe, as someone who didn't grow up learning songs, being very embarrassed that my folk tradition had been deprived. All of my friends seemed to have a huge repertoire. I could play a bit of "Stairway to Heaven."

MH: My parents sang when they drank. When they partied, they sang songs. I grew up listening to the din of their drunken partying and singing. Then I had to go through the same thing with my older sisters, with rock 'n' roll. I'm glad I had that. A lot of my friends didn't have that, they just got into it anyway.

JC: On one of the Raccoon records, at the end of a guitar instrumental you say: "You play one!" That's the attitude, pass it around.

MH: Right.

JC: What was the story behind "Mr. Whiskerwits"?

MH: It was a friend of mine, a Polish guy named Iwaskiewicz. Everyone called him Wax. I called him Whiskerwits. The whole song is a portrait of his lifestyle, to tease him, to heckle him. He's not that bad, but close enough.

It was in the dirty dozens tradition. Making up characters in verses. Used old folk songs. One I used to do is “The Leather Winged Bat”: “Hi, said the little leather winged bat, I tell you the reason that, the reason that I fly by night, is ’cause I lost my heart’s delight.” I learned that from Burl Ives albums. There were about twenty verses, with people we knew in the song. There was one about Weber: “I shape clay with my hands, said Stevie Weber, I shaped shit too, said Frankie Morrell / I wouldn’t spread it around, said Steve, you know it has an awful smell.”

JC: How about “The Twilight Zone”?

MH: Took me six years to finish that. I think I had a hangover one day, and I came up with the chorus. I figured that it sounded like a bridge. And in about six years I came up with the first part of the song. Sometimes I write a middle. That’s what takes years, finding those beginnings!

JC: Is “Old Black Crow” a traditional song?

MH: No, that’s another one that just came out. Same as “English Nobleman.” I was working as a yardman on an estate, a landscape helper in Bucks County, and I made it up while I was raking leaves.

JC: Did you live as a hobo for some time?

MH: Kind of. I was trying not to a lot. I was trying to keep off the streets. I never had to sleep on the streets. I’ve crawled into basements to sleep. But I’ve never had to sack out in the park or on the sidewalk. And I never want to have it get that way! Or a boxcar for that matter. It goes against the grain. I’d rather be rich. But it has gotten close to that at times. But as bad as it ever gets, I’ve always had a lot of friends. It’s like the sofa circuit. You find where you can get by a few days, a week or two, on somebody’s sofa. And then you have to find somebody else. That’s as bad as it ever got. I never sunk lower than the sofa circuit. Some of these winos would really envy a sofa circuiter. In the ’80s, in Vermont, I had a very elaborate sofa circuit worked out. I had a twenty-two-point sofa circuit in the state of Vermont. I learned a lot about how to be a sofa circuiter, sometimes called the couch circuit. There’s rules. I’m a discreet character anyway, so I don’t have to worry about some things others might have to think about. But one rule that I adopted is bring your own towel. Another is try not to show up beyond three in the afternoon, if you’re coming for the first night. Check-in time is before three. Some people are nonchalant about having a guest. These are the best. Most people get too much into it, and they want to serve you a special meal. That’s a problem. But if you hit them after they’ve started to lay back for the day, it’s gonna make it harder for them. They’re ready to fold up and watch TV, it would be a bad

time for you to make the scene. But then if you're established customers, it doesn't matter. Except with Peter Stampfel you have to call about a month ahead of time, make a reservation. My mother's a big problem. When she has a guest, she puts too much energy into it. Best is when somebody says: "Oh, hi, great, you're here. If you want something to eat, help yourself to anything you can find. I think there's a bed upstairs." And their behavior is no different from what it would be if you weren't there. These are your best victims . . . hosts! It's no problem for them, no problem for you. I'm just interested in the flop. I'll rummage my own feed, after they're asleep. That's as low as I get, the sofa circuit. Now I use a van, it's a deluxe version. Don't need the bed, shelter, food. When I had the least amount of money, there was always a place to crash. In the '60s you could rent a house for eighty dollars. Twenty hippies could live there. Now that house costs you a thousand dollars a month. Times are different.

[1993]

## MAYO THOMPSON

### Genre of One

Let's take the story of popular music to be like a drive down Main Street. Branching off from the central thoroughfare of music history are occasional culs-de-sac, blind alleys occupied by influential individual musicians, groups, and sometimes single records. One can't exactly explain why or how these musicians fit into the scheme of things, whom they influence, how their music changes the status quo—in short, where their music goes. They create no school, no movement, no new style or fad. They simply start, make something, then stop—like a scenic road to nowhere.

What does it mean, for instance, when it is suggested that Captain Beefheart was an influential segment on the music history boulevard? The Cap'n was unquestionably a pop genius, but his oblique poetics, his mutated Howlin' Wolf vocal style, and his experimental surgery on pop music forms were all so singularly idiosyncratic that anyone who follows up or builds on them directly has a hard time sounding like anything but an imitator. Case in point: Tom Waits, especially in his lauded triptych *Swordfishtrombones*, *Rain Dogs*, and *Frank's Wild Years*. One listen and it's clear that by 1983 Waits's heart was full of beef.

The reissuing of Mayo Thompson's only solo record puts a brilliant, under-recognized cul-de-sac back on the musical map. First released in his hometown of Houston in a minuscule edition on Texas Revolution Records in 1970 (and reissued on vinyl in the mid-'80s), *Corky's Debt to His Father* followed Thompson's late-'60s records *Parable of Arable Land* and *God Bless the Red Krayola and All Who Sail with It*, both of which included Thompson as a member of the group the Red Crayola (for the second LP they had to change the "C" to a "K" after the surprisingly attentive crayon company complained).

Where other Thompson records center on topics like politics, aesthetics, and linguistics, the basic theme of *Corky's* is sex. Lewd, vivid, pungent, curious, randy, lecherous, Nabokovian, decidedly heterosexual sex. Sex as preoccupation, sex as control, sex as delectation, sex as worship, sex as sex. The record's



first lyrics establish an agenda: "I'm a student of human nature / And all my lessons I have learned for free / I held your little breast in my hand / And kept my eyes on your knee." Thompson's garden of earthly delights is full of wit and hokum humor, constructed with particular rhetorical savvy. Indeed, writer Frederick Barthelme played drums in the original Red Crayola and coscripted the song "Black Legs" on *Corky's*. On "Side Two to You" Thompson ends a striking image with a bold-faced punch line: "Like an old shoe / You are the one / With your tongue hanging out / And your laces undone. . . . Still I'm dying to get you to come, just to be my girl."

Thompson delivers his literate bawd in a voice unlike any other: gangly, guileless, relaxed, at times disarmingly out of tune, with an endearing and slightly boyish falsetto. On Red Crayola records, Thompson fuses elements of avant-garde with rock, but here his southern roots are showing. The music has an easy, folksy feel, the crack band laying down a down-home ambience that's unkempt in a precise way. Perhaps the most wonderful aspect of the record is its spare orchestration—on "Around the Home" timpani and eerie background singers set an off-kilter circus-like tone, while horns and subtle little percussion sounds sneak underneath in unexpected ways. With its ripping three-chord chorus riff, "Worried Worried" is a pre-punk classic, while "Oyster Thins" starts with a dodecaphonic guitar/vocal line that segues into a bluesy march, replete with brushes on snare drum. "Dear Betty Baby" is the record's most poignant point, with a gorgeous acoustic guitar part played by Thompson himself.

The quarter century since the release of *Corky's* has been productive for Thompson. In the mid-'70s he moved to London, where he worked with Rough Trade Records, shaping a generation of do-it-yourselfers and producing records by folks from the Fall to James Blood Ulmer. Thompson lived in Germany for some time and recently returned to the States. After a hiatus, the Red Crayola has begun recording again with renewed vigor. Its current single, "14" backed with "Stink Program," will be followed by Thompson's first full-length album recorded in the United States in twenty years, featuring Chicago guitarist David Grubbs (Squirrel Bait, Bastro, Gastr del Sol), California guitarist Tom Watson (Overpass, Slovenly), German synthesizer artiste Albert Oehlen, and Chicago drummer John McEntire (Tortoise, the Sea and Cake).

You won't find Mayo Thompson mentioned in nine out of ten rock 'n' roll history books. Neither a leader nor a disciple, he's managed to slip off the map. And since he treats each new record as a conceptually separate project, each release is a sort of cul-de-sac of its own, separate from the others and not

connecting back up with the main highway on which a band or musician's life is usually routed. We don't see any "growth" or "maturation" over Thompson's career; instead, each record creates and fulfills its own conditions of existence. Park your car awhile at the end of the lane called *Corky's Debt to His Father*. See, a cul-de-sac ain't necessarily a dead-end street.

[1994]

## JOHN STEVENS

### Unpopular Populists

Cemeteries are chock-full of great people who never got the recognition they deserved. Just recently, one of my favorite writers, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, jumped from a window to his death with barely a notice (I found out three weeks later). And last year one of the world's most brilliant musicians, British drummer John Stevens, died of a heart attack with nary an obit in the major press. It's not surprising, of course, since neither Deleuze nor Stevens was known to a broad audience. Death notices aren't the place where obscure people get their long-neglected reconsideration. But these disparate figures had something in common that links their proximate passings and makes their loss significant to a wider audience: they were each involved in complex, specialized, resolutely "unpopular" activities—poststructuralist philosophy and free improvisation—but they retained an openness, a sense of humility, and an optimistic obliviousness to the demands of the culture industry that made them, at another level, extremely accessible, human, real. Both Deleuze and Stevens were populist avant-gardists.

Over the course of his seventy years, Gilles Deleuze created a unique body of work, much of it written in conjunction with collaborators like Claire Parnet or Félix Guattari. Such tandem tracts as *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (both of which bear the suggestive subtitle *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) were conceived and written as duets, ensemble works that forced the individual thinkers to surrender themselves to the process of writing together. On his own, Deleuze wrote some of the most deeply provocative reevaluations of previous philosophers—Nietzsche, Kant, Spinoza, Leibniz, Bergson. But just as radical poststructuralist Michel Foucault insisted that all history should be a history of the present, so were Deleuze's readings of canonical philosophers always grounded in contemporary ideas and practices, making old ideas relevant to the present. "A theory is exactly like a box of tools," Deleuze insisted in a 1972 conversation with Foucault. "It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. . . . It is strange that it was Proust, an author thought to be a pure intellectual, who said

it so clearly: treat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don't suit you, find another pair; I leave it to you to find your own instrument."

Though Deleuze was concerned with arcane philosophical issues—such as the relationship between systemic repetition and individual identity—his writing was, in a strange way, as open to the nonphilosopher as to the specialist. For Deleuze's complex, sometimes impenetrable writing merges philosophy with poetic discourse—or, better, it treats philosophy as a form of poetry. To read Deleuze generously, at least for me, has always meant allowing myself not to understand everything in a literal way, but to let the metaphorical and the concrete coexist on equal terms. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari challenge the reader to abandon a central metaphor in Western thought: the tree. In its place they suggest using the model of the "rhizome," a plant, such as grass, that doesn't grow from a point of origin (roots) in logical sequence through a single line of reason (trunk) differentiating into various consequential extremities (branches). Instead, rhizome can spread out in unforeseen ways, its end points linking back up with its roots, moving by means of lateral and not strictly linear logic. In fact, it's hard not to reduce things to trees—think of how we have written the story of jazz music, as if it actually proceeded from roots in New Orleans to the trunk in Chicago and New York, out of which many branches grew into different styles. A popular jazz history poster diagrams the music exactly this way, complete with green leaves and bark. But music doesn't strictly work like this. Instead, it's constantly doubling back on itself through stylistic cross-pollination; branches break off, forming alliances with other genres—like a tree that could fuse at will with other trees. Like a rhizome.

The idea is at once high theory and grassroots activism. When illustrating their rhizomatic concept, Deleuze and Guattari use references to popular culture, including the Pink Panther (everything he touches turns pink!), rocker Patti Smith, and the lyrics to the song "Old Man River." Deleuze's is a creative philosophy: simultaneously avant-garde and, in the sense that it resists the elitism and exclusivity of academic philosophy, potentially open to anyone. In the boldest endorsement of his career, Foucault—not known for gratuitous PR—proclaimed: "Perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian."

John Stevens never had the backing of a heavy hitter like Foucault, but he is widely recognized as one of the original European free improvisors, and his groups were breeding grounds for many sounds and musical ideas that have gone on to have lives of their own. Born in 1940, Stevens was inspired by the wonderful but often unacknowledged British bop and early free jazz drummer Phil Seaman. Until the mid-'60s Stevens worked in straight-ahead jazz groups, but in '65 he formed the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, one

of the very first free-improvising ensembles. SME provided a wide range of musicians—including saxophonists Evan Parker and Trevor Watts, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, bassist Dave Holland, guitarist Derek Bailey, and trombonist Paul Rutherford—with a charmed circle for exploration and invention as the new approach to music-making was testing its wings. SME remained an effective vehicle for Stevens's music for the next three decades.

Since Stevens died last September, there's been a virtual avalanche of releases, many of which chronicle his work with SME. *Summer 1967*, released on the reactivated Emanem label, contains the earliest music yet released of sax innovator Evan Parker; most of the record consists of duets between Parker (still sounding like himself but very youthful and not completely formed) and Stevens. Two long cuts capture their first encounter with German bassist Peter Kowald. *Karyobin*, a larger group record from '68 released on the Chronoscope label, is one of the most important documents of early improvised music, maintaining a buoyant jazz feel (courtesy Holland and Wheeler), but introducing Bailey's extreme guitar and a more developed Parker into the SME mix. (Stevens and Parker recorded again as a duo twice for the Ogun label; the more recent *Corner to Corner* is especially worth seeking out.) The record *Face to Face* (Emanem)—recorded in 1973, when SME was a duo of Stevens and saxist Trevor Watts—contains a series of extremely intense dialogues, sometimes featuring Stevens on cornet. And *A New Distance* (Acta), the final SME record, taped in London just months before Stevens's death, finds the ensemble made up of Stevens, guitarist Roger Smith (one of the few free improvisors to use a nylon-string guitar), and saxophonist John Butcher. This version of the group plays music at once supercharged and intricately laced, resolutely abstract and absolutely concrete.

While Stevens clearly learned from Elvin Jones's strong sense of polyrhythm and oblique relation to pulse, he always had a light touch, perhaps more along the lines of Tony Williams. When playing with SME, he often used a sized-down kit—just a snare, a little cymbal, and not much else—which seemed to emphasize his austerity and resourcefulness. Given to spaces of silence, his small-group interactions were something very special. Perhaps the nicest of these on record is *One Time* (Incus), a 1992 trio date with Bailey and Kent Carter, who played bass with SME for a period during the '70s. But oddly enough, while Stevens was one of the most ruthlessly uncliché musicians of his generation, he kept an ongoing interest in the most cliché-ridden style the music produced—jazz-rock fusion—and in fact recorded frequently in this mode. A record by his group *Away, Mutual Benefit* (Konnex), includes twin electric guitars, electric bass, and a free-blowing horn section, all perched atop his off-kilter free-form funkiness. This *That and the Other* (Atonal) is a

trio disc with Jack Bruce, the bassist from the classic rock band Cream, and legendary blues and prog-rock saxophonist Dick Heckstall-Smith; with the latter Stevens made a strong record of duets, *Bird in Widnes* (Konnex). And Stevens made a couple of recordings with guitar-geek god Allan Holdsworth, including *Retouch & Quartet* (Konnex), which are also the only place you'll find the serious-minded bassist Barry Guy playing in a fusion band.

Stevens's interest in pop styles and forms didn't derive from a misguided desire to speak to "the people" in their own tongue, however. Increasingly, the electric jazz of Ornette Coleman—who clearly left his mark on the Brit (Stevens called his own approach to fusion "rhythmelodic," a nod to Coleman's notion of "harmolodics")—has seemed aimed at this kind of vanguard-pop crossover. But Stevens was compelled by the music itself, drawn by Coleman's initial avant-funk gems with the group Prime Time, Miles Davis's experimental rock, and Captain Beefheart's rhythmically unbeatable Magic Bands.

Like Deleuze's writings, Stevens's music is the product of a populist approach that doesn't pander. Whether making unconventional music or writing poetic oppositions to ontology, the first order of business for Stevens and Deleuze was not making sure people liked them, for "being liked" is based on "being heard" or "being seen." The work would have to physically reach the reader, listener, or viewer—thus, a whole network of distribution, controlled or influenced by various interested parties, must be in place—and it must reach people with time, energy, and impetus to give the challenging material the attention it demands. To be taken seriously is a rare commodity—some say a luxury—in our drive-through era.

To place all eggs in the basket of "being liked" is to invest in a dicey omelet. But how does one make meaningful work without becoming snooty and removed from everyday life? "The hope is to suggest an alternative," wrote Stevens in his notes to *Mutual Benefit*. "The Establishment is now getting to a point of totalitarianism. I'm trying to address the machine that's killing people off by dealing with a music that is by its nature humanitarian, informative, collective, specific. . . . The music is a stimulus."

Music as stimulus. Philosophy as toolbox. Both are based on a functional form of thinking. There's no proselytizing prophet showing the one and only way, but artists offering another set of spectacles with which to view the world. If you don't like 'em, you're encouraged to try another pair. Can this kind of vanguard populism withstand our most resolutely anti-intellectual era? Fortunately, Deleuze and Stevens left us more than mere headstones.

[1996]

# PETER BRÖTZMANN TENTET

## Freeways

**Tuesday, June 20, 2000**

The air on the plane from Chicago to San Francisco is charged with adrenaline, as the twelve members of the Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet Plus Two greet, hug, and chat. Gregarious drummer Hamid Drake has already made friends with the inquisitive person in the seat next to him. The band's been rehearsing in Chicago for a few days, and they've played a single set opening for Sonic Youth in New York, gearing up for their first tour of North America: two weeks, coast to coast. It's an enormous undertaking, made possible when multireedist Ken Vandermark, one of the band's original members, was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship last year. The first thing he announced was that he wanted to invest in a tour for this free jazz big band.

Little did Vandermark know that he'd also committed himself to organizing, coordinating, and executing the tour; in spite of the work of his manager, Boche Billions, Vandermark's become the group's de facto road manager, and when questions arise, they seem to be inevitably directed at him. Here on the first leg of the journey, he already looks a bit haggard and sleep deprived, but he's patient and gracious beyond reasonable expectation as he fields queries about itinerary, hotel, and soundchecks with unshakable good humor.

So here's the band, poised for the big tour, boarded, locked and loaded, and what's the first thing to do? Wait! Straightaway an hour-and-a-half delay, sitting on the tarmac in a queue. We're two hours late into San Francisco, where there's no ground transport to the venue. Bruno Johnson, chief of Okka Disk records, and trombonist Jeb Bishop retrieve rental vans, and then to the hotel. En route, Brötzmann smiles; he's been on tours like this before, knows the routine, the roller-coaster ride of tedium interspersed with moments of terror and elation, the joys of cramped quarters with the same dozen sweaty guys. The German saxophonist shakes his head and jokes: "I'm thinking how nice it would be to play some duets!"



Bruno Johnson with Brötzmann boarding their Horizon Airlines flight

The concert in San Francisco takes place at the Great American Music Hall, an ornately interioered nightclub. Soundcheck is smooth, in no small measure because Vandermark arranged to bring engineer Ziggy Zerang along. Zerang, whose older brother Michael plays drums in the group, makes the sound a constant joy, rather than a constant trial—not every club is equipped with someone who knows how to mike two drums, two basses, cello, and seven horns. Flashback to Berlin Jazzfest, '99: the Tentet, in a truncated, unpleasant soundcheck, doesn't yield the optimal musical results. But Ziggy's a lifesaver, a pro who gets the details without compromising the band's massive sound.

Johnson and I survey the concert from the merchandise table at the back of the room, the only two in tow who aren't directly making or mixing sounds. It's a decent house, more than two hundred, very enthused. The ensemble plays its ass off, especially Bishop, who's completely mesmerizing. Multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee's a free music superfly in a wide-brim white hat and metallic silver jacket. By load-out time, the marquee out front already reads: "Robyn Hitchcock."

### **Wednesday, June 21, 2000**

Ungodly early wake-up, with coffee around the pool, but there's action—turns out bassist Kent Kessler left his good bow at the club last night. After searching, it's gone. A serious drag, but he's taking it well.







Brötzmann's boots

Next stop—Portland, Oregon, where we're greeted at the airport by Brad Winter of the Creative Music Guild and a big orange school bus. As we get on the road, Winter breaks bad news to Brötzmann: His friend Werner Ludi has died. The Swiss saxophonist was Brötzmann's age, and in good shape, but succumbed to a heart attack in his sleep. They'd just toured together a few weeks before as a duo. The shock understandably influences the rest of the day; Brötzmann's in a reflective, solemn mood, and the music that night is focused and intense. They add a short free trio—Brötz with Drake and bassist William Parker—that Brötzmann dedicates to Ludi: "He was a good man and a fine musician."

The concert's in a modern chapel on the campus of a Christian school, Warner Pacific College. We stay in dorm rooms nearby—no smoking (even outdoors!) or drinking. In earlier days, such a restriction might have incensed Brötzmann, who was a notorious hellraiser, but he's been on the wagon for half a year, and the rest of the band is too exhausted to muster much protestation. After a couple of hours testing microbrews at a pub off campus, we're all snoozing.

#### **Thursday, June 22, 2000**

Today, this question arises: How to squeeze such a big band onto a tiny prop plane? A smooth flight to Vancouver, but very cramped. More waiting gives me time to think about how air travel compares with the way bands got around

in earlier jazz epochs: train and bus. Ellington loved trains and composed on them. As he put it: “Folks can’t rush you until you get off.” Rail passengers might have some space, time to relax, room to spread out. On a bus you can open a window. Even if air travel is theoretically faster, it’s more exhausting. Constant waiting, lines, recirculated air, disagreeable food, lack of space, rude people, and the anxiety of waiting for luggage to arrive intact. Or not. Traveling with two basses and a cello, that’s a big worry. A few years ago Vandermark found his clarinet case completely crushed. This time all’s OK.

We have to wait about an hour at immigration. With soundman, label rep, and observing journalist, the band is just large enough that it’s not supposed to have to pay a fee, but the border guards assess one nonetheless. Vandermark herds everyone to the booth where we get our work visas; he pays and we pass into Canada, but not before I am forced to pay duty on the box of CDs I’m smuggling through to sell. Doesn’t make sense to haul them around, since I’ve got to pay on the way in, then usually pay a percentage to the house. Johnson humps his bag through without notification, and no duty.

Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson and Vandermark split off from the group; they’re going elsewhere in Canada to play with Gustafsson’s AALY Trio, then rejoin. The rest proceed to the Vancouver Jazz Festival. We’re picked up at the airport and escorted to the Barclay Hotel, where many of the musicians have stayed before. “It’s a dump,” says saxophonist Mars Williams, and he’s right—what charm it once had seems to have acquired a patina of grime and a snippy, half-wit front desk.

It’s one of the strange things about traveling with a large, hard-to-define improvising ensemble these days: every town has a different set of circumstances, each gig has new rules, totally new expectations. In some places you’re another rock band: help yourselves, but where are your roadies? Next, you’re featured artists in a one-hit: kings of earth. Then you’re part of a giant festival machine, with volunteers hauling musicians and equipment to and from the airport all day long. It’s more than just different contexts. On tour, the creative music ensemble has to constantly shift identity, squeeze itself into one or another existing musical infrastructure. There is no such thing as a free music chitlins circuit, no well-trod improvisors’ touring network. Particularly for an ambitious project like this, the only option is a patchwork of diverse venues and game plans.

In the van on the way to the hotel, trumpeter Roy Campbell recounts a great story about once playing with Japanese Buddhist monks who tried to talk him into convincing Art Blakey’s daughter to sell them some of the drummer’s ashes. A Japanese musician he knew suggested: “I’ve got my dad’s urn, we should tell them it’s Blakey!” Life on the road: an accrual of weird tales.

On this day off, Campbell and I discover we have a common affliction—record collecting—and take to the shops, accompanied by Bishop. Over sushi that night, McPhee tells us about his uncle Alfonso Cooper barnstorming across the States in the '30s with his band the Savoy Sultans, hugely successful, getting food served to them on trays meant for dogs. Life on the road: a legacy of mistreatment. We sup our miso soup, pop another slice of California roll, and think about how much things have changed.

### **Friday, June 23, 2000**

Vancouver Fest programmer Ken Pickering has taken the opportunity to spin the big band off into smaller subgroups, some of them ad hoc, some working bands. These days “off” for the Tentet Plus Two are still grueling for the players, who dash from one gig to another. Kessler plays three times today, ending in an Ayler blowout with Williams’s Witches & Devils—by the early morning, fingers on his right hand are shredded. Multiple gigs of high-impact energy jazz in one day: Pickering has perhaps pushed the guys a bit too hard (a total of twelve concerts in three days), and it’s even exhausting just listening to that much music. After his gig with Die Like a Dog Quartet, Brötzmann takes a break from all the music, disappearing for much of the next two days, walking in Stanley Park, storing up for Sunday’s big group concert.

### **Saturday, June 24, 2000**

Today, it’s Vandermark who plays three concerts—with AALY, DKV Trio, and his Joe Harriott Project—all of them very strong, but afterward he’s a zombie. There’s a message waiting for him that his wife, Ellen, called, something important. A few drinks back at the ranch, and off to granite sleep.

### **Sunday, June 25, 2000**

Vandermark’s even paler this morning. Ellen informed him that his grandmother has died, and he’s been up all night phoning relatives. He’s somber, reflective, though he plays ferociously with Gustafsson at their afternoon AALY Trio concert. Early evening, McPhee plays a trio with Fred Lonberg-Holm and Peggy Lee, the Brötzmann group’s cellist and Vancouver’s cellist, respectively. A concert of enormous compassion, power, depth—very memorable. The big group concert is tonight, at the Vancouver East Cul-



The Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet

tural Center, one of the nicest venues, but the air conditioning has blown out, turning it into a sauna built for four hundred that will host the most hair-raising booking of the festival: opening for the Tentet Plus Two is the Georg Gräwe Trio, with Drake and Kessler. But even though they've got to perform double duty—two gigs in a row at the same venue—this rhythm section pulls through gloriously.

At each concert, the band has played a different program, including pieces by most of the band members. Since the group's inception back in '97, it's been very democratic, exceptionally varied with a mix of conventionally notated pieces, conductions, Lonberg-Holm's "lightbox" piece (which uses a row of colored lights to cue players), and Brötzmann's patented block diagram scores. Tonight they play almost everything in the group's book. Even in the blistering heat, after two hours of music not a soul leaves. Three concerts into the tour, the band now has its sea legs.

### **Monday, June 26, 2000**

The group heads east, for Atlanta, Boston, and New York, and here I hop off the tour, but not before a four-hour delay in the Vancouver airport. The endless chain of waiting and hurrying that constitutes contemporary air transport. Chicago, when it comes, is all about sleep and silence.



Brötzmann and the 2002 tour bus

### **Tuesday, July 4, 2000**

Independence Day. Second of two afternoons in Airwave Studios, Chicago, watching the band record. It's gone extremely well, tons of music, though Johnson has sworn off putting out another three-disc set like their first one—a mightily expensive package. The East Coast gigs were a success, apparently. On plane rides, two notable events: Vandermark, perhaps overwhelmed by fatigue and pressure, passed out cold and had to have oxygen administered to him; on another flight Brötzmann, lacking paper, tore open a vomit bag and composed a piece to feature Lonberg-Holm. They record the composition, titled "Backsides," late today. Afterward, Williams and his wife, Liz, pitch a nice, quiet barbecue; a band this size comes as a prepackaged party. Over steaks, chicken, and potato salad, everyone's already nostalgic, reflecting on the tour highlights.

### **Wednesday, July 5, 2000**

We're at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, the last gig of the tour: huge crowd, beautiful space, great vibe. And even though I'm too involved to even feign objectivity—I helped put the band together in the first place and coproduced its first two records—I can say that the music was otherworldly.

If anything, maybe too long, but everyone seemed to want to hold on to the moment, not to let it end. It had the feeling of something that would be recalled a lot: the Legendary Brötzmann Tentet Plus Two North American Tour of 2000. Such exploits should be the birthright of a big band, but the players know it's not dance music they're playing and have suspected all along that it might not be possible again. But there's a murmur about more: Europe? Another American tour? I've heard Vandermark suggest a mode of transport: this time, how about a bus?!

[2000]

# STEVE LACY

## Sojourner Saxophone

My head is my only house, unless it rains.

- Captain Beefheart

### **Road Trip: January 1996**

Soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy picks up shop and hits the trail, leaving Paris, the cosmo metropolis that he and his wife and main collaborator, singer and string player Irene Aebi, have called home for the last quarter century. Their temporary new residence: Berlin. Under a fellowship from the DAAD, the German government's arts foundation, Lacy will live and work in the reunified capital city. But this is only the latest in an ongoing string of road trips that stretch back like a freeway to the early part of Lacy's life.

### **Chapter One: The Road**

An imperative to go where the music tells you to go. "I live on the road," muses Lacy, reclining with an espresso in his airy Berlin apartment. "I spend an awful lot of time in airports, on airplanes. And we're not even certain where the next turn will take us. I'm still on the road, man. Paris is finished for the moment. We've used up Paris. It's not a very good moment in Paris right now, they're blowing it! Maybe we'll go back when it swings the other way." Beyond the yearlong residency, Lacy says he and Aebi will stay a while in Berlin, a city that has quickly proven, as he puts it, "very fruitful." Indeed, already he's been the focus of FMP's five-day Workshop Freie Musik, performing with five pianists (Misha Mengelberg, Marilyn Crispell, Ulrich Gumpert, Fred van Hove, and Vladimir Miller), a festival documented on the live CD *Five Facings*. And over the late-October weekend that I visit, he shares the spotlight with pianist Cecil Taylor at the Total Music Meeting, as one of "Two Portraits."





(Lacy later jokes: “Let’s call it ‘Two Sketches.’ We did what we could.”)

“I’ve always gone where the music takes me,” Lacy explains. “It isn’t that I want to go here or there, it’s that that’s where the music is. The music has taken me all over the world. And that’s also in terms of living, because I have to live where Irene and I can operate. Where I can play and she can sing and I can write and we can have a group and realize things. Berlin has been a refreshing change and opened up everything for me.” With a change of scenery comes a change of scene, and Lacy has disbanded his longest-lasting band, the Steve Lacy Sextet, paring it down to a more economical trio with bassist Jean-Jacques Avenel and drummer John Betsch. It’s been a period of great change and turmoil, honors and knocks: in 1992 Lacy received the prestigious (and lucrative) MacArthur Fellowship, while in the same year, after five records, he was unceremoniously dropped from RCA/Novus, his first liaison as a leader with a major record label. In 1994 his book *Findings: My Experience with the Soprano Saxophone* was published, a crowning achievement in his purposeful and exhaustive self-documentation.

Through triumph and pain, Lacy’s main activities continue to center on composing for Aebi’s voice. “We’re working on an opera all this year, but we’re already performing bits of it here and there,” he reports. In fact, Lacy’s been metamorphosing words into music since 1967, when he adapted Lao-tzu’s *The Way*. Ever road warriors, he and Aebi will take off the next morning—the day after his portion of the “Two Portraits” fest is done—to present the opera-in-progress at a French festival. Strange coincidences abound: Bangladeshi poet Taslima Nasri, whose work Lacy had already been setting to music, turned out to be the couple’s upstairs neighbor when they arrived in Berlin. Now Lacy’s turning her text into the opera’s libretto. “It’s not a coincidence at all, it’s one of those written-in-the-stars things. This is what we came to do here—though we didn’t know that. It’s an adventure also, and it’s a dangerous adventure, so we’re playing it cool.” It’s an adventure, of course, because opera isn’t exactly *en mode* in the

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Steve Lacy

jazz world these days. “I swore I’d never do it. I swore, oh man, I never want to do that!” exclaims Lacy. “We had enough trouble with musical theater pieces and dance pieces.”

### **Road Trip: 1970**

Based in Rome, Lacy and his Swiss-born wife are frustrated playing with enthusiastic, but amateur, Italian musicians. Lacy can’t find anyone whose reading skills are strong enough to perform the music he’s writing. And furthermore, there are no good drummers around. “I played this festival in ’69 outside of Paris, and there were all the cats from Chicago. There was Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith. There were good drummers and Bobby Few the piano player. And I said: Wow, these guys live in Paris, that’s where I want to go.” Go where the music tells you to go.

### **Chapter Two: Mixed Media**

The “Two Portraits” pairing suggests a crossing. “Cecil and I have crossed paths for many, many years,” the sixty-two-year-old Lacy recalls. “Going back to 1953 when he plucked me out of the traditional music and threw me into the avant-garde ocean.” Lacy performed and recorded with Taylor for six years. “He’s a very important figure in my life; he showed me the way to find my own music. I discovered Monk through Cecil, he turned me on to dance like Cunningham and Balanchine; he clued me in on politics, films, a certain amount of literature and theater, and humanity, people.” At the last minute, the whimsical and unpredictable Taylor chooses not to capitalize on a potential (and widely anticipated) mid-fest duet with Lacy, so the soprano saxophonist’s sparkling solo set, full of Monk and Lacy’s own compositions, leaves the crux uncrossed. “Cecil likes to leave people hanging,” grins Lacy afterward, unphased. In the four decades since joining “Cecil’s gang” (his term), Lacy has immersed himself in collaborations with a wide array of art forms. This polymorphousness is evidenced at “Two Portraits,” where Lacy plays with dancer/performer Shiro Daimon and actors Hanon Reznikov and Judith Malina. “I was inspired by Duke Ellington, who was a total arts man. His stuff involved the visual—he was a painter himself—and poetry and dance and music and theater and everything. And on the other hand Harry Partch. Gil Evans took me to see Partch’s show *The Bewitched* in ’57 or ’58 in New York. It was musical theater with song and dance and speech, and things were falling out of the ceiling and floor, like a happening. But it was completely controlled,

it wasn't accidental or chance. A total-theater piece, I saw it two nights in a row. Even before that I was taken to see Broadway shows—that's one of the things my family did for me that I'm really grateful for. Plus I've always been interested in painting. Since I was a kid I was interested in art, in fact I used to try to make a little bit myself.

“To me it seems the most natural thing in the world is not to combine but to employ the various media together. Why not? Like Duchamp said, you can put anything you want in a work of art. That was a very important statement and he proved it in his own work. I've always been eager to collaborate with dancers, painters, poets, actors, cinema, whatever. It makes the music move. Music has to be what it normally would not be. It requires something new of the music, and I like that urgency, that need to change, to adapt, to invent.” Lacy says he can learn more from a painter, actor, comedian, or clown than from another musician. “Sports figures, too. You can get inspired watching some athletes, get ideas about rhythm, line, timing, dynamics. It's all there. We're in the same boat, we're here to entertain each other . . . until the ship goes down!”

### **Road Trip: 1966**

A musical turning point comes during a disastrous jaunt to Argentina, with trumpeter Enrico Rava, bassist Johnny Dyani, drummer Louis Moholo, and Irene along for the ride:

Tangled up in the tango! I learned what the tango was, down there, and it ain't funny. But since then tango has been a very deep part of the music I do—there must be hundreds of little tango-type movements in the music I write. It was a disaster. That was the wrong group at the wrong time in the wrong place playing the wrong music, the wrong money and the wrong hotel. And yet it was very important. The music was incredible, but the politics . . . we arrived and there were tanks in the streets, they were prohibiting the Beatles. It was a fascist jungle, and also there were old Nazis running around. And we arrived with our little free jazz routine, and the posters advertised: “Revolution in Jazz!” You can imagine the reaction. We were on one-way tickets, and playing off the door of the theater. It's a recipe for disaster. The rest is history. Nine months we languished down there. We played all we could and we performed and eventually we found a small public that appreciated what we were doing. Before the very end we recorded [*The Forest and the Zoo* (ESP)]. I made that happen because I thought

the music was too important to lose. It was what we'd call the "hermetic free." The point of no return. Where the music had the maximum calories in it. There was nothing to say, no words necessary. Just: "play." After that, the music went elsewhere.

### Chapter Three: Various Freedoms

In the era after the harrowing visit to South America, Lacy's music took a very different turn, right into the period he calls "the scratchy seventies." "After about a year or so of playing completely free," he says, "the music started to sound the same every night. And then it was no longer free—that's when we had to start making another revolution." In retrospect, he categorizes the work after "hermetic free" into two sequential types: "post-free"—which began to put fences up in the music, to "groom" the total improvisation—and eventually "poly-free." "The C-major scale came right back. I thought I'd never see it again. But when it came back it was wide open with possibilities. We started adding melodies, written things, modes, rhythms. Sometimes it was free and sometimes it was free not to be free. Limits are very important. Once you know you're only going to do something for one minute, there's a certain freedom in that. You don't have to worry about the second minute."

Lacy's musical route took him deep into composition and back into performing Thelonious Monk's pieces, an obsession he first seriously initiated on his 1958 record *Reflections* (New Jazz / OJC), then with trombonist Roswell Rudd in the early '60s. It's a songbook he's never since tired of digging into, though at the time, as Lacy is quick to point out, nobody was recording Monk tunes. As for his own approach, he sums up: "You go through the complex to get to the simple. We have an old piece called 'Bone'—we try to get it down to the bone. You want to end up with something that's easy . . . easy to love!" A prolific composer with a writing style as distinctive as his personal soprano sound, Lacy has carefully honed his perspective on working material. "The jazz I like is a mixture of prepared and unprepared," he details.

The unprepared is also prepared, and the prepared is also unprepared. There are four edges. Improvisation is a tool, not an end in itself. It's a way of finding music that can't be found by composing. And composing is a way of finding music that you can't improvise. Maybe certain geniuses can improvise perfect structures, but in general to really make a language structure you need time to work on it, time to think about it and prepare it. And then you can play it in a minute! It's prepared. And you can play

it in an unprepared manner. You can play it differently each time, in an improvised manner. This is what Monk is about: a prepared structure that can be played in an improvised manner and can be elaborated upon improvisationally. It promulgates improvisation; the tune is not complete without improvisation. And a lot of what I write is made to be improvised. It's up to you to fill them out.

Lacy ponders a minute, then adds: "Monk told me: the inside of a tune is what makes the outside sound good. That's a very succinct definition of form, but it's true!"

### **Road Trip: October 1961**

After Ornette Coleman's record *Free Jazz* (Atlantic) was out and successful, there were demands for him to produce a live concert by his double quartet. Eric Dolphy wasn't available, so Ornette called Lacy, who was working days at a record store:

We had rehearsals in New York—Don Cherry, Bobby Bradford, Art Davis, Charlie Haden, Ed Blackwell. It was wonderful, the music was very exciting, I was looking forward to the concert, really. We got on the plane, went to a cinema in Cincinnati. On the cinema was written: "Free Jazz—Ornette Coleman Double Quartet." Around the cinema was a long line of people waiting to buy tickets for it. And guess what? They didn't want to pay. It was a crisis, man. "Hey, it's free jazz, we're not gonna pay." So they wouldn't pay and we wouldn't play. The concert did not take place, we got back on the airplane, went back to New York, and that was the end of *Free Jazz* in America.

And the birth of an archetypal ruse. "Now it's a joke, but it wasn't then. Everybody was hungry, broke. The chance to play some interesting music and get paid for it! To go all the way out there and find a lack of comprehension like that, it was hard."

### **Chapter Four: The Horn**

In the end, there's the horn. The inimitable soprano sound that Gil Evans wrote lead parts for on his first record, *Big Stuff*. Back then, there was no one but Lacy—even John Coltrane, who several times asked technical advice from his predecessor, was a decade behind Lacy in coming to the straight horn. Now, of course, sopranos are as ubiquitous as, say, Monk tunes.

What do you want your instrument to do and what does your instrument want to do? Those two things are the basis of a style, really. Your own desires and the instrument's exigencies. The soprano, if you take Evan Parker's playing and Lol Coxhill's and Coltrane's and my own, you can see that it can be played in a million different ways. The truth is that it hasn't been played in a million different ways, it's only been played in two or three ways. Sometimes I'm disappointed that somebody doesn't imagine something else to do with that. Maybe they'll come along.

"The main disappointment is that hardly anybody has developed the bottom of this instrument. I must be the only one that's really opened up the bottom." In fact, through tireless work he's extended his lowest note possibility down to a low G through a combination of lipping and foot muting. "I'm waiting for somebody else to really have founded something downstairs. That's perhaps the most interesting part of the horn, the most beautiful part, its most pleasant part." But Lacy points out the excruciating work that goes into such discoveries: "These things are possible if you really want them, but you've got to pay dearly and you've got to sound terrible, so pathetic and hopeless and hapless for a long time until it turns the corner and starts to sound better. To go through those pains, not everybody wants to do that. But the difficulty of playing a thing like that gives it expressive power automatically. It has tension because it's not easily won. It is per se dramatic because . . . maybe you won't be able to do it!" Lacy chuckles with the distinctive laugh of personal experience.

### **Head Trip: Sometime in the 1950s**

Zen was in the air, everyone was reading John Cage and thinking about sound and silence. In NYC, young Lacy had an adventure without leaving his home:

I was practicing long notes to develop my tone. I started playing two notes. I was working on the smallest interval, the minor second. In those days I was pretty crazy, really, I could do things for long, long periods of time. So, I started rocking back and forth on this minor second, between a B and a C, and decided to stay on those two notes for a long time. I played them for maybe an hour. Of course it went through the various stages of boredom, frustration, puzzlement, and it started to get interesting because my perceptions started changing. So I stayed on those two notes, that little interval, for a long, long time, I don't know how many hours, until I started to hallucinate, to the point where that little interval had become enormous.

And I had become very small. There I was, this little being in a huge room, and the room was a minor second. And it was uncanny, extraordinary, and I almost flipped because it was real, it was surreal, it was unreal, but it was for real. I found that I could hear so many things within that little interval, it had completely changed its aspects. When I came out of that room and went back to the rest of the horn, everything had changed, there was no relationship that was the same as previous to that experience of having gone into that little interval. My mind was blown, my ear was blown. That's a very important experience to dig into something to the point where you get beyond. Like Georges Braque said: impregnation, obsession, hallucination. A process like that: dig in, obsess, then it's a hallucination, and that's where something is revealed. And you can apply it to anything, break down a wall a day.

### **Epilogue: Where To?**

As long as he's lived in Europe, Lacy still doesn't like being known as an expatriate. "I've been out here for thirty years," he says, gazing out the window into the gray drizzle of Berlin. "But I don't want to be an ex-anything. If you're ex-, you're gone really. You're not there anymore!" he snickers, revealing the New York twang that's stuck with him through thick and thin. Where will the next twist in life's turnpike take him? "I feel a pull from America, and there's a time coming soon when I'll have to go back. I must, for a while, to see what's involved. It's just a question of timing, but it's coming up. I think there's something I'd like to accomplish—I hear a lot of stuff coming out of New York and it sort of rubs me the wrong way. I may be fooling myself, but I thought maybe I could go back there and do something about it." Home from the road or just another pit stop, maybe the peripatetic jazzman will alight on these shores, set them straight like his horn.

[1997]

## DAVID GRUBBS

### Postcards from the Edge

*In 2002, David Grubbs agreed to participate in a remote interview, not via e-mail but using snail mail. I sent him a list of brief questions, which are implied in his answers. Grubbs composed eight postcards during an international tour, reprinted here.*



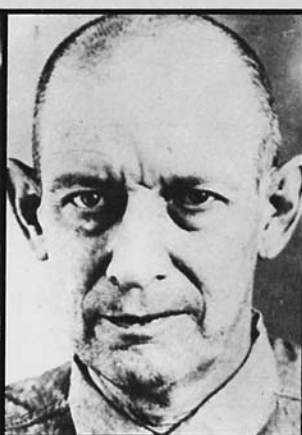
# ALCATRAZ FEDERAL PENITENTIARY NOTORIOUS INMATES



**AL  
"SCARFACE"  
CAPONE**  
#85



**GEORGE  
"MACHINE GUN"  
KELLY**  
#117



**ROBERT  
"BIRDMAN"  
STROUD**  
#594

E-45

Many of the most dangerous criminals in the United States were sent to Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary to serve their sentences. Al Capone, George Kelly and Robert Stroud were three of the well known convicts that spent time on "The Rock".

Photos courtesy: Asteron Productions  
Printed in Korea



5-19-00  
SAN FRANCISCO

Smith Novelty Co.  
400 Ninth St. San Francisco, California

POST CARD

DEAR JOHN ~

I WAS GIVEN A GUITAR AT AGE 12, & THAT'S WHEN I STARTED WRITING SONGS. AROUND THAT TIME I HAD AN UNDIMINISHINGLY VIVID DREAM ABOUT BEING ABLE TO IMPROVISE SONGS. IN THE DREAM, I NEVER PLAYED THE SAME SONG TWICE. MY SKILL WAS AN OBJECT OF MARVEL, & I PERFORMED ON THE MIKE DOUGLAS SHOW. THE DREAM WAS A FIRST TREMOR OF EXPERIENCING COMPOSITION & IMPROVISATION AS POSSIBLY ONE & THE SAME. NOWADAYS I HOPE TO MANAGE A FLUIDITY BETWEEN THESE TERMS BY ROPING IN THE MOST FABULOUS IMPROVISERS I KNOW TO WORK ON OTHERWISE COMPOSED MATERIAL.

JOHN CORBETT

1400 W. OLIVE #3

CHICAGO, IL. 60660

SEE PA, WCN



95  
 CATHERINE DENEUVE BY AURÈLE - 1994 - 22.05.02.184  
 AFFICHE COUSUE SUR ALUMINIUM  
 MAROUFLÉE SUR TOILE - 97 X 130 cm -  
 SÉRIE ACTION DE TERRAIN SIDACOSYSTARS -  
 PHOTO SERGE ARNAL

"Il faut agir dans cette vie comme si on avait toujours  
 entrepris de faire son autoportrait, c'est-à-dire qu'il faut  
 donner tous les jours quelques coups de pinceau sans  
 effacer ce qui est déjà tracé. 18:34"

5-22-02  
 PARIS

DEAR JOHN ~

"PRESQUE RIEN NO. 1" WAS THE FIRST PIECE  
 BY LUC FERRARI THAT STOPPED ME IN MY  
 TRACKS. IT MAKES GOOD ON CAGE'S EXHOR-  
 TATIONS TO OPEN YOUR EARS, BUT ALSO  
 THRILLS FOR HAVING SO DIMINISHED A  
 COMPOSITIONAL ASPECT. THE COMPOSITION  
 IS SUBTLE TO THE POINT OF ACTING AS A  
 FRAME. IT'S STRANGE THAT MY FIRST  
 CONNECTION WAS THIS IMMERSIVE, CONTEMP-  
 LATIVE EXPERIENCE WHEN LUC'S WORK IS  
 SO OFTEN RESTLESS, SELF-INTERRUPTIVE,  
 & ATYPICAL.

UNFORTUNATELY HE'S IN THE  
 U.S. THIS WEEK.

QUEL DRAC, al.



© 1994 BY AURÈLE FOR (AC) ET FLAMMARION 4 - IMPRIMÉ EN FRANCE - XF 1298

PAR AVION



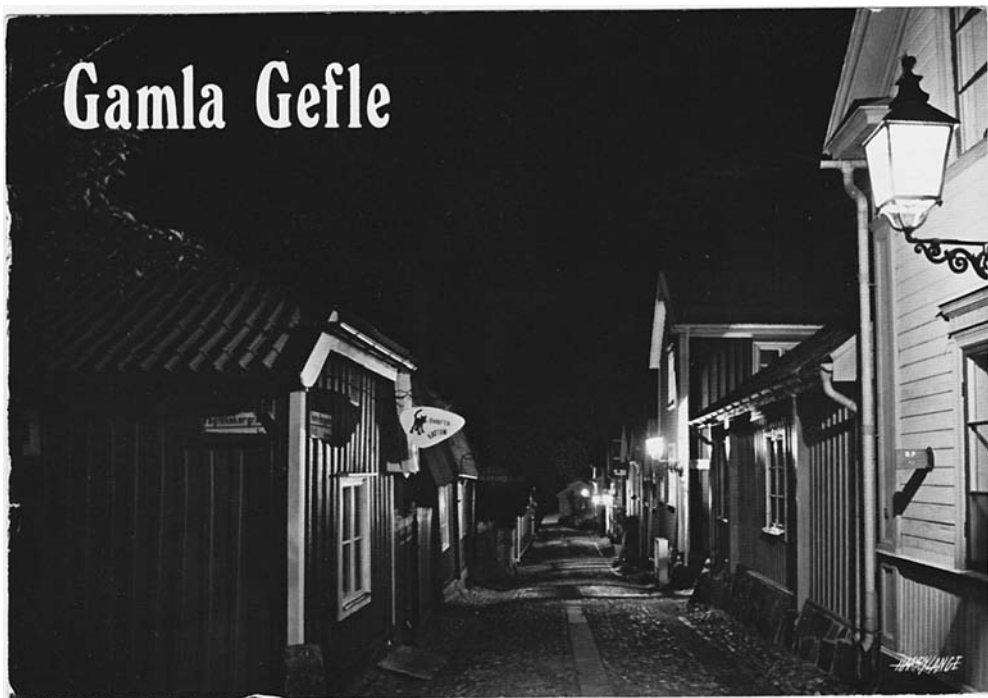
JOHN CORBETT

1400 W. OLIVE #3

CHICAGO, IL. 60660

U.S.A.

# Gamla Gefle



GAMLA GEFLE  
Nedre Bergsgatan

5.23.02  
BRUSSELS

DEAR JOHN ~

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO ROCK'S  
ROLL ONLY WHEN IT EMOTIONALLY  
BLINDSIDES ME. JOHN LYDON'S PIL-  
ERS AOWAL OF ROCK BEING THE ENEMY  
MADE ME ONE CONFLICTED TEEN. (THIS  
WAS WHEN I COULDN'T DECIDE WHETHER  
PUBLIC IMAGE'S "DEATH DISCO" WAS  
MEANT TO BE PLAYED AT 33 OR 45.)  
WHAT I LIKE ABOUT ROCK ISN'T ITS  
ROCKNESS. I LIKE THE POTENTIALLY  
NO-RULES QUALITY OF ITS COMPONENT  
ELEMENTS ~ WHICH IS BY NO MEANS  
UNIQUE TO ROCK MUSIC.

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HANEL SÄGÅGÅGGET HARRY LANGE VIKORISPRODUKTION  
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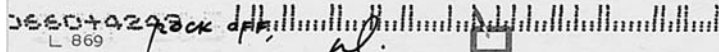
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U.S.A.

PRINTED IN ITALY





ROMA  
 Chiesa di S. Agostino in Campo Marzio  
 Madonna dei pellegrini  
 (Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio 1569 -1609)  
 La Vierge des pèlerins  
 (Michel-Ange Merisi dit le Caravaggio 1569 -1609)  
 The Virgin Mary of the pilgrims  
 (Michelangelo Merisi called Caravaggio 1569 -1609)  
 Die Heilige Jungfrau der Pilger  
 (Michelangelo Merisi genannt der Caravaggio 1569 -1609)  
 5.24.02  
 LONDON

ROYAL MAIL  
 par avion  
 Royal Mail



JOHN ~

I WISH THE RED KRATOLA FIT IN MY SUITCASE.  
 I'LL CONFESS TO A BREATH JUST AS BAITED  
 AS ANYONE ELSE ABOUT WHAT FORM THE PK  
 MIGHT NEXT TAKE. OF THE ORSA CITY RECORDS  
 I PLATED ON IN THE '90S, HAZEL IS A DEFINITE  
 FAVORITE. MY FEELING AT THE TIME WAS  
 THAT THE RED KRATOLA HAD REACHED AN,  
 ER, FRANCIS FUKUYAMA'S STYLE END OF THE  
 RED KRATOLA HISTORY POOL OF PARTICIPANTS.  
 HA! MORE LIKE AN ELIZABETHAN WHEEL OF  
 RED KRATOLA FORTUNE.

JOHN CORBETT  
 1400 W. OLIVE #3  
 CHICAGO, IL. 60660  
 U.S.A.

2320200

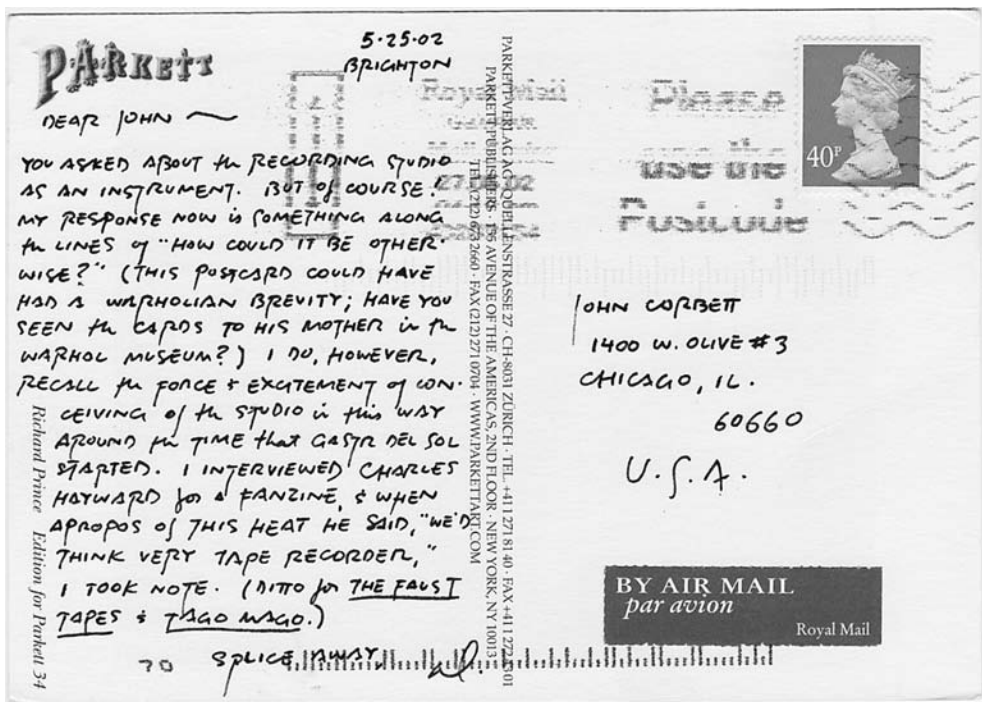
RIPRODUZIONE VIETATA



NON SCRIVERE SOTTO - DO NOT WRITE BELOW

"I'M SO BLASE" IS STUCK IN MY HEAD ~  
 THE AWFULNESS OF "NOTHING REALLY  
 TOUCHES ME"

MOMENTARY FRIENDS





Greetings And Salutations From Hell Cayman Islands BWI



Cayman Islands

6.4.02  
GRAND CAYMAN

DEAR JOHN ~

RE D.I.Y., WHO ELSE IS GOING TO DO IT ~ BY WHICH I MEAN DO IT RIGHT?

I GUESS I'M RENDERING IT IN THE PLURAL: "DO IT YOURSELVES." OR AS YOU SAY IN KENTUCKY, "DO IT YOUR ALL'S SELVES." MOST OF THE LABELS I WORK WITH BEGAN BY PUTTING OUT RECORDS THAT NO ONE ELSE WOULD TOUCH ~ TWIN INFINITIVES, ANYONE? DITTO FOR DEXTER'S CIGAR & BLUE CHOPSTICKS. I'D NEED MORE THAN A POSTCARD TO EXPLAIN THE PLEASURES/REWARDS OF B.C.I; & BESIDES, I'M ON VACATION.

MUCH LOVE

al.

Hell and what it looks like, the young lads indicate their feelings.  
Photo by Hans W. Hannau

BOEING 777 - 200



Maedac Road, P.O. Box 531, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands, B.W.I. Printed in Switzerland by Vontobel

JOHN CORBETT

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CHICAGO, IL. 60660

U.S.A.



Craig Lamotte

The Central Australia Collection

Photograph by Craig Lamotte CA88

24 JULY 2002  
HARBOR, N.S.W.

DEAR JOHN ~

I LIKE BEING THE PERSON WHO PLAYS SONGS AT FESTIVALS OF EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC. I DO IT OFTEN. I'LL TAKE THAT OVER BEING A GUITARIST AT A GUITAR FESTIVAL OR SONGWRITER AT A FESTIVAL OF SAME. (THE NIGHT BEFORE I LEFT FOR AUSTRALIA, I WAS INTRODUCED TO NEIGHBORS IN BROOKLYN & ASKED WHAT KIND OF MUSIC I MAKE. I SAID THAT I WAS A SINGER-SONGWRITER & MY FRIENDS CALLED BULLSHIT ON ME.) THE FIRST TIME I SAW JIM O'DONNANKE DO A SOLO, IMPROVISED GUITAR SET, VAN DYKE PARKS'S DISCOVER AMERICA WAS PLAYED OVER THE P.A. AFTERWARDS. WHEN I SHARED A BILL IN BRISBANE THE OTHER NIGHT WITH OTOMO YOSHIMIDE & YACHIKO M, THE EFFECT WAS SIMILAR. THE DIFFERENCE WAS THAT I PLAYED FIRST, FOLLOWED BY OTOMO, THEN YACHIKO. OTOMO DESCRIBED THE EVENING AS BEING LIKE THE DEATH OF MUSIC!

SWAGGER DAYS, MATE ~ *al.*

The rare Greater Bilby survives in isolated pockets of the Central Australian desert.

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and plants of Australia's deserts in a landscape closely resembling their natural habitat. It is home to more than 400 animals, many of them endangered species which are almost impossible to locate in the wild.

JOHN CORBETT

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CHICAGO, IL. 60660

U.S.A.



6066044223





Sperm Whale, Kaikoura, New Zealand

8.6.02  
CHRIS CHURCH

DEAR JOHN ~

ABLE WAS I ERE I KAYAKED IN ABEL  
TASMAN PARK...

A FINAL THOUGHT: NOT A LOT HAS CHANGED  
SINCE THE DEATH OF MUSIC (BRISBANE,  
19 JULY 2002). IT'S PROBABLY THE CASE  
THAT EVERYONE DIES THEIR OWN  
PERSONAL DEATH OF MUSIC.

SAW THREE SPERM WHALES THIS MORNING.

FONDLY,

al.

Photography Copyright © DENNIS BUURMAN



JOHN CORBETT

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CHICAGO, IL. 60660

U.S.A.

DOLPHIN  
ENCOUNTER

Produced by: Dolphin Encounter  
58 West End, Kaikoura, New Zealand  
Phone 03-319 6777





BLARNEY CASTLE, CORK

**BLARNEY CASTLE, CO. CORK:** Situated 7 km from Cork City, the Castle is famous for its Stone, which has the traditional power of conferring eloquence on all who kiss it. The word "Blarney" has found its way into the English language and has been described as pleasant talk, intended to deceive without offending. The famous Stone is set in the wall below the battlements, and to kiss it, one has to lean backwards (grasping an iron railing) from the parapet walk.

John Hinde  
IRELAND



AIR MAIL

9.27.02  
CORK

PEOPLE!

OK ~ THE POSTCARD PROJECT  
IS FINISHED, RIGHT? HENCEFORTH  
OFF THE RECORD, NO? I HAVEN'T  
RECHARGED MY BLARNEY-ELUQUENCE  
JUST YET ~ MAYBE THERE'S A  
CITYWIDE OSMOSIS? HOPEFULLY?  
'T WAS A BLAST TO SPEND TIME  
W/ Y'ALL. JUST THINKING ABOUT THAT.  
THAT'S ALL.

LOVE, M.

JOHN CORBETT & TERRI KAPSAUS

1400 W. OLIVE #3

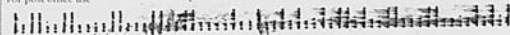
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USA



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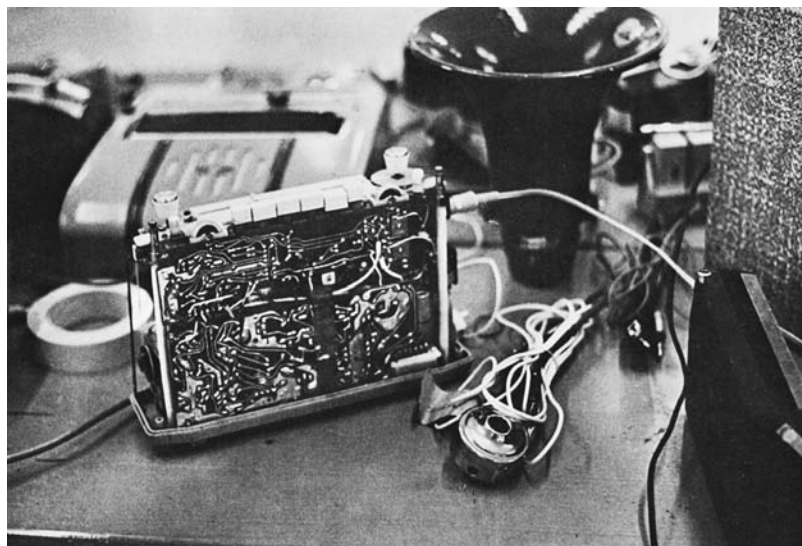


## VOICE CRACK

### From Nothing to Everything

After the gig: carnage. A battlefield littered with corpses. Voice Crack's performances have always seemed like HO-scale train dioramas to me, miniature cities populated with electronic signals intermittently emitting pulses, triggering sensors, eventually making noises. But the vista is important, the destroyed vista. Looking over the wrecked city, it was not possible to imagine how all this détourned equipment had been brought from Europe by just two people, fit into luggage, smuggled onto a plane, into a cab, to the bar. What I'd seen in the first place seemed a figment of my imagination, a false memory.

They arrived at the Empty Bottle on Western Avenue on an early evening in May 1996. Our series had just started a few months earlier, and Voice Crack's



Cracked Everyday Electronics, Voice Crack, 1986

first Chicago appearance was a major happening. Unassumingly, Guhl and Möslang arrived, smiles and greetings, but surprisingly little baggage. They mounted the club's tall stage, plunked some bags onto the folding tables, and opened them up. I distinctly remember my shock. The innards of each of these bags, packed with the precision and efficiency that is the Swiss birthright, looked absolutely like a bomb. *How the fuck did this get through security?* I thought. Maybe I even asked that question—I seem to recall it slipping out of my mouth. If you wanted to make a facsimile of an incendiary device, this is what it would look like. And in the world of airports, even in the days before 9/11, there is no discernible difference between fake and real.

In between the unpacking and the repacking, there was the concert. The totally darkened club was illuminated by sporadic flashes of light, suspended in cigarette smoke (those were the days of indoor smoking!), as bicycle lamps flashed on and off in erratic patterns while rotating on a turntable. It built from nothing to everything. A complete world of sound, self-contained, captivating. And then it died, the audience drifted away, and Möslang and Guhl put Humpty Dumpty back in his bags.

[2013]



**TWO**

EXIGENESSES OF  
CREATIVE MUSIC



## MILFORD GRAVES

### Pulseology

It's no ordinary rec room. Descend into percussionist Milford Graves's basement and you enter his secret laboratory—part music practice and performance space, part computer research facility, part nonallopathic apothecary. Percussion instruments from across the globe fill one side of the low-ceilinged room, along with components of a drum kit (hand decorated with vibrant colors, each with one missing head) and an upright player piano painted bright orange.

At the other extreme of the room, a lovely old wooden bar is neatly arranged with items including anatomical models, an African fetish sculpture, annotated tincture bottles, and bags of dried herbs. Herbs also hang in bunches overhead. In the center of the space are three impressive color screens connected to powerful computers, behind them a wall of manuals, their tops sprouting slips of paper poised at significant reference points. Hanging printouts document EEG and EKG readings of various visitants, and against the opposite wall is a library of older, dog-eared books, including a copy of Helmholtz's *On the Sensation of Tone* disintegrating from decades of use. The place has an uncanny air of ancient and ultramodern, organic and inorganic, handmade and industrial.

The abode itself is a miraculous burst of energy on an otherwise unremarkable—if somewhat rough-seeming—street in Jamaica, Queens. Graves has covered it with swirling mosaics of colorful tiles and stones. Inspired by temples he's visited since his first trip to Japan in 1977, the self-taught artist constructs façades in his backyard workhouse—temporarily converted from its usual function as the space in which he leads martial arts classes—and affixes them to the building. A bamboo garden gently abuts the main house; in it Graves grows some of the harder to procure herbs for his traditional healing practice. Many of these seemingly disparate activities circulate around a basic involvement in studying the human body and the influences of sound



on it—something Graves has come to call “biological music.” Graves’s radiant house is a fitting theater of operation for such a multidisciplinary man.

This is the neighborhood in which Graves grew up, the same address he came to on Sundays to spend the day with his grandparents, who often entertained downstairs at the bar. The residence developed a reputation as a social hot spot in the ’20s and ’30s, and in the basement in the mid-’40s, a very young Graves played piano for his step-grandfather’s relatives from Barbados and his grandmother’s white coworkers, learning early about multiethnic blending. “She was the kind of grandma you think you’ve got to be at attention when she’s talking,” he says with admiration. “But always instilling that you can do whatever you want to do in life.”

In 1970, Graves’s grandmother willed him her house. Along with the fact that he’s been teaching regularly at Bennington College in Vermont since ’73, this precious inheritance has made him less dependent on gigging for a living, and his performances have been relatively rare. But in recent years Graves has played in public more often. He ran a series of personal-invitation-only

concerts in his basement, but he's also performed at festivals and big concert halls, on the bill with Sonic Youth, sometimes with John Zorn or with the newly reformed New York Art Quartet. Zorn's Tzadik label issued two CDs—*Grand Unification* (1998) and *Stories* (2000)—the overdue documentation of Graves's solo music. Graves was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Composition in 2000, which has allowed him to invest more fully in his research. But recognition for his original contribution has been incommensurately slow. Given what new insights he has offered jazz drumming over his forty-year career, one might expect him to be more routinely celebrated.

"My experience has told me that before you do anything you've got to have that divine desire," says Graves as he lays out natural snacks on an acupuncture table in his basement and pours a couple of shots of apple juice in preparation for our eight-hour conversation. "If you've got determination, discipline, and patience, things will open up to you. That's why I didn't go out and aggressively knock on every agent's door. That patience was imparted to me in 1965 by Wasantha Singh, my tabla instructor. He said, 'You'll be good when you're fifty.' I didn't want to hear it, because I was young at the time, but it struck me. I was going to have to be patient."

Graves is a lifelong drummer. When he was a kid, a sublet tenant of his parents, Mr. Page, died and left a bass drum and two field drums in his apartment. His first instrument wasn't a normal kit, and he's rarely used one since. This area of Jamaica was less populous then, and Graves liked to slip into the woods and play on tin cans and his newly acquired drums. "I was a Tarzan movie freak—guys swinging through the jungles, so-called African tribal members at war with him. That movie *Drums with Sabu* fascinated me. I'd go where nobody could see me and play Mr. Page's drums—sending signals, trying to get everybody's attention."

Before he cracked double digits, Graves learned about Latin music from a conga-playing distant cousin. "We were the little guys in the housing project who would put on a show for everybody." In sixth grade, he met a Cuban boy named Renaldo Tracon. Graves got to be close with Tracon's family, and this left a lasting influence on him. "I was slowly becoming Cuban in spirit. Later on, all these guys I played with said, 'Only Cubans can play like that!'" Unbeknownst to him, Tracon's father was a respected timbale player, a fact Graves discovered one night at the Palladium when "the Old Man" was invited to play on Tito Puente's instrument. "He showed you how the timbales should be played!"

Graves's early years were spent playing Afro-Latin music, his appetites and skills nurtured by elder musicians. "It wasn't about licks or patterns, it was



about spirit. And you know that's not in the tradition of jazz, either, to try to clone people to play like Max, Elvin, Roy Haynes, Philly Joe, Papa Jo," he says. "They should inspire you to play like yourself. I'd been brought up with this human feeling, not being someone who went to school to become part of an intellectual club."

At the dawn of the '60s, the Milford Graves Latino Quintet included Graves on timbales and cymbal, bassist Lisle Atkinson, Charlie Parker-ish alto saxophonist Pete Yellin, and a young pianist named Chick Corea. The group played Latin jazz in the vein of George Shearing and Cal Tjader. In '63, Graves went to Boston to play for the summer at the Ebb Tide with Don Alias and Mexican alto saxophonist Dick Mesa, again playing Latin. When audiences were thin, they would slip in a little jazz, Graves playing his cymbal like it was a ride. That summer he bought his first standard set—including the bass drum he still uses—from pianist Hal Galper and started transferring what he knew from timbales to kit.

"I never thought I was going to be avant-garde, I just knew I wanted to play drums," he says.

But I knew I couldn't play the standard way a lot of guys were playing trap drums. When I played timbales, I had two drums! I thought: Why would you have all these drums and not use them? It was the reverse of when I was playing in the Afro-Latin stuff, where the cymbal was the miscellaneous thing. In Latin, playing cymbal through the whole piece was a no-no. You were hitting those skins, cowbell, riffing. So I couldn't understand how a guy would sit and play a basic beat all the time. In African drumming, the drum is in the forefront. Timekeeping for the drummer? I said no way. When I came into jazz, because of the melodic and harmonic structure, it had much more variety, which gave me more freedom. In Latin, you're playing the montuno over and over again. In jazz, as a drummer just sitting back, I couldn't feel it. My reflexes told me to hit those things.

Graves first exploded onto the jazz scene in the mid-'60s with a concept so shocking that some said it was impossible. Of his initial encounter with the drummer in '64, at a rehearsal for the group with Roswell Rudd that became the New York Art Quartet, alto saxophonist John Tchicai wrote: "Graves simply baffled both Rudd and I in that, at that time, we hadn't heard anybody of the younger musicians in New York that had the same sense of rhythmic cohesion in polyrhythmics or the same sense of intensity and musicality."

Graves helped revise the role of percussionist, introducing sounds from non-Western percussion traditions and upending some of the most dearly held

conventions of group interaction in jazz. Working in ensembles with Albert Ayler, Giuseppi Logan, Paul Bley, Sonny Sharrock, and Lowell Davidson and in duets with Don Pullen, he unleashed complexes of unevenly pulsed rhythms and constructed dense aggregates of multilayered polymeters. Graves reconfigured his kit to accommodate the demands of this new music. He took the skins off of one side of his drums, which he says had always made him feel like he was talking with his hand over his mouth, and in the '70s he eliminated the snare from his kit, returning to a setup familiar from his experience with timbales. This enabled him to spread his drumming across the skins rather than focusing on a single central point.

“In the early years I was going along with what was supposed to be done: one hand on cymbal and one on snare. But when I put my own bands together, it was best to make this change. Then I knew they might not complain: ‘Do you play snare? I’d like to hear your snare.’” The new kit opened fresh technical options. “If you know how to manipulate your skins, you can make that dispersed sound—slides, portamento style, sustained tone. Instead of letting your stick free rebound, you can mute it, slide it on there. It calls for greater physicality. And to do it in a certain time span is not easy. But I knew that eventually the drum would have to be restored to its rightful way of articulating sound, not just rhythm.”

That adjustment meant a different function for jazz percussion. “Not taking a greater or lesser role, but an equal role,” he says. “Not reducing yourself to the point that you were considered just a drummer, not a musician. I resented that more than anything.” Graves played in an undocumented rehearsal band of clarinetist Jimmy Giuffre, with bassist Barre Phillips and pianist Don Friedman. “That was a great experience. Jimmy Giuffre wrote out the lines for the drums, usually in duets—clarinet and piano, bass and drums. A lot of the stuff was not in tempo, so it was challenging. He’d have you hitting on the rim, the side of the cymbal. Trying to make the drummer play more tonal. He said, ‘I want a musician, not a drummer.’”

Echoes of Graves’s discoveries were heard in Europe and Japan, in the acoustic avalanches of early Han Bennink, the extensions of color and phrase-shape of Paul Lovens, the long cyclical rhythm patterns of Toshi Tsuchitori. Graves’s reach can be heard more recently in the promising work of his onetime student Susie Ibarra. But Graves’s music is extremely rigorous, difficult to emulate let alone expand upon, so he has perhaps had fewer devotees than some other free drum innovators whose work is more easily digested and/or copied.

Graves’s technique involves extreme physical demands. At sixty, he’s in incredible shape, with better stamina and energy than most musicians a third

his age. He recalls an important test that came in 1965 in a string of five consecutive nights playing with Ayler at Slugs, three sets a night. The first set comprised music of utmost intensity, and afterward Don Pullen, who was in the audience, told him: “You can’t do that for five nights.” But Graves saw it differently.

Albert had split one of his mouthpieces and some of the fragments got caught in his throat, so he said, “Let’s play ballads.” I didn’t want to deal with ballads. I wanted to show everybody that you could play like this. But this music wasn’t developed to be played five nights at a high level like that. Spontaneous improvised music doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to be really deep into yourself, to make sure you don’t get into repeats over and over again. You’ve got to supercompute, and if you’re supercomputing you can blow all your resources. I took Don’s challenge.

He pauses, then laughs. “But then I had to take a vacation for the next week, eat all vegetarian meals, juices, supplements and stuff, do some restoring.”

A common set of principles links the distinct parts of Graves’s life—his work in global music, traditional medicines, and martial arts. An axiom of adaptability, a sense that people need to be flexible to deal with new contexts and new challenges, underlies everything. With his Guggenheim Fellowship and money from a sabbatical at Bennington, Graves bought equipment to test ideas about the inherent adaptability of the body that he’s developed as a musician. A self-proclaimed “fanatic,” sleeping only a couple of hours a night, he taught himself to program the computer. Personalizing LabView and BioBench software designed for industrial applications, and the sound-edit program ProTools, he started creating portraits of people’s hearts, doing spectral analysis of these and converting them into pitches. In particular, he became interested in the cardiac activity—markedly different from one to the next—of his musicians. The aims are, on one hand, to find out more about his players in order to create music more fittingly designed for their constitutions, and on the other to collate data about biological activity to better understand how the body uses frequency information in its own self-regulation.

“The heart is more than a pump,” Graves says.

It’s a total connection between the activity of the brain and circulation. I relate it to pulse diagnostics in traditional Chinese medicine, in Ayurvedic medicine, and also in Unani medicine, out of Persia. I coordinate this with the German electro-acupuncture system. The objective is to be able to pro-

duce sound that can set up a vibration in the body by using sound waves entering the ear, exciting the eardrum, causing fluid movement, touching all the basal fibers in the membrane that will eventually be converted into electrical impulses and electricity, or energy. I'm trying to develop a highly aesthetic, more balanced form of music.

The most fascinating discovery Graves has made comes from heart sounds of people with various pathologies. He'd expected to find harsh results but discovered instead that their heart activities, when converted into melodic information, were the most beautiful he'd heard. "When people are ill, they should have fantastic, beautiful melodies," he says. "Your internal doctor is trying to heal you." Graves recognizes a social and historical dimension to this discovery.

I brought it down to a biological configuration. With Afro-American culture, you've got to stop at some point from talking about the negativity that was done to you and see the positive aspect that can come out of your experience. I've been observing what happens to people with all this stress on them: they produce great melodies. It's obvious where black music in this country came from. Gospel, the blues. Such beautiful lines came from stress. When you are denied a kind of existence, you retreat into your place. You get contemplative. And if you're an artist, you project what's inside.

But there's something from this black experience that can be educational for all people. The true practitioners of Zen were black folks in this country. They didn't have to intellectualize and say I want to forget everything and go into a state of Nirvana. When you were denied existence, you were told to go search your inner soul. When black folks do music, they're serious. Black musicians who decided to become more conservatory educated, involved in a system unrelated to spiritual and biological activities, lost the black community. Because black folks say you've got to have something that can reach their soul. Black people don't go to church to learn about one and one is two. They go there to find out how to keep some inspiration to stay on this planet, man. I can go into the community and be as "way out" as I want to be, never have a problem. You know why? Because I grew up with the feeling. You lose your sense of relating to people, you're finished.

Graves's heart studies also confirm the falsity of one of the easiest potshots taken at nonmetrical or polymetrical drumming in free jazz, namely, that it's unnatural and doesn't mimic the heart, which is assumed to have a steady beat.

That's not natural. You have to go against all the rules of nature, use a metronome, inhibit your true ability to sense the rhythms and vibrations of nature. In a pure metric sense, that means that your inhalation and exhalation would always be the same, because when you inhale your beats per minute increases. If you exhale, it decreases. No one breathes that way. Breath varies, so cardiac rhythm never has that tempo. It's always changing. All the alignments of the heart are determined off needs of cells, specifically tissue and organs. The heart knows if it needs to speed it up. That's basically what the Chinese are talking about in their pulseology.

A parallel is clear: the heart is more than a pump, the drummer more than a timepiece for the band.

At the end of a marathon day of discussion and demonstration, his stamina unhampered, Graves stops to say good-bye to his daughter and plant a kiss on the forehead of his granddaughter, both of whom have been visiting upstairs with his wife. The little girl already has her heartbeat on the computer. Graves returns to thoughts of his grandmother. "She always told me not to let racism hold me down, to do what I wanted to do. She had a heavy influence." He glances around the basement at the herbs and computers and instruments. "It's appropriate that I do this here."

[2002]

## OUT OF NOWHERE

Deleuze, Gräwe, Cadence

How to end?

To produce, somehow, a work without the gentle brutality of an introduction. And, more centrally, one that lacks a conclusion. Creating a piece that points outward in both directions, to something happening before it begins and something lurking after it is finished. What resolve it takes to create work without resolution. To disengage linear, hierarchical links, breaking apart the inevitable sequence of good form: introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation, conclusion. With what task is the end moment conventionally charged? What must it accomplish? In music, so often it is a question of configuring an amnesiac: absorbing the frightening openness of the work's interior regions into a cadence that makes the listener forget—not simply by reassuring (the return to tonal center, refreshed and safe at home), but by distracting (creating explosive fireworks, elaborate series of resolving chords, each one more solid and authoritative than the last, to draw the listener's attention from the text's exposed core). A finish that seems definitive, final, the end, ba-boom.

The finale could be seen as the resolving moment, the release point of tension-and-release, the “fort” of “fort-da.” But it is also a trick, a technique used to erase or evaporate any disquietude created in musical exploration by overpowering what came before it. The most compelling (compulsive) devices in Western music—dynamic extremes (fade to silence or huge crescendo into punch-chord end point), harmonic resolution (triumph of tonal center through “perfect cadence”—a dominant chord followed by the final tonic chord, or any “imperfect” cadences that alter or invert such chords; the “plagal” or so-called Amen cadence, wearing its religious authority on its sleeve), and rhythm cadences (ritardando, slowing down to a gradual stop, or accelerando, speeding up to a sudden stop)—are typically deployed in the attempt to corner the listener's attention and leave the volatility of the work's internal section in its conclusion's dust.

To make music consisting only of middle. Intermezzo. Interminable work. Nothing radical, only radial. No ends, mere means. No succession of segments. No striation, but a smooth, mobile instrument of creative thought.

Perhaps it is fitting that the new electronic and electroacoustic music underground—what Markus Müller has called “discourse-techno”—has found Gilles Deleuze a suitable philosophical icon. Creation of sound works based on fuzzy logics, nonlinearity, collisions of inorganic and organic energies in cybernetic machines of desire, small communities of autodidacts operating without institutional affiliation—such concepts jibe well with the Deleuzian (and Deleuzo-Guattarian) political poetics of rhizomatics, minoritarianism, deterritorialism, and nomadology. A return in certain youth subcultures to an ethic of experimentation—psychedelic drugs, experimental and nonconventional art forms, alternative lifestyles—reminiscent of the late-’60s period in which Deleuze’s ideas first gained an audience, is in part responsible for this grassroots “rediscovery.”<sup>1</sup>

The premium Deleuze placed on creativity and invention (“There is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring-production that is mere fantasy on the other”),<sup>2</sup> as opposed to negative dialectics or pragmatism, has clearly made his work appealing to such artists and audiences. For instance, a small German record label specializing in discourse-techno and experimental digital music has named itself *Mille Plateaux* in homage to Deleuze and Guattari’s book of the same title (suffice to say, no other record company has lifted its name from the work of Theodor Adorno or Jürgen Habermas). When Deleuze committed suicide in 1996, *Mille Plateaux*’s producers assembled a collection, *In Memorium Gilles Deleuze*, which includes a fragment, drawn from a very scratchy record, of Deleuze speaking, as well as a selection of sound works by twenty-six different individuals and groups.

The most interesting of the double disc’s tracks is “You Are \* Here 0.9 B,” by Oval; as on Oval’s other records, tiny fragments of skipping digitalia and computer noise are regurgitated and given form, presence, even texture (against the notion of complete dematerialization in virtuality). Jim O’Rourke’s “As In” begins with an impertinent, practically silent field recording of rustling motion, which quickly shifts into an Alvin Lucier–like resonance document. But if the homespun spirit of the collection is heartening, much of the actual work turns out to be a disappointment: a hodgepodge of neo-psychedelia created on new technology that contains but a few bright moments. Even Ralf Wehowsky, who has produced some of the most challenging records of electroacoustic music in the last half decade, contributes a droll collage, “Happy Deterritorializations,” with contributor Achim Wollscheid. Like the

other recent Deleuze dedication, *Folds and Rhizomes* (and its remix companion, *Double Articulation*), on the Belgian label Sub Rosa, *In Memorium Gilles Deleuze* leaves one to search for a more suitable remembrance.

In what way is the ending cadence structured? It starts with a cue, a signal that the end is near (hence there are so-called false cadences, endings that seem imminent but never materialize); the signal allows a listener to expect a final moment. To immerse him- or herself in the exquisite wholeness of closure. To know what is coming. To prepare to forget.

The composer telegraphs the conclusion the way a bad boxer telegraphs a punch.

Cadences are therefore not simply the temporary cessation of a flow, but complex mechanisms designed to play on memory and to shut the music machine *down*, not just shut it *off*. A sublation (such as a cadence) must subsume what has come before into a higher form, transforming it into something on another level, something more worthy of consideration. The cadence completes the musical piece, sealing it off and crushing down what appeared in its middle, reducing the soft interiority to dismissible filler. Following Deleuze-Guattari's frightened little kid singing to comfort himself in "1837: Of the Refrain,"<sup>3</sup> the cadence is the *final* refrain. The return home, shield against chaos, it is this final refrain that succeeds in comforting.

To resist the final refrain. The breast-mouth assemblage is all flows and breaks. Likewise, the shit machine continues endlessly, pumping out and chopping off pieces of feces like a frozen custard maker or Deleuze-Guattari's ham-slicing machine. "The anus and the flow of shit it cuts off, for instance; the mouth that cuts off not only the flow of milk but also the flow of air and sound."<sup>4</sup> To suck, you have to stop singing; to sing, you've got to stop sucking. All flows and breaks. How to produce music with that constancy, flow, and inability to forget?

Improvisors are faced with somewhat different formal problems to solve than composers (and performers of composed music), and such differences are heightened around the beginnings and ends of pieces. In the absence of a script, two issues arise in real-time music performance: How will a piece of improvised music begin, and how will an end be decided upon? Like composition, the practice of improvisation has developed its own conventions of closure. Among the most common: *the fade-out*, where musicians diminish their volume in tandem until silent; *long tones*, held together until the piece seems over; *simultaneous punch-sound terminus*, in which players play high-energy staccato end notes; *cadenza*, in which one musician is left to make a final solo statement and chooses to end a piece.



Not all improvisors are concerned with starting and stopping. At a concert in Vancouver, the British group AMM began by telling the audience the approximate length of the performance—an hour, nonstop—and inviting them to come and go as they pleased. This had the effect of letting the audience members, many of whom were unfamiliar with improvised music, off the hook; a smart move, it probably kept them there longer than they would otherwise have stayed and assured them that they were not expected to remain indefinitely. Such a sustained improvisation seems to deny the significance of beginning and ending, if only by shifting the balance in favor of the middle; indeed the sheer length of time taken by the musicians forces the listener to confront the immediacy of the resulting sounds rather than anticipating the more formal aspects of the work that cluster around its entryways and exits—the orifices of a piece. (Eliminating a concentration on the music’s orifices meant in this case that the audience was less fixated on the building’s orifices—entryways and exits.) Without markers foreshadowing an impending finish, the music just might *go on forever*. By announcing a finite duration, AMM allayed the fear that it *would never end*. There’s a relaxation inherent in being offered an ending and an anxiety attached to the hint of interminability. Between these poles stretches a profound fear of inconclusiveness, taut like a laundry line.

In his solo work, and in much of his ensemble composition and improvisation, German pianist Georg Gräwe confronts the problem of ending in a manner different from that of many of his colleagues. Rather than improvise great buildups to climaxes or slip out gradually through slow fades, Gräwe tends to play continuously, emphasizing flow—his astounding facility allows him to maintain rolling momentum and establish simultaneous multidirectional rhythms—and avoiding simple repetitive patterns and sequences. But it is his endings that are most startling. They descend on a piece, yanking it away like a rug pulled from under your feet or a doorknob that comes off in your hand. Endings that come out of nowhere. Such end points are not dramatic, more evanescent—each improvisation seems like it could continue infinitely; when it is over, a piece has not drawn to a conclusion but has simply stopped. Gräwe does this without making pieces that wander or drift aimlessly; his inconclusiveness isn’t wishy-washy. And he does it without making the end points weird, “illogical,”<sup>5</sup> or misshapen. One could make endings that are simply the suspension of obvious (but unstated) end points; Gräwe makes plausible stops, graceful stops, elegant stops, but stops that happen most unexpectedly.

Music that lives in the middle. The seven varied solo piano pieces on *Gedächtnisspuren* cessate, they don’t culminate. Work that commits suicide,

ending before its “natural” life is over. On “1,”<sup>6</sup> for instance, the pianist ends midphrase, just as rapidly unfurling lines seem to move in a different direction. That motion implies something beyond the end. Without cueing an impending finish, the stopping doesn’t give a listener enough time to forget the complex music that came before. “5” ends with a single muted cluster following a dense rhythmic tangle; it is more decisive than the truncated phrase of “1,” but so sudden and unexpected that it leaves the pieces just as open and inconclusive. Gräwe: “For me, the music is going on all the time. If I play something, I have this image that it’s like opening the window: you get a glimpse of what’s going on all the time. My music is going on in my head all the time. When I write or play I open a window for a short time. But the stream is going on.”

The Gräwe-Vandermark Large Band contains both ends of the spectrum concerning options for ending. Coleader Ken Vandermark composes pieces with an extremely strong sense of closure, often using powerful musical punctuation marks (sharp unison stops, dramatic recapitulation of “head” material) and traditional cadential harmonic motion from jazz and rock genres. Gräwe, on the other hand, composes open-ended pieces that avoid repetition and move from section to section without strong end points or obvious transition markers, except for changes in arrangement (i.e., a section change segued by a piano solo or clarinet/bass/drum trio). Indeed, at the group’s first performance,<sup>7</sup> several audience members, ambivalent about whether to clap between sections of Gräwe’s fifty-three-cell piece “Snapshots 1–53,” finally broke the silence and applauded, imposing their own sort of external cadence for that particular section. Even on Gräwe’s quartet record, *Melodie und Rhythmus*, which explores tonality and metrical rhythms more directly than any of his previous ventures, conventional strategies of closure are still suspended.

Territorialization and deterritorialization aren’t exclusive or binary opposites (Deleuze and Guattari were far too savvy Zen-o-philes for such reductivism); each contains the other, yin-yang. The point is not to dismiss or outlaw cadential strategies, which can of course be immensely satisfying and can, in many circumstances, be used in creative and unorthodox ways. But other strategies exist, such as Gräwe’s endless intermezzo, and though they may be less conclusive, they’re no less valid or potent.

Eight minutes and forty-five seconds into the second track of a record of improvised duets between Gräwe and wind player Anthony Braxton, *duo* (Amsterdam) 1991, the music stops completely; both musicians (and the attentive audience) recognize that the improvisation is, for some reason, not finished.

Everyone sits quietly, continuing the music. It turns out that it is only halfway through. The inverse of an inconclusive ending—a conclusive nonending.

[1998]

## Notes

1. No other figures more precisely deserve the term “grassroots” than Deleuze and Guattari, given that grass—even configured as a manicured lawn—is a rhizome.

2. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 28.

3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 311.

4. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 36. Cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm tells a story of playing a tape piece of his when he was a student, the subject of which was endings; it used various standard ending strategies, including a “perfect” V-I cadence. Composer Charles Dodge, who was in the audience, insisted on taking Lonberg-Holm aside to discuss endings, expounding a theory that the way composers end pieces has a lot to do with how they were toilet trained.

5. Preparing for a performance with the DKV Trio (the Empty Bottle, August 6, 1997), Dutch reed player Peter van Bergen requested that his three collaborators (Hamid Drake, Kent Kessler, and Ken Vandermark) try to improvise “illogical forms.” The result was that places in the music that might otherwise have served as transitions from one section to another—freely improvised sectionality being one of DKV Trio’s signatures—instead were treated as end points. The internal, intuitive “logic” that steers a piece of improvised music was interrupted. Since the endings were therefore ambiguous and anticadential, this gave the music an intriguingly unbalanced, inorganic feeling.

6. All the pieces on *Gedächtnisspuren* are titled according to the track number only.

7. August 7, 1997, the Bop Shop, Chicago; this was a very short-lived ensemble, perhaps because of these differences in strategy.

## CARLA BLEY AND STEVE SWALLOW

### Feeding Quarters to the Nonstop Mental Jukebox

Nestled among other jazz photographs on the wall outside one basement lecture hall at the Stockholm Music Conservatory, there's a stunning close-up shot of Carla Bley from the '70s, her hair as arresting then as it is today. A couple of decades hence, Bley and bandmate/soul mate Steve Swallow alighted on the Swedish city for a concert with her eight-piece 4x4 band at Stockholm Jazz 2000. Though their musical and personal lives now seem to be inextricably linked, Bley and Swallow have been partners in crime far longer than they've been hitched. "I've always brought Carla's music with me, wherever I've gone," Swallow says. "Initially, when I first came to New York, I was playing with her husband, Paul Bley, and her music was our repertoire. It was crucial to me, and it remained crucial through the years. I forced everybody else I played with to play her music. For their own good."

The day before their concert, Bley's band spent a couple of hours rehearsing. Andy Sheppard arrived late, so they asked Swedish tenor saxophonist Lennart Åberg (also one of the festival's organizers) to sub, just for the run-through. Those of us who were flies on the wall got to hear Åberg tease out the Nordic undertone in a gorgeous reading of Bley's classic "Utviklingssang." Earlier that day, in front of a packed house in that basement lecture hall, Bley and Swallow sat down for an intimate and wide-ranging discussion, ranging from the tactical deployment of humor in music to the politics of self-production.

• • •

John Corbett: A place to start this conversation would be to talk a little bit about what Europe has meant to you over the years. Carla you've been touring here since the mid-'60s, starting with the Jazz Realities group with Steve Lacy, Michael Mantler, Aldo Romano, and Kent Carter, which performed here in Stockholm at that time at the Golden Circle. What are your thoughts about what playing in Europe meant in the '60s, and if it's changed over the years?

Carla Bley: You start, Steve. You're good at talking.

Steve Swallow: Playing in Europe has meant that I haven't had to spend my life playing at Holiday Inns. It's really as simple as that. Without the support Europe has given, it wouldn't have been viable. I would have had to do something else.

JC: When did you first play in Europe?

SS: I first played in Europe when I was a student, for two summers in a row, and played what was allegedly Dixieland, and what was in fact not, in return for free passage on a cruise ship coming and going. But the first real tour of Europe I had was interestingly with Carla, as well, as a member of Jimmy Giuffre's trio in 1961. A few brief words about that tour might illustrate and reinforce my point. The Giuffre trio was playing adventurous music, and was not only ignored but by and large despised by the American public and the American music business community. Giuffre had transitioned from a folksy, bucolic, very pleasant guy to a raving lunatic over the period of a few months, after having heard Ornette Coleman. [laughs] It was something that happened to many of us. What American audience there was for jazz music was very fond of his "Train and the River" period, kind of sweet, countrified music. He grew up in Texas, came by that honestly, and the American jazz listeners were for the most part outraged and offended by the turn of events that led him to play some really challenging, dissonant, and from my point of view, interesting music. The only work we could get in the United States was at the coffeehouses in Greenwich Village.

On the night the band broke up, we were playing for what came in at the door, and when we divided it up it came to thirty-five cents each, so we decided we better stop for a while. Meantime, we were contacted by promoters over here and given a wonderful tour that included being broadcast on the radio several times. To our surprise, we found a sympathetic and enthusiastic public, and it did a great deal to convince us that we weren't simply pissing in the wind, that there was an audience and we only had to be patient to find it. There was a stark contrast with what was going on in America and what was going on in Europe.

JC: Carla, was it a similar situation for you?

CB: Yeah. I've only worked in New York City twice in the last ten years. It's strange. I work over here as much as I like. But I prefer being over here because I think the food is better and the wine is better and the cars are better and the people are better and the pianos are better. So I don't care so much about working in the States. I do have plans for a big band tour in the States in 2003.



Carla Bley (photo: Michael Jackson)

JC: You've made European musicians part of your ensembles since those early concerts. And you've looked to various European musical sources, as well. I read something you said in an interview about how the Beatles had turned you on to using European musical sources. [Bley furrows her brow] Maybe this was mistranslated?

SS: Watch out, she's going to deny it now. That's the way she is.

CB: Well, that was so long ago. I suppose it was a notable influence, because it was weird, but I've had a lot of influences. I do remember saying that's what got me into European musics, but I don't think that was true at all. I think it was a defense against being a white person playing black people's music. I thought: maybe I should just be influenced by Europeans. I have no ties to Africa, so I have no right to do it, so I'll just steal old English music hall melodies. It sounds more like something self-conscious than something true.

SS: I suspect Europeans can empathize with being in the curious position of being both white and being a minority in the music you play. Europeans have had to deal with the accusation that they were playing an American music without . . .

CB: . . . credentials.

SS: Credentials. This is an issue that's been successfully addressed by the current generation of European players, so the young players don't

have to worry about it anymore. It's not an issue. It died a couple of years ago.

CB: I use Wolfgang Puschnig. He's my favorite alto player. And Andy Shepard. Is that all I've got now?

SS: Well your big band is full of . . .

CB: Full of fur'ners! Why not use Europeans? They're cheaper and they play just as well. But a lot of Americans have always had a fully American band. I think I'm going to have an American band in 2003.

JC: I wonder also about the influence your music has had in Europe. Do you see that influence radiating back from your music to new European jazz?

CB: No, I don't. But that would be nice. And I don't hear a lot of bass players playing like Steve Swallow, either.

SS: And a good thing. I need the work myself! [laughs] I do think that, and this is probably true of you as well, what impact we have, we probably have over here. We live in isolation in the United States. In the country, away from the cities. For all practical purposes, we have no identification with the United States, and no life in the United States. It's just our house, the immediate surroundings, and the store where we buy our food. The only sin we still commit is to watch American football. That's about the only way in which we identify with culture in the United States. Our focus is essentially the same as the European improvising musicians of our generation and subsequent generations. So it stands to reason that any impact we have would register here, rather than in the United States.

I work a great deal with European musicians, about as often as I work with American musicians, and it never occurs to me to wonder what I should play because I'm playing with a Frenchman or a Swede. The issue of vocabulary is interesting, in that I suspect that there's a kind of bounce-back effect, and I've been influenced by some of the European folklore that appears in the music of the Europeans I've played with, but it's transmuted into the common language that we share and that we use, and I'm only dimly aware of the accents around me.

JC: I thought we could talk a little about humor in music, which can be a tricky topic.

SS: Talk to her, because I'm deadly serious [grins], but she can be a riot.

JC: [To Carla] I wondered if you had any rules of thumb for humor in music?

CB: I don't feel like I use humor at all. If it comes in, I don't push it away. But I don't sit at the piano with a pencil in my hand saying: "That would be funny." But the last song I wrote, one month ago, I think it was funny. I didn't mean for it to be funny. I'm always trying to write something deadly

serious, just like Steve. And every once in a while something creeps in, and what crept in this time was honking horns. So I laughed and let it stay. But I don't go looking for humor. It's absolutely subconscious.

SS: You're happy when you find it, though.

CB: I like to laugh as much as anyone else.

SS: Yeah, but I mean you're inclined to let that element stay in your music where it appears, and I think a lot of other people would deliberately send it away.

CB: Oh, I think everyone would get rid of it but me. I'm the only one. [laughs] But this is how I've been all my life. I can't help it. I haven't ever written a joke, though. That's really harder than music. To write an original joke is my life's desire. [pauses] I don't see any humor in my music.

SS: What about "Baseball"?

CB: "Baseball." That's true.

SS: What about "Piano Lesson"? I'm thinking about the repertoire we're playing at this festival, it's a riot. You're just not confessing.

CB: I'm in a bad mood.

SS: [Laughs] You're aware that humor used as a tactic is very effective. For one thing it sets the musicians themselves at ease. It's relaxing to play funny music, and it puts the audience in a similar place.

CB: I hate that piece, the funny piece, I really do. "Utviklingssang" isn't funny.

SS: Is too.

CB: Is not.

SS: Is too. [laughs] No, "Utviklingssang" isn't funny. But if we ended up dividing up all the songs you wrote, put a big pile of funny ones here and bigger pile of not funny ones here, that wouldn't be quite right, because there's a kind of strain of humor that runs through some of these pieces that doesn't quite get to the surface but is there anyhow, even though there's no overt laughing going on.

CB: It's not ever sarcastic or . . . what is the word?

JC: Ironic?

CB: It's not ironic. I can't be accused of that. It's pure simple . . . you haven't heard me lately, it's not funny anymore.

SS: Consider "Battleship" . . .

CB: Deadly serious: at the end everybody dies.

SS: It's serious and everybody dies, but there are elements of humor coexisting in a piece about the tragedy of war, "Lili Marlene" . . .

CB: That's not funny, it's a beautiful song!

SS: It is, but it's funny.



- CB: We're having an argument! [laughter]
- SS: It's funny when the British national anthem appears.
- CB: Taps, it's Taps. Everybody's dead.
- JC: I asked this question initially because you have such a sophisticated sense of humor, and I don't think it's about looking to get a laugh, but using laughter or humor as a subversive thread through the work.
- CB: That's better. [everyone laughs] I'll accept that!
- JC: How about the question of self-determination? I'm thinking about the history of the Jazz Composer's Guild, JCOA. The idea of taking the means of production into your own hands, trying to control a lot of elements of the music, not just the making of the music, but how it's distributed, how it's represented. How important is that to you?
- CB: I didn't care about it in the beginning, it was the only recourse. I couldn't get a record deal. Instead of just going away, I just did it myself. But that's only because I had to, and I envied people with labels and producers and budgets, all my life. I think now I wouldn't change a thing, right now I came out safer than the others who get routinely fired or lose their contracts. That will never happen to me. I can do whatever I want to do.
- SS: It's an interesting irony that the bigger the label you're signed with, the more likely it is that your head will roll. What Carla's gained, and by extension I have too, is the secure feeling that we can do whatever we want with virtually no fear of being reprimanded or punished.
- CB: ECM, which distributes our records, never refuses to distribute one, no matter how horrifying it may be to them.
- SS: Carla's moved from the extreme—personally controlling the process from the recording of the music through the pressing through the distribution and publicizing of it—to a kind of modified version, where she, with my help sometimes, still retains complete control over the making of the thing—which includes the visual content as well as the music—and then turns it over to ECM, with whom we have a relationship based on trust. It's worked well, but it is a moderate position. It's not as extreme as her position in the '60s and early '70s.
- CB: And we have a good relationship with our agent, too. We're really protected from the music business.
- SS: To some extent this means drawing a line where your horizon is. We're unlikely to become David Sanborn or George Benson. On the other hand, we've gained the comfort and security that Carla's talking about. Nobody's going to mess with us too badly. But an interesting thing happens when nobody's allowed to tell you what to play, a sense of responsibility creeps

into your own head, unbidden. For better or worse, you begin to think in terms of making connections with a public, establishing a dialogue over the years with an audience. There was a time earlier in my career when I didn't think in those terms, didn't want to think in those terms, and I was only focused on the people with whom I was playing and the note-by-note interaction that happened between improvising players. But now I think about what project to do next, and if it's to be a recording does it have a place in the world of hundreds of recordings per week that are offered up to the very small audience that buys improvised music. Inevitably, if you're left to yourself in this way, you have to face those issues. It's the difference between sideman mentality and leader mentality, or for that matter, sideman mentality and record company executive mentality. Because as silly as it may sound, we're record company executives, in a tiny way.

CB: Labor and management.

SS: Producer and performer. We produce our recordings, and there really is a difference in perspective depending on which side of the glass, as they say, you're on.

JC: You've produced each other's records, which is a very interesting role to assume. You're playing in each other's bands, working in a very democratic duo context, and then producing each other. What are the kinds of special circumstances of working with your partner?

CB: I depend on Steve for so much.

SS: Our life together is very rich because we do so much together. It's not like we each come home at night and tell the other what we've done. There's all this ongoing stuff, and being together just enriches it. I'd previously been married to a nonmusician for a number of years, and raised a family, and our "stuff" was essentially the family, the act of raising the children. In this relationship a lot of the stuff is music, and it's a wonderful thing to create a larger machine than one brain. Especially inasmuch as we have sort of come at each other from opposite directions. I had a primary focus as a player, and she had a primary focus as a writer, but in order to get as deeply into each other as possible, we crossed. I feel I've profited enormously from being compelled to explore composing more. Curiously, I think my playing has profited.

Audience member: Do you ever get tired of music?

SS: I do, and we've talked about it, so I can speak for Carla. You get tired of it and feel deeply enslaved to it. But . . . you are! There's no way out except to go through it. I'm bitterly resentful that I have to practice every day, but I've figured out that I do in fact have to practice every day.

CB: You check in when you get up and check out when you go to sleep. And then you mostly hear music in your dreams.

SS: We both have what we refer to as a jukebox in our heads, pretty much going all the time. So even on a desert island, with no radios and no instruments and no pencils and paper, the jukebox would still be going.

CB: Sometimes the songs are awful. “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?” Worst thing you can do to a friend is say: “Oh, I’m hearing that song.” [looks at Swallow] “Stout-Hearted Men.” Ha-ha, ha-ha. [mock-menacingly]

SS: Oh no, I hate that song! [laughs]

[2001]

## MISHA MENGELBERG

### No Simple Calculations for Life

Next to the doorbell at the Amsterdam apartment, a brass plaque announces “MENGELBERG” with cold, European formality. But it’s warm inside and strikingly spare. I’d expected a sort of mad-genius room, full of paper scraps and half-finished science projects, but the only bonkers touch is his practice piano: the innards of an upright, leaning at an angle against the wall. Misha offers me coffee before I have removed my coat and sets the gamelike tone for our conversation with a list. “Already we are faced with some options,” he says, with barely a trace of an accent. “Strong or weak? Turkish or regular? Large or small?” Anticipating a couple hours of verbal chess, I opt for a large, strong Turk. “We are improvising this conversation, by the way,” he smiles as we settle in at a round wooden table. “This is nothing we’ve rehearsed.”

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John Corbett: Anthony Braxton writes a voluminous amount, which is quite the opposite of your approach.

Misha Mengelberg: Yes, yes. I come with one little paper a year or something. That’s all I can think of. And then I think about what to write on that little paper for half a year and decide to write it and then am discontent and rewrite it, then forget about it, and maybe one day at the end of the year I think, “I have to write this paper, I cannot postpone it anymore.” So I write it. That’s all.

I listen without prejudice to anything. I take the distance that’s needed, I think. That has to do with my background. I have never studied composition or piano. I studied theory in music school. It’s true, I’m interested in that, in reflection on this and that. The point of view of classical theory is most of the time . . . in order to deserve that name of musical theory you should maybe restrain yourself to musical arguments. But now the question comes “What is music?” and “What are musical arguments?” And there I think I have a slightly different position from my colleague

theoreticians. I think that music reflects, most of the time, things that are to be found in the lives of the people that produce the music and is somehow parallel to that. So the fact that Bach had so many children and was hired by the church to produce has an impact on the production. It could be part of the realm of musical theory to look into that together with certain elements of the production. For instance, what I did in the times when everyone was concerned with serialism was to look into Schönberg and Webern for some kind of connection that seemed a breach of the tradition at that time, with the past. They always hinted at that direction; for instance, reading their letters, I think, is no different from the letters of the time. Part of the Viennese tradition of politeness and overconsciousness of certain things concerning food, humor, et cetera. That, in a way, seemed not to be part of the very stringent and so-called pure and detached unsentimentalist sounds that these gentlemen made at the time. But by bringing back the tone rows for melodies in the pre-twelve-tone era of Webern, bringing back all those big jumps, the septimes, to simple seconds, I came to melodic forms that were very related to Viennese tradition—Franz Lehar, Johann Strauss. [sings a Strauss melody] When you take from that Strauss song and make all the minor seconds into those big jumps, then you are very near the musical world of Anton Webern. So my analysis was something between musical analysis and a kind of historical analysis. I was interested in things that seemed to escape analysis, people who write only melodies that go up, or only down. I'm interested in certain hang-ups of composers, things that return every time in the frame of their thinking. There have been studies in that direction by a person called Markov. Change of musical events that were recognizable as change of personalities. Mozart has been studied that way. Those were the things that I was very much interested in at that time, and still am interested in both. Things that are on the brink of being part of the music and part of something else, like the fact that someone always has a headache or never has a headache.

JC: That makes a lot of sense in terms of the turn in free improvisation toward the element of personality and personal vocabulary, as musicians start to introduce their own personalities into the music.

MM: Of course, personal and recognizable elements are part of people's motorism, people's preoccupations, their instrumental possibilities, their musical world, the domains in which they operate. You could call that "style," if you want. Yes. They belong most of the time not to something I would call "speculative element." The stylistic moments are most of the

time things that have to do with structure. You can see an improviser as someone who has tools and luggage that permit him to do things on the same order that composers do in a time framework where the results of what they have been thinking are made audible only sometime later. But they do it at a moment's notice. "Play half an hour," somebody says to them. And they do that. Of course, there is nobody who asks them afterward, "Did you write this down or improvise this?" That's unimportant, because there is only one thing that makes the decision for people to stay and listen to it: Am I amused, yes or no? Intrigued, or do I hate it enough to stay and get very angry? So it's finally: Charlie Parker has to compete with Beethoven. And I think that's fair, that's all right. The composer and improviser are finally in the situation of being judged solely on the basis of what's going on when their music is performed. In order to be able to compete, I think a composer as well as an improviser should have enough interesting stuff in his music to make something come alive, to make machines that work, or to do anything that people are somehow fascinated by.

Is that an answer to your question? I'm not sure. I don't remember what your question was. That's funny, for a moment it seemed as if I was answering your question, then I thought: "What the hell was the question? But I'll finish my story anyway, there is something touched in me that makes me talk, so now I'll talk . . ."

JC: What was it about American jazz music that fascinated you?

MM: Very strongly, yes, certainly. It has stopped having that specific quality, maybe somewhere in the early '60s. Maybe jazz doesn't exist anymore, that would be very feasible. What remains of it is an echo of the jazz era.

JC: Do those records still have that effect on you?

MM: Oh, yes, surely. At that moment, as far as I can reconstruct, it had a fascination of something that had spirit, intelligence, and everything I want from music, without belonging to a cultural pattern that I felt was suffocating.

JC: The Great Tradition.

MM: Yes. So much respect had to be paid to that, I walked out at a certain moment. My heroes of the time were Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and Herbie Nichols. I felt they were my teachers. I would like to say now, I spoke to none of them. That would be the most clear statement. What I learned from them I didn't learn from speaking to them. I spoke once or twice to Thelonious, never to the other two. Or *with* Thelonious, maybe. I don't know, that was a funny conversation. In a way he was



Misha Mengelberg Quartet arriving for their set at Newport Jazz Festival, 1966  
(left to right: Piet Noordijk, Han Bennink, Jacques Schols, Mengelberg)

not talking back at all. I'll tell you the game he was playing. We were sitting somewhere and I asked him some question, and he put that same question to my wife. My wife says something like: "Huh, why do you ask me that?" And he bent over to me and said what my wife said. That was obviously one of his games, funny conversation. Went on for twenty minutes.

JC: With him as a conduit for you and your wife to have a conversation.

MM: Yes, right.

JC: Walking out on the tradition, that was an important element of your upbringing, wasn't it?

MM: Oh, sure, sure, sure. My father was a critic. He was a composer and a conductor. A nice composer, but there were not many opportunities for him, having also a kind of past: he went to the Soviet Union in the '30s and was known as a communist. That also denied him possibilities of a kind of social career. So he wrote for a paper in the '50s, '60s. He took me always with him to concerts. I was a small boy, ten, when it started in 1945. Five or six years I witnessed almost everything that happened in musical life in Amsterdam, and then I was fed up. It had been enough. Everything from the Iron Repertory, you name it, I heard it. He also wrote on jazz music, he wrote on the first Ellington concert that took place in '47 or '48. And I was there. That made an incredible impression. It was on a Sunday afternoon. There was almost nobody there because people didn't have much money at the time and the concert was much too expensive for people to buy a ticket.

JC: I think this would have been the second time he was there because he was there in the '30s.

MM: Oh, yes, I think you're right. What happened is he played a nice first part of the concert and there was an intermission. Then, in the middle of that intermission, I went back to the hall and there was Ellington sitting at the piano, starting the second part of the concert, but playing five or six minutes completely on his own. He didn't care about the intermission still being there. What happened then is the people of the band came one by one and heard what he played. When a section was completed, they suddenly started playing backgrounds to his piano music. Then finally the whole band was there and the hall was filled up with the 120 people who were there, and they finished the piece. I can play the piece for you, you would know it. "The Lady of Lavender"? Something like that. [he goes to the piano leaning against the wall, plays the theme] Those chords, I remember. So I thought, well, if it's possible in that music to



do that, to start without anybody in the hall and without the orchestra, to start a concert just like that, that's my music! I don't like all this compartmentalization. "This is a concert, not this, oh yes, that again." All that which ritualized the experiences, in one moment it *went* for me.

JC: Was it the casual approach that appealed to you?

MM: The casual, yes.

JC: In your music, you have that casual element, but on the other hand, we were talking about arguments. Sometimes there's an element of tension that enters it. Casual and potential confrontation. Does that seem right to you?

MM: Yes, you've described something that has a certain familiarity with what I think of any musical situation. Part of improvisation, the act of improvising, playing with other people, has very much to do with survival strategy. You have, of course, all your expectations and plans, which are *destroyed* the moment you play with other people. They all have their own ideas of how the musical world at that moment should be. So there are two, three, five, six composers there at the same time destroying each other's ideas. But then there comes, for me, a formal argument that you could say, while I am part of this destruction, how long is that an interesting situation, in a formal sense? We spent forty or fifty minutes on being together and playing, this war is, if you look at it and see the clashes and the death and the wounded, after some time you get immune. I think that was one of the mistakes of early improvisational music of the '60s. That the war just went on. Always. The Ornette Coleman Double Quartet is an *ongoing* war, you could say. There are five minutes of your choice, and that is all. And those minutes are very strong, very strong powers there. And they [speaks in someone else's voice] "*really blow the hell out of anything.*" But after those five minutes, I see it as a waste of energy, because what they wanted to come across was found in those five minutes. The record should have taken this form, I think. You have to listen to it, there's maybe three minutes, nothing happens. "Is there anything on this record?" And then you yawn, move the needle ahead. "Oh, yes, after six minutes they seem to do something. Oh, they do a lot!" And then you say, well, I'll do the whole record now, put it on, nothing happens, so you go and read a book or something, and you listen to those incredible five minutes, then it stops again, there is silence for another twenty minutes. That would be the correct form I think it should have taken.

JC: Isn't it one of the inherent problems with making records, that people have to fill all the time up?

MM: Somehow, it was still very close to the times that records *didn't* last more than three minutes. So big forms were not at stake. There was not a tradition for treating the big forms.

JC: So maybe free jazz should have been music for seven-inch singles.

MM: Yes, two minutes of Brötzmann, Bennink, things like that, would be excellent. I *hated* it, this formless energy school. For me it was a nightmare. I thought if we have the freedom to get rid of all these stupid little tunes, then we shouldn't replace it with something similarly stupid. It should somehow come out of that idea of monomania war-making that it became. I think the war was liberating people from all kinds of things, maybe it was good for them to do that, and it resulted in some interesting fragments of music.

JC: But as an experience it wasn't satisfying.

MM: For me, no. But that's maybe a blind spot in my way of experiencing music. I have been through long sessions, in my youth, going to concerts with my father, long sessions of the *St. Matthew Passion*, Mahler symphonies of one and a half hours, things like that. I *hated* that music. I thought: "What arrogant idiots, they can say all they're saying in five or ten minutes." As if the nineteenth-century people were somehow excused for any exhibition they wanted the musical stage to be.

JC: Isn't Bruckner the best example?

MM: Bruckner is a very excellent example, yes. Three minutes just C major. Never quite finished.

JC: I take your earlier point about Webern, but this was perhaps the really revolutionary aspect of his music, making things that contained the essential elements only.

MM: Yes, it gave a possibility to have music do the same type of things that poetry does. For instance, I think that Einstein's thesis on relativity was something like two pages. Things that are important to say, most of the time you can say them in a way that's short. The length is something that belongs not to the domain of musical theory, but of psychology, which is not a musical factor in itself at all. In psychology you have things like process going on.

JC: Opera, is that the excuse to make longer forms?

MM: Well, opera was at that point an exhibition of the technology of that time. We have other types of exhibitions now, Jurassic Park, things like that. That's reasonable, people want to know where we stand, and you have to have these kinds of exhibitions to display that.

JC: The brevity we're talking about seems to relate to conceptualism.

MM: Yes. I think that is something that is for me, in a way, more important than producing a concept in a consumable form. I think the concept is more important. When the form in which you put it is concise enough, in all things that do that, is the doubt on the final form *part of the form*? I don't know any so-called masterpieces that don't include that, somehow.

JC: Some element of doubt?

MM: Yes. One of the things that I like very much in painting, for instance, is a piece by Leonardo da Vinci, in Florence, a Virgin with child. But the only thing that has been properly painted is the laurel bush behind the Virgin. So the painting is about botany. Very exemplary, very precisely done. But the Virgin and her son are a blur. The painting has been regarded as unfinished, which is absolutely untrue. It is finished. But the doubt of the form and the subject are clearly there. With Beethoven, I have that feeling most of the time. The themes and the way he treats them are put in such a way that he says: "Well, I've worked on it very hard, I'm not a very talented guy, but this is as far as I could come with this." That's always there.

JC: Do you feel like that describes your work?

MM: I'd rather not speculate on what I do. I have seen, almost always composers and improvisors tell absolute nonsense about what they do. So I'm very reluctant to go into that at all. Others may decide what happens there. I haven't the slightest idea.

JC: But you can talk about what things interest you, and people can figure that out for themselves.

MM: Sure, I think that would be an indirect, more adequate way of going into an error like that.

JC: For instance, knowing that you find that aspect of Beethoven appealing tells me something about you.

MM: Might, yes. Don't misunderstand me here, I don't see any work of art, or so-called art (whatever that is), as a definite version of what is at stake. Most of the time people say: "Everything is in its place, nothing should be added, nothing should be left out." I think that's absolute nonsense. You can talk about things that have been made in the greatest of uncertainties. Because otherwise it's not worthwhile doing anything, when there is no uncertainty involved. I see it as objects, sound objects, material objects . . . as testimonies of a stage of development of problems of any kind—formal problems, expression of things in a certain material. For instance, they are not in competition with anything when it has that quality, the question of competition doesn't arise, even. It's put there, with all its question marks, and then at a certain point people decide to

put it in a museum, that's all. I think there could also be the choice of putting other things in a museum. For instance, the case of Gesualdo. He was an exceptional Renaissance composer who opened in a way the road for extended chromaticism. But at the time people weren't interested in that, they were interested in the invention of musical perspective, in other words, Monteverdi. The perspective of dominant, subdominant, and tonic. That was the musical rule they were interested in. They left out Gesualdo. Gesualdo was something that came back in the '40s of this century. So for three centuries it was out of the museums.

JC: I don't think that being concise means you've answered all the questions. Hopefully you'll leave some things hanging.

MM: Hopefully, yes.

JC: In the United States, they're even putting Fluxus in museums.

MM: Putting Fluxus in a museum, of course that was to be expected. But what are you going to put into a museum? Fluxus was not a direction that there was for art to take, or something like that. Fluxus was *nothing*. Fluxus was a bunch of idiots who all did their things and saw at a certain point that there were some people that were working in similar kind of amorphous directions. A little glass jar filled with words: instant poetry, shake well before reading. That's a very good concept, I think. It's amusing. And you can also reflect that in other areas. It makes some space. But to say that it is a direction that poetry can take, you couldn't say that. It's a gesture that, yes, you could say it flows, it flows on the waves of interpretation or anti-interpretation. That was very good in that name, that it was not going to take a form at all. You pour out the water when you have done the dishes. Fluxus, downward. Not bad at all.

JC: How did you get involved?

MM: There was this funny man, [George] Maciunas, traveling all over Europe. And I met him sometime, and I was amused by what he brought with him and the people that were involved. There was Emmett Williams, for instance. Emmett was wonderful. There was a German guy, Tomas Schmit. Some of the people in Holland I still have contacts with, Willem de Ridder. But it was never meant to be something that would be like a flag or something that we all assembled behind. *Nothing* like that. There was a moment that we met and did some things together, and then we said good-bye and went our own directions. Which meant for Nam June Paik to make very commercially successful video performances, which is OK with me. If people can earn a lot of money, I'm in favor of that.

JC: You said it was over before it started.

MM: It was a nonmoment.

JC: And if it never started, then perhaps it never finished. I wonder if the sensibility that came out of that, that the name was never a box you could put things into . . .

MM: They made boxes, that was just what I was going to say, but thank you for preventing me from doing that!

JC: Perhaps it was more a sensibility.

MM: It was, and the box idea was the wrong one, because it was already explored by Duchamp. That's all right for the time, having an idea like that, sounds pretty rotten, yes, that's OK! [laughs] Willem de Ridder was the one with the boxes here. Maciunas was the box type. But they were all overruled by the others, I think, about boxes. "Go to your art dealers, but don't bother me with boxes!"

JC: And now they make whole new editions of the boxes.

MM: Of course! Well, I hope they get very rich.

JC: If it was a movement that was over before it started, and it was only a sensibility . . .

MM: Maybe the box people ended the movement. They invented it to end it before it started. Because they knew the other guys they approached with their boxes would say: "Go to hell with your boxes!"

JC: . . . the sensibility never quite ended. Doesn't the sensibility continue to at least interest you?

MM: But you can't generalize there. What you say has to do with this damned Buddhist influence in American culture. That sounds very idealistic. No, things are more down-to-earth. It would like to pull it more down to earth.

JC: More political?

MM: Yes, perhaps political. But I think there is one sympathetic expression within Buddhism. When somebody asks: "What is Buddha?" And the answer is: "Buddha is that heap of shit on the floor over there." That is very correct. That might be the only true religious experience one can feel. Most of the time you don't think about anything in life, you just watch things happen. Well, nowadays, television. You don't watch television, television watches you. Makes impressions on your eyeballs and brain. I try to say something back, but it doesn't help. Atmosphere of Fluxus, yes, you bring it here on the table. I think that crumbled paper there is sympathetic with what you're saying, in a way. What do you have to have happen to make that come true, only for a moment, what you say? I'll give it the form of a Ping-Pong ball and let it jump a little bit on the table. No idea what happens. It will end up on the floor. [laughs]

JC: We'll let it drop.

MM: Yes, that's what you should do with ideas most of the time. I'm more of a Taoist, I think. Taoism is completely different from Buddhism. Lao-tzu, the *Tao*, some obscure poetry, but there's enough nice in it. Maybe quoting from it is already too much, but the way is something we don't know about. The moment you've mentioned it, you lost it already. That's what it says. There are no gods or things, but the Chinese have a whole pandemonium of old men that seem to be knowing about these things. I can do without those old men.

JC: Let's follow up on that. The *way*, when you find the *way*, as soon as you find or name it, you've lost the *way*.

MM: That's right. That's what it says. Not too bad. Opposite to Buddhism, where there's this circle going on, this wheel, on and on and on. It's very depressing. And never going anywhere because the wheel comes to the same point. It's very pessimistic; I think it's Romanticism. The swastika is also there on the lids of pots that go to the sewer. But it's the left-turning swastika, the right-turning one was Hitler's department. I think Buddhism and fascism are both very near because both claim to know something in an era when, really, nobody knows anything.

JC: A friend of mine was just ordained a Buddhist monk.

MM: You should tell him to go out immediately, do something more interesting, simply washing dishes is better!

JC: This *way*.

MM: It's really time for people to be de-convicted, to get out of their religious convictions and all the other options of the American dream. A lot of things can be left out without doing any harm, I think. There was a time when Europe provided the missionaries. Now I think it's time to provide the *de*-missionaries.

JC: Convince people they're *wrong*.

MM: Yes. "We've told you this and that. No, it's all wrong! Please don't believe us anymore!"

JC: But about this *way*, I want to ask, because it seems fundamental to a certain way of thinking about improvising, if I know in a general way before any situation I come to in which I'll be improvising that as soon as I find that *way* . . .

MM: You find by practicing on an instrument, having some ideas of what you should do with it, you say: "Well, there I am. I'm going to make a start here."

JC: You name it, call it "extended techniques" or whatever. If you know beforehand that when you get to that point you will have lost the *way* . . .

MM: I'm just playing some things on the piano, some sounds, yes, that's what I do . . .

JC: Then, isn't it a question of distracting yourself?

MM: Distracting yourself from what?

JC: From finding your *way*.

MM: Oh, *that*.

JC: In other words, if I don't try looking for this over here [puts glass on one side of table], then perhaps I'll end up having come there in spite of not looking for it.

MM: I have learned from my cat in that respect. He was able to play the piano without even *noticing*. He was slightly disturbed by the sounds it made, but it was on his path to do that. I have it on film. I could show it to you, this little film I made. He walks a little bit that direction, makes some turns, then goes to sleep on the piano, makes a very beautiful, silent, soft cluster. Beautiful. Very sensitive. And maybe when you are a consumer of music, you make up things always, you make meanings for yourself while listening. Maybe you drop those meanings, also. People make cohesion that is not even part of the structure. They are responsible for doing that themselves. It means also that those ways of making connections are somewhere *inherent* in what has been done. Maybe the cat does that—he does it, yes, of course, I'm watching the cat, so I do it. But we can assume that he did not mean that order of notes. So, what I learned there is that he made an impression of being very much detached from what he produced, which is a very liberating experience. Because all those piano players and artists are always doing all that playing with something in mind, they *want* something. And that can be worthwhile, why not? You can want something and then do it. People say: "Oh, yes, very nice." But that makes the relation between what is produced and the one who consumes it in a way very simple and something that ties very much into things that are not related to music. It's the culture that is expressed and received. So it's a ritual, in a way. Maybe it's difficult to tell how things would operate differently from that. But things do. Some experiences can be received not specifically as belonging to cultural seclusion. Maybe even that is an illusion.

JC: Or maybe not always a repetition, maybe that uneasy feeling . . .

MM: Yes. I was never very interested in puzzles. The last piece was there, and it fitted in that little spot where it was needed. Then I have done a lot of work to make something that has already been done. This work already has been done, otherwise the puzzle wouldn't exist in that form. I like

puzzles in an open form, like chess or a game of bridge. Something with a development that can lead to something . . . or not. In an open chess game, there can be attacks that are to no avail, events that are going wrong but the opponent makes a mistake, or somebody makes a brilliant move but falters and is mated in two. I have asked a pupil of mine, at school, to make an analysis of *Missa Caput* by Dufay. He has been working now two or three weeks on it, and comes with lists of facts on it, but there seems to be no connection between those facts. I say: "This very slow voice is something from Gregorian chant, you have to look it up and maybe you'll find elements of Gregorian chant in the other voices, but maybe not." So my speculation on that subject may be wrong. That's a good analysis. You come up with all kinds of things, and nothing fits. Maybe it's meant to be that. Maybe it's an open form. Maybe it's like the improvisation of Derek Bailey. He doesn't try to make nice little symmetrical forms, things like that. He's not interested in that; he's interested in making music from moment to moment. With a certain syntax. If you want to analyze that, you have to know the syntax, that's all that can be analyzed in that music, I think. So no little tricks with numbers and all that. No first, second theme; no development section; no reprise. Most historical moments, it's not as simple as that. There are no simple calculations for life.

I think people start understanding that very well nowadays. There are computer programs to deal with those things that seem to have no form, no direction. In nature, things happen. Would it be a good point to count all the leaves in the woods? You still don't know how many trees there are. Then you start with the trees. But there are beginning trees, trees of two weeks old. Are they trees too? Having one leaf, is that also a tree? I think analysis is interesting as long as it fails. And sometimes it doesn't fail, and then a whole new bunch of problems arise, that's all.

JC: Analysis is an experimental activity.

MM: It's an activity, that's all. It doesn't give us answers. When it gives too many answers, you should mistrust it.

JC: Same with experiments. If you confirm your expectations too many times, you have to ask what's wrong with your first question.

MM: Yes. My teacher von Baaden, who was one of the first people to introduce twelve-tone music in Holland in the '30s, was convinced that a musical piece that cannot be analyzed is not a piece. He would discard it. My conclusion is the opposite.

JC: Puzzles that you can put the last piece into are uninteresting.



MM: Uninteresting, yes. Is that an answer to your last question?

JC: I think so.

MM: I'm not sure what it was . . . oh, yes, this Taoist idea. Well! That's something, we have solved this puzzle. Now this has to be mistrusted!

JC: And we have to find what's wrong with the first question! Can we talk a bit about your transition from composing and playing jazz in the mid-'60s until now?

MM: It was my formal training, playing jazz. I tried to deal with all those little chords and the progression of those little chords, sequences. At a certain moment I was very disgusted with it. "I don't swing!" I said to myself. That was the word that was always there while studying this material. Of course I don't swing. I should have started earlier, I should have had black parents, why did that not happen? Then it would have been easier to swing, maybe, and more part of my upbringing in this music. But then there was an interview with Sonny Rollins in *Jazz Hot*, I think. And they asked him about his fantastic, elaborate swing. He said: "Swing? I never bother about swing." "Oh," I said. "That's maybe a clue about my misunderstanding of this music. They don't even try to swing. They just do, that's all." So when you think it doesn't swing, you shouldn't be bothered by that. Then it doesn't swing, that's all right. And I had a kind of mistrust of my own drives, at that point. I stopped playing the music for years then. Because what I wanted to do was find out—I could very well improvise without thinking of jazz music, I thought, I did that before starting the boogie-woogie, I did improvise for hours. So I went back to that. Thought, well, that's stuff I could simply go on with. I should find some other people to play with. There were no other people who were playing improvised music without playing jazz. That was the first reason to be interested, for myself also, to be active with other people. But at one moment there were those people. There was a period that I said to people, "Let's play 'Autumn Leaves.'" They'd say OK, and we'd go dadadadee. And then came to the improvisation and I said, wait a minute, any thirty-two-bar scheme is more or less similar to any other thirty-two-bar scheme, formally. So whatever I do in those thirty-two bars is my affair. So I started to play the things I played before playing jazz in those thirty-two bars. But I had a kind of internal clock that said: "Here thirty-two bars come to an end, now somebody else should play a solo." But the things I did had not too much to do with the forms in which they were packed. After a period of doing that, I said, well, to hell with the attempt even. I should just do those things and not count.

JC: Can you plot that on a time continuum? How did that relate to the work with Eric Dolphy?

MM: Dolphy was more in a period when I was interested in playing nonforms, nonjazz forms. So *Last Date* was going back a bit. I spoke with him and for him it was also going back, he was interested in other things than playing those forms.

JC: There was an earlier period where he had been experimenting with form, but in those recordings with you it was like you describe, more traditional: determinate length, indeterminate solo material over changes and regular time.

MM: Yes, but the thing that was attractive for a short time about doing that was the fact that it had to answer two sets of musical logic at the same time. It should be somehow a little bit related to those forms, at certain points you could say: "Well, here I'll meet that form, and from there I'll drift again into the things that I was busy doing." And the very crazy thing about that was, when I reviewed my analysis of the works of Ellington and Charlie Parker and Monk, that was exactly what they were doing. They had their own plans, and the forms in which it was put were just references, with a certain distance. With Parker, maybe the strongest, because as free as his lines were, they were in a way always reflected by what you could see as chord changes. The order in which these chords appeared was where lines had had very particular, specific character in the way of Charlie Parker and nobody else. The big misunderstanding of the generation of following saxophone players was to see those lines, the exact lines of Charlie Parker, as the whole script of bebop music. In fact, Charlie Parker was the creator of bebop music. He did it all. But it served his very personal and individual purposes in a way that everybody should have said at that point, this is all very beautiful, but we won't touch it, it's Parker's music. We should do something else to do something personal. That was also the lesson of the music, it was about the very individual idea of giving form to a personal way of music. So the model was there, but it was always misinterpreted. People were stimulated to go into their own musical domains, find them, and explore those. And not the bones of Charlie Parker. The first players who came out of that were, in my opinion, someone like Eric Dolphy. He had a definite way of making his own compartment there, and finding his way there in his own labyrinth. The next one was Albert Ayler, a few years later. And there it stopped, simply. That was the last we heard from jazz music, maybe. Maybe it's not nice and unreasonable to say that, 'cause there are still

lots of people alive who have witnessed Charlie Parker doing his things and are still active as players, but I don't hear any specific new voices that I haven't heard in the '50s. Even the elements of the so-called fusion jazz are already there in some of Nichols's work and in a much richer and more complete way than I ever heard in the Wynton Marsalises and Herbie Hancocks.

JC: What about that generation of musicians who came to Europe and then went back to the United States?

MM: Lacy? He didn't go back.

JC: Art Ensemble of Chicago.

MM: I think it's not a coincidence that they are the only guys we met. We met them on equal terms, because we are interested in their experiences and their progress and the development of their ideas, and I think they are also interested in our things. It's like we are having this little conversation. Part of improvisation is also information about each other's whereabouts, and since they have to tell us things we don't know, and we have to tell them things they don't know, we do it on more or less equal terms. With George Lewis, I have a very excellent relation, musical comakers, also as a friend I know him very well, we are in contact and lots of things. I think that's where the development, the era after jazz music led us. There are Japanese percussionists I am interested in, there are lots of people I am interested in, there are South Africans doing interesting things. There is a lot going on.

JC: How do you feel about John Zorn doing your old songbook?

MM: Ah, John Zorn makes fun of everything. Yes, yes, when he phones, he speaks on your answering machine, the last thing he says is always something like: "Have fun!" He seems to be, for me, a generous person, wanting me to have fun, why not, that's all right. He has amusing musical things going on. I like the short pieces very much. I have been in Brazil, meeting all kinds of composers from that continent. There was something fun. There were concerts, on those programs there were always twenty or more pieces: ten before intermission, ten after. They all wrote very short pieces. All of them, the Brazilians, the Argentinians, the Uruguayans, the Peruvians, they all made compositions of three, maybe four minutes. I asked them: "Why are these pieces so very short? I like it, but why is that? In Europe you find much longer." They said: "I think that is very impolite, to have such a long composition."

[1994]

## MISHA MENGELBERG AND HAN BENNINK

### Natural Inbuilt Contrapuncto

In the dank dressing room of Chicago's Empty Bottle, drummer Han Bennink and pianist Misha Mengelberg sit around a table. Bennink is bolt upright, elbows on his lanky knees, back straight and posture sharp. Mengelberg sinks slowly into a couch, hunched forward, head drooping. It's fall '99, and the Dutch twosome is on tour playing duets and some assorted variations, including a trio with Dave Douglas in Guelph, Canada. At the Bottle a night earlier, Mengelberg performed a mesmerizing solo set consisting largely of upended standards, and later this evening, Misha and Han will tangle with local tenor hero Von Freeman.

Bennink and Mengelberg have been a team for nearly forty years, which makes their partnership the most enduring in European free music. They've performed and recorded consistently as a duo, most often for their own Instant Composers Pool (ICP) label, and together they're the core of sixty-four-year-old Mengelberg's ICP Orchestra. They're also one of the music's archetypal odd couples. Seven years Mengelberg's junior, Bennink is the irrepressible powerhouse powder keg, athletic and ruddy-cheeked with stamina to spare, a raging vaudevillian with a slapstick sense of show who absolutely loves to swing. Mengelberg's the droll dadaist tactician who cultivates the absurd, appreciates the broken, and proudly describes himself as lazy, but who also has one of the keenest ears in jazz. And while he might be at pains to disavow it, Mengelberg too possesses a subtle, deft sense of swing.

Their conversational style betrays innumerable sessions of give-and-take. One moment, they're finishing one another's sentences, smiling and nodding as if they were one two-headed person, or breaking away to hammer out some fine point in their native tongue, next moment they're talking boorishly on top of each other with blatant disregard for what the other is saying. Playing with Freeman, those discursive methods are translated into musical ones—sometimes Bennink bulldozes over his elder companions, burying them in an avalanche of clang and thunder, but just as quickly he'll pick up on one of the pianist's playful hints and swing along in full support while Vonski takes a line for a stroll. Underneath it all lurks an unmistakable trust, the bonds and baggage of the Dutchmen's long-term relationship.



Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink (photo: Francesca Patella)

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John Corbett: Do you recall the first time you met?

Han Bennink: I remember that! I met Misha in a jazz club in Bussum that existed only at three o'clock Sunday afternoon. Misha was playing there with "Mondstuk"—Mouthpiece—Anton, Arend Nijenhuis, and drummer Gunnar Nielsen. This must have been 1959 or '60. A year later I played with Misha because I was a young drummer, in demand, but also because I knew many Monk pieces.

JC: What was your initial impression of Misha as a piano player?

HB: I liked it very much. At that time, I played with piano swingers who tried to do Red Garland-style, Tommy Flanagan-style, Wynton Kelly imitations . . .

Misha Mengelberg: Horace Silver.

HB: . . . and also Hank Jones and Oscar Peterson.

JC: [to Mengelberg] You were obviously enamored of Monk, but you mentioned Horace Silver.

MM: I liked the compositions, also the very popular ones like "Sister Sadie." And the people that go with it—Blue Mitchell, Junior Cook.

JC: But you were not such a fan of what they refer to as hard bop.

MM: No! I thought that whole idea of swinging as hard as you can was not a goal in itself. When it's a result of a piece you are playing, that can be valid. But just in itself it means nothing! That was my idea about hard bop. But I had this hangup with West Coast and East Coast ways of playing. I preferred generally East Coast ways of playing, but at the end of that era, around 1956–57, I changed my views there. And later on, I was told that Eric Dolphy was coming from the West Coast, and I had to change my opinions completely. West Coast and East Coast didn't mean anything anymore.

HB: It was a very provincial view, looking from Holland and deciding that East Coast was more happening.

MM: But that was not true at all. It was not important anymore when I had to do the Monk analysis. Monk could have been from anywhere in the world, in a way. He wasn't East Coast. He was an interesting mind, just that. And he made very interesting compositions, and used interesting people, most of them completely inadequate to perform his pieces.

HB: Not capable of . . .

MM: . . . playing with him.

HB: Same as Herbie Nichols. Fantastic rhythm section, with Max Roach or Art Blakey, but you still can hear distance. Herbie's here, and they're there. It's beautiful, nothing against it . . .

MM: . . . but it doesn't fit.

JC: What about what Misha said about swing as an end in itself? Is that an opinion that you share?

HB: I love to swing on a rope and on a tree!

MM: We put swing in as a kind of gesture, in a context. Swing is nothing in itself.

HB: Of course not, like sound is nothing in itself. I agree completely.

JC: The other way of looking at it is that swing can be seen as pure pleasure in jazz.

HB: Fucking myth.

JC: But a prevalent myth. Duke Ellington's . . .

MM: . . . dictum . . .

JC: . . . has come back to bite a lot of people in the ass. It don't mean a thing means that it has to be swinging all the time.

HB: But what sort of swing?

MM: I don't agree with that. I think that's a nice title for a popular piece, but then you don't have to agree with what is said to dig it as a title.

JC: Historically, what challenges did moving away from incessant swinging present to the two of you? Have you changed your minds about some of

those things along the way? How are things different now from how they were in 1962–63?

HB: Not so different.

MM: No, no.

HB: I'm practicing more, and I hope that—these awful words—my musical language is more clear. But I look with the same fresh mind at the stuff I'm playing. I'm a bit older, so I think I have more tools. I used to have more instruments, but it was just a cover-up. You have to reduce, and then it's real clarity.

JC: Misha, did you enjoy the moment when Han stopped playing so many instruments?

MM: I was always thinking about the amount of noise he could make. Everything that made less noise was welcome for me.

HB: Misha was so patient. I was fucking around on everything, and you hardly could hear him, 'cause at that time we didn't have amplification. Finally, when I was completely tired Misha would come in. Amazing. It's like playing with Brötz [Peter Brötzmann], it's exactly like a German football game; they have a little bit in reserve all the time. I'd be playing [makes flailing gestures and bomb noises], and he'd be playing very quietly or eating a salad or drinking a coffee. Later on he got so bored that he'd only come for the second set, so I'd play the first set solo. That's how my solo drumming came up.

MM: No, no, I'd wait until you were finished, and then I'd start my set.

HB: That's completely new to me.

MM: Oh, I never told you that?

HB: Well, we have to be evil sometimes!

JC: Successive solos.

MM: Successive solos. When you were tired, and you were tired at some points when you had made your noise for twenty minutes, you were tired enough to play together with the piano.

HB: We also used to have a little Sony recorder with a built-in microphone, and we found an incredible position to put it for good recordings. We'd play forty-five or fifty minutes, then listen back during the intermission, then another fifty minutes, then we'd drive back in this little van, listening to the tape. Real intense!

MM: That's right. I was in essence analyzing what happened.

HB: Later, Misha wrote many pieces coming out of the duo playing. "Dressoir," for example. This was the process.

MM: Later on I came to hate that . . .

HB: I know, but why?! It was such a great time!

MM: . . . to use those things that came out of playing for pieces. I was stealing from myself.

HB: I know, you said, like Nietzsche, when you create, fuck it, next day completely new. If you want to be really creative, you should destroy everything. But the compositions are so nice. We miss them.

MM: But I am not going to steal anymore from myself for pieces. Because it really fucked up my solo playing for twenty years.

HB: Don't you think you came to playing solo because people asked you to?

MM: You could say that I came to playing solo in '87 with the things I did for Jost [Gebers] on FMP.

JC: But what about the great solo record from ten years before that, *Pech Onderweg* on BVHAAS?

HB: Oh, beautiful!

MM: I don't like it very much. It's not this and it's not that. But the first one I didn't steal from myself for was the one on FMP [*Impromptus*], the second was *Mix* [ICP], and then I did not compose for four years. And now I'm thinking about composing again.

HB: But in that period we were working with ICP Orchestra, and you found tools for group improvising.

MM: I got interested not so much in having nice little pieces to play with the orchestra as developing methods to have possibilities for group improvisations.

JC: I wonder if there's any area where the two of you strongly disagree? In improvising contexts, sometimes disagreeing is an important component.

HB and MM: Yes!

MM: I think we disagree from time to time on most simple things, like sound-wise . . .

HB: But maybe not so much anymore today.

MM: That's right, the days of total war are more or less over.

HB: I learned a lot, I must say!

JC: So is it that you have capitulated?

HB: Not at all. I like to play what I like to play. But maybe I can play better with a sense of form.

MM: We still are at war with the amounts of sound. I think that everything that Han does . . . but he's who he is . . .

HB: And Misha is the person he is. I like to cycle 120 kilometers a day, and Misha likes to sit on a couch and see a fantastic football match. And he's doing fantastic analyses of what he saw in the match, and I'm telling



what warbler I saw or how the wind was or was it cumulus cumulus that I saw. I think when you play together in a duo, that's fantastic, it's like a tennis match.

MM: To have different things to tell.

HB: And if you add a third person to it, the combinations are so many and so difficult, so hard to find clarity, that I'm an absolute duo player. I love that.

MM: I would describe myself for the last four or five years as a solo player. [Han laughs hard at Misha's contrariness] I like duo playing, but solo . . .

HB: It's so annoying, Misha!

MM: Not anymore. Before it was annoying, I couldn't do it! I was opposed to solo playing. I was a follower of Derek Bailey in that respect, he hated solo playing.

JC: Duo improvising is often described as a dialogue, as something where both players are having a conversation and the power relations are equal. But in a way it's not necessarily a dialogue, or it can be the kind of dialogue where people are talking at the same time . . .

HB: And still you can follow it. That's why I like duo, because you still can follow it. With three people talking you can't follow it anymore.

MM: No, but then you have to make very quick decisions about what kind of setup you want at that point. Then people can make their own decisions about following or countering that. That happens fast. In duo you don't have that time of choosing positions, there is no third party that's part of the power game. But I must say playing has been shifted over the years. You also play different, I think.

HB: I hope so, otherwise I'd give up, I swear.

JC: How would you say it's different?

MM: Well, I think my idea for solo playing is somehow related to that. I have to find a space that in earlier times I was not looking for.

HB: You avoided it.

MM: I didn't want to touch that area, because it had to do with a model of harmony, somehow, which I was not interested in. Now I like the divergences, but I also like moments of convergence. I like that to happen also. That there is a willing way of playing into a kind of harmony.

JC: You're talking about "harmony" not in terms of pitch relations but more in terms of relation of parts. I wonder, Han, if you've moved in a similar direction, liking to have moments of things coming together very explicitly.

HB: I think it's kind of odd when I hear groups doing the same thing for a whole block, baaaaah! That's what we did in the '60s. What we did with Brötz . . .

MM: Willem Breuker.

HB: And Evan [Parker], all the people.

JC: Now it's a tool.

HB: I think it's old-fashioned, dated. It doesn't work for me. I love playing with Cecil Taylor for seventy-four minutes. "Doing it" is the most important thing, not so much the result, so I love to do it. But I never listen back to it, I'd rather listen back to Sly & the Family Stone. I do the other stuff, but I never listen to it. The process is the main thing.

MM: No, I don't agree with that. I think that "what the result is to you" is the main thing.

HB: Of course, but I'm the one talking.

MM: The result is not only the process, the result is the finalizing of something that is maybe not to be finalized at all, but you do it, you just say: "Let's not talk any further on this subject." [the debate continues in Dutch] It's an aspect, that's right. But the finalizing is not nothing, it's something, it's part of it. The next moment, if we are all well and living and kicking, then all right, we'll go on.

HB: My thing is to go into something very impulsively and childish. The French call it *l'esprit d'escalier*, the spirit of the staircase. I might say something in one direction, but when it comes to playing and thinking about art, I agree so much with Misha.

MM: I think we agree on lots of things.

JC: I've had the impression, Misha, that you like to talk about the specifics of music, that you like analysis, and that Han, you're a bit more averse to that.

HB: Well, it might look like that, but when I work on a CD with Misha, I repeat it so often, I repeat it maybe twenty times a day, and I can sing the whole CD. So from my point of view, I also analyze. Misha once pleased me—he's teaching counterpoint, and I have no interest in classical music, though of course I listen to lieder from Schubert, I know Satie, I listen to Scriabin—by saying I somehow have a natural inbuilt contrapuncto!

MM: Yes, I think you have that.

HB: I really liked that. "Hello, I also have an inbuilt contrapuncto."

[2000]

# FORM FOLLOWS FACTION?

## Ethnicity and Creative Music

### I. Toward a Minor Music

In their innovative study of Franz Kafka, French writers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari approach the relationship between content and expression in the context of what they call “major” and “minor” literatures. “A major, or established, literature,” they propose, “follows a vector that goes from content to expression. . . . But a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, where expression (or form or structure) is determined by its content in a major literature, a minor literature is capable of liberating “pure contents that mix with expressions in a single intense matter.” Examining the way Kafka, writing as a Jew in Prague, utilized the dominant German language (rather than the minority Czech tongue), Deleuze and Guattari further unravel the idealized dichotomy between margin and center: “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.”<sup>2</sup>

To attempt to write a correlate to Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature for composition and improvisation, a “minor music,” one must first acknowledge the complexities of musical representation. The play between form and content is already a knotty enough issue in the representational arts—figural painting and drawing, photography, film, video, and, indeed, literature. But music is an art practice in which the notion of content shifts from denotative representation to more fluid modes of connotation, association, emotion, and style. It’s not so easy to discuss the “issues,” “concepts,” “stances,” “opinions,” “stories,” “messages,” “morals,” “ideas,” “references,” in short, the discrete “content” of a musical work. In music, the quest for meaning always occurs in a fuzzy borderland between materials (rhythms, timbres, tones, sounds), structures and forms, and personal or collective style. And where there are clearly many different musical syntaxes, the semantics of music are harder to pin down. Thus, in musical discourse the threads that connect con-

tent to expression, structure to significance, form to meaning, are nastily entangled. To understand the content of a given music, it is absolutely necessary to deal with its form. Style, poetics, abstraction, materials: these are at once the elements of a music's makeup and its ultimate meaning.

The fact that music has no overarching denotative semantic code doesn't keep it from having powerful cultural significance. Music is at the heart of much minoritarian political activity, for instance, providing shared heritage and a bond of unity (or lending a mnemonics to the lyrics of revolutionary songs). Musical traditions ranging from tsifteteli to karaoke to hardcore punk offer points of identification for members of subcultural, countercultural, or subaltern groups. But, as with any representation of ethnicity or alternativism, this risks becoming exoticized and generalized by mainstream culture. As cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak put it: "When the card carrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone 'speaking as' something or other, I think *there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization."<sup>3</sup> When drawn into dominant culture and required to "perform as" one or another ethnic identity, minority musicians encounter a similar stereotyping. They play "on behalf" of their genre or ethnicity, which is essentialized as a static, fixed, definable object. Anthony Braxton, for one, has long been subject to this treatment: as an African American musician (and a saxophonist, to boot), it's assumed that he'll play jazz. Sometimes he certainly does, sometimes probably not, but after years of befuddled criticism, Braxton now eschews the term and its attendant genre ghettoization.

To say that a particular genre of music belongs to a cultural or ethnic group puts that music in a precarious position: suddenly, it is apt to become a badge, a sticker of ethnicity or stamp of authenticity. And conversely, the music's integrity must then be upheld—playing it correctly and according to well-defined rules is seen as an act of honor, respectful of the culture that produced it; to breach the tradition, to alter the music, is to defile the ethnicity it has come to represent. Most national folkloric ensembles have been fraught with just such a stifling purism. And this is the predicament of American jazz as it aspires to official status as a national treasure, enshrined at Lincoln Center and tended by master morticians Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch. In their world, a universe of sanctioned sound, jazz can no longer be open, grow, change, or look for material extraneous to its historical essence; instead, it is required to reiterate itself, prove its worth, gain acceptance, in its trek from a minor to a major music. Deleuze and Guattari ask: "How many styles or literary

movements, even the very small ones, have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language . . . ?” What alternative do they offer? “Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, a sizable faction of the jazz community has heeded just this call. From its earliest history, jazz has been a shining example of a minor music (or better yet, a “becoming-minor” music, i.e., one that continually remains open to change): working with the basic instrumental tools of Western symphonic music (a major music if e’er there was one), and excorporating elements of that tradition’s harmonic base, jazz has gone so far as to utilize Tin Pan Alley pop tunes as the skeletons of some of its most beloved “standards.” Jazz musicians didn’t invent a new musical mode of communication, *lingua ex machina*, but instead worked within the major musical lit to create a positively minor music.

## II. Ethnic Grafting: Eine Kleine Weltmusik

Musical appropriation sings a double line with one voice. It is a melody of admiration, even homage and respect, a fundamental source of connectedness, creativity, and innovation. This we locate in a discourse of “roots,” of reproducing and expanding “the tradition.” Yet this voice is harmonized by a countermelody of power, even control and domination, a fundamental source of asymmetry in ownership and commodification of musical works. This we locate in a discourse of “rip-offs,” of reproducing “the hegemonic.” Appropriation means that the question “Whose music?” is submerged, supplanted, and subverted by the assertion “Our/my music.” • Steven Feld

The eighty-plus years of success that jazz has enjoyed (and exuberance and joy are surely part of this process, as well as politics and intellect!) in articulating its new, minor literature of sound perhaps explains why African American creative music has been the rallying point for musicians from so many other minority groups. Look at the three ensembles presented in the New Histories performance series, Henry Threadgill & Make a Move, the Far East Side Band, and John Zorn’s Masada: each group utilizes contemporary jazz as the underlying conduit for its own personal and cultural expressions. But all of them revel in multiplicity, too, grafting together musics of different origin, with different cultural associations and ethnic identities.

This practice is not without its perils. Treacherous flip side: cultural hybridity as a mainstream utopian fantasy. In certain cases, the free mingling of genres masks a deep power disequilibrium, an imbalance that in fact allows,

for instance, the makers of “world music” the mobility to borrow from various traditions at will. Much of the time, this entails a romance with exotic otherness, a profound leveling of disparate cultural traditions and an accompanying interchangeability of genre parts.

Bernard Gendron has examined the way that part interchangeability and pseudo-individuation interrelate in the pop music industry,<sup>5</sup> and an exact counterpart can be found in the domain of world music. A musical tradition must first be boiled down to sound bites—didgeridoo as a musical icon of Australian aboriginal music, for instance, or the use of certain modes to evoke Middle Eastern or Asian music—and then these component parts can be assembled, mix-and-match, to create an apparently unique, appealing product.

In an age of expanding multiculturalism, given the internationalization of the music industry, one must ask who is framing cultural hybridity and how: Who plays? On behalf of what identity? Using what markers of ethnicity or tradition? And with what combination of idiosyncratic individualism and cultural convention? Will the results be used to filter difference through rose-tinted headphones? To undermine essentialism? To enforce polystylism? Or, when combined with mainstream music, to reassert hierarchies that place exoticized “ethnic” sounds at the low end of the proverbial totem pole? The dilemma becomes: How to create music that incorporates elements of different cultural traditions without kowtowing to either a purist “roots” mentality or a predatory kind of nouveau exotica?

### **III. Improvisation: Form/For(u)m**

One of the facets of jazz that makes it especially flexible in this regard is the sanctified spot it reserves for improvising. Strategies for intersecting improvisation and composition, ways of entwining innovation and tradition—these are arguably the concerns that link Henry Threadgill, John Zorn, and the Far East Side Band’s leader and composer, Jason Hwang. One would be hard-pressed to call any of them an ethnic purist, though they each deal with the notion of cultural tradition through the expressive devices of improvising and writing. Zorn, for example, has called ethnicity to the center of his work with Masada. Positioning himself at the core of what he has called a “radical Jewish culture,” he poses a contentious set of questions: Is there any such thing as “radical Jewish culture,” and would it be radical culture that’s Jewish or Jewish culture that’s radical? What would *define* such culture? Is it any “radical” cultural artifact made by someone Jewish? Must it deal with Jewish content? Issues? Ideas? Doctrine? Or must it indicate its Jewishness in some

recognizable way? Must it “sound” Jewish? In other words, just by suggesting the concept of radical Jewish culture, focus is shifted back to the relationship between content and form, between ethnicity and expression.

Zorn has left these questions open, particularly as the curator/producer of a “radical Jewish culture” series on his own record label, Tzadik. In that series he has included explicitly Jewish content, like Zeena Parkins’s investigation of Rotwelsch (an old thieves language that used an altered form of Yiddish), as well as music that falls at the leading edge of a Jewish traditional music continuum, like David Krakauer and the Krakauer Trio and New Klezmer Trio, and work that is simply made by Jewish artists.<sup>6</sup> With Masada, composer and alto saxophonist Zorn uses Yiddish-sounding tunes, some of them traditional in origin, but he and the quartet play them in the style of Ornette Coleman’s late-’50s groups, thus making an implicit connection between his radical Judaism and the nascent African American radical music. A mapping of klezmer onto free jazz: Does this conflation indicate that Zorn seeks to claim an authentic marginal zone, a radical Jewish ghetto for contemporary artists of Jewish heritage? Is it a way of distancing him from the white mainstream, a way of snarling back at the annoying, but often reiterated question: What cultural right entitles a white guy to play radical black music? And will it therefore help produce an essentialized ideal of what it is that qualifies something as Jewish? Or, on the contrary, does Masada subversively undermine the stereotyped purisms of black and Jewish music by grafting them together?

Like Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill has refused to sum up his work with the term “jazz.” “Jazz is in my vocabulary,” he explained in a 1995 *DownBeat* interview. “But I don’t do jazz specifically. I consider myself an international musician.”<sup>7</sup> His activity in recent years has included a range of performers from different cultural traditions, such as pipa player Wu Man, percussionists Miguel Urbina and Johnny Rudras, accordionist Tony Cedras, and, indeed, violinist Jason Hwang.<sup>8</sup> Threadgill’s music has long integrated different genres, and eclecticism was a key feature of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the important Chicago-based organization that helped foster his work, along with that of Braxton, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Muhal Richard Abrams, Leroy Jenkins, Leo Smith, George Lewis, and many other great black artists. As Art Ensemble trumpeter Lester Bowie put it in 1980: “We’re free to express ourselves in any so-called idiom, to draw from any of the sources, to deny any limitations put on us by anyone—by ourselves, journalists or record companies.”<sup>9</sup> Given a jazz industry that constantly attempts to categorize and pigeonhole, the political significance of that statement—which applies perfectly well to Threadgill—cannot be overestimated.

Jason Kao Hwang's Far East Side Band can be seen in the context of a rapidly emerging Asian American creative music boom that includes such figures as Jon Jang, Fred Houn, Miya Masaoka, Francis Wong, Glenn Horiuchi, Ikue Mori, Eyvind Kang, and Fred Ho. Like Zorn's radical Judaica, the members of this pan-Asian movement don't hesitate to challenge the dominant image of Asian identity, whether that means parodying the equation of pentatonicism with Asia, aggressively overturning the orientalist use of instruments like koto or shakuhachi to provide exotic "moodiness," or turning a sixteenth-century epic adventure story into a "living comic book," as Fred Ho and the Monkey Orchestra recently have.<sup>10</sup> The Far East Side Band works out of New York, drawing on three distinct Asian heritages: second-generation Chinese (violinist Hwang), first-generation Korean (string specialist Sang-Won Park), and Japanese (percussionist Yukio Tsuji). The band later invited tubaist Joe Daley to join, and he adds a different jazz dimension to Hwang's long, sectional compositions. Once again, the fertile territory between improvisation and composition provides a place for the exchange of cultural ideas and the construction of a pan-Asian identity (though Daley arguably helps keep that from growing too exclusive or purist).

While Hwang, Threadgill, and Zorn are each absorbed in a set of particular musical and cultural concerns, the fascinating thing is that key aspects of their work—the inherent potential of improvisation; integration of soloism in mixed group context; formal challenge of writing dramatic, long-form, sectional compositions; combination of momentum-based rhythmic structures with static sound forms—allow for a fruitful comparison, cross-culturally. One needn't turn to a reductionist formalism, for these three figures, these three ensembles are all participating in the elaboration and redefinition of a becoming-minor music. Of course, it would be possible to curate a show around each of them: place Masada as the performance component of a radical Jewish culture exhibit, *Make a Move* in the context of a show of contemporary African American creative arts, the Far East Side Band in a series examining the recent surge in pan-Asianism. But what makes it equally feasible, sensible even, to group them together the way that *New Histories* has is their participation in playing that shared music and their common use of jazz and improvising as craft for their exploration. In the cracks between the issues of ethnicity, construction of styles, and politics and economics of making music in the real world—onward they push toward a minor music.

[1996]



## Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975]), 28.
2. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 16.
3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Questions of Multi-culturalism," in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews. Strategies. Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 60.
4. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 26–27.
5. Bernard Gendron, "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 18–38.
6. Zeena Parkins, *Mouth=Maul=Betraver* (Tzadik TZ 7109, 1996); David Krakauer, *Klezmer Madness!* (Tzadik TZ 7101); New Klezmer Trio, *Melt Zonk Rewire* (Tzadik TZ 7103). Zorn's Masada recordings are coming out as a series named after all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, starting with *Alef* (DIW 888, 1994).
7. Larry Birnbaum, "Henry Threadgill: Outside Moves In," *DownBeat*, March 1995, 16–19.
8. Threadgill's recent recordings include several made for the major Columbia label, including the latest *Makin' a Move* (Columbia CK 67214, 1995).
9. Charles J. Gans, "Art Ensemble of Chicago: Nice Guys Finish First," *Jazz Forum*, no. 68 (June 1980): 34.
10. Fred Ho, *Monkey: Part One* (Koch Jazz KOC 3-7815-2H1, 1996). The Far East Side Band has two records, the first of which, *Caverns* (New World 80458, 1994), is without Daley, while the most recent, *Urban Archaeology* (Victor cdo37, 1996), features the full quartet.

## ANTHONY BRAXTON

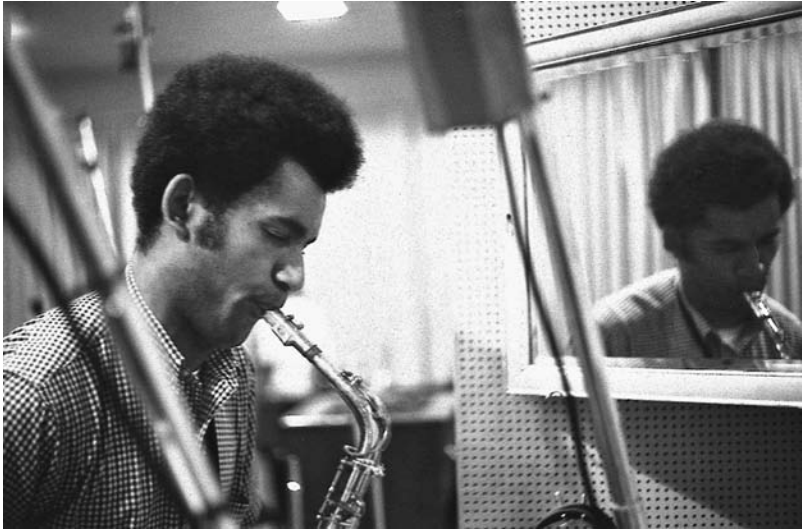
### Ism vs. Is

No other figure so handily condenses the hopes and fears of contemporary musical discourse as composer/multiple-reedman Anthony Braxton. Since emerging in the 1960s, he's been a veritable lightning rod for writers, holding out for some the great nonwhite hope of musical progress and exploration, while drawing from others vitriolic and dismissive attacks for "over-intellectualization" and treacherous mergers of jazz with contemporary classical music. "I read in *Coda Magazine* that our music was a poor example of Webern," he wrote in 1969, in liner notes that were never used for his important solo album *For Alto*. "The jazz musicians say it is not jazz and the classical musicians say it is not classical."

Can you think of another post-'60s musician associated with the avant-garde who has *three* full-length studies in print? Graham Lock's 1988 book *Forces in Motion* has now been followed by Ronald Radano's *New Musical Figurations* and a book in German by writer/bassist Peter Niklas Wilson. If you add a forthcoming tome by scholar/trombonist Mike Heffley (who, like Wilson, has also recorded with Braxton) and throw in Braxton's own *Tri-Axium Writings* and *Composition Notebooks*, not to mention liner notes by Braxton and a list of journalists long enough to fill his incessant output of discs with verbiage, you begin to get the picture. What's refreshing, if not surprising, is the fact that there's so little redundancy in these studies—a clear testament to the breadth, depth, and richness of Braxton's sound world.

"For me this is a kind of validation of the path I've taken in my work," he says on the phone from Wesleyan University, where he is currently chairman of the Department of Music.

I have felt from the very beginning that the dynamic implications of the re-structural musics from the '60s time cycle, what I call the "sixth restructural cycle" musics, were important, and that the seventh restructural response from musicians like myself and the AACM, but also including musicians



Anthony Braxton, late 1960s (photo: Terry Martin)

like Frederic Rzewski, David Behrman, Pauline Oliveros, was legitimate. I'd like to hope that the spectrum of writing will give future students of music an opportunity to consider some of the breakthroughs from, say, the last twenty-seven years, in my case.

I think the interest in my work goes back to the fact that I have, at every point, tried to document how my processes have evolved. And finally we find ourselves having to justify what happened in the last thirty years because we're confronted with a power structure that says nothing existed, everything stopped, or everything went crazy after 1960, when Coltrane did *Ascension*, or whatever. In the case of my work, I can talk to you about what happened. I can tell you how I started with it and how I proceeded with it, like it or not. It's evolved in a consistent way, and I can show how it's related to other things. So my work has become, or maybe will become, one of the ways to look around some of these dynamic arguments and start looking for how these experiences might relate to the future. Whatever the merits or demerits of my work, I was always trying to do something. I might have blown it, but at least I've documented it in a way where there'll be a lot to read about!

Most recently, and strangely, Braxton was used by Tom Piazza in the *New York Times* in an argument concerning jazz at Lincoln Center. "I was surprised

to see my work again being used in the spectacle–diversion games of the marketplace and media,” he admits.

It is fashionable now to put down Wynton Marsalis or Stanley Crouch, but in fact I find myself thinking “I will distance myself from this.” I used to say I was a jazz musician, and all the jazz musicians said, “No you’re not.” So I thought about it and said, wait a minute, if I say that I’m a classical musician, then I can do whatever I want, including play jazz! If I say I’m a jazz musician, then I have to play jazz “correctly.” All of this is part of what the jazz world has become, what jazz journalism has become, what the jazz recording complex has become. An attempt to enshrine blackness and jazz exoticism and contain it within one definition-space runs contrary to the total progression of the music. So now there’s suddenly a controversy at Lincoln Center. Why, if I were president of Lincoln Center, I would choose the musicians I liked myself. My disagreements with those guys have more to do with . . . how can I put it? I find their use of the phenomenon of “balance” to be profoundly creative.

Braxton sees this all presaging what he calls a “new techno-minstrel period.” “The new minstrel era is being manifested, in my opinion, by the images portrayed on television, also by a concept of ‘blackness’ that would be open to the kind of manipulation that is historically consistent. By chopping off the innovation of the music, you have chopped off anything to grow from. If bebop and Dixieland are it, that’s great, but that’s a Eurocentric idea, anyway.” He laughs hard, then sobers a bit. “You can put this in your article if you want to get me shot, but what the heck: The African American intellectual community from the ’60s/’70s time cycle has now embraced Eurocentricity on a level that boggles the mind,” says Braxton.

Remember now, I’m called the “white negro.” Nobody wants to use those terms, but I’m supposed to be the embodiment of that which has not been black, when in fact I never gave one inch of my beliefs or experiences. What is this notion that you can corral blackness? That’s a marketplace notion. You can be sure that when you start hearing arguments about what is properly black we’re moving toward another spectacle and diversion cycle and a narrowing of possibilities. But you show me one person in the last thirty years who has grown up in America and who hasn’t had to confront MTV, Bruce Springsteen, or my man Frank Sinatra.

In specific, Braxton suggests looking at four current tendencies:

(1) The African American community is no longer gonna be able to hide behind the concept of bogeyman, and as we begin to look into the next thousand years we aren't going to be able to blame the Europeans for every problem on the planet. (2) The concept of marketplace alignment that we see in this period, which has happened before with the early New Orleans period, would seek to, in many cases, build an idea of "blackness" that would be more limiting than equal to the processes Jelly Roll Morton was talking about. I'm seeing New Orleans used in this time period to crush the composite aspirations of the music. How unfortunate! (3) I think, if you're an African American, this is a great time to have a comedy TV show. (4) We're going to find ourselves forced to look at America in terms of where we are and where we'd like to be as we get ready to move out into the new millennium—I feel that our diversity is part of our strength. I align myself with the people who respect Frank Sinatra, even if they don't want to give him four or five stars! There's no reason to disrespect the guy, he is one of our masters.

That's right, Braxton's a big fan of Old Blue Eyes—and the whole Rat Pack. And Barbra Streisand (particularly her version of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"). And Johnny Mathis. And Tony Bennett and Nat King Cole. "I have been warming up of late," he 'fesses,

to Natalie Cole, as well. That's one of the wonderful areas given to us, the American song-form tradition. I'm trying to get tickets to see Sinatra when he comes to Connecticut. I'd do anything to see my man! He's an old guy, he sings like an old guy, but he's a great master who's come to his old and senile period, and I want to hear it! I'll love every moment. It's past perfect-pitch, past all of that. It's got heavy life experience!

The music that pushed my button was more than a word "jazz." It was individuals who were approaching the music in a certain way, with a certain set of value systems and intentions, a certain honesty and humility. There was respect for similarities and differences. Nowadays, when you say "jazz" it's like going to a Dixieland festival, there's a way to play and you better not step outside of that or it's not jazz. They've closed off the definitions in a way that's laughable. I'm not jazz, but I'm what jazz used to be! When the "ism" is more important than the "is," you have jazz. And . . . swing it, baby!

Of course, Braxton's distancing himself from the jazz arguments hasn't exactly made him central to "new music," either. "I've had to build an involvement in the cracks, because no definition camp wanted to respect me as

a person, as an African American, as an American. The classical guys were never interested in me. 'A black guy with a saxophone, are you kidding? Give me a break!'" Without the official recognition of these camps, in the tradition of maverick loners like Harry Partch and John Cage, Braxton has pursued the development of his panoramic, highly personal approach to composition and performance.

Over the last ten years, he has been working diligently on a theoretico-poetical musical model based on a science-fiction city/state metaphor, replete with storytelling based on a set of characters (check the liner notes to *New Albion's Composition 165* [NA 050] and *hat ART's 2 Compositions (Ensemble) 1989/91* [CD 6086] for examples of Braxton's stories). These pieces synthesize many aspects of his work, combining his preoccupations with science (which appeared early on, in the Erector set-like schematic titles of his '70s works), ritual and mythology, humor, and humanism. He likens the extensive territory in these fantasy lands to Plato's *Republic*. "In my system I will be able to discuss the philosophical implications of the various arguments in the *Tri-Axium Writings* and at the same time, as far as the 3-D components of that information, give the kindly traveling musician the possibility to move in that space with all kinds of worked-out, choreographed sequential materials that can be re-targeted inside of that experience."

In November, at the Contemporary Improvised Music Festival in Den Haag, Holland, I had the pleasure of seeing Frederic Rzewski perform "Composition 171," for piano and narration, which took the audience on a didactic tour (narrated by an uncostumed Rzewski as a mounted tourist guide, though missing the slide-projected maps and prompts called for in the score) through regions that were at once musical and geographic. Braxton's "Composition 174" (for four percussionists), recently performed at Arizona State, "demonstrates a similar logic, in that a group of mountaineers will be scaling a mountain—in fact, they will be demonstrating *gradient* logic interactive components, and as such will be demonstrating the theoretical and poetic implications of my system."

Looking ahead, Braxton is excited about the future, stimulated by a recent demonstration of artificial sonic environments by composers Morton Subotnick and Joan LaBarbara. "The act of experiencing music won't be so much about putting a CD on, as much as taking advantage of new processes in technology. CD-ROM is just the beginning, I feel. One aspect I hope to arrive at would be akin to a sonic Jurassic Park, a three-dimensional composite state that will invite the traveling listener, musician, experiencer, to visit twelve states of geometric identities, within each state a type of people, twelve states

of language components, imagery components, gesture components. We have arrived in the future,” he says, echoing a proclamation from Sun Ra. “We are now in the post-future, and only the jazz musicians are arguing about ‘How High the Moon.’”

With all of his wide-eyed enthusiasm for the future, Braxton remains entranced with and involved in a variety of traditions. At times, he unquestionably plays jazz—he just finished a record of Charlie Parker tunes with Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg, tenor saxophonist Ari Brown, trumpeter Paul Smoker, bassist Joe Fonda, and drummer Pheeroan Ak Laff—though that doesn’t necessarily make him a “jazz musician.” He’d rather not be hemmed in by those definitions, and it only seems right to respect that wish. Still, in a way Braxton considers himself a traditionalist (he has released two records called *Standards* and two called *In the Tradition*). “They’re using tradition to kill the tradition. When you stop to think about it, what’s all the controversy about? I’ve kept my nose on the grindstone about the tradition. I might have been wrong when I thought the kids would be dancing to this music and I’d have five million dollars by 1970, but with the exception of that it was a sound career move!”

As this comment brings us to the end of our phoner, I read to Braxton from the *For Alto* notes that he forgot he wrote back in ’69. “If this record doesn’t sell a million copies I will be very disappointed. Already I am making room on my mantle for a gold record and I am going to have parties and I am preparing an acceptance speech.” At this, the nearly fifty-year-old laughs his sparkly, wonderful, slightly loony laugh. “That’s perfect! I was ready for the big time! Beautiful life. I’ve had a strange career, but I must say music has made the difference. Tell ’em, in the ’gos kids will be dancing to Braxton. We’ll all make a billion!”

[1994]

## ANTHONY BRAXTON

### Bildungsmusik—Thoughts on “Composition 171”

On the first night of the Contemporary Improvised Music (CIM) fest, at Den Haag’s Korzo Theatre, mid-November 1993, Frederic Rzewski takes the stage for the second time. His initial foray consisted of a thoroughly discombobulating meeting with fellow pianist Misha Mengelberg and reedman Ab Baars, in which Rzewski performed Felix Mendelssohn’s *Lieder ohne Worte* directly from the score while his cohorts improvised along with—and at times against—him.

Now, carrying another stack of staff paper, Rzewski steps up to the piano and describes Anthony Braxton’s “Composition 171,” a three-hour work of which he will play one-third. Rzewski lists various backdrops, including illuminated maps and other visual aids, that would be included in a full staging of the piece. In this performance, however, he will play the solo piano part and simultaneously serve as narrator for a story/lecture/travel guide that accompanies and is integrated into the music.

Braxton’s narrator turns out to be a fully realized character, a sort of traffic cop or mounted policeman who takes the audience on a detailed road tour of what Braxton variously refers to as the “Southwestern Region” and the “Tri-State Area.” Ranging widely across these zones, “Composition 171” sets up a topographic arena that is a metaphor for Braxton’s music. It is a spatial and narrative condensation of the various routes, highways, and byways of sound in the musical universe that Braxton is building and exploring in this and other works. In a delightfully deadpan voice, Rzewski details the delights of certain of the region’s paths and warns of the dangers of others, mixing explicitly musical references with rhetoric that could come directly out of *Fodor’s* or *Let’s Go*. Meanwhile, the piano music continues, sometimes intersecting with the cadences and meanings of the text, other times ambling about on its own circumlinear track.

Braxton once told me to consider the phrase “Navigation through form.” Musico-theatrical performances like “Composition 171” indicate Braxton’s firm



links with Sun Ra, a composer whose music was explicitly about navigation, about the formal construction of vehicles for travel in self-created space. Ra called for listeners to do the impossible, to make manifest a fantastic journey, a highly politicized, poetical trip into unknown worlds. His work was predicated on the concretization of metaphor and the materialization of space as a musical and mental—but altogether real—place.

For me, this aspect of Braxton and Ra calls to mind what Russian literary critic M. M. Bakhtin called the “chronotope”—a combination of “chronos” and “topos,” literally: “time-space.” In 1937–38, Bakhtin defined the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships”: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.”<sup>1</sup>

Bakhtin saw in the emergence of various forms of the literary novel a radically new approach to the relationship between time, space, and reality. In a later essay on the *bildungsroman* (which Bakhtin translates as “novel of emergence”), he specifically analyzed a set of mid-eighteenth-century works by Goethe, the reception of which “gave evidence of a certain reorientation of the artistic image with respect to actual reality.”

A definite and absolutely concrete locality serves as the starting point for the creative imagination. But this is not an abstract landscape, imbued with the mood of the contemplator—no, this is a piece of human history, historical time condensed in space. Therefore, the plot . . . and the characters do not enter it from outside, are not invented to fit the landscape, but are unfolded in it as though they were present from the very beginning. . . . The locality became an irreplaceable part of the geographically and historically determined world, of that completely real and essentially visible world of human history. . . . The world and history did not become poorer or smaller as a result of this process of mutual concretization and interpenetration. On the contrary, they were condensed, compacted, and filled with the creative possibilities of subsequent real emergence and development. Goethe’s world is a germinative seed, utterly real, visibly available, and at the same time filled with an equally real future that is growing out of it.<sup>2</sup>

Braxton and Ra intermingle fantasy and reality in the same sort of way, literalizing and concretizing their metaphorical localities (named and charted very exactly in the case of the cartography in “Composition 171”), providing

the “germinative seed” for transformative mixtures of aesthetics and politics. They populate these mountains, plateaus, planets, and waterways with both characters and listeners. In a record title, Braxton’s onetime AACM compadre Henry Threadgill once urged his listeners to “easily slip into another world.” In this, Threadgill, like Ra and Braxton, asks not so much for suspension of disbelief as for the acquisition of new beliefs—that is, for (spatial and spiritual) navigation through (musical and poetic) form.

[1995]

## Notes

1. M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

2. M. M. Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 49–50.

## PAUL LOVENS

### Lo Our Lo

#### Characteristics of Masked Man:

Rides into town.

Special garb.

Works well with partners, even his horse, but basically a loner.

A little melancholy.

Heavy gunplay only when absolutely necessary. If needed, no problem.

Mystery.

Secretly loves Dionne Warwick.

Arresting.

Thrills townsfolk with his daring escapades.

Does not want a reward or personal acclaim.

Rides out of town.

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In the world of freely improvised percussion, we are fortunate to have such a diversity of approaches, temperaments, and aesthetics. That's one of the music's great joys, its polymorphous perversity. I am always hesitant to use words like "greatest" or "favorite" when we're reveling in heterogeneity—who would want to have to choose between Han Bennink and Hamid Drake? Thankfully, we don't.

For me, however, there is one absolute top dog. I would extend my enthusiasm beyond the sphere of improvised music and jazz to include all living drummers in any genre. Paul Lovens is my personal favorite. Sure, I love Zigaboo Modaliste and Clyde Stubblefield, Bun E. Carlos and Levon Helm, Nasheet Waits and Roy Haynes. And Milford Graves sits outside of the category of drummer, so I'll bracket him. But for my money, as drummers go, Lo takes the cake.

What lessons do we learn from Master Lovens? First, he shows us how he can ride into town and make an arrest. He arrests time, that is. Time will, in Lovens's hands, quite literally stop. It is a pliable material, equipment no less tangible than the springs on the bass pedal or skins on the drumheads. To snatch it back and hold it with that authority is not only a skill, a discipline; it's a gift. And it's a present that Masked Man continues to bestow on the townsfolk from village to village around the world. With those terrifying thwacks, followed by metronomic rimshots, a sound or two on tuned metal, maybe a rattle or perfectly timed item dropped to the floor, Lovens is our superchronometer, changing and redirecting time. Making time palpable.

We also learn how the most pianissimo event can dovetail with the cataclysmic. Whispering and wailing are both dramatic devices, but Lovens knows how to use them in close proximity without turning them into bathos. It's elemental: if you can stop time, you can place unlike energies next to one another. In the wrong hands, these combinations could be dangerous. It's the possible nearness of free jazz and chamber music. We all know that these fields can become mannered when brought together. Lo avoids this by staying natural, loose-limbed, ready for anything, not boxed into a corner. Listen to him react. Nobody else is responsive like that. He pushes back, too, in just the perfect amount. Swim along, leave the school.

A mere six decades does not seem enough to have learned all that Masked Man knows. His mark is more than the music alone. Long partnerships with Parker and Schlippenbach, Christmann, Chadbourne, Wacshmann, Gustafsson—these are the enduring and growing variety of improvised music relationship, and they give us a very important model for our social lives. Tenacity, integrity, style, humor, strength, a devious streak—we have grown to know and adore these traits. The importance of little rituals, the things “we” do or don't do (“We don't negotiate a fee after the gig . . .”; “We don't play plastic heads . . .”; “We don't drink cheap wine when there's good wine anywhere in reach . . .”; “We don't tell our secrets . . .”). The white shirt and skinny tie. The lucky slippers, falling apart but still worn every concert. The half-closed eyes and supersensitive radar. The taste for a killer Italian red and a beautiful meal.

There's a stubbornness in Lovens that can be difficult, but it's an important part of his character. I tried to talk him into licensing some of the Po Torch label for release on disk. He wrinkled his nose. Better to wait until there's a superior medium to CD, he suggested. At the time I thought he was just being ornery. Now I think he was probably right. In any case, his unswerving dedication to the cause of vinyl is perhaps vindicated by the current turn in independent music back toward the black pancakes. We should take a moment to tip a



Paul Lovens (photo: Michael Jackson)

hat to the Po Torch accomplishment. This label includes some of the greatest improvised music ever released. Remember that Lovens issued a twelve-inch record documenting three-and-a-half minutes of music. It's one of the absolute perfect recordings ever made. And who had the courage of conviction to put it out? Masked Man, that's who.

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Obviously, I am smitten with our honoree. There are many reasons, but I'll recount one in particular that will perhaps say more about who he is than the others. I visited him in Aachen one year, back in the late '90s. When I arrived, he told me he had prepared to make a nice dinner. Turned out he had gone to a butcher who sold him some beautiful beef kidneys. But on the way home he had gone to another butcher who sold him some really, really beautiful kidneys of another kind. So he had lots of kidneys, which he cooked in an incredibly elegant, delicious way. Meanwhile, we devoured several bottles of already decanted Barolo, older and fuller ones, while listening to selections from his record collection. The kidneys were so scrumptious that we couldn't stop and ate them all, opening and consuming several more bottles of wine and some select and very good spirits before falling fast asleep.

When I awoke the next day I was not well. No, that's not stating it strongly enough. I was nearly dead. When Lovens saw me, he could immediately tell

that I was deep in the shit, and with the compassion of a nurse and the prestidigitation of a great magician, he managed to spend the whole day coaxing my system from the edge of self-destruction. At the pinnacle of my misfortune, he made the great decision to put something on the tape deck. It was Evan Parker giving a lecture somewhere about improvised music. And it had some mystical power over me, making me less green, finally empowering me to leave the house and go for a walk. I have never been so deathly ill. But sometimes in those moments you learn what someone is really made of. Masked Man came to the rescue, damn near saved the day.

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For the betterment of culture and humanity, may Paul Lovens don his tie and shirt for another sixty years. But let's get him a new pair of slippers.

[2009]

# CLARK COOLIDGE

## The Improvised Line

John Corbett: Let's talk about the simple relationship between writing and playing improvised music.

Clark Coolidge: Not simple. I do both things. I try to. Started as a drummer, didn't really write until in my teens, unlike a lot of my contemporaries. I came out of a musical house, all classical. When I write there's a certain kind of time, meter, which is a bebop meter, not iambic pentameter. It's Max Roach, who I used to try to imitate. I couldn't make the fast tempo, but who could? Max, cut it out! Circus tempos, 2/4. Music and writing were kind of separate for me, which was good, but then I gave myself that bum steer of "you can't serve two masters," hung the sticks up for a dozen years. Somebody jumped on me and said, "What are you, a jerk?" Because I had played with some pretty great people. So then I set up my drums again. It seems compatible in a way. I've been playing a lot of free music lately. In a way I miss playing "But Not for Me." There's something in my heart that goes back to playing all those standards. Me and Al[vin] Curran, we had a teenage band, in college at Brown. He was in the school's jazz band, the Brunotes, like I was. That's how he got to Europe, after I quit. I wasn't meant to be on that tour.

JC: He didn't go on to play jazz.

CC: He went to Yale, came back and studied with Elliott Carter, and then they sent him back to Berlin, which he hated. I screwed myself out of that, but the Brunotes were a really bad band, and there's nothing worse than playing with bad musicians. No matter how bad you are, you want better guys to push you up. I was lucky enough to play with Buell Neidlinger and together to work with guys like Sam Rivers. Got to play beyond myself. Buell and I were going to have a coffee shop called the Golden Tuba. We had it all picked out, a flattened tuba to use for the hanging sign.

JC: Where was that?

CC: In Providence. We had been playing a coffee shop called Tete-a-Tete—“New England’s Only Continental Coffee House”—for like \$1.65 a night. Buell blew up at the lady who ran it and said: “I can’t afford to bring Sam Rivers down for that.” And she said: “Get out of here!” When we started our own thing, she knew the cops, and we never got our health license, so it never happened. It was going to be me and Buell as the rhythm section with all the guys from New York. I could have played with Cecil [Taylor], all those guys. I began to think maybe it wasn’t in the cards. I could use pencil and paper, didn’t need the chemistry of the other guys. Which of course is fantastic if you’ve got the right chemistry, but often you don’t. So then I didn’t do it for a long time until [David] Meltzer called me up in ’67 and said he had a Vanguard [Records] contract, and I went to play whatever kind of San Francisco rock that was. That was an education. I’d never been in a recording studio. It wasn’t a pleasant experience. The guy, Sam Charters, I don’t think he’d ever done anything like that. He’d recorded blues and jazz. Vanguard desperately wanted a hit in that market, a rock band. They got Country Joe, whose band couldn’t even play, took them an hour to tune up on acid. They had John Fahey, who was a total nut case. And us, Serpent Power. From Kundalini. Then I got back to the pen. The end of that band wasn’t a great time. The Meltzers needed money, thought it could be a dance band, like Quicksilver. It had turned into this free improv band, essentially.

JC: A free improvising rock band.

CC: And less and less rock. I think David and I were the only ones who had any jazz at all, David less than me. We had some wars, and finally I said I don’t want to be in that kind of band, and we broke up. You couldn’t be in it for the money. It was obvious that the bands that made the money were Airplane, the Dead. The rest of us were failures, as far as that goes. It’s a shame, because there were some very interesting players and music going on. Great band from Berkeley called Mad River, if you ever have a chance to hear them, they have a couple of LPs. One has Richard Brautigan reading on part of it. They had a guy who played really soft feedback. We had a guy in our band who could play little melodies like that, not cranked Marshalls. I lost hearing in my left ear because David played so loud and his amp was always to my left. It was such a thrill to have that power and volume. For a while. Then it became a drag. Then I got back to writing. Lately it’s been easier to bridge the gap. I wish it had happened a long time ago, but these things have their own time.



- JC: You bring up the fact that as a writer you don't have to work with other people. Instead you work independently. That's a major difference. But another thing that strikes me as a primary distinction, at least so far as improvised music is concerned, is the ability in writing to edit. You can go back and rethink something.
- cc: Well, you know I come from Kerouac, and I pretty much move along that line. He would say it's a sin to edit. I don't say that, but I come from the improvised line. That's what gave me the first instruction to write at all. I'd been taught that you sit there until the word comes and then you write it. Kerouac obviously didn't know what was coming, and he swung on. I thought maybe I could do that. I knew what it was like to do that in music. Anything that I've done that's any good in writing is improvised. I don't revise that way. I throw away things, like a false start. Like Charlie Parker. Now we can hear all his false starts! What if all the writers published their false starts? I throw them away. But if it gets going, if I get a page or a poem, that's what I do. I have friends where the joy is in the editing. Looking at the same page day after day, maybe changing a word, see how that changes everything else. Can be fascinating. It would drive me crazy. I would change every word finally, and it would be totally different. Why put yourself through that kind of madness?
- JC: The relationship between writing and playing, from a road standpoint, in terms of which road you took, they're very different, but on the other hand they feel very close in terms of the practice in your case. When I read your work, part of what's so interesting to me is that I hear it as being felt out in terms of how it sounds and then in terms of what it means. So it's never only about the formal qualities, but also never only about a specific denotative meaning. It's a play back and forth.
- cc: That's the trouble talking about this in any linear way, because those things are all true also. I *hear* everything. I just have one of those heads, I can't look at a line of type without hearing a voice. I've found that's not true of everyone. So I think we're born determined that way. I was surprised that some poets don't hear at all. What are they doing? I'm rigid enough in my own thing that I can't understand soundless words. I can't imagine it. For me it has to have meter, a bop meter, not an English meter. Or an Indian tala, like fifteen or twenty beats with different accents repeated. That's a more interesting line, I can imagine that as a unit. I think bigger than a pentameter or tetrameter line. Of course, you can say Shakespeare blew over those changes. But that's why he's a genius! There ain't too many. And English is not a good language for rhymes

and that sort of thing. It obviously makes sense to me to be doing both music and writing. I was doing it in my head, was listening, never gave up the record collection, going to clubs. After I played with Neidlinger, was first call guy, played every kind of gig, and I sort of thought I was never going to have another chance, thought that was my moment. Club failed. No money. Buell went off to be in the symphony.

JC: If you think about improvisation and poetry, you sometimes run into performance poetry as a genre. Which seems to me not always so interesting. I'm more excited by hearing the language in my head than having the poet inflect it for me, most of the time.

CC: It's like doing stand-up. I'm not sure it's improvising in the same sense. I remember Allen Ginsberg used to challenge me: "Coolidge, why don't you just get up and blow?" We went around a few times, and finally I said: "I don't want to end up like you! Those corny rhymes." He laughed. He knew. It was a problem. I seem to need for the thing to go on the page and then feed back to me. That loop is part of the process. It would be short-circuited if I just stood at a mike and opened my mouth. I've never heard anybody do that really well. Maybe somebody has.

JC: I've never heard anybody do it well either. The presumption is that we use language most freely when we speak, which is probably not true. When we speak, we fall back on patterns and clichés. The pleasure of writing is freeing yourself from having to fall back on those. You can take more time. Nobody is waiting for you to say something. It's a big difference. There's no reason speaking should be free. It's interlocutory: you're locking up with somebody else to get a particular meaning across. But if you're not trying to do that . . .

CC: Poetry is something else. You want to get out way beyond that kind of constriction. And you can't be apologetic. You've got to get out there and blow, somehow. When I read, I really need someone who can ride the gain. I have the tendency to eat the microphone, because I can't hear myself. I need monitors, but who's ever heard of a poet with monitors?

JC: A rock poet!

CC: Even in the Serpent Power we didn't have monitors, they were just about to hit.

JC: If you loop one more medium into this, having collaborated extensively with Philip Guston, how does having experiences with different media inform what you do?

CC: That's the tough one. Visual art, I don't know. Funny thing about Guston, I loved those guys in the '50s, the abstract expressionist gang. Particularly

de Kooning, Pollock, and Kline, the gestural guys. Guston at that time was close to that. It amazed some people that a guy like me didn't have trouble with his transition, which I totally didn't. I think something was happening in my work that was a bit parallel. I was starting to allow more statement to happen. And the sense was that Guston could have it all. He could do what the renaissance guys were doing, he could do pure paint, abstraction with forms, and recognizable images. He could do the whole thing, and at his best he damn well did that. He got a lot of friction for that, painters wouldn't talk to him after that '70 Marlborough show. The only guy who embraced him was de Kooning.

JC: Sadly, it was a musical figure who was most heartbreaking.

CC: Morton Feldman. It truly was, he felt great pain at the loss of Morty. But you know it's educational because it says a lot about Feldman. He was one of those guys—who said that line “To live is to defend a form”? He had an idea or theory or way, and he was going to goddamn well keep to it. It does take that kind of narrowing of your vision, in a certain way. I think Feldman's late music is unbelievably great. He did something that no other musician probably will ever do. He couldn't adjust his mind to what his old buddy was going through. Feldman wrote great articles about visual art, he had a good sense of a lot of all of it. But he somehow missed it with Guston's late work. Or a defense of his own work led him away from understanding, or publicly understanding it.

JC: If you look at Guston in the late '50s, you already see the shift happening, at a time when he was part of the gang, he was already making the change internally. You have a sense that he wanted more latitude in what he was doing, in what was admissible into it. And Feldman went the other direction. His work got more streamlined and refined, rather than opening up.

CC: I think it opens up your head to a new kind of music. Those endless pieces, listening to the same intervals. It's as far from jazz as you could get. That's not improvised music. But maybe to him it was.

JC: Someone told me that Feldman's late music is about getting lost. Harmonically, you feel yourself in one tonal center, and then at some point you're in another and you don't know how you got there. And then sometimes you feel yourself in both at the same time. It's about these ambivalences, feeling at once very grounded and at the same time completely adrift. The time scale of those pieces is especially important in that respect, the fact that there aren't huge markers where one thing shifts to something else. It's going to change gradually over a long

period of time, and in the middle you really don't know where the hell you are.

CC: It reminds me of a period of mine, the early '70s, where I was very close to Bernadette Mayer, and we were both egging each other on to write really long pieces. To be read aloud. It was difficult. You couldn't find venues. They wanted a forty-five-minute set. I was thinking that I need to set up the landscape, to reconfigure it for everybody, and then play off that. You can't get those changes unless everybody's living in the same territory. And you're setting up an unfamiliar territory, for these things that spin out of it. I had a good experience in San Francisco: for a week I did two hour-long sets a night. A lot of that was misunderstood, even by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E guys, maybe especially them. They thought it was like a conceptual thing, like conceptual art—you're reading so many words a night, like an athletic-conceptual thing. I'm saying, no, man, I'm like this musician, I come in and have this long piece and I play two sets a night, and if you can't make it tonight, maybe you can make it tomorrow night. Or, as did happen once in a while, you could fall asleep, then come awake at a certain point and have an amazing flash. Someone told me they fell asleep and then woke up and heard the word "Pennsylvania" and felt like they'd never heard that word before. They were apologetic, but I said, no, that's the greatest thing that could have happened. I did this gig with bassist Michael Bisio, an hour and a half, and people were yelling about durational poetry. I was wondering if that was the new thing, capital "D." But don't hang that term on me. Any fool can get up and read for a long time.

JC: I relate it to the turn in Coltrane's music, with Miles when the solos were getting longer, and then later on his own, the marathon solos. Coltrane had to set certain things in motion in order to let them be felt. It wasn't about some ideal form; he had to set up a field in which it could happen.

CC: You have to experience it note to note. Word to word. The greatest experience I had with Coltrane's music was just that, precisely listening; if you didn't, you might think he's playing the same little phrase over and over, but actually there's something else going on.

JC: It's funny, I'd never thought about Coltrane and Feldman in the same breath.

CC: Me either.

[2014]

## NATHANIEL MACKEY

### Steep Incumbencies

John Corbett: Music is such an integral part of your writing. Can you give us a little narrative of how music came to be important in your life?

Nathaniel Mackey: It started early, when I was a kid. It was in the house and in the neighborhood. Rhythm and blues, blues, gospel, stuff like that. I was absorbing that and into it. Later, as a teenager, I started to branch out, listen to my older brother's jazz collection. Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, things like that. At that time, in the early '60s, folk music was having a revival, and part of that was an interest in international music. Through the folk revival I started listening to flamenco and Hamza El Din, from Nubia, the oud player/singer. Very early, this branching out included a cross-cultural dimension. Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain* made sense when I started listening to flamenco. It was something that, at that point I didn't see it as occupying the place that it has come to occupy in my imagination and in my sense of things, but it grew to be that. The impulse to write, when I started writing in high school, was largely bound up with my involvement with music. I remember writing to music, short stories, poems, things like that. It led me into exploring the musicality of language itself. Certainly language can refer to music and musicians and pieces of music, but I was interested in the musicality that resides within language itself. Rhythm, cadence, what Robert Duncan talks about as the tone leading of vowels, in poetry the use of assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme. Certain concatenations of sound and image. I was reading contemporary poetry, William Carlos Williams, Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones—his engagement with music was strong, clear. In fact, I first encountered his work as a liner note writer. *Coltrane Live at Birdland*. Made quite an impression. That was the first Coltrane record I bought. But I saw that Baraka was a poet and sought out his work. *The Dead Lecturer*, which was the most recent of his books

at that point, was something that I read. I got into other poets, the Black Mountain School were very important to me, reading Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Denise Levertov, and while music didn't come into their work as explicitly as in the work of Baraka, there were certain analogies to music that I picked up on. Olson talking about breath, I'd listen to Sonny Rollins play, and that seemed to be some version of projective verse even though he wasn't using words. Then later I would find that Olson said in an interview, "We didn't have an aesthetic in the '50s, we had Charlie Parker." So even he, who wasn't close to music in any explicit way, would invoke music on occasion. It was coming up in many places, and it was one of the resources that I kept going back to in my own writing in various ways, whether we're talking about the poem sequence *The Song of the Andomboulou*, which came out of hearing a piece of Dogon music back in the early '70s, or the epistolary fiction I've been writing, which quite explicitly takes up the imagination of music. It's just, as they used to say about ragtime, jus' grew.

JC: You mention the Black Mountain poets, and Black Mountain was also a context where there was important musical activity of a different kind, with Cage. Did that come into your scope?

NM: No. I knew about Cage, both as a composer and as a writer. Read the impact of his work and ideas on a poet such as Jackson Mac Low. But other than certain ideas it wasn't as immediate to me as the involvement I was having with jazz and with various world musics. I knew about the multidisciplinary arts environment of Black Mountain, how important that was, and for example how references to dance come up in Olson's work a lot, the presence of Merce Cunningham, and the importance of painting, abstract expressionism, all of that. I had a sense that these were part of a larger whole. But I don't feel that part of the music world was something that I was engaged with enough to say it came into my work in any strong way.

JC: And there are also certain things about the way Cage was approaching his ideas about chance that were pitted against jazz ideas about improvisation, he's explicit about that in some places in his writing. He was not interested in spontaneity and expression, but was interested in obstructing expression in some sense.

NM: I kind of play with that idea in *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, the idea of the obstructions built into instruments, prepared instruments, there's some playing on Cage that [the character] N. does. I knew he was there and some of those attitudes. I remember reading in one of his books the line

“Music as discourse will not work. Jazz has proven that.” I remember also seeing some comments by Jackson Mac Low about improvisation, that it was too involved with the ego, whereas the aim of chance operations was to get beyond the ego. There was a different thing going on with that. The relationship to the self and to expression, self-expression, was being differently posed. It was a thing that I had to be aware of as being different from or antithetical to the things that were making sense to me. I may have been put off by that or felt that I was being put at a distance by that.

JC: It’s interesting to think about the political consequences or origins of some of that in relationship to another thing that’s prevalent in the trilogy, which is the notion of collectivism and collective activity. It is part of the narrative, with reference via the Mystical Horn Society to actual historical organizations like the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the Black Artists Group (BAG), the notion of self-empowerment and the significance of representing yourself as a black artist in the 1960s. As opposed to the politics of Cage not advocating collectivism, but instead advocating a kind of solitariness and individual activity. Having no interest in ego just at the point when ego becomes a legitimate pursuit, in a certain respect, for an African American artist.

NM: Well, there’s a kind of privileged assurance of agency that Cage is coming out of that allows a theoretical dismissal of agency. But coming from a group of people that have been denied agency, that sounds frivolous or luxurious or something that can’t be afforded. Assertions of agency and of ego have a different inflection, have a different place, play a different role because they’re coming from a position of deprivation and denial, suppression of agency. Again the social positioning of Cage as against the AACM is very important to look at. These positions don’t just come from nowhere. And they’re informed by something and express something and are symptomatic of something. Certainly the emphasis on the collective and the attempt to transform individual and eccentric or idiosyncratic agency into group assertion is one of the things that N. is mediating on and alluding to again and again and again in those letters. How does the musical ensemble which affords such a singular place for the interaction of group and individual voice and provides such a unique space for idiosyncratic and eccentric self-assertion, what are the implications of that for collectivity outside of the musical context? Is there some kind of translation into more explicitly social terms that

can be made of that situation and that music? That's very much a question and issue that comes up in the African American musical tradition, partly because music has had to do so much work that was proscribed in other areas. Music as a kind of channeling of energies and activities that might have taken place in other areas is very much a part of that tradition. How do those energies get reinscribed into those proscribed places again? Over and over, you hear Malcolm X talking about improvisation, that the solutions to the problems that African Americans face will be improvised. Seeing the improvisatory ensemble as a model of democratic transformation, the antiphonal relationship between soloist and chorus, for instance, suggesting a liberated or utopian social space.

JC: If you take it in a militant direction, it's interesting to think that if you google "improvised," the majority of hits that you get have to do with munitions and are about how to make bombs.

NM: Really.

JC: You'd think it would be about music, but it's about explosives.

NM: If you put in "improvisation"?

JC: "Improvised." I think it's the form that relates to IEDs. Which is interesting if you think about radical struggle, if things are going to be changed, they'll need to be improvised. And improvising means using what comes to hand, at least in one of its definitions.

NM: Well, they've always talked about drummers "dropping bombs."

JC: Backing up, I thought about the moment that John Cage came to the University of Chicago and had a very fractious afternoon with members of the AACM. And Cage refers to it very dismissively at a point in *Silence*.

NM: I have a photograph of John Cage and Sun Ra, do you know anything about that?

JC: Nineteen eighty-six. I had the pleasure of interviewing Sun Ra the day after they had that encounter.

NM: They're both smiling in the photo.

JC: I spoke with Ra the next night in Providence, and Ra's perspective on it was that it was nice, but, he said: "Of course, he's into his own *love* thing." I'd never thought of Cage as into a love thing, but that was Sonny's way of seeing it.

NM: It wasn't love in outer space . . .

JC: It was love right there on earth, I guess! You mention the duality between individuality and collectivity, and what's interesting about how collectivity features in the trilogy is that you're exploring it narratively, looking



at possibilities for collectivities, but you're writing it, which is a solitary activity. What are the implications of having this idea of collective activity, integrating idiosyncratic individuals into some common, consensual, or argumentative space? Here you are the solitary writer. Have you participated in collective writing exercises?

NM: No, I haven't taken part in much of that. The epistolary fiction comes largely out of fantasy and wishing to be a musician, which is something that began to plague me in my early twenties. I would have recurring dreams of being a musician. Usually I was a saxophonist. In my dreams I played with a lot of great musicians. I played with Ornette, Archie Shepp, Trane. Obviously, musicians had a heroic stature for me, and still do. *Bedoin Hornbook* begins with N. having this dream of picking up a horn and playing it. That work begins with something of a confession, that this is fantasy that I'm hoping to turn into fiction, the fantasy of being a musician. Written into that are some of the tensions that you mention between the two media. Writing is a solitary art, you do it alone. There's a wishful attraction to an art form that involves collectivity, collaboration, that you do with other people, that is interactive. That's one art form looking enviously at another art form. Writer who would be musician. No art form has it all, so there's a certain part of that that's inevitable. Some musicians envy writers. John Cage and Sun Ra write poetry. Archie Shepp writes poetry and plays. Also, thinking about my own fantasy-attraction to music and music's fantasy-attraction to writing, wanting to complicate it with that fact, so that it's not just a poor writer who wants to be a musician. In the writing I write as a musician, but N. is quite a writer. For a musician, he writes a lot of letters. I'm playing with music aspiring to the condition of speech and writing. And music aspiring to the condition of speech is certainly an important feature of the music I'm talking about, Mingus, Dolphy talking about getting their instruments to speak. The speechlike qualities of jazz improvisation, that's a given. One thing I'm interested in in the fiction is that way that the different art forms look enviously at one another. Of course, the whole concern with solitude with collectivity is all over the place in the fiction. Letters being written to an angel, dear angel of dust. Which can be read as a desperate state of estrangement. If you have nobody you can talk to but an angel of dust, you may be in dire straits. One thing N. says early on is that the last thing we want to be is a lonely hearts band. They're haunted again and again by the idea that that's what they are. They're plagued by the lonely and private against the communal. I think that's a dialectic that

writers struggle with, but I think musicians deal with it too. The place of solitude in becoming a musician is formidable too. Great time spent alone in the woodshed. When I think about it more deeply, the place of solitude in developing one's art is unavoidable. There are forms of taking it public and making it more communal. But there's that play between the woodshed and the public space. And that happens for musicians and writers. The public space of writing is not as spectacular as the public space of music presentation. Books, obviously. The relationship to audience is not as obvious—someone somewhere is reading your book, and you don't know who they are. But you find out that they're there. You get a letter. Or meet someone on a book tour. You can do a reading and approximate that condition, but the two arts are quite different in significant ways.

JC: You touch on something that's striking to me on reading and rereading the trilogy, which is this gravitation from writing toward music and from music toward writing, in some representations of musical events, where there's a concert, there's a literalness of what happens in the musical moment, a literal reading of the music. An event might take place, and a word comes into play, and that word isn't only one person's interpretation but becomes the band's interpretation. So there's a way that there's a real interplay between language and musical sound that I think is, for anyone who has thought about the ritual power of music, a very beautiful way of writing about it. And invoking that sense of the relationship between musical signifying and linguistic signifying, which are thought about as being so very separate. One, language, based in denotation, and one, music, based in connotation. You've constructed a community that has a collective understanding via music. Music has the ability to make puns. Plays on words without words being invoked.

NM: And it develops in *Atet A.D.* where the music begins to create texts that emerge from the instruments as comic-strip balloons with writing. The band is troubled by this, has mixed feelings about this kind of literalization. On a certain level, it seems like they've risen to a higher power. But from another side they're not so sure it's not a demotion from the expansive possibilities of the indefinite. What is it that Poe says, that indefiniteness is music or music is indefiniteness? The music becoming definite in its registration as text troubles the band but makes for certain popular appeal. In *Atet A.D.* one of the club owners wants to write into a contract that the balloons have to appear at least once per set. I was toying with ideas of accessibility, the impossibility of translating instrumental

music into words, but the compulsion we have to do that, or to think that it can be done or is pre-done. We constantly talk about a musician “saying something.” Well, if he’s saying something, what is it? There’s a kind of outrageousness in that undertaking. But I think language and music hook up somewhere, and I’m writing out of that conviction. Music is a provocation. It is a provocation to deploy language in ways that are not just denotative, not just referential, but have something to do with saying the unsayable. Or something that hasn’t been said. I was writing something a couple of weeks ago listening to a piece of music and trying to describe this piece of music, a piece by Prince Lasha and Sonny Simmons, “The Loved Ones.” The sentence came: “It had a steep incumbency to it.” I’d never heard of a steep incumbency before listening to that music. My “discovery” of that word combination was entirely the work of that music, a translation of a quality I heard. That happens to me a lot. I listen to nonverbal music and get verbal suggestions. A lot of writing in the trilogy comes out of that. Charles Lloyd, asked to talk about his music, once said: “Words don’t go there.” N. quotes him, saying: “Words may not go there, but I’m pretty sure they come from there.” That’s me, I’m pretty sure they come from there.

JC: The working proposition between all of this is that there are not hard lines between categories. For instance, different media, cultures, ways of working. It’s characteristic of some of the musical collectives we were mentioning. For instance, to understand that there is not a hard line between improvising and other kinds of musical activity. To say this is the composed part and this is the improvised part. Because if you put credence in dreamwork, for example, as it figures as inspiration in the book, the relation between fantasy as something done individually and fantasy as something done collectively and organized via writing or description, all this breaks down and you have a more fluid relationship between these kinds of activity. Which is suggestive in terms of writing as well. We think of writing as being very weighted toward the compositional. It could be considered a form of notation. But if there’s more fluidity between these categories, then maybe we can understand reading and writing differently, the processes of reading and writing might be more like Barthes thinks of reading and writing, as breaking things up and being active and engaged.

NM: And recombining and things of that sort. Thinking about the relationship of the fiction I write to my poetry, I was writing poetry first, and a lot of what led me to poetry was an interest in and desire to cultivate

the musicality of language. One of the things that happens with that is certain departures from language as reference and denotation, a sense that language is inventing what it refers to as opposed to the idea that one sees something and tries to find the language to refer to it. That's one of the anxieties that people have about poetry. One thing that compelled me to write the fiction was somehow to comment on my poetry. N. is a projection of a would-be musician, but N. is also a projection of the poet. In some ways my fiction has been more accessible than my poetry, I get that sense. I was drawing out this analogy between poetry and music, making people who might be uncomfortable with the inaccessibility of poetry aware of the fact that we're dealing with kinds of inaccessibility and nonreferentiality all the time in music, which is a universally popular art. Trying to use music's cache to understand certain practices in poetry that people tend to shy away from. The fiction inhabits this terrain where there's very specific reference. The third cut on Don Cherry's *Complete Communion* album. That's very specific. You can go and listen to that cut. It has very exacting referentiality. Very deictic, pointing to that Archie Shepp album over there. But it's also a work that bridges the distance between that and a flighty deployment of language. Steeped incumbency. Go find *that*. That interesting play between the specific and the connotational or indefinite. It's going on in the poetry, easier to see in the fiction.

JC: I enjoy the fact that this web of references in the fiction is also an invitation to become more informed about this music. It's part of the music, suggesting that people reading ought to know more about the music. It's my nonscientific observation that there's a kind of medium specificity in interest sometimes, which means that people who are reading challenging poetry, for instance, don't always have any taste for any kind of challenge when it comes to what they put in their ears, or what they put in their eyes if they're going to look at visual art. In that sphere, I think there can be a very regressive tendency; people are very sophisticated about what they say about and think about when they have an image in front of them, and then they're all primarily listening to the Talking Heads. This work, these books, what adds to them is simply listening to the music. Rather than you going on about it, you can point at it, and someone can listen to it and it becomes something else. I think about Barrett Watten writing incredibly specific poetry about graffiti in this one place that everyone should go look at, very little description of it, but if you go look at it, it will be much more interesting to you.

NM: You're creating a potential audience, pointing them to these various artists: listen to these folks. But you're also dealing with the audience that already exists, referring to a particular piece of music, there are readers who will know what you're talking about, will have heard that piece of music. They might not apply the same words N. does, but they're part of a cult that includes N., and they're interested in what he has to say about that music because it's a cultic artifact. I've been interested in cult formation in art, often spoken of as audience, but I see it as cultic. Especially when you're dealing with very marginalized artistic practices. It's not mainstream. The people who do subscribe have a fervor, knowing that your numbers are not that great, and that you have to band together and give each other reassurance and comfort. I've gotten a lot of reaction from the free jazz cult and they are thrilled to see it registered in writing. The cult in poetry, there's a cultic aspect there too. Referring to language itself has become the sign of the avant-garde, but we're also responding to what gets referred to in poetry. Language itself is a reference, and that's the basis for a kind of bonding. We have a group called the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. People who are very interested in the Dogon will find my references something to bond over. There's been a lot of talk about the nonreferential, but the referential still has a power and is one of the things that binds writing or listening communities together. We share a commitment that *this is significant*, the Dogon are significant, John Coltrane is significant, Balinese gamelan is significant. This is a part of our referential universe. That was part of taking the permission of getting very specific, that it would abound in specific reference. One thing that you often get asked as a writer is, who is your audience? I came up with the idea that you create your audience, your work is a definition of your audience. One way you do that is through the references you make. I'm writing for people who know who Don Cherry is. I see it as cultic. One is creating a cult, and from a self-reflexive way, "From a broken bottle, traces of perfume still emanate" is dealing with that. It's about creating an ensemble, a small collectivity of like-minded individuals, and that being a microcosm for a large collective or communal possibility. They'll bond along a specific word, like the graffiti they come upon. They agree this is a specific object of attention, and the act of interpretation exegesis, however it may splinter off into different directions, is a binding force, that they are a community of interpreters, held together by the commitment to the significance of that act of interpretation. That's easier to see in music. People give music permission in ways they don't always give

the written word. To be elastic and indefinite. Or for that matter they give sculpture and painting permission to be elastic, indefinite, suggestive rather than denotative. Language is an everyday medium, we use it all the time.

JC: As a tool.

NM: As a tool. Pass the salt. Stop. Things like that. That usage of language is so ingrained, it's often difficult to see that there are other ways of taking language. In some ways, music in my work is a pretext for the kind of language use I want. I'm going to tell you what music says, which gives me a certain permission with language that I don't have if I'm trying to describe that corner. It is more enactive writing than descriptive. Although it does make descriptive moves. I'm interested in the relationship between the descriptive and enactive there.

JC: You've talked about dealing with the musicality of language. I wanted to ask you about reading styles. Let's think about a spectrum that deals with the musicality of poetic language in different ways. On one hand a highly inflected reading style like Jayne Cortez, in which reading is presented as a musical performance that has the extreme contours associated with music, and on the other hand someone like Tom Raworth, whose reading style is extremely flat, but I would say very musical, but allowing the language to do the work of its own inflection. Having heard you read your poetry a couple of times, I think of you falling somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

NM: I would agree. I guess for me the key would be the speaking voice and the range of inflections and pitch variations that this speaking voice that you're hearing has. I don't tend to get into more performance-oriented senses of music, although I respond to some of it very positively, it's just not what I do. Yeah, Tom is something else, it's almost like he's trying to reproduce the flatness of text, like he's trying to read writing in a very literal way. There are certain things about vocabulary and diction that are tied up in one or another reading style. I'm very conscious of how the work would sound. I'm hearing it in my head. And often as I write, I speak it. It's not flat text, it's written with oral delivery in mind. But it's not at the overt side of the performance spectrum. The word "performance" is a troublesome one for writerly poets, because it's become associated with the more theatrical and declamatory possibilities associated with performance art and poetry slams, things like that. Writerly poets tend toward a view of language itself as performance, writing so that the language can perform. One wants to speak those words clearly,

so that they can be heard. What's meant when we talk about language performing? When we hear a word, it can evoke different possibilities. I remember hearing a reading by Robert Duncan. There was a passage where a word came up. I heard it as "stairs." When I checked the text later, it was "stares." I think he had the idea of allowing the word to perform either of those meanings, and it didn't have to be made musical in any particular way.

[2003]

## SUN RA

From the Windy City to the Omniverse—

Chicago Life as a Street Priest of DIY Jazz

The space-voices got me on a space wisdom beam, and the beam led me to Chicago.

- Sun Ra, 1962

It's April 13, 1956, in Chicago. Sun Ra and his friend and manager, Alton Abraham, arrive at Balkan Music Co., a small record and musical supply wholesaler at 1425 West Eighteenth Street. After helping the other seven musicians unload, they file into the storefront, which doubles as a recording studio, to record the first full-length session for their new label, El Saturn Records.

The band is in top form, having just completed a lengthy engagement at Budland, the basement venue at the Pershing Hotel. Originally called Birdland, the club was threatened with a lawsuit by the owners of New York's Birdland, an eventuality that Sun Ra helped avoid by renaming it with a word that's spelled differently, but pronounced almost the same. Ra was a logophile, and he loved homophony just about as much as he loved tangy, dissonant harmonies, aggregations of low horns and parallel unison. Homophony is why he called his group the Arkestra: On one hand, he slipped in a biblical reference to the Ark. On the other hand, Ra explained that where he came from, in Alabama, that's how you said "orchestra."

It's midnight and the session is in full swing. One take and the band nails "India," the loping, percussion-thick, quasi-Egyptian number with electronic piano and penetrating Art Hoyle trumpet. Things are off to a good start. Two takes of "Sunology," a vehicle for Pat Patrick's meaty baritone saxophone and James Scales's tart alto sax, are so solid that they'll both end up released, but on the longer second version the tape breaks. The band waxes a couple of numbers with singer Clyde Williams, then again hits a bull's-eye with "Big Charles," a tune retitled "Kingdom of Not." A full take of "Eve" doesn't work, but the dark, stormy piano, bass, and percussion part is a killer, and an edit of the first minute and a half cuts out the full band section and turns it into "Portrait of the Living Sky."



They're into the second long tape reel when Ra calls a blues, with John Gilmore's smoldering post-Sonny Rollins tenor; it's after 2:00 AM, but they call it "Blues at Midnight." The recording closes with a tremendous single take of the Arkestra classic "El Is a Sound of Joy." At 3:00 AM the band packs up for the night, everyone gets a check (union scale, \$41.25/hour, with Ra getting a royal \$165 leader's fee), and a little bit of history is made.

Saturn has already issued seven-inch singles, starting with Ra's signature piece, "Saturn." Abraham and Ra contemplate using the session to put out a ten-inch or a series of extended-play singles, but in February they decide on a full LP, and on Valentine's Day 1957, at RCA Studios, they edit the record, taking home test pressings that will be released as *Super-Sonic Jazz*.

Abraham has a group of record cover designs to choose from, drawn by Claude Dangerfield, and he selects a surrealist pianoscape, with piano lids on the horizon, lightning bolts and stars above, flaming piano keys, and from offscreen to the right, an arm holds an incongruous cocktail shaker. In March, five cartons of a hundred LPs each are delivered. Two-color red and cream covers are printed, and the full package is hand-assembled by Abraham. A poster is made and hung around town. *El Saturn* has its first album.

The tale of this recording session was pieced together from business documents, American Federation of Musician forms, Abraham's notebooks and RCA documents, all of which were part of the exhibition *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn & Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground, 1954-68* (co-curated by this writer), at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago and later at the ICA, Philadelphia. The exhibit, which offered an intimate view into Ra's development as an artist, was augmented by a symposium on Ra, "Traveling the Spaceways," which brought together musicians, journalists, artists, and scholars to discuss Ra's cultural impact.

## Chicago Landing

If you were in Chicago in 1958, you might have happened into a jazz club on the South Side to find a band of musicians dressed in outer-space costumes, chanting "Rocket number nine, take off for the planet Venus," and setting loose battery-driven robots. On another day, on a stroll through Washington Park, kitty-corner from the Baptist preacher and across from the Nation of Islam representative, you could have come upon a street-corner lecturer in a flowing faux-leopard cape and black beret, detailing the etymology of the word "negro" and the coded meanings of the Bible. In both cases, the same man was responsible: Sun Ra.

Pianist, composer, bandleader, mystic, and self-proclaimed extraterrestrial Sun Ra was born Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914. During later stints starting in the 1960s in New York and Philadelphia, Ra gained an international audience. But it was over the course of the fifteen years that Ra lived in Chicago (1946–61) that he adopted his new identity, legally changing his name to Le Sony’r Ra, assembling the first of his big bands, the Arkestra, establishing key associations with musicians like Gilmore, Patrick, and Marshall Allen, and sketching and then fleshing out his own elaborate self-mythology.

The Chicago period has been almost exclusively known through a group of important records that were made there in the middle and late 1950s, albums and singles that were issued on Ra’s own El Saturn label, one of the first musician-owned record companies, co-owned by Ra’s business manager and fellow mystic, Abraham. But it was a pivotal era in Ra’s development for a variety of factors, not all of them musical.

Ra was the central figure in a secret society based on the South Side. Thmei Research was dedicated to mystical, occult, and paranormal studies, which included highly original readings of the Bible, numerology, and deep research into nonmainstream histories (especially the lost history of black Egypt). The group was also intensely trained on new technologies, scientific ideas, and experimental concepts, especially concentrated on space and the future. In about 1951, Thmei began writing a dictionary of occult terms, and it was ultimately interested in following a line of reasoning familiar to black intellectuals at the time, a quest for independence through the possibility of separatism, rather than integration.

“Me, Sun Ra, and Pat Patrick used to rehearse together in Sun Ra’s apartment down on South Prairie,” said drummer Robert Barry. “His room was all books, a little bed, kitchenette outside the door. He was into the Egyptian way of life, said there were secrets to eternal life in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. He had books, wall-to-wall books, all the Bibles, the Koran, and he studied everything. He even studied funnies, tried to find the underlying meanings. He studied body language, seeing what someone means by how they move.”

Documents show that Abraham and Ra were investigating unclaimed land in the west, and an “El Saturn Treasure Map” from the early ’60s finds Ra’s music spreading around the globe, while Ra and his cohorts set up a utopian society on ten thousand acres.

Robert Barry, drums: In Calumet City, on the Illinois state line, there were gambling joints, other vices—strip clubs. We were playing there in

1954, '55. I was with a trio, quartet, continuous music for eight hours, and we were behind a curtain, so we couldn't see out, and they couldn't see us. Sun Ra worked there because of the money. We worked there together with Jive Jackson, a half-assed trumpet player who was the connection, knew guys and hooked them up with musicians. Everyone had to play all the instruments, because if somebody wanted to take a break, somebody else had to play your instrument.

Art Hoyle, trumpet: I was stationed in Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, and there was a young clarinetist named John Gilmore. We became friends, played off base. He was also playing tenor sax. He got out before I did, and when I got out I got in touch with him. He recommended me to Sun Ra. I auditioned and joined the band in December 1955.

At the audition, we sat down and played some of his music, together with the group. He also had me play with just him—he wanted me to play “Cherokee,” to see if I knew anything about changes. That was an acid test. Richard Evans and Julian Priester were in the band, although they left to join Lionel Hampton. And there was Pat Patrick, whose living room we rehearsed in every day, five days a week. I commuted from Gary, Indiana, where I live. We played dances at Robert's Show Lounge, and we played for dancing for a group called the Rounders, whose motto was “no squares allowed.” I was there during the whole period the band played at Budland.

Adam Abraham, writer/publisher: The place at 4115 South Drexel Avenue, a three-story walk-up, was where my dad, Alton Abraham, lived. In the basement, it was like going into a library, lots and lots of books, but dusty and dank. Maybe more like a catacomb. These books were old, you wondered who read them. They had obscure titles, like the Egyptian Book of the Dead. My dad, who was an X-ray technician, would talk about the Creator, wisdom, life. We'd drive down to his post office box downtown and pick up Saturn Records' mail. He ran the business quietly.

Hattie Randolph, singer: My father, Zilner Randolph, was a musician, and Sonny played with him for a little while. He must have told Sonny about my brother playing trumpet and me singing. Somehow, I found myself singing with Sonny. We rehearsed like people would go to work—they did an eight-hour job, and we did an eight-hour rehearsal. We rehearsed at Old Joe's Deluxe Club. We had lunch breaks. It was a fun business, and it was enlightening. I did standards. The band had

little hats, but I wore my own thing. A little before they went to New York, their costumes got a little out there. If they had had tuxedos or blue jeans, it would have been off balance. The costumes made a lot of sense.

Ricky Murray, singer: I came in with Sonny around about '58. Down at Budland they had these Monday morning sessions. I was a shy guy. I came up and did a few numbers, as an amateur. I was going through some marital problems, so I didn't meet up with him again until later, at a place called Crossroads, at Forty-Seventh and Lake Park. I went into this joint and got up the nerve to ask to sing with Cozy Eggleston. Afterward, I went across the street, went in, and Steve McCall was on the drums, sitting in with the Arkestra. He hollered at me to come up and do a number. Afterward Sonny asked if I was with anyone, I said no, so he asked me to come rehearse at his house. We played at a bunch of places and ended up at the Wonder Inn. After that we went to the Pershing Lounge. Then we went up to Montreal.

## El Saturn Records

“Beta Music for a Beta World” • El Saturn Records motto, c. 1960

Before the 1950s, artist-owned record companies were unheard of, but Sun Ra pioneered the idea along with a couple of other musicians and composers—notably jazz musicians Charles Mingus and Max Roach's Debut label and classical composer Harry Partch's Gate 5.

In 1955, Ra and Abraham registered their company, El Saturn Records, in Chicago. Saturn's earliest records were released starting in 1956, and after *Super-Sonic Jazz* they issued *Jazz in Silhouette*. In a period of intense activity, before the focus of Saturn was shifted to Ra's residence in Philadelphia in the 1970s, Ra and Abraham helped define the do-it-yourself ethic that came to be a central part of the American independent music industry, designing and in some cases manufacturing the covers themselves. They maintained a previously unimaginable degree of control over the look and content of their releases.

The designers of Saturn Records were drawn from a group of semiprofessional and amateur artists, some of them associates of the Arkestra. Dangerfield made numerous preliminary studies and sketches. These cover designs mix space iconography with a highly personal combination of apocalyptic and tiki lounge imagery. Dangerfield's images were combined and recycled for a series of releases, most of which were actually issued in the '60s, after Ra

had moved to New York; these include *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth* and *Interstellar Low Ways*.

Ra himself designed several Saturn LP covers in the mid-1960s, sending them back to Chicago, where Abraham used them to manufacture—often in his own home—and assemble the covers. Ra’s artwork—which had zigzagging and swirling designs made using the surrealist technique of automatic drawing—were used for the covers of *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* and *Other Planes of There*. Through an uncommon agreement with RCA Records, negotiated by Abraham, Saturn was able to press copies of its records in small numbers, on demand, sometimes even pressing twenty copies for a given concert.

Abraham and Ra had ambitious plans for Saturn. In a notebook, a sketch shows them envisioning a Saturn Records skyrise complex, with separate floors dedicated to Bible and space research, Sun Ra’s records going platinum, and a Saturn limousine chauffeuring them around. In the early years, Ra recorded for a few other labels, including Transition and Savoy, and in the ’70s he (with Abraham’s help) forged a relationship with Impulse, which introduced him to a worldwide audience. But the fierce independent streak that defined El Saturn helped establish Ra’s approach to releasing his music.

Barry: We were still in high school when we met him. We’d go practice with him after school. Up on the fourth floor, I’d take a snare drum to rehearse. At night, he’d go do shows for the Club DeLisa. The Space Trio was the first band, just three of us, with Pat. Then we did some things with five male singers, the Nu Sounds. Then he added guys, some from high school. John Gilmore had already graduated, but he came, then others. Later we rehearsed at the Rhumboogie, where [Al] Capone used to go. One time I saw Capone’s cars coming up to the Rhumboogie, we knew it was the mob. Kids used to stay out late in Chicago, we weren’t afraid of crazies.

Von Freeman, tenor saxophone: One of the most interesting experiences I had with Sun Ra was when he told me he was going to give me my “real name.” He sent it to me through trans-sans-portation or something like that, so that I would hear it in my head. I was playing one night and I heard this voice give me my name: “Eck-ke-moke.” Some secret language. I kept hearing this word, and people were looking at me.

I was working at a place called Betty Lou’s, about Eighty-Seventh and Vincennes. Vernell Fournier and John Young kept looking at me, “What are you mumbling?” I could hear this voice loud and clear. About a year later Sun Ra came through town. “You sent me the name,”

I said. And he said the name. I said, “How’d he know that?” He was ahead of his time, which didn’t bode too well for his career. He was the only person who was doing what he was doing. They’re even now dressing like him.

Hoyle: The Arkestra was playing opposite Dinah Washington on the night that Clifford Brown was killed. Max Roach and Sonny Rollins came by, and Dinah sang “Goodbye” dedicated to Clifford. We played dances at ballrooms on the South and West Side. Lots of people danced, believe it or not. I was there when some of the costumes came in—orange shirts and loud green pants—not nearly as outrageous as later. He did things to gain attention for the group. He and Pat Patrick would pass out mimeographed sheets to promote the band on streetcars, on the street, in bars and restaurants.

Randolph: We were in the studio and somebody hit a pen on a glass of water, by accident, and Sun Ra stopped everything and said, “Oh, I like that.” He used it on one of the pieces. I remember Sonny working down on Rush Street. I wasn’t with the band then. My son, who plays drums, sat in with him. There was an interviewer there who asked Sonny when he was born, and he said, “I wasn’t born.” My son was in high school, and he said, “Mom, what does he mean?” I tried to explain that he was a creative man, and you’ve got to know him.

### **Broadsides, Leaflets, and the Emergence of Afro-Futurism**

One of the least-known aspects of Ra’s tenure in Chicago was his activity as a writer and street-corner lecturer. Recently, a cache of his early writings was discovered, including previously unknown broadsides and manuscripts, written by Ra and proclaimed aloud—often in Washington Park—or handed out as mimeographed sheets. Before these works were discovered in 2000, only one such document had been circulated, a sheet titled “Solaristic Precepts” that Ra gave saxophonist John Coltrane in 1956.

Ra’s investigations, undertaken as part of the Thmei group, were related to broader cultural trends of the 1950s, including a fascination with outer space—leading up to Sputnik and the moon landing. Ra’s alignment of the notion of African American alienation with a utopian vision of interplanetary transplantation qualifies him as a visionary proponent of Afro-Futurism. These early manuscripts also show Ra’s curiosity about language, his playful and paradox-ridden approach to etymology, his attempt to decode the Bible, and his intense scrutiny of the lexicon and social roots of racism.

As far as Ra was concerned, the past was passed: “Yesterday belongs to the dead / Tomorrow belongs to the living.” The past was violence and “the chains that bind.” But imagination could usher in a better tomorrow, one full of pleasure and freedom and discipline. Freedom and discipline were not contradictory. These ideas went hand in hand, and music was the method, the primary means for unleashing these positive vibrations in order to build a more promising world.

Ra did not leave the past completely behind. He and his colleagues excavated many ancient concepts and texts, central among them the Bible and Egyptology, mining the past in order to formulate the future. Evidence of Ra’s integration of past and future, as well as various cultural traditions, appears on the cover design for a Saturn brochure, which mixes a Buddhist lotus with Egyptian ankhs and spaceships. Ra’s imagined tomorrow incorporated transformative music and outer-space clothing, futuristic technologies and various mysticisms, utopian community, extraterrestriality, and a belief in the possibility of immortality.

In 1993, the year Ra died, cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term “Afro-Futurism,” broadly defined as “African-American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come.” Through his writings and lyrics, his record titles and cover designs, and especially his provocative music and otherworldly presence, Ra established himself as a visionary and innovator decades before Dery’s definition.

Murray: They’d gotten the word [in Montreal] that we were coming to town, and this guy who ran a beatnik coffee joint called The Place, across the street from McGill College, he gave us a gig and fed us. You should have seen the people who came out. It was packed every night. The Frenchmen up there kept saying, “Sun Ra, you should be in Paris!” We made the soundtrack to a movie and recorded it at The Place. It was called *A Grain of Sand*. We had some lean days up there too, and when we did, Sonny would cook us his Moon Stew. Sonny asked us whether we wanted to go back to Chicago or go on to New York. When we left, the Montreal firemen and police gave us a big going-away party. Me, Marshall Allen, John Gilmore, Ronnie [Boykins], and Sonny: five guys in one car, with the bass. The drummer, Billy Mitchell, went back to Chicago. We went to Birdland when we got to New York. We played the Five Spot, Village Gate, Village Vanguard, the Bitter End. Sonny said, “We’re going to go shake them up!” We wore capes, and we’d have these hats that had lights on them, you could activate them beneath your cape.

Hoyle: His compositions were not straight-ahead. They were unusual and his own approach. That's why we rehearsed so much. I found the music worthwhile and challenging. He'd tell me to improvise at a given point, I'd ask for the key, and he'd say, "Space key." Which meant to go for whatever the music dictated to me, to respond to it. I recorded a lot with the band. We were excited about going into the studio and recording, because the group was getting some recognition. Alton was positive about what we were doing, promoting it, working hard for the man. In 1957, I joined Lionel Hampton on the recommendation of Priestler and Evans. When the Arkestra came to New York in October 1961, I was on my way back to Chicago. I ran into Gilmore at Birdland, and he said they would come by to see me. Sun Ra and about six of them came by my room about 2:00 AM. They were wearing miners' helmets with lights on top, he had a big gold sunburst on a chain that spread across his chest. He had a notebook that had the equation for eternal life in it, what he was working on at the time. He showed it to me. That's what the conversation turned to.

[2006]



## FRED ANDERSON

### The House That Fred Built

It's a black-and-white photograph, slightly weathered from years of being handled, carried from place to place, packed away, and rediscovered: A small child, maybe five years old, sits on the stoop of a house in Monroe, Louisiana, in the mid-1930s, the dirt yard spilling out in front of him. He's wearing a striped summer shirt and shorts and a big, beaming, gentle smile. He looks like a sweet kid.

I saw that picture at the original Velvet Lounge, 2128½ South Indiana, some years before the club was forced to move by encroaching condos. The kid was the Velvet's owner, primary barkeep, and sometimes headlining act, tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson—scene caretaker, underground booster, indefatigable cultural worker, quiet force for good. He and I were looking through folders and boxes of vintage images, preparing the art for one of the few records I was fortunate enough to work on with him. We both sat looking at the photograph, Fred staring at himself nearly seven decades earlier. "Man," he said, "that's a long time ago."

But Fred had a lot more left to do. He continued running the Velvet, ramping it up rather than down, turning it from the most open-minded jam session in the city to an international venue presenting top-shelf players like soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, who, unasked, inscribed a promotional poster on the wall of the club: "This place is a temple!" Early one morning Fred called, animatedly describing how the small bar would soon be transformed into a three-hundred-seat theater complete with a restaurant. That ambition never came to pass, but all the same, by the time the Velvet moved to expanded digs at 67 East Cermak in 2006, it had a small army of supporters—devotees who understood the power of Fred's music and helped him get the message out.

Anderson also still had, unexpectedly, a career to build. Starting in the early '90s and reaching full steam a few years later, he released dozens of recordings in all sorts of creative contexts, from duets with his musical soul



Fred Anderson at the bar of his Velvet Lounge (photo: Michael Jackson)

mate, drummer Hamid Drake, to a festival gig as a guest with Tortoise. This was unexpected not because it was undeserved—quite the contrary, because Anderson had been working just as hard, week in and out, and playing with just as much originality, since the late '50s. But it was only as he hit his midsixties that the world—beginning with Chicago—started to catch on.

My fondest memories of Fred include his big, projecting sound—a tone he honed practicing outdoors as a young player, bouncing notes off buildings—as well as his epic solos, which could stretch as endlessly as the midwestern horizon. Perhaps that's how he earned the nickname the “Lone Prophet of the Prairie.” In the 1970s, left behind by most of his AACM cohorts, he was nearly alone here, holding down the free music fort, but as his profile rose, so did that of Chicago's creative music scene, in no small part due to his attention and care. It certainly wouldn't have the depth of character that it does now without Fred.

As paternal and inspirational as he was, he never lost his humility. He was quiet but principled; I saw him turn down high-profile gigs when the terms weren't to his liking.

Another favorite scene: Anderson is onstage at the Velvet with Drake and German bassist Peter Kowald, playing one of the most ferocious and startling sets I've ever heard from him, plying fat multiphonic smears and daubs of harmonics that depart radically from his usual direct linearity. Then Drake



takes the reins, and Fred, horn still dangling from its harness, descends from the stage, nimbly moves through the capacity crowd, and proceeds to refill the cigarette machine.

So many memorable concerts, such a wealth of bold impressions and new sounds. Eighties duets at the Velvet with drummer Ajaramu, one or two folks grooving in the audience. The early-'90s gigs at Lounge Ax with the Vandermark Quartet opening, which in my mind signal the beginning of an era. That first meeting with pianist Marilyn Crispell at HotHouse (back in '94, when it was on Milwaukee Avenue) and the studio encounter that preceded it. There were the yearly aftersets during the Chicago Jazz Festival, Anderson and Kidd Jordan improvising together, birds of a feather. There was the closing night of the first Empty Bottle Festival of Jazz and Improvised Music in 1997, which I'd helped book: Fred took the stage with Hamid and bassist Fred Hopkins (who, like Kowald, passed away far too early) and played a set of such unrestrained strength that the crowd, still holding its collective breath at gig's end, took a long moment to thunder forth whooping and hollering.

Those are my touchstones. Ask someone else and you'll hear about a '60s trio playing an all-Ornette Coleman program; the immortal '70s front line with trombonist George Lewis, trumpeter Bill Brimfield, and reedist Douglas Ewart at the Foundation Church Coffee House; sessions at the Birdhouse, the Velvet's late-'70s precursor; celebratory blowing at the new Velvet; or triumphant sets at New York's Vision Festival, where Fred was a regular.

In the studio, I often saw Fred during playbacks slumped in what I first assumed was slumber. But it wasn't—it was a very unusual kind of listening, the intensity of which was almost trancelike. A cut would end, the engineer would stop the machine, and after a long pause, Anderson would comment, emerging from someplace very remote. He attended other musicians' concerts that way too, listening carefully, thoughtfully, always listening. He lived for the music, for the community that was formed around the making of that music.

Last time I saw Fred, it'd been quite a while. Peter Brötzmann and Hamid Drake were playing at the Hideout, and there he was, in the audience, listening in his hard-core way. He'd lost weight, and I almost didn't recognize him—his cheeks were hollow and his eyes set deep in their sockets, giving him a slightly ghostly appearance. At the end of the gig, he spotted me up in the DJ booth and caught my eye, and suddenly he was all Fred again, that big, warm, generous smile breaking on his face as he waved and nodded and headed out.

[2010]





**THREE**

ULULATIONS AND OTHER  
VOCAL STIMULANTS



# SUN RA

## Queer Voice

Middle 1960s, NYC—Sun Ra sits alone in his apartment in front of a tape recorder and his electric piano, which is unamplified. If he is queer, a question which he makes a point of never addressing (aside from his affection for Coleman Hawkins’s “Queer Notions”), it is not a matter of being gender-queer or having queer desire. Ra is identity-queer. He is thoroughly altered from name to person to mind-set to creative output, earthbound man transformed into Saturnian sun god. One of his primary concepts is the “alter destiny,” a way that language constructs reality wholesale—queer notion indeed. Ra hits record: “Do you think the truth will set you free?” He answers his own question: “Truth is bad or truth is good. It depends on where and how and why and who you are.” Then he adopts a bizarre, conspiratorial, theater whisper that continues for the rest of the recitation. “That is the great secret. Truth is bad or truth is good. The word ‘truth’ must be considered *carefully*, *carefully*, and the precepts of that which is called ‘truth’ must be equationized, balanced, and understood.” The last minute and a half of the recording finds him looping a line: “This is the idea of the greater age, this is the word from the cosmic tomorrow.” At the end, he isolates “cosmic tomorrow,” the final word acquiring a rolled “r,” stretched out portentously into one of the queerest voices ever heard.

[2010]



## JAAP BLONK

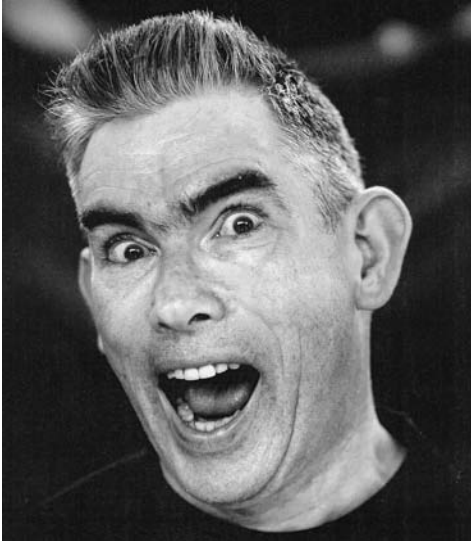
### Uncommon Tongue

John Corbett: How did you get involved in doing dada sound poetry and other kinds of soundworks?

Jaap Blonk: I can only attempt a reconstruction afterward; at the time I had no idea what this all would lead to. I started playing saxophone as soon as I got a room of my own, got out of my parents' house. The only thing I knew was that I wanted a loud instrument, so I went to the music school in Utrecht, where I studied math and physics. It didn't matter to me if it was a trumpet or a saxophone, as long as it wasn't a harmonium. [laughs] They kindly advised me to take up saxophone because trumpet, at that age, would be much harder to learn. But it was just a hobby. Later, it was in the '70s, you could do all kinds of workshops on creative things, so I did some workshops on poetry—how to recite and write poetry. I was twenty-four, and only at that age did I start to read poetry. I was very enthusiastic, it was a new discovery for me. I found some nonsense or sound poems, and when we had this demonstration from the workshop I chose those poems to recite, I kind of liked them. A little later again, I heard somebody read the *Ursonate* by Schwitters and I found it very interesting. I asked him where he got it, and copied it.

JC: Was this a live performance?

JB: Live, but rather static. He was just standing behind a lectern and reading it. But he had a good voice, sounded beautiful. Hans Hausdorfer. At that time I had started to take the saxophone a little more seriously, writing music also. I was in a group with people who made stage presentations of Dutch poets, also did a program of surrealist poetry, and I did the music for this and played saxophone. And I did some of the reciting. I did some pieces by Antonin Artaud, French translated into Dutch. Very extreme texts which took me, with the help of a director I then had, over the edge of, well, to do with madness and losing yourself. It was import-



Jaap Blonk (photo:  
Telemach Weisinger)

ant to me to know I could go much further than I thought. In sound and emotionally, not to be afraid to do something where you didn't exactly know where it would end. The work of the Dutch poet Lucebert, in the mid-'50s group of experimental poets, I think he's now being regarded as the greatest poet of our country since the Second World War. I started reciting his poetry along with some musicians, also to improvise on it and stretch the texts by repeating sounds. His poetry is in Dutch but has made-up words sometimes, many words that are in the dictionary but nobody knows them, associations are quite wild, very powerful poetry. This helped me to go from words into sound and vice versa. To take a text and do it in many different ways, as a jazz musician can take chord changes and improvise on them, I could take a text and improvise on it many different ways, use it as a framework for improvisation. This was the beginning of the BRAAXTAAL trio. Later I made my own text, but we started with Lucebert.

JC: When was this?

JB: 1984 to '85. My first performance of the *Ursonate* was in '82, which was about the time I did the Artaud. I remember the first time I started improvising with the voice, it was along with a free jazz record, Archie Shepp and Roswell Rudd. One afternoon I was sitting in my room listening to it, all of a sudden I started going [makes untranscribable noise that sounds like a pack of dogs ripping apart a live animal] along with the record.

Well, when the record was finished I was still doing it. Felt quite good, kind of a breakthrough. I had been reciting at that time and trying to do these kinds of things on the saxophone, but this felt much more direct and much more natural to me. There's no instrument between you and the sound. Then I started to do this improvising with musicians, started using the saxophone more for melodic things, not to make these sounds and things. I think my talent is with the voice.

JC: You're not interested in exploring extended techniques on the saxophone.

JB: No, not for me. There are many people who do that so wonderfully. For a long time I've been looking for an area between speech and music, because in the poetry I always tended to favor the nonsense/sound poems and in music I was, as it were, trying to speak on my instrument, so I think I was gravitating toward this middle ground.

JC: If you had to say where your center is now, would you say it's in sound poetry or in music or do you consider yourself someone who isn't interested in those categories?

JB: I wish these categories weren't as strongly kept in the organization of the world, where you try to get performance spaces, funding, and so on. It's always been difficult for me to try to get money from the music departments or the literary departments, because they say "You're not doing music" or "You're not doing literature." But speaking of the work itself, I see it now as a very large area where I can use elements from music but also from language. I like to play with meanings. Maybe it's partly tied to my own language, so it's not accessible to English-speaking people, but I'm working to do it more with other languages. I've done some pieces in German, which were quite effective. And on the new material with BRAAXTAAL there are some pieces in English.

JC: These are pieces on which you are playing with semantics, so you're playing with the combination of the meaning of language and the sound of language, some interference or connection between them?

JB: Yes, like the two pieces of "Der Minister," which are on the *Flux de Bouche* CD. They're very simple examples of that. I will keep using the semantic aspect, but also the music aspect. People say: "Sound poetry is such a restricted thing, so marginal." To me it's huge. There's so many possibilities of things to do, it's a great freedom.

JC: Let's talk a little about the specifics of the *Ursonate*. I know many different versions of it. Eberhard Blum, for instance, has a very specific approach, and someone like Lynn Book has a very different approach. These two are maybe the extremes, and your performance maybe falls in between.

Eberhard treats it as a classical text; he says he wants to treat it as if it were Beethoven—not theatricalized, not narrative. He doesn't project anything onto it, it's a piece that you simply read and follow the directions as closely as possible. Then, on the other hand, Lynn Book dresses in costume, makes it extremely theatrical. Yours falls in the middle, I think. How do you feel about various interpretations of it?

JB: I used to do it as a live performance, with certain movements and abstract, maybe futurist-inspired theatrical elements. I did this together with a director in Holland a long time ago. The photos are there on the record sleeve—a red jacket and black pants and a black band on the left arm. In the last part I used a red flag with a black pole. It was an attempt to, well, these were rather aggressive but beautiful colors, with at the same time communist and fascist associations. This was very confusing to people and very provocative. We were trying to make it a shock, which worked quite well. It was made to do in rock clubs, where they have some nice poetry performances and people came just to hang out, they weren't there to hear the poetry or whatever. This version created an uproar in many of those places, so in that way it was quite successful. I got a lot of beer over me and these things, up to the high point when I performed it in a Utrecht concert hall as support act for the Stranglers, for two thousand people. Before I'd said a word they were all screaming: "Get this guy out of here!" But I performed the entire piece, nearly half an hour, and the entire time plastic glasses falling on me and six guards fighting to prevent them from coming onstage to kill me. At the beginning, there were maybe a hundred people on my side, but by the end I think it was quite balanced—as many shouting for it as against it. One newspaper wrote the next day: "Jaap Blonk Shocks Punk Audience with Dada Poetry." The theatricalized movements came directly out of the sounds. I used to perform the piece just standing up, and the director looked at the intuitive movements I made with some sounds and worked on them to stylize them and make them bigger, with an abstract story with each section of the piece. Later on I abandoned this theatrical version and made it more like a recitation. Some of the emotional content is quite clear still. But when I make a transition, it serves to clearly indicate the different section of the piece, which is much less clear if you listen, for instance, to Eberhard Blum's version. He imposes melodies, or suggestions of melodies, on the piece. I personally don't like that so much. The piece loses a bit of the speech quality. To me it's more of a speaking piece than one you should make rhythmic melodies on. I don't mind if people make

much more theatrical performances on it, why not? And I respect when people say that it detracts from the sound quality of the piece and you should just listen to it. I notice sometimes when I'm performing it that people are closing their eyes just to hear the sounds, and that's OK.

JC: It seems obvious that the piece should be about multiple interpretations. If there's one thing that dada opens up it's the idea that you could take a little germ of nonsense and actually have it blossom into a lot of possibilities.

JB: And about improvising, the very well-known instructions of Schwitters say that, as for the cadenza, he just wrote one for people who have no imagination at all. If you have any fantasy, you should improvise one. I wonder why neither Chris Butterfield nor Eberhard Blum improvise the cadenza. I think they're just too scared. Blum, being a classical musician, I don't think he could do it. They're very loyal to the piece, and I'm not talking about the quality of their interpretations. Beyond any doubt, they're OK. But that's why I improvised the cadenza on my LP. To be complete, I added the written cadenza as an extra track. I think it's useful to have. Schwitters himself said he improvised the cadenza differently every time.

JC: It seems backward to me that there's someone out there, like Ernst Schwitters, saying that there's a definitive version.

JB: I've never had a chance to talk with him, so I don't know his exact motivation. They say he's just idolizing his father, having this Merz Barn in his house and saying nobody should touch the *Ursonate*.

JC: You mix a lot of periods of work, different movements, doing a Schwitters piece with futurist and surrealist work. I'm interested in what you think the relevance is of a lot of that work now, and since those people used very specific methods and were often antagonistic toward one another. I'd like to know what you think the politics of using different movements' work together are?

JB: For instance, you have the Italian futurists, whose political view was very doubtful, I think. I sometimes recite a bit of Marinetti, but I don't really like their work that much, it's like program music with war sounds interjected in the poetry. Russian futurists I really like, however. I think they were very creative with language, much more interesting with ways of combining words to make up new words. You can't really say the *Ursonate* is a dada work. It obviously originated in dada, but it was finished in '32, and by that time it had grown into the big work Schwitters regarded as his masterpiece. A thing like a "masterpiece" would never

have existed in dada. They were inimical toward Art with a big “A.” So, I think the *Ursonate* is not a real dada work anymore. I recited a lot of dada poems, most of them only a few times, after a while didn’t find them interesting anymore. So, what was very useful to me, the spirit of dada, it told me that you can use anything you find in your work, don’t hesitate to use sounds or phrases you find anywhere. The surrealist way of writing, automatic writing, was very useful. But then I’m not so much concerned with these periods anymore. I like to perform some of the pieces—they were the roots for me and I still love to perform some of them. But mostly I perform my own work.

JC: There aren’t readily available versions of many of these early pieces, so in a way it’s very important to have some of them performed like you do. But there’s the problem that whenever you start doing that it becomes a bit like museum work, which is so antithetical to, say, the dada idea.

JB: That’s why I only take the pieces that give me a real challenge. I have to make them new. It can be by improvising on them or a piece like Raoul Hausmann’s “Nightmare,” which took a long time to make it an interesting piece because of its impossible consecutive consonants. Hausmann recorded some of his poems in the ’60s, and this sounds like real museum work. In the ’20s it was enough to stand up and read a nonsense poem and people were outraged. They didn’t have to work on their voice, make it a very special thing. Now you have to or else it just isn’t very interesting. A piece has to give me some energy to keep me wanting to do it. Sometimes it’s hard to explain why a piece loses interest.

JC: Do you have a practice regime? You talk about “making the voice a special thing.” There was a time when, perhaps these pieces didn’t have a specific technique that had to be cultivated in order to perform them, transitioning to a period when it does require certain techniques. I’m wondering whether you have a vocal practice regime?

JB: Yes, I do various things. For instance, I’ve been practicing articulation, very, very straight with a metronome. And practicing articulation at the lips; in the mouth, the dental space (the tongue behind the teeth); and the guttural ones. If you practice those three you have KTIGUHFTIGUH; BUDIGUHBUDIGUH; or MUNINGUHMUNINGUH. To get them faster, as chops for improvisation, and also to be able to go through these *Ursonate* passages—slow, I find them boring, I like to go through them at some speed with ease, and to accent different syllables, make it a rhythmic improvisation. They seem to be more lively that way.

JC: These require very specific kinds of technical skills.

- JB: To me, it felt necessary to work on that. Otherwise I felt I was working through them with difficulty. I've been practicing specific sounds. I like to try to imitate sounds—machine sounds or traffic sounds. Not to make an imitation, but they give me new sounds. I've had straight singing lessons to be more aware of what I could do with my voice without damaging it. Certain exercises to make basic voice sound more clear or projecting.
- JC: Are you concerned, doing a piece like “Bruillt,” that you might do permanent damage to your voice?
- JB: Yeah, I had been at some point, but the experience has told me that it won't happen. My voice can take a lot. I can do much more than many singers or vocalists can do, I think. I'm happy with that.
- JC: When you do that piece, it knocks your voice out for a couple of days?
- JB: It did a couple of years ago, but I think it would be less now. I noticed on this tour that, playing four or five nights in a row, sometimes I'm a bit hoarse in the morning, but for the performance I've been OK.
- JC: It's interesting, because you said that one motivation for getting more involved in voice was the directness, the fact that there's no instrument, but in a way you're treating your own body as the instrument, so it still has something of that character.
- JB: Yes, there's still the influence of having played the saxophone for a long time. And the movements of the hands, sometimes it's as if there's a saxophone there.
- JC: I think one of the most interesting aspects of your work is the way that the mouth is foregrounded. After coming out of last night's performance, it enriched how I heard everybody else's voices in every speaking situation. These kinds of details are there already, but by isolating them in performance, you point them out. And speaking with a friend, I might hear some of them in his speech. Which seems consistent with dada's challenge to the staged performance as the only place where art happens. After the performance, it changes how you hear normal conversation. Do you ever feel yourself becoming self-conscious about vocal sound, hearing it or speaking it, after a performance?
- JB: Oh yes, that happens to me a lot. Hearing a news report about some people being killed and thinking it's beautiful just because of the rhythm of a phrase.
- JC: It's so much about emphasizing the material aspects, and letting that lead you back into associations and connotations and other meanings. Last night I walked about hearing my own bodily sounds more prominently, my head voice a little more than normal—particularly after hearing you

do some incredible things with holding your lips closed and using your voice. How much of what you discover is onstage?

JB: Quite a bit. I'm happy about that. Some pieces are more or less set, but some pieces I'm trying to investigate. It's part of the pleasure of doing it. Also, performing with good improvising musicians, you have to find new things to find a way out!

JC: There's a strong association between Dutch improvising and the use of humor. How does that association work for you? It seems like it can be a real trap—there were people laughing at last night's performance.

JB: It sometimes can be a trap, I agree. Usually I don't have to do much for creating the humor, devise jokes or anything. Many people laugh when someone starts talking gibberish, or what they consider gibberish. Or sometimes they just laugh when I come onstage, my ears, I don't know. [laughs] But still, it's also a vital thing in my work, this humor, and you just have to find the narrow line where—I don't like obvious humor, of course, and I've seen many, many people in Dutch improvised music, to my taste, going too far over that line. Maybe I did that too, myself, I don't know. It's quite tricky. I've been much more reticent lately.

JC: It seems like you want to retain some of the seriousness of it without becoming overly serious. And somehow it still has to trouble people. Because laughter can mean lots of different things—delight, fear. And you want to mix those, so someone might not even know why they're laughing. Like last night, I thought there was a lot of laughing at the sound of the language and the facial expressions and gestures, but then there was one dramatic moment where you came forward, off-mike, and did a piece that was very extreme, fast, you fell on the ground on all fours. It was humorous at first, and then suddenly you took it to an extreme that made people wonder for a moment. And maybe this goes back to that earlier observation about finding an ability via Artaud to go someplace that's beyond this safe, kinda funny, kinda crazy area. Asking people to step back and be afraid for a minute. Getting people to wonder whether they're laughing at the right thing. You also use all sorts of very contorted, visually unusual facial expressions, but they always register in the sounds.

JB: Yes, I refrain from using any other facial expressions than what are necessary to create a sound. Sometimes I did much more grimacing than was necessary, and I saw it on video and didn't like it. I've been practicing in front of a mirror to reduce that and to just use no more than is necessary to produce the sounds.



- JC: But when it's in balance, the visual aspect of it is extremely important. The fact that in "Dinosaur," for instance, you're smiling, changes the way that it sounds, so that the beginning of it has this sinister sound because you're saying it so quietly but you're smiling. The smile changes the sound and the meaning, also. Very humorous and very disquieting. You can hear the smile. Right off the bat hearing your version of the *Ursonate*, there was a sense of commitment. And it's implicit in "Bruillt," the idea that "I've started this and I have to take it to its logical end point."
- JB: But that was with me from the first time I started performing sound poetry. I always had this feeling, this is what I am here for. There was never any question whether I should stop. I think that's the main driving force in this area, there isn't a shade of a doubt why I'm doing it. It's just: this is it.
- JC: Can you explain why you think some audiences respond negatively to nonsense?
- JB: As soon as they don't know how to categorize something, some audiences are in trouble. It depends on the circumstances. I did a lot of street performances also, and I sometimes think I should return to it to see how it would be now. I haven't done it for some time.
- JC: To keep from feeling like you're preaching to the converted?
- JB: When we're talking about audiences turning against me, I wonder did I lose something? Was there something there that might be interesting to get back, a roughness or lack of technique? Or maybe ugly voice sound which I should try to get back to. For instance, Ab Baars sometimes talks about this, when he hears absolute beginners playing saxophone: "Oh, I wish I could do that!"

[c. 1995]

## PJ HARVEY

### Mother's Tongue

PJ Harvey's new record, *To Bring You My Love*, reminds me of the debate over the peculiar powers of the female voice that has been building over the last couple of decades in a few enclaves of critical and cultural theory. In a collection of essays, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press), edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, the nut of the debate concerns whether or not female voice—in speech or song—somehow bypasses the whole network of linguistic and symbolic systems through which people normally exchange meanings. It has this power, some say, because it recalls a period in the mother-child relationship when an intense vocal bond existed without need for concrete language. Listened to this way, women's voices inherently carry with them the potential for direct, unmediated communication.

*To Bring You My Love* is awash in references to mothers and children, and the most immediately arresting thing about it is Harvey's voice. Her tunes will quickly insinuate their way into your memory, her arrangements will soon reveal their ingenuity, and her lyrics will eventually sink their awesome claws into your consciousness. But the thing that will hit you in the face like the wet kiss at the end of a hot fist is the sound of her voice. Or, to be more accurate, the sound of her voices, since there is no single Harvey cantus here. Instead there are a host of different vocal modes, some created through studio techniques—miking, distortion, electronic treatment—and others conjured from someplace between Harvey's vocal cords and her mouth. And a peculiarly powerful pack of voices has she.

Perhaps the most striking juxtaposition of vocals on *To Bring You My Love* comes between "I Think I'm a Mother" and "Send His Love to Me." The former is a gender bender twisted enough to make Prince scratch his head. Over a rolling and tumbling guitar riff and low-pitched drums, Harvey grunts the tune's title in a husky, butch, slightly muffled truck driver growl. Is she a mother or so

tough she's a motherfucker? On "Send His Love to Me," a totally different vocal land, Harvey belts out the tormented love lyrics with a bright, open-throated gusto reminiscent of Patti Smith circa "Dancing Barefoot" but with a surer punch. That quality of voice reappears on another flamenco-tinged tune—also about mothering—"C'mon Billy." On "Meet ze Monsta" she pushes her voice in yet another direction, coloring each line with a strained lilt by calling on the wind machine hunkered in her stomach.

On the harrowing "Tecló," which contains one of the most beautifully conceived arrangements in recent pop music, Harvey also actively manipulates her voice, singing with an overarticulated arch perfectly suited to the song's gothic hum. If Diamanda Galas were as incisive and unhokey a songwriter as she is a vocalist, she might be doing something this powerful. "The Dancer," which contains a run of faux orgasms, deploys the same purposeful pomposity. The voice comes as close as it will to Sweet Polly Purebread at the end of the record's big radio hit, "Down by the Water," by suddenly turning into a whisper and tonelessly uttering the unsettling words: "Little fish, big fish / Swimmin' in the water / Come back here, man / Give me my daughter."

Much ado has been made of Harvey's blues influences. On *To Bring You My Love* they're evident in many aspects of vocal production. Take the title cut, on which she dares to use distortion so thick it might seem like a technical flaw. In fact, from the way her voice turns into raw, ragged static when she ups the volume and vibrato, she sounds like she could be singing into a harmonica mike just as blues harpists often did. The heaviest slab of song on the record, "Long Snake Moan," treats Harvey's voice with an even more opaque coat of distortion in its explicit call for gender reconstruction: "You wanna hear my long snake moan / You wanna see me grow my own." The song's a bass-intensive kick in the head. In fact Mick Harvey of the Bad Seeds (no relation to PJ) contributes the record's only string bass at this point; elsewhere, PJ uses an organ to give the disc its unique bass sound.

The most unusual vocal technique on *To Bring You My Love* occurs on "Working for the Man." It almost sounds as if Harvey's singing into a cup. Or maybe a phone. Breathing and microphone rustling add to a mounting sense of claustrophobia. Then a second, higher, unobfuscated vocal track harmonizes, recalling the stripped-down technique Harvey used so effectively on the earlier record *4-Track Demos*. But it's that muffled lead that sounds so strange and menacing, so secretive and perverse.

The cover of *To Bring You My Love* is a takeoff on symbolist painter John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*—Harvey is supine, nymphlike, immersed in water up to her ears, eyes closed as if listening. Drowning and bathing, like motherhood,

P J Harvey • To Bring You My Love



are recurrent images on the record. Metaphors of liquid envelopment are also used by proponents of the theory of prelinguistic mother–child sonic communion, who say sound is a matrix similar to the placental matrix that encases and protects the baby and manifests oneness with its mother.

But the sheer variety and play of voice production make *To Bring You My Love* as good an argument as any against such an essentialist maternal paradigm. Harvey refers to the myths of feminine vocality, actively embodying and manipulating them, but she doesn't fall back on them. Instead she reveals them as constructions, productions, and myths by treating the female voice—her female voice—as a flexible icon of multiple femininities and polymorphous gender identities. For if she sometimes invites the listener to revel unabashedly in the sound of her voice, to commune like a babe in unmediated sonic bliss, she just as often cuts the umbilicus, distances herself, and turns the warm bath into a storm of hail.

[1995]

## AURAL SEX

### The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound

(coauthored with Terri Kapsalis)

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes defines representation and bliss as mutually incompatible terms. Bliss is the limit of selfhood and the threshold of the text; it runs parallel to and is incommensurable with pleasure. One cannot, according to Barthes's schema, represent bliss, since bliss is the destruction of representation. With the experience of rapture or *jouissance*, the codes of orderly rhetorical representation are scrambled and the comfort and safety of interpretation are violently punctured. For Barthes, the site of this disturbance is never mass culture, where any potentially ecstatic repetition is "humiliated repetition" and the shock of bliss is engulfed in a deluge of superficially new fashions. The erotic text appears only in excessive scenarios: "if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness." Bliss interrupts language. An orgasm: the blissed-out sound of broken-down speech.

If we abandon Barthes's anti-mass stance, what do we make of the proliferation of sounds of ecstasy that have been a staple of the pop music world since the 1960s? Specifically, how can we account for the meaning of the many works that include or, more often, center on the female voice simulating sexual bliss? Indeed, with the advent of digital technology and the widespread use of digital sampling in popular music, female sex vocalizations (moans, shrieks, gasps, sighs) have become a staple of dance music from hip-hop to Belgian new beat.<sup>1</sup> And outside of the arena of music, in contemporary popular pornographic technologies (phone sex, CD-ROM, "virtual reality"), sound tracks are currently being produced that utilize these vocalizations in a variety of both nuanced and clichéd ways. Is it possible that underlying the simple discomfort and embarrassment that naturally accompany the public airing of such graphic sex sounds is a more profound disturbance: a gentle threat to the stability of sensical representation? What happens to this seemingly untenable presentation of bliss when it takes the form of a recording? Is this

the pleasurable drawback of ecstasy, containment of rapture, and prevention of total textual loss? Or are pop music sex sounds something harder to pin down, something we experience as unsettling to deep cultural architecture?

A number of hard questions arise from this ubiquitous practice, questions that have long been addressed in terms of film and visual pornography, but questions that take on an aural specificity particular to practices that hinge on recorded sound. Linda Williams has discussed the “money shot” in mainstream porn as “evidence” of male sexual satisfaction, and she has explicated the difficulty encountered when attempting to visually render female orgasm: “Since ‘normally’ the woman’s pleasure is not seen and measured in this same quantitative way as the man’s, and since visual pornography also wants to show visual evidence of pleasure, the genre has given rise to the enduring fetish of the male money shot.”<sup>2</sup>

It isn’t that female pleasure is completely unaccounted for, however; indeed, it has a highly codified status in music and film. As the female counterpart to the visually present ecstatic male, evidence of female sexual pleasure is usually deferred to the aural sphere. Hence, within mainstream pornography and mass culture alike, where male sexual pleasure is accompanied by what Williams calls the “frenzy of the visible,” female sexual pleasure is better thought of in terms of a “frenzy of the audible.” Sound becomes the proof of female pleasure in the absence of its clear visual demonstration. The quantitative evaluation of male sexual pleasure by means of the money shot (“payoff” measured in amount of ejaculate, force and distance of stream) may also be represented in the quality and volume of the female vocalizations. Annie Sprinkle, in her video *Sluts and Goddesses*, plays on this very code by charting an extended series of orgasms, superimposing a graph over a video image of her achieving climaxes. The graph’s x-axis measures time, its y-axis measures “orgasmic energy.” Not coincidentally, the chart reads like a seismic register of the volume of Sprinkle’s vocalizations; her “orgasmic energy” peaks at moments when she screams loudest, while the graph’s valleys represent quieter, less vocal interludes. Female sexual energy or “letting go,” in this case, is explicitly linked to the “release” of sound, the vocal expression of an inner state.

The recognition of this separate standard of measurement for male and female sexual pleasure (liquid volume vs. sonic volume) is at the center of an ongoing debate, popular and more recently academic, over the status and/or possibility of female ejaculation. In an attempt to draw this conundrum further into the heart of feminist and postfeminist theory, Shannon Bell wrote: “The ejaculating female body has not acquired much of a feminist voice nor has it been appropriated by feminist discourse. What is the reason for this

lacuna in feminist scholarship and for the silencing of the ejaculating female subject?”<sup>3</sup>

The word “ejaculate,” of course, has a convenient double meaning—vocal ejaculation and sexual ejaculation—that allows Bell to conflate “silencing” (an aural phenomenon) and “erasure” (a visual phenomenon). Though the ejaculating female body has been largely excluded from visual representation in pornography, the vocal ejaculations of climaxing women are a prominent, perhaps the most prominent feature of representations of female sexual pleasure in mainstream porn and popular culture at large. In a discursive formation that measures female pleasure and performance primarily by how much sound is made, the notion of female ejaculation, as Chris Straayer points out, maps a male-exclusive visibility onto women’s bodies,<sup>4</sup> giving them the chance to have “money shots” of their own. This confounds the traditional marker of sexual difference—ejaculation as the sole domain of men—inciting a flurry of scientific, pseudoscientific, cultural, and social questionings of the verity, the desirability, and the very physiological possibility of such a thing. Striking a nerve at a very deep level, the question of female ejaculation subtly reveals underlying constructs of the “truth” of male and female orgasm (you can see men orgasm; you can hear women orgasm), the same kind of truth claims around which the use of sex sounds in film and moreover in music functions.

Without a visual image to “anchor” it, the recorded sound of sex and sexual pleasure—for example, in popular music or phone sex recordings—raises a number of fundamental questions about the construction of aural codes for sexuality. In the absence of a synchronous or illustrative visual image, what do recorded female sex vocalizations become evidence of? Whose pleasure is being represented?

On one hand, these vocalizations are conventionally designed to provide sexual arousal for a male listener. At the same time, like the money shot, such pleasure is derived from the assumption or fantasy that a surrogate partner—with whom the listener may identify—is engaged in sexual activity with the vocalizing woman. This complicated structure of viewer or listener identification involves a frequently absent, usually male character. Whereas in film one has visual evidence of the sex act and its culmination, sound recording constantly begs the question of evidence. Is she “really” enjoying herself? Are they “really” having sex? As evidence of the truth of her orgasm and the truth of his/her ability to bring her to orgasm, the listener is offered the sound of uncontrollable female passion. Sound is used to verify her pleasure and his/her prowess.

At the base of an economy of pleasure is a biological truth claim about the “nature” of women’s and men’s sexual behavior. Men’s pleasure is absolute,

irrefutable, and often quiet, while women's pleasure is elusive, questionable, and noisy. This gendered opposition augments another biological construction that configures the male and female orgasmic economies differently: male orgasm is seen as singular and terminating; female orgasm is heard as multiple and renewable. The importance of this singular/multiple dichotomy in the world of sound recordings will become clear later in this essay.

The enforcement of this dichotomy between the spectacularization of male pleasure and the aurality of female pleasure calls into play a problematic with legal implications: in a scopophilic society in which one looks for "eyewitness" accounts (as opposed to mere "hearsay"), what defines aural pornography? What is the legal status of non-language-based sexual sound? The pornographic is defined as that which is seen in images or written in language; in both senses, graphic = written. Thus, federal agencies and consumer advocates can easily police visual obscenity in video images and content obscenity in song lyrics, but they have a much more difficult time defining and prohibiting the use of sex sounds in popular music. Female sex sounds are thus a more viable, less prohibited, and therefore more publicly available form of representation than, for instance, the less ambiguous, more easily recognized money shot. Following this logic, this could be seen as another way of sanctioning and popularizing the construction and circulation of women as the objects of sex, as being "on the market."

At a basic level, then, recorded sex sounds are engaged in, on one hand, the production of an erotics and, on the other, a strict maintenance of gender binarisms. At the same time, sex sounds always work in one way or another in relation to the visual, either by playing on the absence of image (allowing sex in places you aren't allowed to see it) or by referencing the visual directly, inciting spectacular fantasy. Aural representations of sexual pleasure therefore enjoy a double standard which allows them to occur in places, including public spaces, that would otherwise ban visual pornography, either cinematic, videographic, or print. For instance, one can hear female orgasm sounds in background music while browsing at a popular clothing store, though the same store would never dare screen porn video loops on in-store monitors.

## **First Station Break**

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SEX-SOUNDS BROADCAST

1. Record sounds on recording device (ooh, ooh, ahh, ahh, ahh, oh yeah, squeaky bedsprings, etc.)
2. Rewind tape, play back, turn up volume



3. Face playback device out various windows as sound plays
4. Move speaker throughout space, placing on floor, against walls
5. Watch for response

### **Love to Love You, Baby**

As early as the 1920s and '30s, several genres of singers turned to the “low moan” for erotic effect. White entertainers like Sophie Tucker (“last of the red-hot mamas”) and Mae West cooed seductively for male audiences, as can be heard on West’s 1933 record “A Guy What Takes His Time.” Black blues and vaudeville jazz singers used similar techniques, often incorporating sex sounds into the narrative of the lyrics. Luella Miller’s 1927 song “Rattle Snake Groan” and Victoria Spivey’s 1934 take “Moanin’ the Blues” both use the same combination of sung moans and snake-penis imagery, as Spivey sings: “Now you talk about that black snake juice / well you haven’t heard no moanin’ yet / Aaaaaall . . . day long / And when you hear this moanin’ it’s moanin’ you will never forget.”<sup>5</sup>

Female sex sounds came to the forefront of Western pop music with Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin’s major 1969 French hit, “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus.” Since that mythological initiation—which was, at the time of its release, banned from radio in many countries<sup>6</sup>—the pop music world has produced a virtual orgy of like-minded songs, songs that are aimed at a cross section of mainstream, heterosexual record-buying audiences.

Though the industry may target these audiences, this does not account for the actual uses made by nondominant audiences, such as various gay subcultures, who might cross-read such musics. Nor does it account for the fact that the music industry might have the savvy and “inside knowledge” to market at those subcultures at the same time as it does dominant audiences. These multiple possibilities for consumption make the market for such music larger and even more diverse, as the presence of Donna Summer’s simultaneous gay and mainstream popular hit “Love to Love You, Baby” attests.

A short list of songs that contain female orgasm sounds includes Marvin Gaye’s “You Sure Love to Ball,” the Time’s “If the Kid Can’t Make You Come,” Duran Duran’s “Hungry Like the Wolf,” Prince’s “Orgasm” and “Lady Cab Driver,” the Chakachas’ “Jungle Fever,” Major Harris’s “Love Won’t Let Me Wait,” the League of Gentlemen’s “H. G. Wells,” Little Annie’s “Give It to Me,” Lee “Scratch” Perry’s “Sexy Boss,” Aphrodite’s Child’s “666,” PJ Harvey’s “The Dancer,” and Lil Louis’s “French Kiss.”<sup>7</sup> Within the diegesis of most of these examples, a male lead singer satisfies, either directly through a mini-narrative or indirectly by association, a secondary female vocalist. Structurally,

this woman maps onto the role of the background singer, oohing and aahing nonsensically behind the lead's meaningful words.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, the lead vocals may be sung by a female lead singer who eventually slips into the throes of ecstasy, as is the case on "Love to Love You, Baby."

In all of these songs there is an ambiguity of address: Is the listener being asked to identify with whoever is satisfying the vocalizing woman, or is the listener an outside eavesdropper (the aural equivalent of a voyeur) who "gets off" on the very sound of her voice?<sup>9</sup> Assuming that the ideal listening subject for female orgasm sounds (from the music industry's point of view) is almost certainly male, what happens—as it often must—when the listener is a woman? How does this reorganize the chain of signification? Given a dominant heterosexist perspective, do the cooing sounds of female sexual pleasure serve as a normative model for the "correct" female response to sexual stimulation? Are these sounds part of a disciplinary framework in which supposedly "free" sex vocalizations are ideologically instituted as the acceptable sound of stimulation? Is this a tyranny of ecstasy, teaching women how to sound and men what to try to make women sound like?

The explicit sex sounds used in popular music are clearly often a direct genre reference to mainstream cinematic and videographic pornography. In these forms, the sound track during sex scenes will typically relate to the actions that are visually depicted in only the most general way; thus, synchronization is not used as a verification of the "actuality" of the scene. Postsynchronized groans and moans function more as an additional stimulant than as an *effet du réel*. Naturally, this brings us back to issues of "evidence." As Linda Williams says: "When characters talk their lips often fail to match the sounds spoken, and in the sexual numbers a dubbed-over 'disembodied' female voice (saying 'ooh' and 'aaah') may stand as the most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances. Sounds of pleasure . . . seem almost to flout the realist function of anchoring body to image, halfway becoming aural fetishes of the female pleasures we cannot see."<sup>10</sup>

Since these female voices in porn film and video are already disembodied from their visual referent, they make a fitting item for purely aural production. Devoid of the usual realist evidentiary role, female sex sounds are free to be used in highly stylized and seemingly antirealist settings.

For instance, the sampling of female sex sounds are used in some forms of post-disco dance music in a compulsive-repetitive way. In these contexts, the very same sex sound may be repeated ad infinitum. Though on the surface this appears to be completely nonrealist (as are all mechanistic uses of sample loops and repetitions), at base it still carries deep, "real" connotations about

female sexuality. When sampled in this way, these women's voices are hyper-representations of female sexuality as out of control and excessive. As we have noted, the male orgasm is culturally constructed as terminal and limited, while female sexual pleasure is seen as infinitely renewable and multiple. Like the female orgasm, the technology of sampling is not subject to the generational "exhaustion" of analog technology, but digitally replicates and proliferates the original text. As infinitely repeatable and renewable resources, women's orgasm sounds are thus the perfect item for digital sampling, epitomizing the ecstasy of communication.

## **Second Station Break**

*I hear her sigh and I want to buy. I hear her sigh and I want to buy.* These words race through my head as I flip through racks and racks of hangers. Euro disco sex pop is piped into my ears, making my head spin. Plastic, leather, latex, scratchy wool, smooth cotton, rubber—an orgy of consumable textures. A salesperson comes by and asks if I need help. No, thank you, I'm just looking, I bark. Her sighs grow more intense into shrill, rhythmic shrieks. The electronic cash register spits and the shoplifting detection device blasts a penetrating alarm. Amid it all, like the filling in pain au chocolat, is the shrieking Euro girl dressed in all the latest fashions.

## ***Cyborgasm***

Digital technology has already produced the "first virtual reality sex experience." *Cyborgasm*, produced by Lisa Palac, editor of *Future Sex* magazine, is a compilation of sexual vignettes on compact disc. Modeled largely on *Penthouse* "Forum," the scenarios are almost entirely hetero, including backseat interracial encounters, light s&m, an orgy, role-playing pedophilia (preceded by a spoken disclaimer by Susie Bright, who assures that the participants are consenting adults), and a science fictionesque dream fantasy about necrophilia. Most are enacted narratives that put the listener in the position of eavesdropper; one utilizes a male voice to describe the sexual event; several include direct address, positioning the listener as part of the diegesis. One thing unites the scenes: almost every cut includes copious female sexual vocalizations.

The prime marketing gimmick that *Cyborgasm* employs is a claim of "virtual 3-D audio." Its press release suggests that there are benefits from this technology: "*Cyborgasm* sounds so real you're not just hearing sex, you're having it." Reviewers seem to have bought this virtual line, as evidenced by Jim Walsh's

review in *Utne Reader*: “Cyborgasm is so in-your-libido vivid, it’s like being a fly on the wall of some of your best friends’ bedrooms, bathrooms, or backseats. An extremely aroused fly, I might add.”<sup>11</sup>

Recorded by Ron Gompertz, whose “virtual audio engineering” earns him auteur-like status in the project, *Cyborgasm* claims to use “encoding technology developed for virtual reality applications . . . creating a you-are-there listening experience.” In fact, the technology for *Cyborgasm* is not new but utilizes techniques for “audio imaging” long available, primarily side-to-side panning and foreground/background perspective illusions. These are, at best, somewhat enhanced by the technology of compact disc and “ambisonic” or binaural recording methods (like an audio pop-up book), but they utilize standard studio effects. Especially noteworthy is the gratuitous way that panning is used without reference to activity in the scenarios, suggesting that any unusual, dizzying psychedelic effect will seem three-dimensional. To enhance these effects, the listener is encouraged to experience the disc with headphones, without which the 3-D effect is not heard. “Dim the lights and close your eyes,” the instructions read. “Wear our eco-goggles, so you’re not distracted by any visual stimuli.” Hence, wearing cardboard blinders that come with the CD, one is reminded of the 3-D cinema glasses that were popular in the ’50s. But the projection is into the mind of the listener, not onto the screen, or, as the packaging says: “Let your mind go and your body will follow.”<sup>12</sup> Obviously, as with most porn, this is a call to masturbate, but without the intrusion of someone else’s images into your fantasy.

What is significant here is not that this is or isn’t a new technology, but that the promotional materials and packaging rely so heavily on claims of technological innovation. Similar claims covered the sleeves of late-’50s record albums, which sought to capitalize on the novelty of stereo and “high fidelity.” Flamboyant recording tactics (including the use of gratuitous panning) were popular and engendered a profusion of race car and sound effects LPs. On *Cyborgasm*, it is the promise of new audio technology, the fetish of high fidelity, that is used to enhance the sex fetish, particularly the fetishization of women’s vocalizations. This double sex/tech fetishization, too, has an early precedent. On the back of *Erotica: The Rhythms of Love*, a 1950s LP that superimposes the sound of squeaking bedsprings and a woman’s ecstatic vocalizations over pseudo-Latin drums,<sup>13</sup> an impressive box of text is dedicated to technical data detailing the record’s innovative approach. It is claimed to be the “culmination of more than two years of research, utilizing today’s most advanced electronic techniques and the talents of sound engineers who have pioneered a host of technical achievements . . . acclaimed by many as a noteworthy landmark in recorded sound.”

Whereas *Erotica*'s sex sounds are not supported by narrative justification and explanation, each sex sound in *Cyborgasm* is accounted for in the diegesis of its scenarios. Of these, perhaps the most emblematic of the status of women's voices is "Pink: Sweatboxes" by Bunny Buckskin and Carrington McDuffie. This vignette involves a pair of heterosexual female roommates. The first confesses to the other that she gets turned on when she hears her roommate having sex with a male lover through the wall that separates their bedrooms. In particular, the first roommate admits, it is the other woman's wild vocalizations to which she responds. This confession in turn excites the second roommate, predictably leading to a sexual encounter between the two women, undertaken explicitly in an effort to reproduce the coveted sounds. Hence, for the listener, the woman-on-woman scene (not atypical in mainstream hetero-male porn) creates a situation with double-strength female sex sounds. In this narrative, women's voices are used in numerous ways to titillate—as evidence of sexual activity in the room next door, as the "truth" of homoerotic interest, and finally in their traditional role as proof of female pleasure.

Kaja Silverman suggests that in cinema a compulsive mechanism draws the woman's voice back into the diegesis. In recorded music and aural pornography we find examples that both confirm and contradict this. On one hand, there is the frequent use of sampled sex sounds in current dance music that occurs without reference to a specific narrative. In other cases, like "Je t'aime," female sex sounds serve as the culmination of the familiar "bringing her to orgasm" story. In either case, the question "what are these sex sounds evidence of?" is left dangling. Without an accompanying image for confirmation, to answer what Rick Altman calls the "sound hermeneutic,"<sup>14</sup> the question "is she coming?" can never be answered "see for yourself." As evidence, the sound of a woman in ecstasy is never quite sufficient for conviction, and the possibility of representing women's sexual pleasure is therefore left ambiguous. But this uncertainty is coupled with an additional representational ambiguity: Are the moans, shrieks, and cries evidence of pleasure or pain?

### Third Station Break

Putting the car in drive, I leave the parking lot. It's hot, so I open the window and turn on the radio. They're playing "Love to Love You, Baby," by Donna Summer. I turn up the volume, the car throbs, and Donna moans into a slow fade-out. As I pull up to a stop light, the disc jockey comes on in a deep, sensuous baritone: "Hey, out there in radioland, this is your big daddy dee-

jay.” Interrupting his patter, suddenly he begins to groan: “Uh, oh, oh . . .” A man crossing at the crosswalk shoots me a disgusted look as I turn the radio down. “Mmmmm, aaah . . .” Instantly, I roll up the windows, despite the heat. “Ahahahahhhhhh.” Now, in the privacy of my burning automobile, I’m sweating profusely. “Yes, yes, yes!” With his next outburst, I begin to look at the pedestrians differently. “Ohhhh yes.” I’m not thinking about my driving, and accidentally run a stop sign. “Ah, ah . . . could be enough . . . gggrrrr, aaah . . . to satisfy . . . wheeeeeeeew!”

## **Crying Dub**

Take, as indicative, a late-'70s dub reggae version of Bob Marley's well-known song “No Woman No Cry,” called “Crying Dub.” Produced by Jamaican dub pioneer King Tubby, this lyricless dub uses the original song's basic rhythm track, but on top of that and in the place of Marley's original lead vocal it substitutes a woman's voice. This voice is precariously perched between mournful despair and sexual ecstasy. Of course, the title suggests the former, but the quality of the vocalizations themselves suggests the latter. In fact, in almost every example we auditioned, female sexual vocalizations blurred the line that separates a representation of pain from a representation of pleasure, often sounding uncomfortably like screams of torture as much as outbursts of sexual pleasure.

This begs an important question that brings us back to the issue of identification and subjectivity: Is the listener assuming a sadistic listening position? Is pleasure, for the listening subject, predicated on a secret (or not so secret) enjoyment of the sound of a woman in pain? Or on the contrary, is the listener to identify with the vocalizing woman? Does the representation of her pleasure serve as a contradictory place of male-to-female identification similar to Silverman's theory of male masochism?<sup>15</sup> Adapting Silverman's theory, the listener (presumed and structured male) may surreptitiously, perversely identify with the woman-as-victim.

## **Final Station Break**

Speed: 7½ inches per second

At the Kinsey Institute, she hands us the sound collection—some vinyl and reel-to-reel tape—and leads us to a small office, closing the door as she leaves. Leather chairs, fancy bookcases, and sexology diplomas. We set up the dusty reel-to-reel player and push aside “Copulatory Vocalization of Chacma Baboons,

Gibbons, and Humans” in order to hear tape of “Sounds during Heterosexual Coitus.”

Track: 1/2

Taped to the box is an explanation: “Session I: 6/13/59. Recording begun immediately after intromission. Male face turned partially toward microphone about three feet distant; hence male breathing drowns out female’s. Recorded at too high volume and hence movements on bed give exaggerated noise. Recording ceased after orgasm and when respiration nearly normal.”

But it is Session II that interests us, “Eccentric take-up reel causes continual background noise. . . . At orgasm the female gives a series of small cries; subsequently she emits an occasional post orgasmic similar cry. This sort of vocalization is not infrequent in this female.”

AV521

Remnants of sex breath and vocalization leak outside the small office. We try to keep the volume down.

WAD: Timing (From a Hearing 24 Aug ’65 on Wollensak Machine)—

Session II    276 Start Recording  
                  405 Start Heavy Breathing  
                  424  
                  428–33  
                  435–8 female vocalizations  
                  444–47  
                  453–6  
                  472  
                  482–84  
                  509 Verbalization  
                  516 End

[1996]

## Notes

1. These sounds also appear with some regularity in art music contexts. Hear, for instance, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry’s 1952 piece “*Erotica (Symphonie pour un homme seul)*,” on the *Musique Concrete / Electroacoustic* collection *Concert Imaginaire* (INAC 1000).

2. Linda Williams, "A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: BFI, 1993), 185.

3. Shannon Bell, "Feminist Ejaculations," in *The Hysterical Male: New Feminist Theory*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 162.

4. Chris Straayer, "The Seduction of Boundaries: Feminist Fluidity in Annie Sprinkle's Art/Education/Sex," in *Dirty Looks: Women/Pornography/Power*, ed. Gibson and Gibson, 168–72.

5. Thanks to Keir Keightley for the West and Spivey references. An interesting variation can be heard on Memphis Minnie's 1934 "Moaning the Blues." Here, the (still somewhat eroticized) moan refers not to sexual gratification but to sadness over the loss of Minnie's man, a subtle combination of pain and pleasure.

6. Contrary to our earlier point, the banning of "Je t'aime" suggests the possibility that sex sounds are sometimes sufficient evidence to merit strict regulation. A quick listen to "urban contemporary" radio today, however, reveals that these sounds are now publicly acceptable, although words like "pussy," and "dick" are carefully altered for radio play. See John Corbett, "Bleep This, Motherf\*!#er: The Semiotics of Profanity in Popular Music," in *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 68–73.

7. There are a few converse examples of male sex sounds, including the Buzzcocks' "Orgasm Addict" and works by audio artist Rune Lindblad and Japanese extremist Gero-gerigege. But the overwhelming majority of examples of bliss noises we uncovered were female.

8. See John Corbett, "Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist," in *Extended Play*, 56–67.

9. If one of the main issues of certain feminist analyses of mass media has centered on the objectification of the female body, it might be fruitful to ask, what becomes of the issue of objectification when the female voice is disembodied?

10. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 122–23.

11. Jim Walsh, "The New Sexual Revolution: Liberation at Last? Or the Same Old Mess?," *Utne Reader*, no. 58 (July/August 1993): 64.

12. This is a poor paraphrase of Funkadelic's credo "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow."

13. Interestingly, these "exotic" drums are accompanied by grunting male musical vocalizations in a stereotyped "ooga-booga" style, implicitly linking the "savage," uncontrollable female sex sounds with the uncivilized "primitive." Only the "civilized," controlled, (presumably) white male protagonist is silent.

14. Rick Altman, "Television/Sound," in *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 46–47.

15. Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 185–213.



## LIZ PHAIR AND LOU BARLOW

### On Music, Sex, TV, and Beyond

*Grinning widely, Lou Barlow opens the door to a room on the eighth floor of Chicago's swanky Meridian Hotel, and the sweet smell of hash incense wafts into the hallway. Inside, a slightly dazed Liz Phair bobs up and down on the queen-sized bed, where she'll remain for much of the afternoon.*

Barlow, twenty-eight, is a soft-spoken latchkey kid from the Boston 'burbs. Growing up with parents who were unusually supportive of his musical endeavors, he opted to postpone college and live at home until he was twenty-one. After leaving Dinosaur Jr. early in the band's career, he has recorded under a variety of monikers, including Sebadoh, Sentridoh, Lou B., and the Folk Implosion. A confessional lyricist, he pours his soul into aching songs about lost love, found love, uncertain love. Though much of his music is recorded at home on a four-track, Sebadoh's latest album, *Bakesale*, is the band's most accessible yet.

Phair, twenty-seven, is the daughter of a Northwestern University research physician and an instructor at the Art Institute of Chicago. A product of the Chicago 'burbs, she is self-possessed and conversationally savvy. Her songs—obsessive, compulsive, neurotic, flip, and always sexually charged—also focus on love, though with a knowing wink. On the cusp of superstardom with her much-anticipated album, *Whip-Smart*, Phair is living up to her startling 1993 breakthrough, *Exile in Guyville*, and her earlier, self-released, lo-fi *Girly-Sound* cassettes.

Throughout their conversation, MTV flickers in the background as Phair easily coaxes Barlow out of his self-imposed shell, freely responding to him with her own flamboyant, THC-fueled metaphors. She even offers Lou advice on how to propose to his girlfriend: "Don't be a fucking dork—walk out and get a ring! With a decent-sized diamond in it!"

### **Pigeonholed**

Liz Phair: No one ever asks me about my guitar playing. No one's ever fuckin' asked me about how I write songs. I have all these things to say about that, but no one cares, 'cause it really doesn't matter what I play on gui-

tar. Even if I play really interesting guitar songs, the only thing they care about is what it's like to be an upper-middle-class cute girl with smart parents singing dirty words. You know? No one wants to talk to my band. I know why they like me. I know what they want. And that's depressing, 'cause then it's a job. It's not a quest for change. But the music is what got us into this room today. It's what we're here for.

Lou Barlow: I'm just getting to the point where I'm trying to ignore what the printed things say. It's like, OK, they've pigeonholed you, but there's nothing you can do about it, so ignore it. I mean, it doesn't matter how much you do right, 'cause in the end the people decide.

LP: It's like a political campaign.

LB: Yeah, I was thinking about that today. I'm some kind of fucking weird politician, and I can't believe that. Through default I found myself in this position of being a strange politician and spending most of my time talking about something that I don't have time to *do* anymore. It just totally sucks.

LP: This is what happens. This is the truth of the game. I had a fucking breakdown about two weeks ago, and I figured it all out. It hit me like a big old ugly hammer. I was exhausted from something that most people would consider a really cushy job, and I just couldn't figure out what was wrong, and then I got it. I got everything that I do and why I was asked to be here. It's just so surreal. In entertainment they don't tell you the job until you're there.

LB: I don't know, 'cause I'm not in your position at all.

LP: Yeah you are. You're in exactly the position I'm in. You're saying the exact same thing that I'm saying.

LB: Yeah, but the pressure on me is less than it is on you. I guess I still don't feel claustrophobic, 'cause I still feel that there's not very many people listening.

LP: It really changes your life to feel claustrophobic. It means you have to take active measures. It's a matter of deflecting. Earlier we were talking about being the center of attention. Really, the change in my life has been being paid so much attention. The money thing—I lived better as a child. Well, not really. I don't know. But it's like deflection. I don't have a good proactive measure to protect myself from being the center of attention. I have good passive-aggressive measures. I don't look at who's in the room anymore. I don't even try. I used to be a person who would make eye contact with people. Now I can very easily slip in and out of places without ever knowing who else is in the room.

LB: See, I just spent my whole growing up looking at the ground. I'm serious. I would look down all the time, and it's taken me up until the last couple of years to even be able to look at people.

### Sex in Cyberspace

LP: It's a computer world. My boyfriend is totally Internet. Well, we don't have Internet yet, but we want to get all that stuff. We've got America Online.

LB: It's kind of exciting. It's like, I don't believe anything's sacred, you know? I don't think anything should be any particular way just because it always has been. You know, there's Internet sex, and it's all just sex. It doesn't matter.

LP: But there'll never be a substitute for personal interaction, I don't think. Phone sex? I don't even relate. I don't even know anyone who has phone sex. Do you have phone sex?

LB: No, I never have.

LP: Have you seen this software—it's the weirdest thing—where you can couple this woman with lots of different little things, like bondage partners. On a computer nobody can interfere with your enjoyment. Anyway, one of the things she has is this little eight-ball lover—which is so sick. To this day I ask people what it means. It's a guy with the head of an eight ball, like a pool ball, and he's about up to her knees, and he comes running up between her legs and just starts fucking her. I've got a great imagination, but I have no idea what that means.

There are some things that *are* sacred—like real sex. I guess there's the danger of feelings. If you're more into using a computer than getting down, then don't have kids—and that's just as well. As I see it, we can stand to strain our gene pool. Fuck it. Those people—we don't want their genes. Don't propagate!

LB: That I understand. I like that.

### Socializing

LP: I wasn't extremely social when I was in high school.

LB: But you said you made eye contact with people when you met them.

LP: Well, yeah, all right, so I was *extremely* social. But I knew people who were more social than I was.

LB: It's not a bad thing to be social. I think it's kind of good.

- LP: My mother's extremely social. But I was as much of a closet academic geek as anybody.
- LB: You'd have to be. I mean, your music indicates that you'd have to have spent some time, like, thinking about shit.
- LP: Sure, yeah. But it pays for me to be one thing and not the other. There's more pressure for me to be gregarious, social, cute, and fun than for me to be a great musician. I think that's sexism.
- LB: That's the classic. . . . It annoys me so much whenever I read anything about your records—the way people are actually surprised you're singing the things that you're singing. They think you're somehow stepping outside of your role as a woman. I'm like, "What fucking role?!" When I got your record I reacted pretty strongly to it, like, "This is a rare kind of thing." And then when I started to read what people thought, it annoyed me so much.
- LP: I brought so few values to it—and they brought me so much.
- LB: Exactly. And for people to think that the sensitivity in my songs is somehow a gender role reversal is just ridiculous. That's just my upbringing.
- LP: But maybe the kind of man you are hasn't been seen in a public sense for a while. You know how centuries have their trends as to who's the voice that's listened to? Who do we want to look through the eyes of now? I mean, I think there are gender roles. I did it all over my own album—"Look at this, I fuckin' gender flipped!"—without knowing it. I'm about as girlie as they get on some levels. I think of myself in a multiethnic, multieconomic category, but I'm perceived as a very specific item.
- LB: And I've sung certain songs from a feminine perspective—just trying to understand power. Power between men and women—that has a lot to do with a lot of the songs I've written. I've had to actively think: What would it be like to be in that position? I've tried to really get into the situation and understand it.
- LP: That's what my whole first album was, for me. That's the whole *Exile* thing: to appropriate "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

## **Sex in the Real World**

- LP: My dad's chief of infectious disease at Northwestern, and what he does is work with AIDS, which has been around probably about five to ten years longer than you think, and I think to a large extent the fear of it is just the swings of paranoia in our culture. As far as I can see, it's like people dying from any disease. It's pretty much like any pathology of disease.

I don't buy that whole idea that there was this change in sexual politics because of AIDS. It could have been anything, and I think whatever it was would have affected our sexuality too. I think anything could have been inserted in the place of AIDS. And it pisses me off. [laughing] I don't know. It's my issue. I just think it made everybody scared in this really evil way. It didn't make people scared in a constructive way. I think it was just a catalyst for the paranoia of our time.

LB: It didn't make people scared enough to actually stop . . .

LP: To stop doing it. It just made people like, "I'm looking out for myself and you are a threat to me in a gross way—in a way that I can look down upon." Like a status thing. I thought people who wouldn't really get the disease spent a lot of time thinking about it. People who are still becoming really infected and developing symptoms and living with it—they're kind of passé now and we're just mulling over how we feel about them. I think the fear of AIDS is a scapegoat. I think we were born aimlessly neurotic; too many choices and not enough direction.

### **The Lo-Fi Theory, Take 1**

LP: I like that four-track sound, man. I'm going back, I'm fucking going back!

LB: I write songs using a four-track.

LP: Yeah, exactly. It's a sketch pad.

LB: Yeah, totally. The thing with my four-track stuff is, I'll just sketch it out so hard and in so much detail that I don't want to take it to a studio, 'cause it'll ruin all the tracings and all of the layerings and the texture of the sound. But then, I record in the studio all the time with Sebadoh. If you have a band—guitar, bass, and drums—I think it's best to at least try to experiment with the studio, 'cause there's got to be a good way to get a good studio sound. As long as you can hear the voice, and the voice has some texture to it. Liz, the way you sing has that total four-track feel. It really registers with me.

LP: That's the thing about live stuff. With that kind of volume and wattage attached, you can't have that kind of intimacy you want. On a four-track you can pound the drums, throw it all on a track, do anything you want at the intensity you want, and be like Chet Baker, you know?

LB: And it'll have so much of a presence over the top of everything else.

LP: Just floating like a little Cheshire cat.

LB: That's exactly it. It gives it personality. I found that I had to learn how to sing my songs in a stronger voice.

- LP: That's really what it is. It's learning how to sing. I was going to take singing lessons. You've gotta become a performer. It's not even related to the studio situation. Like, Branford Marsalis loathes my music because of the lack of musicianship, but at the same time I've been in loads of music classes, so there's a certain amount of *conceptual* musicianship. So what's the difference? It's the lo-fi thing: indie rock humbled us. The idea that there are God-given musicians, and it flows freely from their souls—that's not what we are. We're privileged, trained, white kids, so we just get down on our knees and we're like, "I will not pretend to perform. I will just do my best to be the same way, like a soul, straight." Lo-fi feels like it's giving a clean offering. Do you know what I mean?
- LB: I think so.
- LP: 'Cause we'd think someone was bogus who had a lot of glitz to them; like it was so clearly contrived. But we're probably very contrived on some level too. We know what we're doing, but we respect more than anything our ability to just freely come up with something. So we go lo-fi to be humbled before the gods or something.
- LB: I go lo-fi because that's all I have.
- LP: Really?

## Television

- LP: I watch HBO a lot. I watch a lot of movies. Some TV—*Beavis, Married with Children* . . .
- LB: I just watch comedy. Comedy and nature documentaries.
- LP: Oh, the stoner channel—absolutely a must. Nature and God in the living room!
- LB: It's between that and comedy. And then CNN, you know, occasionally.
- LP: CNN? I don't trust them anymore. It's like the *New York Times*.
- LB: I have this belief people who work real jobs, like out in the actual working world—for them, TV somehow serves this real function, like this meditative function. It's really strange. It's like they *need* to watch TV. My father's like that. He works eight hours, dressed for the job, and he comes home and just turns on the television and just fucking channel-surfs the entire time. It seems to me like a lot of people do that.
- LP: I think you're exactly right. I know exactly what you're talking about. I'm sitting here trying to fathom why that is.
- LB: Just the monotony of having a nine-to-five job. I'm really happy that I escaped from that. There's something really debilitating about working

a real job. I always thought that watching TV was pretty similar to sitting out in nature and just listening to the breeze blow. I never believed that one was better than the other.

## Nostalgia

LP: How old are you?

LB: Twenty-eight.

LP: I'm twenty-seven. So we're roughly the same generation. Your babysitters would be my babysitters, right? So '70s rock. It's like you're stuck. I think there's something that happens to people as they reach adulthood. They spend a lot of time trying to figure out what first hit them about rock 'n' roll. It's like the first time you took a drug. You want that first time back. You want that first deviance from the world as you know it.

LB: Right.

LP: And so you're pretty much destined to rehash that over and over again. It's scary.

LB: And that's Urge Overkill!

## Lo-Fi, Take 2

LB: I'm super defensive about this, 'cause I just spent the last three weeks in Europe, and every fuckin' day it was like, "Why are you lo-fi and why do you think you're a loser?" It's exactly like you were saying—you're just this middle-class kid, you know, whatever. I just don't understand that lo-fi . . .

LP: OK, Veruca Salt goes into the studio and does their vocal take billions and billions of times until it is perfect and it's not patched together. It's that professionalism.

LB: So, it's lo-fi not to do that stuff?

LP: Yeah, it's lo-fi not to do that stuff.

LB: Well, I do all that stuff all the time.

LP: But not the way everyone else does. You do it in your own flaky, retarded way.

LB: Yeah.

LP: I think I sound more mainstream working retarded than I do when I'm being professional. And that's the disparity, because you think you're selling out completely with these lo-fi productions, you're using all the cheeseball moves, and then radio won't play it because the sonic quality is not that of a tapestry that can meld into the secretarial pool.

LB: Yeah, but I do all of the recording techniques to totally emphasize the voice and the lyrics and the emotional impact of the song, which to me is being as commercial as I could possibly be. I feel like I have always been completely commercial, but I can never tell anyone that at all.

## Pop in a Box

LP: Idiosyncrasies are what keep you unsold. Like Cindy Crawford has one little mole, but the rest is great. But she has one defect. You have to hone it down till you just have a few acceptable defects. I think that's commoditization. You get to pick your three worst flaws and you can exploit them, but everything else has got to be goddamn perfect. And then you win the lottery. Wouldn't you like to win the lottery? The music lottery?

LB: Just become a huge, huge star?

LP: Really quickly, under a different name. And then go up to Canada. I've always said I wouldn't mind being off on my own.

LB: Being off on your own? What do you mean?

LP: The freedom you have once you become a commodity in the extreme.

LB: So when are you not a product? And *who* is not a product? There's no way I could properly answer those questions. Either way, people'd grumble. So what am I going to say?—"There's nothing wrong with being a product." Or, "OK, there is something wrong with being a product."

LP: The thing about being a product is that, partially, it gives you power to be who you want to be. But obstructively, you forget why you wanted to be powerful in the first place. You have a big, booming voice, but you have less to say, 'cause you're spending all of your time worrying about your bigger, booming voice. At some level, that's why you played your songs for a friend to begin with. You were hoping that somebody would see the true you, and that this would mean something. That the true you was not just your mother's illusion. There was something you could offer that was your own creation. You could offer something that was poetic. Commoditization blurs that line really fast, because the world of business and the world of vision are too much alike.

LB: It took a really long time before I was able to do that. The whole act of playing my own music was such a huge step that I waited a really long time. I was listening to it, just myself, and I was like, "I know I have something to give." And then you start giving and it starts perpetuating itself.

LP: But then your audience is like little baby birds going: "More, more, more!" There's probably something more essential and archetypal about what



you give in songs that people want, but if you hear all those different voices—“Lou, when you did this it was fantastic!” “Lou, when you did this it blew my mind!” “I can’t believe how much it touched me when you said this!”—it’s all these different mouths to feed . . .

LB: Do you still keep making music when you reach that point where you’re like, “This is the most absurd thing?”

LP: Remember how you said you were absorptive instead of reflective? You tend to be someone who took everything in, sat quietly, and watched everyone doing what they did. You’ve absorbed it all—now what you’re hearing from people is so harrowing to absorb that you can’t do it anymore. So commoditization is the process of being eaten alive, more or less. There were just one or two people you were saving up all your songs for. Then suddenly there are like thirty thousand, and you’re dimly aware of it.

LB: But you’re still concentrating on those one or two people anyway.

### Lo-Fi, Take 3

LB: I figure I could never walk into a studio and sit down and work on vocals and lyrics that meant that much to me. I have to be totally alone. I think in order to find your own identity and sound in a world like this—a world that is constantly bombarding you with the idea that you are not original and there’s nothing you can do to be original—the best thing you can do is somehow cut apart all the rock myths and offer your own rearrangement of them. What four-track and lo-fi meant for me was crafting the way I was going to speak and the words that I wanted to say. And it’s something that will just keep evolving. It’s not something that I’m attached to. It’s simply a recording technique.

LP: I’ll betcha. You pay me fifty dollars if in five years you don’t change your mind.

LB: About what?

LP: About recording—that it’s just a technique. I bet it means something more to you. Betcha.

LB: Hmmm. More than a technique. But it’s a technique that I would probably always come back to, ’cause it means a lot to me.

LP: But you just said it didn’t mean anything.

LB: No, I’m just saying—what I’m trying to say is, um, you’re right. OK. But I’m trying to devalue the whole lo-fi thing. I just hate that it *means* anything. I hate that there’s music that’s described by the way it’s recorded. That, to me, is just a total violation.

- LP: I totally know what you mean. The radio will only take certain kinds of arrangements as legit.
- LB: But that's not my problem.
- LP: But it is your problem. It's *completely* your problem.
- LB: No, it's not, because I've been able to do so much already. I've already satisfied all of my artistic goals. All that's left are just vanities. Otherwise it's like, "Wow, I've been able to make music!"

## **Integrity**

- LB: So you'd definitely be into being a huge star?
- LP: But I've always craved my privacy. I think I'm at a great point now. I think this is the point at which I can indulge my ego in feelings of famousness, feelings of fabulousness, without really having to take the knocks for walking down to that shitty beer garden and having everybody know who I am. No one has told me where I can't go. And no one has told me I'm only this good. They've said I could be the fucking best. And people still don't know who I am. When I get really crowded in, it makes me feel miserable. I cry, I feel horrible. I feel like I have rotten self-esteem. Like I'm really ugly, really stupid and self-centered. It's a drag. So I think being mega-famous would truly be a painful transition.
- LB: I still don't have to worry too much about that. It's just a total oddity for me. This is the first time I've been able to shamelessly throw myself into the media loop. Before, there was too much of this white-boy, punk rock guilt factor. Now I don't give a shit. There's so many things in the world that's so much more mediocre than what I'm doing, so why not toss what I have out and see how many people take it? There's not a question of integrity involved.
- LP: I could explain it in concrete socioeconomic terms, in terms of how my family mistrusts my motivation, how I mistrust everyone I know, or how I no longer have a sense of identity. I don't know what I am anymore. All that stuff really takes a toll on your ability to live.
- LB: There's so much I'm not willing to lose. The one thing that I fear is becoming alienated from people you know, like your friends and people you love.
- LP: Just like a Vietnam vet. Joan Rivers once referred to people who were not in the entertainment business as "civilians." You know what I mean? Let's face it, I'm well on my way to being a star. I was on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. But I don't talk about all this with my friends. I want desperately

to have people to talk about it with. And you just can't. It's one of the loneliest jobs at some level, because to all the people I love, I just live this entire existence like I don't do what I do. I just go along with the people I'm close to as though it was the same old me. But clearly things are totally weird.

LB: And you don't talk about music? You don't talk about where you have to go and shit like that?

LP: Where I have to go or what it was like to pose for *Sassy*—we really don't talk about it.

LB: Really?

LP: Really.

[1994]

## LIZ PHAIR AND KIM GORDON

### Exile in Galville?

Four years and one baby later, Liz Phair is ready to swan-dive back into public life. Phair's first burst of fame came in 1993 with her sassy, sexually frank debut *Exile in Guyville* (Matador), which scaled various charts, earned lavish critical attention, and eventually landed her on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Phair's meteoric ascent was hindered only by uneven live performances, fueled by debilitating stage fright. Assertively upper-middle-class, white, suburban, and—especially—female, she eschewed political correctness while honing in on a carefully crafted bad-girl image. After her less successful '94 follow-up, *Whip-Smart* (Matador), Phair took a year break, played a few comeback gigs, then got pregnant and continued her hiatus through the birth of son Nick.

On a sunny Friday afternoon in her hometown of Chicago, Phair is back at home in front of the cameras, posing campily, coquettishly, decked out like a barely updated Cyndi Lauper. Career-wise, she's poised to take the second plunge with a new record, *white-chocolatespaceegg* (Matador) and a spot on this year's X chromosome-dominated Lilith Fair tour, alongside Bonnie Raitt, Des'ree, Natalie Merchant, Sarah McLachlan, and other heavy-hitter women of pop and rock. One wonders, though, how a complex lyric like "I never realized I was so dirty and dry / 'til he knocked me down, started draggin' me around / in the back of his convertible car . . . and I liked it, I liked it more and more" (from "Johnny Feelgood") will fit in with the other Lilith fare. In preparation, she's busy with voice lessons, gearing up to deal with her dislike for performing and, as she puts it, "learning to play live again."

Kim Gordon wouldn't have time for stage fright. Early in a five-week Sonic Youth tour (short by SY standards), she's set to play two full concerts in a single day in Chicago—the dash from afternoon college gig to evening rock hall executed with military precision. The mainstay alt-rocker has a young child of her own with husband and fellow Sonic Youth member Thurston Moore; Coco, now four, is out with the band supporting their latest outing, the expansive *A Thousand Leaves* (DGC). Where Phair's hit-seeking new songs are unrepentantly power poppy, cogitating on loves and losses, Gordon's post-punk work with Sonic Youth has grown increasingly exploratory, as is clear from the group's other

latest record, *Musikaj Perspektivoj*, an even more sprawling collaboration with leading experimentalist Jim O'Rourke released on their own SYR label.

After a round of joint photos, a preliminary discussion of the ups and downs of rock motherhood, and an in-depth exchange of fashion opinions, Gordon and Phair sit down to swap notes on power and gender and to contrast their respective—very different—musical aspirations.

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Liz Phair: Nice suit, Kim!

Kim Gordon: So are you already thinking about what you're gonna have to wear onstage?

LP: No, I haven't given it any thought. You want to know what I really want to wear? I want to wear dresses.

KG: Are they wearing dresses on the Lilith Fair?

LP: Probably not.

KG: Go to Agnès B., get a couple of simple dresses.

LP: So, can I ask you a question? What does your new CD sound like? Is there strange, long feedback stuff, or is it more short song structure?

KG: It's exceedingly uncommercial. [laughs] The shortest song is like six minutes.

LP: Did you write them all before, or was there some composing in the studio?

KG: We just wrote them in the studio. We have our own studio, so we turn on the sixteen-track at a certain point when the songs get structured a certain way and start recording them. That way we don't have to go to the studio when we've already done demos for a song, worrying that the demos sound better.

LP: What about vocals?

KG: That always comes afterward. We sit around and improvise more like jazz musicians or something. There's one song that we wrote and recorded in one day; the vocals were improvised.

LP: For the first time on this album, I literally appropriated two songs that other people composed the music for; they were all finished, just missing any vocal. I wrote a song to their music, this kind of cool thing I'd never done before. On this album you must have done a lot of that.

KG: I don't choose what I sing. Thurston usually has a clear idea of what he wants to sing on or what songs are good for him to sing on, and then I'll sing on whatever weird songs are left! [laughter] Lee [Ranaldo] has the most singerly, melodious voice, though he likes to talk-sing.

LP: Do you make up your own words?

KG: Yeah. Although Thurston made up lyrics to one of the songs—which is funny because it’s the most punky and it’s from a girl’s point of view.

LP: Which one?

KG: “Ineffable Me.” He knows I like Pavement, so he said: “I’ll write you some Pavement lyrics.” [Liz takes Kim’s suit jacket, puts it on and walks to a mirror at the other end of the room, styles, then returns.]

LP: That’s nice. I don’t have a husband where we do that kind of creative interplay. That must make for a really interesting marriage.

KG: So, what are the songs that you didn’t write the music for?

LP: “White Chocolate Space Egg” and “Baby Got Going.”

KG: What song is going to be the single?

LP: “Johnny Feelgood.”

KG: That’s what I thought. Either that or the one about the bartender [“Poly-ester Bride”].

LP: They tell me I have one shot, isn’t that creepy? I’ve been out of it for four years, come back, and it’s like: “The men of the industry are abuzz with the new way things work.”

KG: MTV told Geffen: “Don’t give them any videos unless they’re superstars. Don’t even bother.”

LP: What do you mean, “superstar”?

KG: Like a Beastie Boys or Beck. Somebody really huge. But we did a video with Macaulay Culkin, and he’s a superstar.

LP: That’s smart. I’ll get Keanu Reeves. When you’re told you’re not a superstar, maybe that’s the moment of creative inspiration, like: “Really? Well fuck you.”

KG: I always liked the videos you did. The first one, it reminded me of early Madonna videos, when she really had that pluck, she really wanted to make it. It showed a charisma.

LP: I really like those old videos because they feel like diaries, and I don’t keep a diary. I was at my parents’, we were checking the VCR the other day, and I stuck in the tape and it’s like: “God, I did that. Look at that.” And they are kind of plucky, there’s a little heroine in the story. Madonna’s “Lucky Star.”

KG: Yeah, that’s great. “Borderline.”

LP: You don’t like the new one?

KG: I don’t like it when musicians just appropriate whole styles. And even though she comes out of the club dance thing, it’s like: “Hey, I’ll do this electronica thing now.” It just sounds a little stiff and empty. And the whole marketing of spirituality.

LP: Didn’t you ever feel a new beginning in your life?

- KG: Yeah, but I didn't feel a need to use it as a marketing tool. Partly it's just the position she's in, it's not her fault. I really liked the VH-1 special on her going back home and showing where she used to rehearse. She said: "Had I known what I'd have to give up . . ."
- LP: Did she actually say she wouldn't have done it?
- KG: Yeah. She didn't just imply it, she actually said.
- LP: I would never say that. I don't believe her.
- KG: It's a tough position. I can't think of anything more difficult than being a solo artist, like yourself. You're just out there alone. You're so vulnerable. I'm protected, I'm part of a group.
- LP: Now that you mention it, I've forgotten what it's like to be scrutinized. It's been four years.
- KG: I'd forgotten too, and I was really excited, then bad reviews came in. I just would really rather not be made self-conscious about what we do. I'd rather just do it.
- LP: I want people, if they don't like it, to just be like: "Yeah, I don't like it," and forget about it and let me go about my life. Because it's such a private thing to make music and to like it, and nobody's holding me up for public office, I don't have to serve the people. I'm making something for people to buy or not buy. People take it so intently, they say: We want this excised from society, you have made something that will ruin my life, how could you be so shallow? Or whatever they're going to say about me. It's going to be nasty, really nasty.
- KG: But you have really different things you want out of the music. Don't you want to be a pop star? Sell millions of records?
- LP: Yeah, that would be great. That's an esoteric thought, because I don't want to lose those reviews that make me wonder who I am and wonder whether I really am focused. Because you can't help but read, and they're usually smart people reviewing you . . .
- KG: I don't know if I would assume that at all.
- LP: There are lots of stupid reviewers out there?
- KG: When people don't understand something, they'll usually just interpret it or write it up anyway. I think there's a handful of people who relate to or understand what I'm doing vocally. But that's a different way of working, like painters or artists; you're surrounded by peers. Obviously we're doing it for people, but it's like that immediate group of people who you want to like it, they're the ones that matter.
- LP: For me, it's really sappy, but I just want to make people happy, I want to make them feel the way I feel when I listen to music.

KG: What music do you like that you want to listen to over and over again?

LP: Last night I was watching *The Box* and “Gettin’ Jiggy wit It” came on. This is how bad I am. But I like really good stuff too, really difficult going. I loved *OK Computer*. When I listen to [whitechocolatespaceegg], sure sometimes I get bored because I’ve heard it so much, but generally speaking it makes me laugh a little, the lyrics are funny, or it makes me feel good or a little contemplative. I don’t want to . . .

KG: . . . be so heady with it?

LP: Yeah.

KG: It definitely reminded me of a girly ’80s record.

LP: Probably right in my teen years.

KG: I was just curious about Fiona Apple?

LP: I listened to all her singles; I never had any of the CDs.

KG: It seems like all these women are really mining women singer-songwriters. Were there any whose voices you especially liked, mainstream or indie rock?

LP: I liked Fiona, I loved Alanis’s first couple of things. I love to hear in the music my own life replayed for me. That whole women-in-rock thing is about women’s experiences, usually involving love interests and being fucked over. I enjoy hearing the subject matter being relatable to my life, from my perspective. It makes my life happier.

KG: Do you like Cat Power?

LP: I don’t know Cat Power. Do you?

KG: I love her voice. I think she’s maybe a little lazy. She’s just so natural at it. I guess she’s such an “I-am-a-singer-songwriter,” I wish she’d just put herself at a little more risk, have more ambition. Focus.

John Corbett: I wonder if you see Lilith Fair as a sort of ghettoization?

KG: I don’t see it as ghettoizing at all, I see it as really broadening. You know, the way that Lollapalooza organized the audience and showed that there was an audience for alternative music. It galvanized forces and showed that there was money power behind it.

JC: Would Sonic Youth play Lilith Fair?

KG: Only my songs! [laughs] I don’t know what you mean by ghettoization.

LP: I know what he means. It’s the same thing they said about African Americans. If you give them affirmative action, then they’re being hired because of their race. You will be known forever as part of a female movement, never be able to break out of it.

JC: Is it a convenient way to provide a forum . . .

LP: [Mock-sneezes] Bullshit! OK, look at all those singles, they’re huge. The [performers] I saw at that press conference—Paula Cole, Sarah



McLachlan, Shawn Colvin, Lisa Loeb—they all had singles out that I can sing all the words, just because they're catchy, not because I really want to analyze them deeply. Just like any male pop star can do. I looked around me and there was radio, VH-1; that's not ghettoizing, that's pop stars. That's demonstrating the viability of a female marketplace. Two years ago they said: "Women don't buy records." All I kept hearing was fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old males are the only people who buy records, and that determines how many videos you make, your photo shoots.

KG: I think there's a certain sound that's been equated with women in music right now, which is very much a part of who's been playing on Lilith Fair. That's mainstream, to me. That's what Lilith is about, more than it being ghettoizing as a gender thing. I would be worried about being ghettoized as far as style. I would rather go see a woman who I saw the other night whose instrument was a rock. That's my preference. I thought it was incredibly sexy. It's an issue that never goes away. Like that Rolling Stone women-in-rock thing. I thought it was very interesting that Jan [Wenner, publisher] chose women to sell the biggest issue of his magazine. Using women as sex objects in a passive way. Because women sell magazines, put scantily clad women on the cover.

JC: The potential downside is illustrated there, that it becomes part of an industry's marketing.

LP: But that's not pop, that's about life.

JC: But we're talking about it specifically in terms of the music industry.

LP: I'm much more concerned with how long we'll live under "aggressive male/passive female" everywhere, all the time, in our relationships, in our relationships with our parents, in our workplace.

KG: I think however you try to deconstruct that passive image, it seems to end up as some device. It's hard to escape that. Women are saying: "We're doing it ourselves, we have more power." Whatever. Do it 'cause you want to do it.

JC: The image of a powerful woman as an image can sell magazines, too.

KG: Yeah, exactly.

LP: That *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* thing [April 2 Rolling Stone cover], I couldn't decide what to make of it. She was in this dominatrix outfit, looked amazingly hot, looked very comfortable, but I was on the fence about it. Is it catering to men?

KG: There are very few women doing anything with irony in terms of their looks, except you are.

LP: I try to. I wrote songs as a man on this album, and I can't think of anybody who's done that before. I was really proud of that.

KG: I did.

LP: You did?

KG: It's called "Female Mechanic Now on Duty."

LP: Isn't that cool, though?

KG: But music aside, we started out talking about clothes, and image is a really serious issue. It's part of your armor. You at least are trying to deal with irony, and I applaud that. Debbie Harry used to do that, and nobody's really done that since then.

LP: I like doing it, it comes naturally to me. But I get a lot of other questions about how the way I look makes other girls feel and stuff.

JC: It confuses people.

LP: And that's good. I think one of the dangerous things about the women-in-rock thing is that it'll be forgettable in a while. It'll be forgotten. Remember that whole '60s thing, how it faded off into "Well, now we know what happens when you do a lot of drugs," instead of what they thought at that time, that optimism that things were really changing. Settling back into same-old same-old. But it's not really the same-old.

[1998]

## KOKO TAYLOR

### The Blue Queen Cooks

Twenty-five miles south of Chicago, in suburban Country Club Hills, it's sprinkling outside of Koko Taylor's house. Inside, I'm marveling at her living room—grand gold statuettes and a giant American eagle occupy strategic corners; the matching furniture is made of ornate white wood and plush pink velvet upholstery, covered in plastic; deep pile white shag carpet stretches from wall to wall, again, covered in plastic. From the kitchen wafts of pork chop smoke blow into the bright room, and the noisy sizzle of frying oil mocks the feeble rain outside. As I put my cream soda on the ice-like plastic floor it dawns on me: this is a house designed for easy cleaning, for someone who is hardly ever home.

Taylor descends from a stairway off of the living room, carrying a tape recorder she's lending me, as mine is on the fritz. "We better check it out, make sure it's working," she says. Turning it on, she begins to sing in her trademark gravel-toned voice: "Rain, rain, rain, go away, come again another day, 'cause we got to talk about the blues, and we gonna give the people some good news!" She switches it off and laughs a sparkly laugh, a gold tooth matching the gold droplet earrings that cascade from her lobes.

Koko Taylor is the reigning Queen of the Blues and probably the hardest-working woman in show business. Nominated for nine Grammys, winner of one, and recipient of twelve W. C. Handy Awards, she's built her kingdom on the road, with the sweat of her brow and belt of her voice. At sixty-three, she still plays more than two hundred concerts a year, most of which she reaches by bus. "My career has never been a bed of roses," she surmises in a surprisingly light speaking voice. A lithe sexagenarian, she only really shows her age when she occasionally searches for a breath. "It didn't start off that way, and even today I don't get the red carpet laid out for me. I'm just doin' what needs to be done. As long as I've got my health and strength I'm gonna be doin' it, because I'm not doing what someone wants me to do. I'm doing what I enjoy

doing, which is making people happy with my music all over the world. Folks walk up to me and say, ‘That song you just played made my day.’ That makes my day. My priority with my music is to make people feel good. A lot of people who don’t know think that blues is drawn out and depressing music. But my music is designed to make people happy, feel good about themselves, look up, pep up, get up. My music is designed to be like therapy.”

Taylor was born and raised in Tennessee, where she first began to sing. “When I was in Memphis growing up,” she recalls, “my father said everybody in his house had to go to church on Sunday. I sang gospel every Sunday in this little gospel choir. That kept up until I got into the blues. My family didn’t have a lot of records. We didn’t have a lot of nothin,’ just one another. We were in the country and we didn’t have electricity, so we had a little record player that you’d wind up with your hand. My brother went out and bought this record by Memphis Minnie called ‘You is one black rat, someday I’m gonna find your trail, and I’m gonna hide my shoes somewhere near your shirt-tail.’ The other side was called ‘Me and My Chauffeur Blues.’ I learned that song. When I would sing that song, it was out back of our little three-room shotgun house. We’d come from the field, pickin’ or choppin’ cotton, my oldest brother made a guitar with some hay bailin’ wire, he put some nails up behind our house, put on those strings, and that was his guitar. Of course he couldn’t afford to buy one. My younger brother made himself a harmonica out of a corncob. I was the vocalist, I didn’t need no mike. This was what we’d do when we wasn’t workin’ in the field or in church on Sunday. We’d jam and play for our own enjoyment—I did this all my life.”

In 1953 Koko moved up to Chicago with her boyfriend and soon-to-be husband Robert “Pop” Taylor. “We got on a Greyhound Bus in Memphis and we had thirty-five cents between us and a box of Ritz crackers. We came to Chicago, and when that bus stopped at Sixty-Third Street and Cottage Grove and I saw all of the lights, everything lit up, I had never seen so many lights in all of my life. I said, ‘Good God, this must be heaven!’” Pop got a job at a packing plant; they went to Indiana and got married and had a daughter, Joyce Lynn, aka “Cookie,” who is at the helm of the frying chops in the kitchen. Through a friend, Koko got a job. “They used to call it ‘domestic work.’ I call it housecleaning, ’cause that’s what it was about. I got a job working with a rich white family in Wilmette and Winnetka. I worked for these people cleaning house, ironing clothes, taking care of their children, cookin’, whatever.”

Pop and Koko would work through the week, but on the weekends they were committed partyers. “That’s how I started sittin’ in with these musicians. We both loved music. My husband played guitar, like John Lee Hooker, by

himself, you know.” Unlike earlier blues generations, which were full of great women singers like Bessie and Mamie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Memphis Minnie, and Lil Green, the late-’50s urban Chicago scene was almost exclusively male. Koko’s lone venture into this world is a wondrous story, one she is clearly practiced at telling. It’s also a tale that revolves around a single song.

“Well, I’ll tell you about that song,” she says, slipping off her pink house slippers. “‘Wang Dang Doodle’ was written especially for me by Willie Dixon. Willie Dixon was an A&R man for Chess Records. Willie Dixon was the man, I would say, who discovered me, ’cause he heard me sittin’ in with older musicians like Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, people like that. Muddy Waters, [her voice glows] my number one first priority. He was my idol. I used to listen to him before I met him. When I got to sit in with him, I would melt to be around him, I loved his music that much. He was also one of the greatest guys I’ve ever wanted to be around. I never had no problem with any of the guys. I worked with Buddy Guy, J. B. Lenoir, Elmore James, Magic Sam, Johnny Shines, Sunnyland Slim. I used to sit in with people like that when I moved here from Memphis. Weekends, we would go to small black clubs on Chicago’s South Side. This was for my own enjoyment. There was no money, no recording, no nothing involved. The guys got to know me, they would invite me up on the bandstand to do a song here and there. One of those times, Willie Dixon happened to be in the audience, and when I finished and came down he walked over to me and said: ‘My god, I never heard a woman sing the blues like you sing the blues. We have a lot of men today singin’ the blues, but not enough women. And that’s what the world needs today, a woman like you to sing the blues.’

“That’s when I got my first break, ’cause he thought I was the greatest. He took me down to Chess Records, they heard me and agreed. So he got busy writing and gettin’ it together for recording. Willie Dixon calls me up in the middle of the night, must be one o’clock, two o’clock in the morning. ‘Wake up, I want you to come down to my house.’ He rehearsed in his basement, and he wanted me to come down there at this time of night” she begins to sing, as if testifying in church “’cause he wrote this song . . . and it’s a good song . . . and it’s hot . . . I know you can do it . . . this is a million-dollar seller.’ I said, ‘What kind of song is this that it can’t wait until tomorrow, that I got to work on it tonight?’ He said, ‘It’s “Wang Dang Doodle.”’ I said, ‘What made you come up with an idea like that?’ He said, ‘Money!’ I said, ‘OK, I’m on my way!’”

Taylor laughs, catches a breath, and continues. “My husband and I got to Willie Dixon’s basement and started workin’ on this tune. He had me going over it and I thought it was really crazy, with all these people. Pistol-Totin’ Pete; Butcher-Knife-Totin’ Annie; Fast-Talkin’ Fanny. I said, ‘Who are these

people?’ He said, ‘I don’t know and I don’t care. They’re just good lyrics, it’s catchy, it’ll catch people’s ears, and we want a hit.’ And I’m goin’, ‘Right, somethin’ like this gonna be a hit?’ I recorded it on Chess, they played it on the radio once, and Willie Dixon called me up and said ‘You know that tune? Purvis Spann played it once and got a hundred phone calls. That means if it’s good, it’s gonna do just what I told you, it’s gonna sell a million copies.’ I’m still laughing in his face. Two weeks later he told me it’s hit the top twenty. And I still don’t know the meaning of all this. Three weeks pass, he says, ‘It’s number one. Chess has sold a million copies.’ I couldn’t believe it, I thought I must be hearing things. This couldn’t happen to me. He must be talking about Tina Turner or somebody else. But it was true, and it was my biggest seller so far,” she beams proudly, then checks her pride for the 1965 smash hit: “I’ve had my net out tryin’ to catch a fish that big ever since.”

Taylor has cast that net worldwide, drawing in fans in Europe, Japan, Australia, and in the States. “It’s tiring,” she admits. “But people in the bank get tired countin’ money, you know? So I definitely get tired, but I rest up, come in off the road, sometimes for a week, two weeks, sometimes two days. I have done it for so many years, my family calls me a visitor around the house.” A legendary cook, Koko rarely gets to exercise her culinary skills. “I don’t have time to do a lot of cooking at home and I don’t cook at all on the road. My daughter cooks for the family. Hey, most of my eatin’ is in Shoney’s restaurant, or somethin’ like that. Holiday comes up, I’m on tour, so I have Thanksgiving dinner at Bob Evans. It’s rough, but it’s fair. I accept the fact that I’m gonna be out on the road, so I deal with it. I smile and be happy and do what I gotta do. Like I said, it’s never been a bed of roses. I took the good with the bad, bitter with the sweet. Don’t nobody put down the red carpet for me, and I’m not expectin’ it and I don’t look for it. I just do what I do, and that’s that.”

“Sometimes it is very disgusting,” Taylor says, her voice acquiring a truly angry, bitter edge. “Like today, I’m very disgusted because people like myself, and I’m speaking for myself, I work hard and put all the energy, all my heart and soul into my work. But blues has never gotten the recognition that it deserved. Personally, I’m disturbed about that. It doesn’t get the airplay other music gets. Radio stations are very prejudiced against the blues. They look down on blues like they’re looking down on garbage. Certain radio stations have blues programs, like, every Saturday morning, or midnight for a couple of hours, when all the working folks are asleep. The bottom line is that the blues don’t get the airplay, the recognition, and we definitely don’t get the money. Yet, we work just as hard, make just as good records, just as good songs as any other entertainers in the world.”

She continues, regaining her humor: “I feel we have the right to a chance of knowing how good we are. But you don’t know what chicken tastes like if you’ve never eaten it. You can’t say blues entertainers will never sell a million records. You don’t know that if you don’t put it on the radio where people can hear it. People can’t purchase things they’ve never heard. Interviewers always ask me this question: ‘How come there aren’t more younger black people into the blues?’ It speaks for itself. They can’t buy what they don’t know about. Younger people listen to the radio. What they hear is rap, they hear rock, they hear pop, they hear jazz. They hear everything but blues. How do you know the young people don’t like the blues if they don’t hear it?”

Fast food tips from Koko Taylor, for the musician on the run:

“I’m a country girl—I call myself a girl ’cause I’m sixty-three years old but I feel like I’m twenty-one—but a good recipe, talkin’ about on the country side, I love good old southern fried chicken. All I use is seasoning sauce, very little salt, a little pepper, sprinkle some flour over it, put’t in some deep-fry shortenin’. Fry it and let it cook very slow over a very low flame. Let it brown, cook good, and that’s some of the best eatin’ you could ever have. Also, to have fried chicken and some good old rice, all you do is boil your rice, wash it so there won’t be any starch. Let that boil tender as you like. Whip me up some gravy, pour it over your rice or put it to the side. I’m a good spaghetti cooker, too. For my spaghetti I cut up some green pepper, onion, salt, pepper, stir it up. Maybe just a pinch of sugar. Put in my tomato sauce, let it simmer real slow, season it real well. Pour it over spaghetti that I have boiled and washed. Then stir it up with ground beef, put the ground beef in there. Let it cook real slow, you’re ready to eat, and that’s some of the best eatin’ you could ever taste if you like spaghetti. These recipes are really simple. Have some string beans to go with it. You like corn bread? I can cook corn bread, too. And I can make homemade biscuits. McDonald’s and Popeye’s biscuits ain’t nothin’ to these that I make with my hands!”

[1994]

## BRION GYSIN AND STEVE LACY

### Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permuted

I'm the fleetest baboon  
The Beatest baboon  
But the neatest baboon  
Of them all, all, all!

- Brion Gysin

People who follow jazz, a lot of them have no interest in literature per se and they don't want to hear no high-fallutin' lyrics they can't understand. But the whole thing is about doing what you want to do in spite of what everybody wants. Like Monk said, they catch up with you after a while. I saw Monk first time in '55, there was nobody there but musicians. Five years later he was on the cover of *Time* and now he's in supermarkets.

- Steve Lacy

American-born writer Brion Gysin had a healthy contempt for America and for writing. The former led him to a life of travel, the latter to a career of slicing, splicing, deranging, and rearranging words. Mobile from a very young age, Gysin was at times a resident of different spots in North Africa and the Mediterranean, and lived in London for part of the '60s. A student at the Sorbonne, Gysin spent a large amount of time in Paris, and he and his long-term collaborator William S. Burroughs set up shop and worked on and off at the legendary "Beat Hotel" in that city between 1958 and 1963. It was from that outpost that Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* was launched; it was there, as well, that Gysin's most potent experiments with cut-up—for which his partner would receive the lion's share of the public credit—would be initiated. But Gysin was no Parisian; he was an internationalist, an antinationalist. Peripatetic: a thinker on his feet. That willfully nomadic lifestyle impeded certain publishing possibilities when he left a trunk of manuscripts in Paris during one of his stays in London in the early '70s.



But it is the stateless writer's mitigated relationship to his art form that is of most interest. Gysin's most widely circulated statement—one that he repeated and refined on various occasions and in different contexts—was that writing was fifty years behind painting. Of course, Gysin was also a painter. A full-fledged member of the surrealist movement in the '30s, he enjoyed the tangible, hands-on quality of painting, the engagement with the medium's materials. This tactility was absent in writing, which always stood in an equivocal relation to the meaning of the words. The concreteness of abstraction, the attention to the play of paint on the picture plane in Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock, the severe materiality of Barnett Newman or Robert Motherwell, the calligraphic energy of Franz Kline or Mark Tobey (whose work Gysin's own paintings strongly resemble)—these aspects of modernist painting, long taken for granted, were merely in their infancy in writing when Gysin began his work.

But beyond the cumbersomeness of meaning, Gysin complained that literature was “a solitary practice, an ascesis, a withdrawal, a prison of words.”<sup>1</sup> To combat this stifling reclusivity, Gysin actively pursued collaborations. While his relationship with Burroughs, who after Gysin's death in 1986 called him “the only man I have ever respected,”<sup>2</sup> was his best-known and longest-running partnership, he also forged a collaboration with soprano saxophonist and jazz composer Steve Lacy. This productive joint effort began in 1973 and lasted until Gysin died. The pairing of Gysin and Lacy makes perfect sense, in some respects. Lacy, too, is a traveler. Born in New York, he has lived in Europe since the mid-'60s, and for a quarter century starting in 1970 he lived in Paris. While still a child, Lacy was moved by Broadway shows such as *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *Finnegan's Rainbow*, which his family took him to see and hear, and at the same time in the '40s Gysin had moved back from Europe and was in fact working on Broadway musicals. (The eerie question comes to mind: Could they have in fact already crossed paths thirty years earlier?) Like Gysin, Lacy was always interested in collaboration, particularly intermedia projects. He's proven one of the most dedicated art song composers in recent decades (despite coming out of jazz, where that tradition is held at gun barrel's distance), as well as working with dancers like Shiro Daimon and Min Tanaka and performing ensembles like the Living Theatre. “The thing about all these things is that I can learn more from a painter than I can from a musician. Likewise, working with an actor, studying how he uses his voice and gestures and personality and the space and the time. We all share time and space, that's why it's possible to work with anybody—you

have to share the time and space and be focused on the same aim, the same game. It's not possible with everybody."<sup>3</sup>

It was possible with Gysin. Lacy had heard his work in London in 1965. There, Gysin had already involved himself in sound-making, extending the idea of the cut-up to tape recording and introducing Burroughs to the practice, which he would later extend dramatically. In 1960, he devised a program called "The Permutated Poems of Brion Gysin," produced by Douglas Cleverdon for the BBC Sound Effects Studio. Gysin later boasted that it was "broadcast to the second lowest rating of audience approval registered by their poll of listeners. Still sorry to think that the lowest rating went to an opus by Auden and Britten."<sup>4</sup> Among the pieces he recorded for the show was the one that Lacy later heard, a work of *poesie sonore* called "Pistol Poem" that Gysin created by manipulating the distance of a microphone from a firing pistol, then submitting the recordings to a permutations procedure to determine the sequence of distances. This piece, along with several others from the program, including his permutation poems "Junk Is No Good Baby" and "Kick That Habit Man," were compiled at that time by sound poet Henri Chopin as part of a record album called *OU*.<sup>5</sup>

A chance encounter in Paris, and the Lacy-Gysin collaboration was off the ground. Gysin showed the saxophonist his dream machine (the vision-producing stroboscope that he and Burroughs had spent years peering into) and then his poems, many of them unpublished. "What a stroke of luck to have run into him at that time," recalls Lacy. "We hit it off like gangbusters. His lyrics were gold. He'd had some of them since 1949, and nobody had seen how great they'd be to set to music." The ensuing partnership resulted in the development of some nineteen pieces of music (each uniting Lacy's composition with Gysin's text), live performances, and joint recordings, the central of which is an album simply titled *Songs*, recorded and released in 1981.<sup>6</sup> This record provides an excellent place to reflect on the character of the Lacy-Gysin encounter, as well as offering a good vantage on the collaborative possibilities of words and music, an aspiration that occupied many of the writers in and around the Beat movement. While neither Burroughs nor Gysin was *per se* Beat—they in fact took pains to distance themselves from the movement—they were friends with such Beat mainstays as Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg, and though their work was explicitly experimental in a way that someone like Jack Kerouac was not, they nevertheless had certain things in common with the Beats, such as an immersion in Arabic culture and a love of jazz (as well as bebop's main drug, heroin).

## Facing Music

Chance is but our ignorance of causes. • attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck by Philippe Soupault

Writing separately, Jean-François Lyotard and Bill Viola have both pointed out the etymological connection between *hearing* and *obedience*.<sup>7</sup> To face the music, to obtain a hearing: from the Latin *ob audire* (to hear facing someone). As a way of assessing the potential of new musical technologies, Lyotard begins by investigating something that Gysin and Lacy deduced artistically: namely, the idea that the “liberation” of sonic material (equally true of literary material) is paradoxically in direct relation to the amount of control exercised over it. “First sense: the material is all the freer for being more determinable. That’s quite easy to conceive and practise. The number of choices to be made—‘freedom’—increases with the increase in the number of variables one can act on with determinism. Second sense: the material is the more determinable and masterable the more it is freed.”<sup>8</sup> The second of these senses is the experimentalist’s credo: set up the conditions for the experiment and let the material draw its own conclusions. That is, free the independent variable to speak on its own behalf. Be an obedient listener. Face the music.

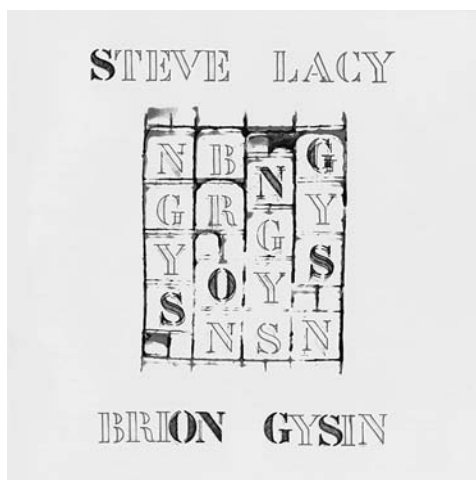
For Lacy, this realization came about as a result of playing free jazz—absolutely improvised with no preset materials—in the mid-’60s. Lacy has subsequently referred to this period of his playing as the “hermetic free,” and links it to automatic writing and action painting. “The point of no return. Where the music had the maximum calories in it. There was nothing to say, no words necessary. Just: ‘play.’ When we made the record *The Forest and the Zoo*, we agreed to play twenty minutes, turned the tape over, played twenty minutes, that was the whole concert.” But Lacy quickly tired of this variety of freedom, finding it its own kind of straitjacket, and when confronted with a film score, he began to organize the material, to determine the possible variables in advance. “We started putting little fences, suggestions, directions. We got into a kind of graphic notation. There were no notes, still; we were in controlled chaos. For example, we’d have one piece where it was only dynamics: here it gets loud, here it stops, here it goes on but it’s much softer. So the music was still free, but directed. It had limits. Another piece had listed only quantities: ‘A few things.’ ‘A bit more.’ ‘Much less.’ ‘Only one thing.’ ‘Two things.’ ‘All the things.’ ‘Nothing.’ That worked very well.” Lacy now refers to this as the “post-free” period of his work and points out its relation to the French *art informel* movement. And after some years working like this, organizing struc-

tures for the improvisation to occur in or refer to, Lacy began to reincorporate the once-scorned musical materials of melody, harmony, pulsed rhythm, and various kinds of traditional form, developing what he calls “poly-free.”<sup>9</sup>

Gysin, too, had been an obedient artist, looking (or listening) for what the material had to say. Consider, for instance, a note he made in his diary about an experience he had on a bus in France in 1958, a note that is only interesting in light of the dream machine: “I was swept out of time. I was out in a world of infinite number. The vision stopped abruptly as we left the trees. Was that a vision? What happened to me?”<sup>10</sup> The bus had passed trees that intermittently admitted sunlight, providing an ad hoc flicker effect; thus, Gysin was attentive to the material “offered” to him. Likewise, his method of permutation poetry construction came from an encounter with what he called the Divine Tautology, a string of words he was working on, looking at: I Am That I Am. “It looked wrong, to me, nonsymmetrical. The biggest word, “That,” belonged in the middle but all I had to do was to switch the last two words and it asked a question: ‘I Am That, Am I?’ The rest followed.”<sup>11</sup>

What differentiates Gysin’s cut-up and permutation methods from those used by John Cage? Where Cage was interested in utilizing these techniques to make work that had no meaning in any of the conventional senses, Gysin (and Burroughs) used these approaches to create or search out new and latent meanings. Thus, where Burroughs admitted that composers Cage and Earle Brown had “carried the cut-up method much further in music than I have in writing,”<sup>12</sup> he explained that he was not a “pure experimentalist” in that he would “go so far with any given experiment and then come back; that is, I am coming back now to write purely conventional straightforward narrative. But applying what I have learned from the cut-up and the other techniques to the problem of conventional writing.”<sup>13</sup>

In fact, comparison with Cage’s approach may be fruitful enough to spend a moment on. Cage and the Gysin/Burroughs team are both involved in tapping the wellspring of chance procedures. The differences between them illuminate the fact that chance is not a singular thing, but has many dimensions, many possible applications. For where Cage was interested in using chance to produce work that wasn’t necessarily readable in conventional terms—a continuation of the tolerance of nonsense that was the legacy of dadaists like Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters—Gysin/Burroughs used various chance tactics to produce work that could be interpreted in unconventional terms. Cage was interested in the unthought-of textures of spoken language, unimagined sounds or visual images created by chance; things that happened to sound conventional, though produced by chance procedures, were of little interest



to him.<sup>14</sup> Burroughs/Gysin were not focused on the aesthetic ramifications of chance, but on the production of meanings by chance. Throwing cut-up words (on paper or on magnetic tape) together randomly, they sought to reveal the prophetic, paranormal power of chance. Or, better, to disprove chance. To expose, in naturalist Lamarck's terms, our ignorance of causes<sup>15</sup>—that unseen forces guide chance operations. Of course, Burroughs and Gysin had distinct perspectives on cut-up and permutations, but in this case the comparison holds true—like Burroughs, Gysin was intrigued by the way that, simply by rearranging the sequence of a sentence's words, one could reveal new, sometimes absolutely contradictory or bizarrely complementary meanings. He had, in the words of his own poem, "come to free the words." He insisted, in the gist of another poem, "no poets don't own words." But it is the word-as-unit that dominates Gysin's work, not the letter, syllable, or fragment.<sup>16</sup>

The record cover of *Songs* itself has an intriguing piece of wordplay. The two artists' names run horizontally across the top and bottom of the square front cover, while in the middle of the space Gysin's trademark block grid contains his name (without Lacy's), repeatedly, in four vertical rows. The record's title is thus spelled out anagrammatically, in emboldened letters above and below the grid: **Steve lacy briON GySin**. And again, it is spelled out of the letters of Gysin's name in the middle. Thus, not only are the letters for the title of the song there in the names, they're arranged in order. At a glance, this resembles Cage's anagrammatic mesostics poetry, in which repetitions of a word (usually an honorific name, like MARCEL DUCHAMP or JAMES JOYCE) are run vertically through the middle of a poem, organizing the words according to principles

or game rules that seek to find a way to make that structure possible. But the names “Steve Lacy” and “Brion Gysin,” in this case, are left as is, readable, unscrambled; the point is only to produce the uncanny revelation that, strangely enough, when their names are run together they already contain the word “songs.” The title transects the names of both the artists, an elegant way to introduce a cooperative work.

The recordings on *Songs* can be separated into four basic areas: art songs, two idiosyncratic pieces, and a suite of permutation poems. The first area includes four songs played by Lacy’s jazz group and sung by Swiss-born vocalist Irene Aebi, “Gay Paree Bop,” “Nowhere Street,” “Somebody Special,” and “Keep the Change.” Strophic, cyclical, with standard verse/chorus structures, these cuts are the most conventional on the record. The music is composed by Lacy, and it transforms Gysin’s lyrics—including the earliest to be used on the session, “Somebody Special,” written in 1949—into lieder, pop songs, or art songs. The words come to face the music—and Lacy is obedient to the words, writing melodies based on the syllabic structure of Gysin’s poetry (and altering that logic by adding melisma in small doses, like at the end of the line “I want somebody / Somebody special / Somebody special / To live with . . . ,” where Aebi’s voice ornaments the otherwise step-by-step melody).

Since beginning to set words to music with Lao-tzu’s *The Way* (which he adapted in 1967 and has returned to intermittently since), Lacy has utilized a wide variety of texts, including letters in newspapers, obituaries, neologisms, telegrams, and random scraps of paper found in the street, as well as the words of many different poets and writers. “The question is should you do it or would it be better left alone?” he says. “Do we need this? And will they sing it? And you have to be very careful not to betray the spirit of the author, the original inventor of those words, the one who said that. That’s a serious responsibility, ’cause it’s easy to just cheapen things and make them twang. But it’s hard to really set something correctly so it can be sung later on. And I hope that these things will be sung later on. After I’m gone.”

Beat’s use of jazz turned the music into a backdrop, a background for poetry. As an archetype, imagine the poet reading in a smoke-filled café, with a bongo player providing ambience, perhaps a saxophonist emoting bluesily between stanzas. Even a writer as vehemently opposed to the clichés of Beat as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who conducted live concerts with fellow poet Kenneth Rexroth in the late ’50s at a San Francisco club called the Cellar, maintained this conventional, hierarchical words/jazz relationship. “A natural affinity does exist between the ‘protest poet’ and the jazz musician who blows ‘dissent on the horn,’” Ferlinghetti argued.<sup>17</sup> But rather than develop an interface for

the two, jazz remains an accompaniment for the meaning of the text, which predominates. Though Rexroth and Ferlinghetti's poetry readings also included early exploration of what was at that time termed "free form" jazz,<sup>18</sup> that premium on experimentation didn't translate into a question of the basic poetry/music hierarchy.

On *Songs*, Gysin reads his long poem "Luvzya" with what is very nearly traditional Beat accompaniment by drummer Oliver Johnson. Indeed, the scene could be from a Beatnik fantasy: white intellectual poet reads while black jazz percussionist punctuates the poem. Like many of his non-permutation-based pieces, Gysin writes the poem's words phonetically, stressing the idiomatic hues of the language. In this he's not un-Beat, either; writers like Kerouac maintained a problematic, romantic relation to the contours of black English and jazz music alike. Played so close to the Beat code, "Luvzya" is nearly parody, but what distances it is in part the content. If the Beats, as Andrew Ross has put it, approached down-and-outness with "tender-hearted humanism,"<sup>19</sup> the viciousness and offensiveness of Gysin's poem are cut from a different cloth. Dedicated to Vladimir Nabokov, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Roman Polanski, it is a poem about pedophilia, told from the standpoint of a pedophile, and Gysin's brilliant reading emphasizes the harsher aspects of this taboo love. "Luvzya cuzya mine / Mine mine mine / Mine alla time / Rainna shine / Sick on wine / Glom mah nob / Li'l snob / Ya mebbe on'y nine / Butcha mine / Li'l swine!" Where the stereotypic sunglassed bongo player would only keep a steady, unintrusive rhythm for the poet, Johnson invades the text, challenging the reading and attacking the cadences of lines, leading Gysin to speed up or conjoining with him in articulating the words. At once, "Luvzya" stands as an incisive roast of Beat and a wickedly subversive poem.

The other idiosyncratic piece on *Songs* is "Blue Baboon," a cabaret song sung by Aebi and Lacy, with the band. In fact, the text for this piece is a Gysin elaboration of a brief moment in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*; Gysin wrote an early screenplay for a musical film version of the book, part of which was reprinted in *The Third Mind*, and the songs for which are recited (not sung) on Gysin's record *Orgy Boys*.<sup>20</sup> In Burroughs's novel, the scene occurs as a professor at Interzone University is lecturing on baboon behavioral strategies in dealing with attack—namely, to submit or to find an even weaker baboon to beat up. Several stage directions are indicated: "Dilapidated Diseuse in 1920 clothes like she sleep in them ever since undulates across dreary neonlighted Chicago street" says (in what Burroughs describes as "canned heat tenor");<sup>21</sup> "Find the weakest baboon." Then, at a frontier saloon, a "Fag Baboon dressed in little girl blue dress sings in resigned voice to tune of Alice Blue Gown: 'I'm the weakest

baboon of them all.’”<sup>22</sup> In Gysin’s screenplay, set in a ’20s nightclub, the song is designed to be sung by a character named Violet, a “Marlene-type disease.”<sup>23</sup> Aebi’s voice can sound, at times, like Marlene Dietrich (or Lotte Lenya, as Burroughs suggests in the book); Lacy’s unison singing perhaps carries the “Fag Baboon” connotation by superimposing a male voice on Aebi’s. But what this song evokes most directly is Gysin’s history working on Broadway, given its literal use of clichéd Tin Pan Alley–style “moon/june/spoon” rhymes. A corny pop tune, albeit one that adopts a baboon as its central metaphor.

The most interesting pieces on *Songs*, however, are the three very short permutation poems: “Junk Is No Good Baby,” “Kick That Habit Man,” and “I Don’t Work You Dig.” The first two of these Gysin had recorded as spoken pieces for the BBC in 1960, and the last one was written in 1974. Lacy’s musical score is a precise mapping of the permutation process onto a melodic scheme. Where the poems use the exhaustive rearrangement of each line’s words to produce a string of variations, each word (or syllable, in the case of a word like “ba-by” or “ha-bit”) is assigned a note, and the melody is varied accordingly. This brings to mind the mnemonic “hooked on phonics” concept, in which a word is linked to a sound to aid in memorization and learning. But Gysin and Lacy are not involved in such pedagogy—they are experimenting with the simultaneous effect of text and music permutation, exposing the other submerged organizations contained in any single line of text in poetry or melodic musical statement. In a sense, what they are suggesting is a reading outside of time—through the process of listening to permutations, a refinement of the ability to hear other possible combinations might occur, a training for the listener. Thus, the attentive listener begins to hear the words not as a sequence, but as a set; not as a montage, but as a collage. Sound and language no longer simply confirm the “flow” of time, but seem to pool up, creating a reservoir of combinatorial possibilities.

Permutation: systematization of the pun. The foisting of wordplay back onto the reader/listener. Revelation of multiple meaning. Atomization of syntax. Ambivalence of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations—the structural function of individual words becomes mutable. Inherent in the statement “I don’t work you dig” are the variations “I don’t dig you work” and “Work I don’t dig you.” Punctuation and spoken inflection are very telling here: if Gysin just left the readings flat, like scraps of verbiage on tape, then the suggestive meanings dredged up by the permutation process would remain only latent. But Gysin brings them to light by reading with the lilt of a question mark, the pause of a comma.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the process itself is a flat one, taken to its full expenditure by running all the possible permutations of a line, and in this



the mute indifference of the tape recorder remains an important precursor.<sup>25</sup> The experiment runs its course, produces its results—the fact that what is exposed seems uncanny (unseen, lurking puns, countermeanings, tangents) is both an aspect of language and an artifact of Gysin's reading, but not a selective process of weeding out uninteresting lines.

An untestable pet idea of Gysin's seems interesting in this context. "I started fiddling around with superspeeds and overlays as soon as I could. I've got a theory that this is one of the things bebop sprang out of the first time Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk and them heard themselves at double speed and then at quadruple speed . . . made for dog whistles, after that."<sup>26</sup> Several threads connect this to Lacy. First, Lacy himself has utilized recording as a medium for experimentation, an activity not particularly common among jazz musicians. His piece "The Cryptosphere" finds Lacy playing along to two different versions of trumpeter Ruby Braff's record "Was I to Blame," overlaid and played back simultaneously.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, although Lacy was never associated with bebop, he has been closely affiliated with Monk for decades, ever since working and recording with the pianist in the early '60s and forming a repertory group with trombonist Roswell Rudd, originally designed to play Monk, Kurt Weill, and Billy Strayhorn, but pared down eventually to nothing but Monk.<sup>28</sup>

The more substantive connection is that Monk's music, in itself, is already concerned with permutation; whether or not he learned from recordings (which one could imagine, listening to the lightning run in a theme like "Four in One"), Monk's pieces often use interlocking motifs, arranged as if to investigate the relations of the parts. Like objects on a table, the fragments that make up the theme of "Evidence," for instance, bear more resemblance to Gysin's variable permutations than a strict sequence. This makes Monk's compositions particularly suitable material for improvisation, elaboration, restructuration. "Every time I play them something new is revealed to me," explains Lacy, who has performed certain Monk tunes in concert thousands of times. "I hear them better and I get closer to them, but I'm almost never satisfied with how I play them. And it's always about life or death. If the thing's not lively, I put it up on the shelf." And Lacy's own composing has been, by his own admission, modeled on Monk. His other model, Anton Webern, can also be seen as a permutation artist. The Viennese serialists' development of such compositional methods as inversion (which takes the intervallic relations of a given tone row and turns them upside down) and retrograde (which turns a tone row around backward) are siblings of Gysin's text permutations.<sup>29</sup>

Gysin was insistent that poets did not dominate their words, but that the words had an existence of their own. The three permutation poems on *Songs*,

totaling less than five minutes, let the words be. They defy the arrogance of the writer, just as Lacy spits in the eye of the composer: “The work itself shows you, takes you there if you just follow it. It’s not that you say: you must do this. The work tells you what you must do; you don’t tell the work what to do. I also think: ‘Well, I’d like to do this and that.’ But the matter is much stronger than me.”

[1998]

## Notes

1. Brion Gysin, “23 Stitches Taken by Gerard-Georges Lemaire and 2 Points of Order by Brion Gysin,” in Brion Gysin and William Burroughs, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 9.

2. William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, “Ports of Entry,” *Grand Street* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 71.

3. Steve Lacy, personal interview, Berlin, October 31, 1996. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Lacy are from this interview. It is an irony worth noting that despite his enthusiasm for intermingling art forms, Lacy made the conscious choice not to double on other reed instruments (a very common practice in jazz, especially since the ’60s), but to concentrate obsessively on the soprano saxophone alone.

4. Brion Gysin, *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In* (West Glover, VT: Something Else Press, 1973), 61.

5. The BBC versions of “Pistol Poem,” “Junk Is No Good,” and “Kick That Habit Man” have recently been compiled on a CD collection, *Brion Gysin* (Perdition Plastics, no catalog number, 1995).

6. Steve Lacy and Brion Gysin, *Songs* (hat ART CD 6045, 1990). The record was first issued as a vinyl LP, with an accompanying seven-inch 45, and was reissued as a CD with an additional track.

7. Jean-François Lyotard, “Obedience,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 165–81; Bill Viola, “The Sound of One Line Scanning,” in *Sound by Artists*, ed. Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), 39–54.

8. Lyotard, “Obedience,” 166.

9. For more on hermetic-free, post-free, and poly-free, see Steve Lacy, *Findings: My Experience with the Soprano Saxophone* (Paris: CMAP / Outre Mesure, 1994), esp. 75.

10. Gysin, *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*, 28.

11. Gysin, *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*, 53. Gysin wanted the *Divine Tautology* to be a palindrome (at the level of the word, not the letter); for a fascinating exploration of the permutation possibilities of a palindrome on audiotape, hear Gregory Whitehead’s short piece “Eva Can I Stab Bats in a Cave?” on *The Pleasure of Ruins and Other Castaways* (Staalplaat S. T. CD 059/KP 4493, 1993). Whitehead speaks the palindrome that is the piece’s title, then turns the tape around, then learns to mimic the backward version,

records himself doing that, and finally runs the faked backward version backward to see how much it's like or different from the forward version.

12. William S. Burroughs, "Journey through Space Time," in *The Job* (New York: Penguin, 1989 [1974]), 33.

13. Burroughs, "Journey through Space Time," 55.

14. "Those are the things that we don't 'discover,' but which hit us over the head, as it were." Cage in John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 183. In the same interview, Cage also responded directly to Gysin's manifesto on the relative retardation of writing vis-à-vis painting, agreeing that it is "a very useful statement" (188).

15. Referred to in Phillipe Soupault, *Last Nights of Paris*, trans. William Carlos Williams (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1992 [1928]), 22. A version of this line is also attributed to philosopher David Hume.

16. Gysin's theory and method of cut-up and permutation poetry was first explained in an essay published in the *Outsider* in 1961.

17. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, liner text to *Tentative Description of a Dinner Given to Promote the Impeachment of President Eisenhower and Other Poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti* (Fantasy 7004, 1959). From a British context, hear the two volumes of *Poetry and Jazz in Concert*, with poets Jeremy Robson, Laurie Lee, Adrian Mitchell, and Dannie Abse accompanied by the Michael Garrick Quintet (Argo ZDA 27, 1964).

18. Hear Rexroth's "Thou Shalt Not Kill" on *Poetry Readings in the Cellar*, with poems by Rexroth and Ferlinghetti and music by the Cellar Jazz Quintet (Fantasy 7002, 1958).

19. Andrew Ross, "Hip and the Long Front of Color," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 85.

20. The version of "Blue Baboon" on *Orgy Boys* is somewhat different from the one on *Songs* and the one in the *Naked Lunch* screenplay, which is slightly different from the one on *Songs* as well. The *Orgy Boys* version bears a dedication to singer Iggy Pop.

21. "Canned heat" is a term referring to getting high on the cooking fuel called Sterno, which was cheaper than bootleg liquor; the practice was described in blues singer Tommy Johnson's 1928 song "Canned Heat Blues." See David Evans, *Tommy Johnson* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), 56–58.

22. William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1982 [1959]), 86–87.

23. Fragment published in Gysin and Burroughs, *The Third Mind*, 150–58.

24. In the reading of "No poets don't own words" on *Orgy Boys*, Gysin utilizes homophony, allowing "no" to become "know." He does the same with "Come to free the words," freely turning the "to" into "too" or "two." This expands the number of permutations exponentially.

25. Actually, Gysin does leave a few possible permutations out, as well as converse inquiries: "Don't you dig I work?" and "I dig work don't you?" Perhaps the countermeaning of these—confirming work, rather than disdaining it—was too much for the poet, who still felt at some level that he did own the words. Or perhaps he had only subjected the line to so many permutations, not having produced those two alternatives yet.

26. Brion Gysin, "Here to Go: Planet R-101," *Re/Search*, nos. 4/5 (1982): 44.

27. “The Cryptosphere,” on *Lapis* (Saravah, SH10031, 1971). A precedent for this “playing along” is Swedish saxophonist Bengt “Frippe” Nordestrom, who in the early ’60s recorded several singles (all in minuscule batches, released privately) of himself playing along with Ornette Coleman records. British saxophonist Evan Parker followed up on “The Cryptosphere,” recording a version of Lacy’s piece with a microphone embedded in his soprano sax; by opening and closing the keypads, he controlled how much of the piece was heard. Evan Parker, “Lapidary,” on *Process and Reality* (FMP CD 37, 1991).

28. Hear Steve Lacy and Roswell Rudd, *School Days* (hat ART CD 6140, 1994 [1963]) and Lacy’s quartet with trumpeter Don Cherry, *Evidence* (Prestige / New Jazz OJCCD-1755-2, 1990 [1961]).

29. The interesting difference here is that the serialists maintained sequence as a foundation, producing permutational variation by these other means.





# **FOUR**

THE HORN SECTION



## ORNETTE COLEMAN

### Doing Is Believing

Perhaps it's a little too academic for such a soulful and organic art form, but the Ekkehard Jost description of Ornette Coleman's music has always rung true to me: motivic chain association. Coleman strings together melodic segments, eschewing an overarching harmonic framework while retaining the immediacy and clarity of a tonal center, and his music moves in bursts of thought, changing abruptly, returning to an earlier motif, not culminating or cresting so much as staying in the moment.

Conversation with Coleman runs much the same way. Quick shifts in topic, frequent loops back to motifs du jour—in this case themes of death and birth and the primacy of the idea recurred, as did a childlike delight in the reversibility of “dog” and “god”—linked together in an exploratory, sometimes difficult-to-follow associative chain. Soft-spoken, but talking at an amazing clip, Coleman struggles to articulate his observations, reaching for a comprehensive cosmic analysis that centers on the human being and its main aspects, love and life. As the headline act at the Chicago Jazz Festival, Coleman demonstrated the depth and fluency of his music, extending the new sound he first introduced fifty years ago. A day before the gig, wearing a colorful, slightly threadbare vest and doodling on a notepad filled with musical sketches, the seventy-eight-year-old saxophonist, composer, and bandleader was concentrated and engaged over the course of two hours. At particular moments Coleman fingered invisible keys, as if he'd be better able to express himself on the horn than in words.

• • •

John Corbett: You paint as well as make music.

Ornette Coleman: I try. Music is something that is very valid. It's never something that can talk. You can only hear it and feel it. So you don't need to have lots of conversations that are not equal to the results of what you are talking about. But when you hear it and feel it, you know what you are experiencing. I've been playing music since I was a teenager, and I've gotten better, I've gotten clearer, but the timing is still the same.



You still have to stay up and work and make mistakes and clear them up. That's not gonna ever change because the idea doesn't have an agenda. The idea is just in you, it's the same thing that your brain is doing. You can't cure it in a moment, you can't change it. You have to deal with it as well as you can if it makes logic about something you believe. It's not dangerous, it's just human. The human being is the only form of life that has been fruitful to humanity. Regardless of how much knowledge you can learn, the human being is still more accessible and more to enjoy. Like we're sitting here talking. That's gotta be much more real and important than something that you can't see or talk to or all you can do is express how it makes you respond. Human, whatever created human beings had a really good idea. The human being has something built in their soul that makes them want to add to the quality of life more than destroying it.

JC: That's part of what makes following music and following the arts so enriching, that we get to see that.

OC: And the fact that the human form, which also has a quality of knowledge built in their structure emotionally and physically, which we call the brain and the love, and, what is it called? The science. Humanhood, marriages, they just feed your brain. Sometimes a meal is not right, sometimes you have to start over. But the quality of life is really conducive to what humans do with it. Imagine that life doesn't have any description, form, shape, or sound, but we know what it is when we're speaking. Don't we?

JC: We do.

OC: Well that's fantastic.

JC: We can imagine it even though we can't exactly define it.

OC: You can kill people, but you can't kill life. That's pretty good, isn't it? That's about as good as you can get it. The thing about life is that they come in different forms. That has made what we call the earth the most advanced planet in the sky. It's really something, imagine that whatever decided there should be human, all they've done is expanded the eternity of what life can become. If you are trying to learn how to relate to how you got into existence, then you have to start with life. It don't end there, it starts there. The only thing that ends is time. Well time doesn't end, the quality of time makes you know you have done this for so many years and this is what affects you since you've been doing that. Plus the *idea* is all there actually is for human beings to make a decision about something that actually means something today and twenty years tomorrow they'll

have even more value, if the quality keeps rising. I've been playing music since I'm a teenager, and now that I call myself composing music, which is putting it in a form where it makes other ideas besides itself, the notes themselves carry a certain form of what you'd call sound-power. I think there's twelve notes, basically. Whole steps and half steps, but they have names. Sound, can you imagine? I was born in the '30s. This stuff existed way before the '30s. Humans have always been raising the ante of how life could be expressed in so many different forms. It's never going to die, it will only get better. I'm sure that one day there will be a cure for all the things that kill humans, there will be an advanced knowledge for humans, taking more chances on going to other planets. Imagine how many human beings there are. And every one of them has the ability to be the way they wish they can be, seeking out the knowledge they want to bring to the surface, to be able to be judged because of that. The definition of life starts with human and it ends with human, as far as I'm concerned.

JC: Is that because of consciousness?

OC: No, I think it's because there's something in the human body that makes you think, makes you feel, sometimes makes you sad. It doesn't form for you to talk to it. It only acts in your nervous system for you to know that you've been affected by it. What is so eternal about human is the *idea*. The idea is to human what the sky is to life. Something like that.

JC: Wow. I like that.

OC: That's not too bad, is it? Imagine: there's no piece of paper anywhere that says one day there are going to be humans. They just are. It's true. The knowledge of human seemed to be so concerned with life and love. You can't get any closer to what you enjoy. People are getting married because they love one another or they enjoy life because they have grown to want to live longer to enjoy it. And you're not required to prove why. Nobody says why do you want to do this?

JC: That's true, there's no scientific proof for life or love.

OC: There's no formula that's going to show you. What's amazing about human, even the word doesn't describe it, it's beyond that. Isn't it? Of course we have legs, arms, head, a frame. Imagine how many races make up the human race. And we have the same exact reasons for being, which is to find a way to believe in something that has something to do with the way you are and the way you don't want to be. So there's the way you do want to be, but if everybody doesn't agree with it, you're not going to be so satisfied. But you don't choose life, life chooses you. Human is prob-

ably the most precious thing in existence as far as the word “life.” It has the most advanced form of love, knowledge, experience, and even death. Everybody that dies they don’t die because of death, they die because something kills them. Here we are on a piece of existence called life. We’re in the sky somewhere, and we’re not going anywhere, but where we are we’re making progress about why we’re not going anywhere.

I’m just a simple human being. Two things I believe in: knowledge and truth. And human . . . *whew!* I wonder who created the word “human.” They got it pretty accurate, the only thing they missed is that it doesn’t have the same freedom of change and experience because the conditions of what we call poverty and wealth, race and knowledge, science and illiteracy. These things are just titles. Every human being is affected by one or the other.

JC: You mentioned the word “truth,” and I wanted to ask how that word is related to the word “music” for you. Two abstract ideas that take a concrete form as we experience them.

OC: That’s the same word. The name of what we call eternity that we can’t see or touch is “God.” But God spelled backward is “dog.” So God wouldn’t give himself that name. “God” would be very dumb. That don’t sound right.

We all grew inside of someone else. Isn’t that something else? Wooooo! Can you imagine, it’s not something that you planned, not something that you heard about, it’s something that you brought about. It creates people. You can say that what we call race is different, but it doesn’t change you from having to go to the bathroom or eat.

JC: We have so much DNA in common as humans, much more than what separates us. You talk about “sound grammar,” a commonality between people, and your music seems to be oriented that way, trying to get away from the elements that are exclusive of one another and toward things that people can share.

OC: That’s amazing because what you are expressing is the very thing that is the reason why we are sitting here. It’s called an idea, it’s called human being, but most of all it’s called the creation of what exists that represents what we call life. For some reason life is not an object, it’s not a form, you can’t see it, you can’t talk to it, or at least it can’t talk back. But it allows you to know that there is something eternal, and you didn’t create it. You can’t prove that you created life. Human beings don’t spend enough of their love for life to understand why the quality of life is so easy to be made anger, disappointment. Whatever it is, someone can say something



Ornette Coleman (photo: Michael Jackson)

to you and you want to fight. But that's not life doing that, that's jealousy, envy, dishonesty. Those things come into being because of value and wealth. When someone says they love you, that's like someone saying you're worth all the money in the world to me and they ain't got a penny. We know that there is something that doesn't die, can't be killed. That's life. And there's nothing that says you've got to die. You die because you get sick. But nothing says you gotta die.

JC: Sun Ra expressed much the same set of concerns. He said death is an option, it's not something that we have to do.

OC: When you would like to make things the way that you believe them, the one thing you cannot do is make all the decisions for yourself and not think about anyone else. And yet the reverse of it is that someone will come along and hire you to do something that they want you to do, and if you do it to the point of satisfaction it becomes different because knowledge works socially and financially.

Life is eternal. There don't have to be people for it to be eternal. If we didn't have what is called a mother and a father, our definition of life would be very different. The sexual act has created a lot of people. The only thing it hasn't done is that it hasn't made them any better or worse. The human form is there to acknowledge life. If the human form didn't have life, then life would need it.

JC: That's assuming that the human form is the ideal manifestation of life.

OC: These two creatures, male and female, they're still dominating the picture. Not because they're male and female, but because they're human. Imagine all other concepts of life, it is the human at the zenith of all of that. I don't know how to say this, but the human being doesn't seem to be interested in human, they seem to be interested in how they can use the lives of other people because they know something about how they can make them do something they want done. But that's sad.

JC: That's about exploitation. Tell me about the notes you're working on here.

OC: There are notes and there are signs and there are numbers and there are words. They're all used for different reasons, but the results are because of. . . [writes three words on his pad] "Action." "Lost." "Present." Action, lost, and present. It's obvious that the way we live and die has been altered by the quality of human beings. Somebody says I'm going to do this, it's called a job or whatever. It's actually about class, and the sad thing is that it has a quality of being human that's under so much pressure. Can you pay your rent? There's always something that threatens

how you exist. It was created by a concept of some human beings and they found a way to use it to get the results. It's still like that.

JC: You were talking about exploitation, about the fact that one unpleasant aspect of human beings is that they use others to get what they want. I think that's interesting in relation to your music, because for me one of the great joys in your music is that it presents a model of being together as musicians that is very open-ended. It doesn't say I'm the leader, it doesn't say I'm the sideman. Not just in terms of who is at the top of the bill, but in the structure of the music.

OC: Not only are you describing it to the T, but the main thing is that the idea cannot be killed. *The idea cannot be killed.* If you have an idea that the world has not experienced, it will come into existence.

JC: You've offered us so many new ideas and new feelings.

OC: Yeah and it's not going away. It is the very essence of what we call love. You don't have to have a diploma to know that you love. It's in you because without it, no you. If you don't care about yourself, how can you care about anything else?

JC: Last time I heard you play I was shocked at how strong and fresh your playing was, even though it was definitely you.

OC: What you're speaking about lives in every human being, it's called an idea. The idea is as new as being born. The only thing that's different about it, nobody knows it's an idea, they think it's an emotion. They respond to it like that. As human beings we haven't found a way to know how love and creativity can do without each other but they're equal when they get together.

JC: John Cage said that we haven't yet solved the problem of how to be together.

OC: Uh-huh. That's definite, that's good. Do you realize the individual that's responsible for you being there is your mother?!

JC: That's true. Mother's Day. I'm going to think a little differently about that holiday this year! I'm going to say: "Ornette told me to think about it!"

OC: And they're not going to make it any worse, any better. It's just the way it is. And it's not going out of style any time soon. It's still as new as ever.

Something called truth. Truth . . . I wish I was pure enough to explain how I've experienced what I believe it is. Truth is not light or darkness or high or low or sadness or happiness or good or bad. Truth means conviction about whatever it is, I'll stand for the punishment. In other words, there is a truth that is not required to prove anything, but there is a truth that just has to do with one thing: human.

Love does exist. Love doesn't have any goals. It only has causes and effects, to be happy or to not be sad. The thing that is amazing, life doesn't have enough truth in it to represent the quality of what everyone is going through because they're alive. There is no way we humans can exist without need and want. Not because it's human, it's because the quality of need and want causes so many things to change, and you can't replace it because of who you are or who you aren't. You can only replace it if you have something greater or if you are able to help someone to bring them to the level of who they want to be. It's hard to sleep and eat and do all these things and want to be happy because of just being human, but it's hard to know how to approach something without using something as a reference. That is not a cure for any knowledge. Whatever knowledge is, it has only two purposes: to exist and to have a reason why it can change something or activate something.

There's only one human being and we're all imitating that same person. That person that we're imitating knows something that we don't know. We can find out if we can find out where that person or who that person is. I don't think that person is ever going to show. I guess what I'm trying to get to is that you don't have to die. It's not required.

JC: No, but lately you know what I've been thinking? I've got high blood pressure . . .

OC: You and me both.

JC: . . . and I've been thinking about my heart, and the fact that, you know, I have a car, and my car's motor is going to die. It's running, and if you run it a lot, it's going to stop, to break down. I thought to myself, we don't give our hearts a break. From when the minute you pop out, you don't ever let it even cool down for a minute!

OC: Oooh! That's true! But think about who created it, what about that? How did they know that that would do what it does? Not only that but the heart and the brain, this is something that humanity has dissected, written about. I used to love chemistry, whoo boy! We as human beings, I think the life that's in us becomes purer and purer the more you understand the less you need but the more you want to give. I don't claim to be in control of anything. I would say I like science, and sound is like a science, but the one thing about sound that's so amazing, it doesn't have any goals. It doesn't say: "I'm going, I'm leaving." It's just there.

JC: One of the great contributions you've made is to get away from functional harmony, and functional harmony is about goals.

OC: Yes. As you sit there, do you know what's causing you to say what you say? The idea. The name of the idea is just that, but what is it? It's: *Everything that can be known can be found*. I'm getting a chill. It makes me realize that the quality of God is very close to the quality of idea. The idea is . . . I'm trying to figure out how to put it in words without making it seem like I know what I'm saying. I can visualize it in my head, but I don't know what it is, but the thing that causes me not to say it is that it changes things. It raises the status of life in a human way; not only does it calm you and make you appreciate what you want to express yourself, but it makes you know that you are the person you think you are. Think of women. Not only are they more advanced, they can make their own people. Men can't do that. I really do wish to learn to know what I see as clear as I'm looking at this. [lifts up his notepad] But I haven't. The only thing I see that clearly is sound. I see sound.

JC: You see sound.

OC: Uh-huh. What I mean is that sound is invisible, but the more invisible it gets, the clearer the sound is. All these qualities we have, our heart, knowledge, brain, I'm sure there's a guy who can take out your brain and put it back in your head and you'll never even know it. But life allows them to learn how to do that. Which goes to prove that life is not scared of anything you learn. Because the chances are that something will come along to date it. I know. I'm a victim of that. I have tried my best to get as eternal as I believe I could. Then I find out for what reason? I'm already there! Why would I be trying to get somewhere where I am already? The only thing that gets me is that I want to learn and know, but not to replace something or depress something or make something less to get there. I don't want to do that.

JC: In order to make a statement, you don't have to deny somebody else's statement. You once told me that for you harmolodics was the idea that people playing together could all have their own statements.

OC: I think that's true. I'm just human. We all have the same structure. All I'm saying is that there is an idea, that creation idea, but it's not because of need or want. It's because of what it does. The best way I have tried to find to get more eternal in what that is is to contemplate an idea that doesn't need to be replaced, doesn't have to be right or wrong, doesn't have to be erased, doesn't have to be an emotion, doesn't have to be a thought, just what it is itself. I'm telling you it *does* exist, honest to God it does. I have experienced it. I'm trying to materialize it in the form of



knowledge. I'm beginning to do it. Let me see if I can explain it the way it happens to me. [lengthy pause] What bothers me is that this part [points to his heart] and this part [points to his head] are connected, but are not relating. That comes from my ability to remember that I have experienced things that are eternal, good, valuable, and I can't find a way to call upon them when I need them.

JC: That seems to me what people are looking for in enlightenment.

OC: Take music, anything that you learn. I really know the structure of music, these twelve notes. The order of those notes will never change, it will always be that way, but the idea will change in the twinkle of an eye. The reason is that it's a function that's like imagination, whatever imagination is.

What you would like to do, make sure that it is not something that you need or want, it's something that you would like to do. If you find that in your heart, it will actually show you who you don't have to ever become. I'm pretty close to getting there, the only thing that I don't know how to do is share it. I don't know how to do that yet.

JC: It's the same as in the music. You have a thing that you know about, how to get to it, but then you have to find a way . . .

OC: . . . to activate it.

JC: People who are working at a very, very high level, they're struggling to take what they would like to do and bring it out. I can hear it in your music. It's also a quality of vulnerability. That's one of the only exclusively human qualities. You're not trying to dominate something, as you've said.

OC: What's so free about it, you don't have to hunt for it, it will appear. It's not coming there because of you, it's coming there because it exists. That's what gets me. Life itself is dealing with those problems every minute. The quality of knowledge is not class, race, sex, it's creation. If you have an idea and you put it down and materialize it, that's as good as you can do.

I'm sitting here speaking to you, and I know that if I got my horn out and played it, I would be doing that for the same reason I'm speaking to you. To bring something that has a meaning to the surface. We are all living, breathing, working, supporting each other, but there's no human being up here and down here. That's not human. For me, doing is believing. That's one way you know you exist.

JC: That's such a beautiful statement, and it seems to relate to the long musical relationship with your son, which shocked many listeners when you

debuted him as a child. But it showed how people could work together, be a parent, a bandleader, but also just be beings together.

OC: Believe it, there's nothing in the way of it getting better. Nothing! Just you and your heart and your brain and the love that you wish to express because of what it means to you. Doing is believing. It's the whole thing. Doing doesn't get destructive, doesn't have to be above or below, it's right there.

JC: Like surfing. When a surfer gets right where the wave breaks, everything is suspended. The fact of riding the wave has consequences, comes from someplace, but for that moment everything is halted. Your music can do that to me. On alto saxophone, in your hands, the act of doing is an act of belief.

OC: You couldn't say it any more clearly, eternally, how you describe things, you describe them in an eternal way, and you don't have to describe things, you only have to activate it. It has to do with two things: love and life. There's nothing in between, as I know them. I'm trying to free myself from surviving. I'm getting a little closer, but I'm not sure if I'm going to survive, because I'm not clever enough. Who knows my weaknesses? I don't even know them. I want to find the idea before it's thought of, so I can be prepared for it. When I take my instrument, I know it too well; when I get ready to execute, I know the way I have to move my fingers, and I know that too well. Because of that, I'm not sure I want to do it that way. I'm only trying to make contact with life. We can make contact with life. It exists.

JC: Was that behind your choice to move to violin and trumpet, instruments you didn't have training on?

OC: Those things have another way of adding to what the idea could replicate. I'm glad you brought that up. Suppose you couldn't read or write, but you could pick up a horn and play everything anyone has ever heard? That can exist. That *does* exist. Trust me! Life doesn't send you any bills.

JC: So according to life, you can pick up an instrument and play it . . .

OC: . . . instantly, as if you've been playing all your life.

JC: You don't have to play it according to all sorts of . . .

OC: . . . rules and conventions. You got it. The saddest thing in the whole world is when a human being makes another human being feel less than they are.

[2008]

## ROSCOE MITCHELL

### Citizen of Sound

Charter yourself a quick cruise back through the three decades of recorded work by Roscoe Mitchell and you're bound to notice its variety. Pre-Art Ensemble of Chicago pastichery on "Ornette" (1966); intensely abstract inventions for solo alto saxophone on "Nonaah" (1974); the sprawling percussion-only octet on "The Maze" (1978); classical textured orchestral topologies on "Sketches from Bamboo" (1979); a penchant for funk and fanfare on "Jo Jar" (1981); rapping over hip-hop beats on "You Wastin' My Time" (1983); the brutal free energy blowing on "The Reverend Frank Wright" (1987); diffuse audio art with Steve Sylvester's bicycle-propelled bullroarers and wind wands on *Songs in the Wind* (1990); tart sax with conventional jazz quartet on *Hey Donald* (1995). But Mitchell is more than an eclecticist. He's got no use for titles, tags, labels, or bags because he's a citizen of sound.

"I can relate to anything in music that's good," Mitchell explains succinctly. "I would advise any of the younger musicians not to be stuck in certain portions of music. That takes dedication. You've got to understand the big word 'music.' Then you can let go of the different categories." In fact, although he's already heaped his plate with such a diversity of orientations, the reed and woodwind expert and founding member of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) has recently started studying baroque flute, taking lessons and learning the difficult, very different fingering. "I'm fifty-six years old, man. A lot of musicians died much younger than I did. For me to be sitting around twenty, thirty years longer than them, not interested in anything, that's not paying proper honor, in a way."

Mitchell began his life in creative music in 1961 after returning to Chicago from a stint in Europe as an army musician. While in the service he had encountered records of Ornette Coleman, who he admits he "didn't quite understand, because I was caught up in Art Blakey, the Messengers, things like that." Another early brush with free jazz came in the form of Albert Ayler,



Roscoe Mitchell (photo: Michael Jackson)

who Mitchell heard play in barracks jam sessions when joint parades brought their military bands together in Germany. (He never played with Ayler, as has sometimes been reported.) “When I first heard him, he had an enormous sound on the instrument. I knew that I couldn’t have anything to say about that, being a saxophonist. Some of what he was playing I didn’t understand until a blues got played; when he played the first couple of choruses relatively straight, that started to make a connection for me.”

Back in the Windy City, Mitchell joined Muhal Richard Abrams’s legendary large ensemble the Experimental Band and began leading small groups of his own, playing music deeply indebted to the quartet music of Ornette Coleman. He remembers this as a fertile era in Chicago jazz, with plenty of activity and places to play, including a weekly session at Wilson Junior College, where many future AACM members including Henry Threadgill and Joseph Jarman were students. (Jack DeJohnette was there at the time, as well.) Abrams was, of course, the guiding light for the new musical community. “For a lot of us, we would go to Muhal’s house after school. There we’d study composition, and we were writing for the big band, so we had a place to air out the compositions we were writing, get help with them. It was a great opportunity in Chicago at that time for people who wanted to learn about music and maybe expand their ideas.”

In 1966, Mitchell was the first AACM musician to record; his groundbreaking LP *Sound* opened a new chapter in jazz history, integrating ideas as old as Jelly Roll Morton and as new as the New Thing. This inevitably led to concerts away from his hometown, the first being a trio tour of California (with trumpeter Lester Bowie and drummer Phillip Wilson). Mitchell had played on a single with Nick Gravenites, who was by then working with Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the R&B singer helped them get a place to stay. “All we had to do was sell a record every now and then to get money for food, gas, tolls,” recalls Mitchell. “We kept going out to different places, covered the States.”

By the late ’60s, Mitchell’s quartet had transformed into the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and in ’69 the urge to ramble took that hugely important band to Europe, where they lived for a couple of productive years. “I always remember myself as wanting to go somewhere, and after I left Chicago I began to feel more a yearning for the country than the city. I felt I had been in the city, and that was a good experience—I’d go to concerts by Joseph Jarman, Muhal Richard Abrams, and leave feeling inspired. You’d want to go back home and work hard to present your next concert. But I also did yearn to get out of Chicago.” Much of the AACM departed at this time, including Anthony Braxton,

Leo Smith, Steve McCall, and Leroy Jenkins; when the Art Ensemble came back to the United States at the end of '71, the scene was radically changed. "There were a couple of schools of thought: a lot of people thought they would move to New York, but what happened to them was that they usually ended up playing with someone else, and I wasn't wanting to do that as much as developing what I had going on." Mitchell fulfilled his yearning by transplanting to a farm in the Michigan countryside—that's the rustic scene on the cover of *The Roscoe Mitchell Solo Saxophone Concerts* (Sackville)—before moving to his current home close to Madison, Wisconsin.

Perhaps the most common assertion made about Mitchell is that he is a structuralist, a composer and saxophonist with a pronounced experimental and conceptual bent. Of course, in the jazz world there's immediate wariness of anything calculated, inorganic, cold-blooded, or unemotive—check the party line on Braxton, for example. "I think you have to be familiar with both sides," argues Mitchell. "You can go along with being emotional all your life, if you want, but you can also check out being nonemotional. And that can give you that point in the middle that you can only have if you understand both sides. But everything has structure, so you can't get away from that. Anything you've heard where you said: 'Wow, that's a great piece of music,' if you look at it there's some kind of structure there.

"The word 'music' is so big," he continues.

There's so much to study about it. For instance, if you study improvisation you've got to look at it as paralleling composition—it's basically the same process you're going after except you're trying to do it spontaneously. In order to really do it spontaneously, you have to control many things. When you're writing something, you have options, many ways you can go, and you have the time to do that if you want. You have to still have that situation if you're improvising. That's the challenge, to learn as much as you can about the word "music." That way you are able to create spontaneous composition and understand why you did it. In music, you work really hard. Every now and then something will happen like magic and you can do anything you want to, but generally that's not the way it is. You have to work on it.

Mitchell's approach to improvising—and to music in general—is based on study, on evaluation and analysis, not on wanton abandonment. He has little patience for people who don't want to analyze their own free play. "That's stupid. All the great composers, they played their pieces and if they didn't like them, you know what they did? They changed them. Music is something that you study. I heard that a long time ago, guys come along 'Let's just play in the

moment.' Play what in the moment? The same old personality over and over again? That's not that interesting. That don't have anything to do with the big word 'music.' That's no fun: let's close our eyes, oh you're great, and all of this. No, man."

Like certain other post-bebop saxophonists, such as Coleman and Jackie McLean, Mitchell's saxophone sound often uses startlingly off intonation. "Sometimes you may need a bit of the sound with the note to project a certain image," he explains. "Maybe it's not just the note itself that you want to project. I study a lot of things like that, in terms of being able to sustain situations that don't necessarily depend on melody, for instance. And I might look at the instrument and consider the overall history of what it has done and can do. The saxophone itself: people said oh no, this is not the instrument to be in the orchestra, it's a bastard instrument, and so on. But if you look at it, the vocabulary is enormous."

"All these different instruments have a personality of their own," says the voracious multi-instrumentalist. "Conceptualizing all these different percussion instruments I've collected over the years, putting them together in a way so that they come at you—for instance, this is an interesting idea—totally unrelated to the others, in a situation where a roll even becomes too much, in terms of the mind being able to relate to that as something that it recognizes. Music that is totally stimulating, totally engaging, so that you would actually be sitting on the edge of your seat. Hey, these are big goals," he chuckles earnestly. "And I've got to be able to work with George Lewis, to take that saxophone and make it sound like a computer if I have to. Or take it with Jodie Christian and pay some sort of homage to the great tenor saxophonists. The baroque flute, my god, it's a whole language. That's enjoyment for me, to look back a couple of months and see where I've come to from where I was."

At present, in addition to practicing baroque flute and bass recorder (he's now joined the American Recorder Society), Mitchell is preparing orchestral music for a piece commissioned by Petr Kotik, anticipating the release of a new two-CD set of solo music on Delmark, looking forward to recording an expanded version of his group Note Factory (with George Lewis on trombone, Hugh Ragin on trumpet, Mitchell on woodwinds, Craig Taborn and Matthew Shipp on pianos, Jaribu Shahid and William Parker on basses, Tani Tabbal and Gerald Cleaver on drums) for ECM. The Art Ensemble continues to perform (for the last few years, without fellow saxophonist Jarman), though it's grown into something perilously close to a caricature of itself. Mitchell complains about AEC's lack of acknowledgment in its own land. "The States still haven't recognized the Art Ensemble of Chicago for what it's done—none of the elite

blacks, nobody in the States. In Europe, Japan, Australia, the Art Ensemble works much more. That's the way it's shaped up to be." Nevertheless, when given an opportunity, as they are at Yoshi's in San Francisco, he says the crowds come out, increasingly so.

The Art Ensemble doesn't have a current record, but every concert is sold out. And I've noticed that it's like that with me, too. My events are all sold out. I think that gleam is coming back in people's eyes. All these people who have been shunned by the media, they've been working on their music. So now, they're like ferocious terrors; give these people a chance, man, you'd be surprised, 'cause that's all they know! That was the philosophy: work on the music. There's nothing wrong with Joshua Redman getting some exposure, but some of these other people should be getting exposure too. That way you know it's healthy, people get a chance to make a choice. Just because you listen to Joshua Redman doesn't mean you won't listen to George Lewis.

Mitchell's is an ethic of continuous artistic expansion and refinement. "This is it, this is my life. Last week I was in Ann Arbor playing wonderful concerts with Malachi Favors and Gerald Cleaver. Before that with George Lewis in Italy and France. This is what I want to do for the rest of my life. And I'm grateful that I've met people who have helped me. I've been allowed to explore music, that's a big thing. Allowed to be yourself in music—check that out! That's really something these days."

"I went to get some credit for something," the midwesterner muses. "The guy asked me: 'Well how long have you been on your job?' And I said: 'Thirty years.' Who's been on the job for thirty years?" Big job, big word, big life: music.

[1996]



## FRED ANDERSON AND VON FREEMAN

### Tenacity

The scenario's got Chicago writ large all over it: two boss tenors at a South Side bar locking horns. It's not a battle royale, though, but the big dig, an ongoing discussion that started nearly forty years ago when Fred Anderson first approached Von Freeman between sets at a club called the Trocadera. Now they sit at Anderson's own place, the Velvet Lounge, which is about to undergo major renovation, swapping stories, opinions, compliments, and smiles—the two Windy City tenor legends who came to play and chose to stay.

Earl Lavonne Freeman—“Vonski” to his friends and fans—has stitched himself into the fabric of Chicago's mainstream since the end of World War II. After studying under Captain Walter Dyett at DuSable High, he went on to work with everyone from Charlie Parker to Sun Ra. Though he's mostly known as a slinger of straight bop and ballads, his debut (made when he was fifty!) was produced by Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and he's recently made a surprisingly out record with the collective called Fire. A spry, sparkly seventy-three-year-old who could easily pass for fifty, Von is living proof of the rejuvenative powers of jazz—indeed, along with his guitar-playing younger brother George he spends much of his time caring for his mother, who hits the century point later this year. Freeman's tenor sound combines an edgy tone, unpredictable melodic turns, and molten phraseology. “Like Fred knows. I'm capable of getting up and playing another way altogether,” he warns.

Anderson has made it his musical mission to play another way altogether. One of the original architects of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), he too has spent his sixty-seven years as something of a loner, albeit serving as a mentor for many younger musicians, including Von's horn-playing son, Chico. Like Von, Fred's utterly individual saxophone playing has gone woefully underdocumented, though of late he's grown more active, releasing records on the Okka Disk label (formed expressly for the purpose of promoting the music of Fred Anderson). His stellar new quartet disc—a tad on the straighter side than his others—Birdhouse, is named in honor of the Velvet Lounge's precursor, which Fred ran during the late '70s.

Anderson and Freeman sprouted their wings in the age of jam sessioning, and that venerable tradition lives on via Fred's Sunday afternoons at the Velvet and Von's Tuesday

nights at the New Apartment Lounge. A roots-conscious vanguardist and a loose-cannon mainstreamer: in *Onion City*, all paths cross.

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John Corbett: What exactly does it mean to be a part of the Chicago tenor tradition?

Fred Anderson: There's a lot of good tenor players come from here: Gene Ammons, Clifford Jordan, Von, Johnny Griffin. Me, I guess I come into it a little later—and so they say: "Add him to the list."

Von Freeman: There's so many guys. John Gilmore, Eddie Johnson, Bugs McDonald. Sonny Stitt made a lot of his reputation here. Pres too. Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster. See, this used to be the jazz mecca from 1940 to when Bird died in 1955. Earl Hines's big band was here, King Kolax's big band. Captain Walter Dyett had a school band that was very good, he called it the DuSablites. Sixty-Third Street, 58th Street, 61st Street, 55th Street, 43rd Street, 47th Street, 38th Street—these South Side streets all had taverns and places with jam sessions. So much going on during and after the war. You could see it fading when the Pershing went down.

FA: What year did the Pershing close? I remember coming into Chicago from Evanston to see Charlie Parker—I was kinda young at the time—and to see Pres at the Pershing, around '59.

VF: With the coming of the '70s everything collapsed on the South Side, period. It seems remarkable, 'cause there were countless clubs. And they always had jam sessions, and all the cats with big names would come in from around the country.

JC: Do you see a big difference between New York and Chicago?

VF: New York is much more competitive, and it shows in the music. Let me relate something that happened to me with Chico. I've been in Chicago all my life, but Chico's been in New York for years, ever since he used to hang up under Fred. Now we had a gig at the Blue Note. The bass player and the drummer couldn't get there. So I'm worried to death. "Chico, what are we gonna do? We can't work the Blue Note without a bass and drum!" "Daddy, not to worry," he says. I didn't even know what he was talking about, 'cause I'm from Chicago, where it's hard to find cats who can play. Chico's watching me to see my reaction. We walk in the club, and there must be four or five drummers with their drum sets! And about four or five bass players. And all these cats can play! They had heard through the grapevine that he didn't have a drummer and bass player. That's the difference between New York

and other places: the competition. And everybody migrates there who wants to make it.

JC: Neither of you migrated to New York.

FA: I've never really played in New York yet. In the first place, music's always been like a hobby to me. I raised a family, married, had a day job. I've played the music because I loved it.

VF: Everyone had gone to New York, except me and Fred. Even the AACM cats.

FA: I think they went to New York around the same time as Chico. I remember when Joseph [Jarman] formed the Art Ensemble, he was playing with me before that. We had a group that played the first AACM concert. Joseph came to me and said: "I think I'm gonna hook up with Roscoe [Mitchell]." Next thing I know Lester Bowie came in, and they formed the Art Ensemble. But at that time I wasn't thinking about leaving Evanston, 'cause I'd just bought a house.

VF: It's so ironic that most of your popularity came from Europe.

FA: Well, I went to Europe on account of George Lewis. He took a tape to Burkhard [Hennen, of the Moers Festival] of me and Anthony Braxton, playing at [the Evanston coffeehouse] Amazing Grace. But they were already in Europe. I'm still here, you dig?!! And they're all gone. Chico's gone, Muhal's gone. And me and Von, we're still here! The thing is, these cats used to follow me down on Wells Street. We'd play in this little storefront for a church organization. George, Douglas [Ewart], Hank [Hamid Drake], Felix Blackmon. That was a good experience for them, 'cause by that time all the jam session places were gone.

JC: Fred, how did you meet Chico?

FA: I was at the North Park Theatre one day. I saw you [to Von] and you said: "My son is goin' to Northwestern, up in Evanston." So Chico used to come over to my house.

VF: Oh, man, he loved Fred. Sit up under Fred. I didn't raise him, Fred did.

FA: He'd come over, we'd sit up all night listening to records, listening to Bird, all the guys.

VF: See, they were all trying to get Fred's way of phrasing. And the way Fred heard. 'Cause, you see, Fred's never heard music like other people. One time, I'll never forget, at the Trocadero, he said: "Man, I just don't play like y'all." And he never has. He always had his own way.

JC: In what way is he different?

VF: He plays the way that he hears and the way he feels, which takes a lot of courage. Most people play the way they think they're supposed to play, the way they think they're supposed to hear. The good thing about back



Fred Anderson and Von Freeman (photo: Michael Jackson)

in that day, you had Bird, Pres, and a few people that were top artists on their instrument. Bird had a few records, Pres had a few, Ben had a few, Hawk a few. But you didn't have billions of CDs with everybody playing just about the same thing. These were different styles altogether.

FA: I think you realized that too, because you created a style. I'll say this now, and I told your son about it: Johnny Griffin is you! [Von starts to demur] No, no, no, ain't two ways about it. Dig this: Johnny Griffin went to New York, then made this record *Chicago Calling*, remember? I listened to it, then I played it for Chico and said: "Who's that sound like?" He said: "Man, that sounds like my father." Now, I know you're modest and say no, but Johnny Griffin left Chicago and took you to New York.

VF: I was already out of school before he came to DuSable. Next thing I know, he was famous! He's kind of like Gene Ammons. Gene Ammons and I were the two little hotshot saxophone players at DuSable. When I looked up, he had gone with King Kolax, and then he went on to the Billy Eckstine band. He never looked back either. Almost everybody who wasn't playing like Hawkins was into Pres. And then you had the little limbs—part-Hawk/part-Pres. Then Charlie Parker: although he played alto he had this tenor sound, not a high sound like most alto players during his era. He had this deep tone. Everybody had their different style of playing, which made it so great. When Trane came along, he wiped out

that history 'cause everybody wanted to play like Coltrane. So then you had about fifty million Trane clones, but they didn't know where Trane came from.

FA: Charlie Parker, Dexter . . .

VF: . . . and what was that cat he played with, used to play the Pershing all the time, hit all those high notes? Earl Bostic! Helluva saxophone player.

FA: Oh, now you're telling me something new. I knew he'd played with Johnny Hodges, but I didn't know Trane was with Earl Bostic. Trane had been in good company a long time! [laughter]

VF: He was well seasoned!

FA: And then he got all these ideas together and he created Coltrane. This is the whole thing, if you're speaking about myself. I listened to all these people, and I never did try to cop off the records.

VF: Oh, Fred, you always had your own style. I remember his formative years—he never played like anybody. And a lot of people, they didn't understand Fred. 'Cause they're looking for the latest riff. But I always appreciated what he played.

FA: He was the only cat! He comes up to me and says: "Keep on doin' what you're doin'." That meant a lot to me, 'cause I was catching hell.

VF: I could hear the swing and the general approach. It has a pulse. It has heart and soul in it. Some people are looking for some elements so they can put it up on a shelf and say: "This is this." They'll never be able to categorize Fred.

JC: The same is true of you. I don't hear anyone phrasing the way you do.

VF: Well, Fred and I are coming from the same place, just from different directions, actually.

FA: I had this vision, years ago when I started playing, that I wanted to create my own voice.

JC: Let me throw out an idea: I think one reason Chicago is such a special place for jazz is because the distinction between mainstream and so-called vanguard is less hard-line than elsewhere.

FA: I think what changed all that was the AACM. Muhal [Richard Abrams], he played with all the cats, played with all the mainstream guys . . .

JC: Played in your band, didn't he, Von?

VF: Uh-huh.

FA: . . . but he had some different ideas about what he wanted to play. He wanted to move the music a little bit. And then he put the guys in the position of putting on concerts, presenting the music, writing their own music. I think this is one of the main things that happened in Chicago.

The AACM contributed to the music. It's part of the history. You can call it "jazz," "avant-garde," anything you want. What it is is some good music. It's an extension. When I started playing I was thinking about being an extension. I wanted to contribute something, but I wanted to stay with the roots of the music. I never wanted to lose the roots. Anybody listening to what I play—maybe they won't understand how I phrase or whatever, you dig, but I know one thing, they can hear the feeling of the roots.

JC: You've both had ongoing jam sessions for many years. Jam sessioning waned at a certain point, but I know you both think it still serves an important function. Why is that?

VF: It helped save the music on the South Side. There was nowhere to work.

FA: And that's the same way it is now. The reason I have so many musicians come to the Velvet Lounge now is a lot of them aren't working. Some of them work a few weekend gigs, some are out playing on the street. This gives them a presence, they can present themselves.

VF: And a crowd is just a bonus. To me it has more to do with the ambience of the occasion. Jam sessions are like the Old West. Who could draw his gun the fastest? We all know that that stuff is mostly legend. Somebody outgunned someone—really someone hit the ceiling, he ain't hit nobody. It sounds glamorous to jam session. We go with the legend.

FA: Years ago I used to go to jam sessions and not play. I could have, but I had so much respect for the guys, so I wouldn't get up there until I felt like I could be effective. So what I would do is go home and practice. And this is what we try to do here, now. We encourage the cats to come up and play, take a short solo, then come on down, go on home and practice. Come back in two weeks, three weeks, try again. But just a cat come up with no respect think he can do anything: no good!

VF: Mess up the atmosphere in the whole room.

JC: Jam sessions are about learning, respect, inspiration, more than gun-sliding.

VF: Well, it's like I said, most of that stuff is legend. The first thing you learn about music is you have good nights and bad nights. I've often tried to figure out where creativity comes from or where it goes. I'm seventy-three and I haven't found out yet. I've gone to work and felt great: "Baby, I'm gonna express myself tonight!" And nothing happened, all night long I can't get nothing. And then sometimes just everything flows. And I don't know why. As a professional, you try to keep everything at a certain level that you never go under.

- FA: If you're playing out, you've got to keep yourself at a certain level. And the only way to do that is to stay on the instrument.
- VF: Fred, you said the key. You got to practice!
- FA: You can't take anything for granted. If you take yourself for granted, taking the public for granted, you're through. They know. They're listening what you played last time, what you're playing now. They're paying to see you perform.
- VF: This is the hidden psychology of jazz: the audience. A musician who grows older has to study all these facets. The study of an audience is one of the greatest studies in the world. A lot of people say: "Ooh, I'm blowin', baby. But how come they ain't diggin' it?!" Well, an audience may be diggin' you to death, they might even get up and walk out on you, but still dig you. The very cat who walks out during your solo might be the same one hollerin': "Man that Fred Anderson's playin' like mad, baby." Another one sitting there [claps his hands and rocks his head] later say: "Man, they ain't sayin' nothing." Drives you nuts.
- JC: You're both hovering around the seventy-year mark, but you're also so young at heart. What advice would you give younger players?
- FA: You've got to always think you can do something different, something better. Never think you've got it made, never get the big head, and always keep your mind going. I go back and play the basics. If you think you know the basics, then you don't know the basics. Go back and start working there again, you'll find you learn something. And you might find it'll take you someplace you haven't been before.
- VF: Fred, you've echoed my thoughts again. While you were talking I was thinking about some of the great saxophone players who are still living: Sonny Rollins, Teddy Edwards, Benny Golson, Harold Land, Pharoah Sanders (he's not quite as old as we are, but with that beard he has the look of a sage), one of my favorites of all time James Moody, and Johnny Griffin. The biggest thing that I find as I grow younger [Anderson chuckles], and Fred hit it: it's so hard to remember what you've forgotten. All these things I learned fifty years ago, if I don't practice every day, they leave me. And I don't realize till I hear some guy forty years my junior playing what I played fifty years ago, and I'd forgotten I'd even played it. And I know Fred does the same thing. And a poor man like Sonny Rollins, he's probably forgotten more than the average cat is gonna ever play. Sometimes you forget you've got to practice every day. And as you get older, you've got to practice more. Everybody's got it backward: they practice fifteen hours a day when they're twenty, then they get to sixty

or seventy, they say [lowers his voice to that of a gruff old man]: “Well, I got it covered.”

FA: No, can't do that. Got to keep your mind going. Don't use it, you'll lose it. Getting old, your mind doesn't have to be feeble. Your health has to be there, too. That's the only thing that can get in the way.

VF: I was writing a little jive book once, then I gave up on it. But my last theme was: it'd knock me out to see a guy one hundred years old that was out playing Bird. One hundred years old, creating something new!

[1996]



## GEORGE LEWIS

### Interactive Imagination

George Lewis may be the ideal spokesman for catholicism in creative music. Ideal, that is, because his musical actions speak just as loud as his words, and his remarkable openness is firmly grounded in a specific cultural tradition and sense of community. He's one of the world's finest trombonists, able to leap from downtown conceptualism to down-home blowing in a single bound—just ask Delfeayo Marsalis, who had a private one-on-one session with George in Italy (a musical “getting-to-know-you”). Lewis is purposeful and self-assured, while in the same stroke he's restless, ready for anything. When he returns to his hometown of Chicago, he always makes a point to come out and jam with newcomers and old friends at the Velvet Lounge. Meanwhile, at his most recent home in San Diego he's busy working on intermedia installations and designing new ways to interface human beings with computers.<sup>1</sup>

Discussing issues near and far in the record-lined studios of the University of Chicago's radio station WHPK, we're spitting distance from the Lab School where Lewis and classmate Ray Anderson both took up the 'bone in third grade, and we're but a hop, skip, and jump from the back alley where, home from Yale in the summer of 1971, Lewis stumbled on the Muhal Richard Abrams rehearsal that soon led to a deep involvement in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). “Any creative mind eventually ends up questioning its own premises,” Lewis surmises, a statement that could encapsulate his own career, a life full of consistent interrogation and reinvention. But he's merely reflecting on the current jazz scene.

“I don't mind seeing some controversy where some people have set up barricades,” he continues. “And some people grow and change. I would hate to see a kind of orthodoxy take over. Let's say everyone at Lincoln Center was fired and I was put in charge. I've been in charge of music programming before!” Lewis laughs knowingly, having curated shows at the Kitchen in New York from 1980 to 1982. “The thing I had to grow out of was the idea that I



George Lewis (photo: Michael Jackson)

should like everything that was being programmed. What you do have to give Wynton and those guys credit for is insisting that black people should have a very important voice in outlining what African American culture is all about. I think that's a good thing to do. But then I have a pretty expanded view of what the African American tradition can be. I've learned from some really amazing individuals representing a pretty diverse take."

Lewis sees his unique abilities as a series of unique opportunities; consider some of those "amazing individuals" with whom the forty-three-year-old has worked and you get an idea of where he's coming from. While in New Haven, the philosophy major hooked up with drummer Gerry Hemingway (a "townie" in Yale-ville), trumpeter Leo Smith, bassist Wes Brown, reed player Oliver Lake, and pianist Anthony Davis. Back in Chicago, he joined the AACM, studied composition with Abrams, and was a member of the Experimental Band. "I can't say enough about Muhal," says Lewis. "There's that famous quote from [Joseph] Jarman that before he met Muhal he didn't care for the life he'd been living. My dad says I fit that category too." In the same period, Lewis worked with AACM cofounder Fred Anderson's group, "getting helpful critiques from people like the trombonist Lester Lashley" and stretching out at legendary all-night sessions. "You had to find a way to play like Fred, to become Fred. The relation between what the paper said and what was played was elastic, you had to listen to him to play it. It was a combination of literature

and oratory—which is characteristic of African American music.” Since the mid-’70s Lewis has had an especially fruitful relationship with reed player and composer Anthony Braxton. Along with countless other AACM projects, he once replaced Lester Bowie for a five-night stint with the Art Ensemble of Chicago in New York.

Lewis has a keen perspective on continuities between the adventurous musical regions for which he’s best known and more conservative (he uses the more precise term “conservationist”) parts of the jazz continuum.

In my experience from playing with Count Basie to the AACM, nobody was locked out to the extent that I hear in the media. I remember sitting in the Count Basie band bus discussing the merits of Anthony Braxton with Al Grey and Jimmy Forrest. They didn’t say oh it’s complete nonsense, they just said I have some problems with it. So we could discuss it. But it was never locked out as [he adopts a stern voice] “This is not part of black music.” Nobody ever said anything that stupid. How could they? The only questions were: What about tradition? What about virtuosity? And these are real issues, not just some blanket condemnation or an attempt to tar someone with “This is too European” or that sort of simplistic race-baiting.

“They let me play exactly how I wanted to play. I got to play solos every night. I’d try out making noise, weird combinations, playing silence. Anything. I played exactly like I would with Fred. And I did not get fired!” he chortles in his huge-voiced way.

What’s more, it generated a lot of interesting discussions. People weren’t inalterably opposed to freer forms of music. In fact, Basie came up to me and started talking—he never talked that much, and who was I?—but he said: “I really like all this experimenting you’re doing. You know, that’s what we did.” I thought, god, this guy’s connecting what I’m doing with what he was doing. I guess I was pretty naive, and it had never occurred to me that these guys were also experimental musicians. But he would go out every night, and he might play the piano with his elbows: completely experimental, utterly spontaneous, but really informed by everything. After that, I had a little less patience for people who wanted to detach tradition from experimentation.

As for his instrument, Lewis has clear ideas:

People should try to get wild on the trombone. There are so many different kinds of sounds—in some ways the older, pre-J. J. [Johnson] generation

seemed more sensitive to the timbral possibilities than the current group, which seems focused on articulation and speed issues. And then there's what I like to call the Trombone Inferiority Complex. People often come to you and give you less challenging parts; if you ask them for the more challenging parts they say: "Well, you could never play that." And then you go home and say: "I'm gonna learn it, damn it!" That's how the adventurous ones extend what they know. My take on J. J. Johnson was that he was a really analytic, introspective individual who had to discover on his own a lot about the trombone, because it's a very experimental process. The kinds of research required to develop what he did, that's the kind of thing I like to think I'm trying to do myself.

Imbued with a sense of his own American jazz heritage, Lewis has nevertheless also actively involved himself in several European musical communities. While he had already begun to investigate electronics by 1977 (he plays Moog synth on one track of *Shadowgraph*, on *Black Saint*), he started working with computers in 1980, the same year he began playing with Gil Evans. Early in the '80s, Lewis moved to Paris, where he was commissioned to work on an interactive computer music piece at the renowned electronic music lab IRCAM. There he also connected with European creative jazz figures, like drummer Daniel Humair, bassist J-F Jenny Clark, and clarinetist Michel Portal. After Paris, Lewis moved to Amsterdam, where he worked at the electronic music studio STEIM, and while there he solidified a long-standing partnership with pianist Misha Mengelberg, whom he calls "the Muhal Richard Abrams of Holland."

Lewis had already forged connections with European free improvisors like Mengelberg and guitarist Derek Bailey, but his tenure on the Continent allowed him to play with virtually every free musician in the biz; indeed, he's unquestionably the black American musician who has worked most extensively with European improvisors. "Living in Europe accelerated certain processes that had already started," he explains. "I had incredible experiences, like playing with Evan Parker." By 1985, Lewis says he realized "it was time," and he moved back to the States, returning to New York, where he made a collaborative installation project with his computer mentor David Behrman and became a member of News for Lulu with John Zorn and Bill Frisell. "I damn near starved for a couple of years," he laughs with a trademark mix of joviality and bite. "Everything had changed in New York; I don't remember '87 as being a very good year!"

In '89 Lewis moved back to Chicago, where he taught for a year at the School of the Art Institute, eventually settling in San Diego, where he was chair of the

“Critical Studies / Experimental Practices” wing of UCSD’s music department. “Teaching in art school, I grew to realize that I was an interdisciplinary artist all along,” he later recounts on the phone from California. “So rather than reach back to learn to play better bebop, I’ve been looking outward to figure out how to put different things together.” His work developing an interactive computer program for improvisors led to the record *Voyager* (Avant), with saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell. Lewis’s interdisciplinary orientation blossomed on *Changing with the Times* (New World), the title track of which revolves around a spoken narrative based on his father’s life. Now he’s at work writing a piece for Rova Saxophone Quartet, gigging as a member of the ’bone quartet Slideride, and putting the finishing touches on another text-based project, this time built around a basketball poem by frequent collaborator Quincy Troupe, with percussion by Steven Schick and vocal fragments of recognizable pro ball stars.

As a pedagogue, Lewis bemoans the lack of good scholarship on improvisation, though he’s written an article for the Center for Black Music Research titled “Improvised Music since 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives.” “I call it my ‘Birdcage’ piece,” he jokes. “It discusses Bird and Cage as contrasting paradigms within real-time music-making, deconstructing notions of spontaneity in relation to the question of power. When it comes to actually describing or theorizing a hermeneutics of improvising, there’s some suspicion on the part of people who are dealing with an earlier model of what that scholarship should be like. In one review of the collection *Representing Jazz*, the reviewer—who has actually written a number of jazz books himself—was complaining about the number of supposedly ‘big words’ he had to get through. My dad always told me if you don’t understand a word, go and get the dictionary!” he guffaws. “That phony populism isn’t the point; I don’t see only one way that jazz should be reviewed. I think we should try to generate different ways of talking about the music.”

Searching for good lit, Lewis recently made Bulls’ coach Phil Jackson’s book part of his students’ reading list.

I’ve heard basketball compared to bebop, and I don’t think it’s like bebop—especially the way the Bulls do it. I think it’s more like free improvisation or the AACM: everybody’s making a sound because you need to make that sound, not because you need to stick out as a personal ego thing. But at the same time you do bring something to the table and at the right moment you’re allowed to express that, the way Michael Jordan does, for instance. There’s still an idea of personal narrative about it, you can’t be completely selfless because you have to tell your story. In Jackson’s book, you see direct

analogies—when he starts to describe the basic principles of the triple-post offense, the idea of spacing and that the offense should spread out and leave space for everyone. The same way, in European free improvisation, the downtown New York scene, and the AACM it's about integrating your story with all the rest of the stories that are out there.

[1996]

### **Note**

1. Since the publication of this article, the Velvet Lounge has closed and Lewis has moved back to New York, where he is the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University. He was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2002.

# MATS GUSTAFSSON

## MG at Half-C

What's wrong with Mats Gustafsson?

This meditation on my friend will start with the psychological profile. Bear with me.

The first and most important thing to know about Gustafsson is that he is a connoisseur and an enthusiast. This is not always the most winning combination for an artist. Of course, practitioners are often fascinated by the history of their medium, by other approaches; it's necessary to at least know the basics of the historical context if for no other reason than to avoid constantly reinventing the wheel. That's the one side, the connoisseur side, the facet of Mats that's given over to blindfold tests and whiskey tastings. And, yes, his obsessions extend beyond his chosen art form. A few years ago he called to ask my opinion on the quality of a Bob Thompson drawing that he subsequently bought, a wonderful portrait of Steve Lacy. Gustafsson recognizes minute differences between things, qualitative hues that others might miss; he is an acute and attentive critic. I have watched him identify a saxophonist by the sound of the make of his horn. I've seen him accurately surmise a grape and a year. He's no sommelier, but he's damned good.

But the connoisseur aspect of Gustafsson's personality is augmented by another one, perhaps even more pronounced, what for lack of a better word I will call his passion. This is the guy who wears a Ruby's BBQ T-shirt as a badge of honor, who went bananas the first time he saw Gastr del Sol, who can wax poetic on the virtues of a particular kind of Viennese chocolate. When you cross the taste-shaping aspect of the connoisseur with the supercharged passion of the enthusiast, you can sometimes end up with an encyclopedic cheerleader rather than a visionary artist. Perhaps the painter John Graham was an example—he schooled people like Gorky and de Kooning, showed

them things they didn't know, but he didn't have the absolute originality and obliterating commitment to his own way of seeing that they did. Maybe that sensibility was obscured by his knowledge, his connoisseurship, his many enthusiasms.

Gustafsson possesses that obliterating commitment. He has evolved as a player over the last twenty-five years by following his own ears. Once, in a classroom presentation, he explained that, metaphorically speaking, he carried around a backpack into which he put all sorts of influences and interests—things he heard, saw, experienced. Indulging his connoisseur tendencies, he filled up the backpack, constantly adding new material. The trick, he said, was to work to develop a technique that allowed one to access that backpack instantaneously, without the intervention of thought. Hence one had to practice diligently, and play as much as possible, to stop thinking, to work intuitively, in order to get the things you know out of your way, to keep them from obscuring the vision. As Henri Michaux once said, to push so deep into yourself that style can't follow.

Pragmatically, for Gustafsson this means that he can't let his love of records—he's termed it "discaholism"—distract him from his own music. He's one of today's most avid vinyl fetishists, maintaining a maniacal website and managing a museum-quality collection that will serve future generations as an authoritative source for creative music research. Gustafsson and I have a good time plumbing the depths of discaholic depravity together, playfully jousting over want lists and holy grails. There's a community of such weirdos, including his trio Discaholics Anonymous, with Thurston Moore and Jim O'Rourke; stories of their shopping escapades in Japan are legendary. This, of course, is where the connoisseurism turns the corner into full-blown crazy. There is no off switch. Conversations incessantly loop back to vinyl. If there's a record store nearby, no matter how awful or picked over, the radar will pick it up, and a magnetic force will pull him there. Even for a fellow freak, it can be exasperating. But it's part of his charm. And it's how he recharges, a constant way that he adds to the backpack.

In the beginning, there were Little Richard and little Mats. Mr. Gustafsson, 1970s, in his room up Umeå way, rocking out; Mr. Richard, 1950s, hot ball of mess, spreading his tutti and his frutti all over the world in an explosion of atomic energy. I think today, if you hold a Gustafsson recording up to your ear and listen like you would to a seashell, you can hear a distant echo of Little Richard, not only the wailing saxophone, but the singer's incessant urgency. No time to waste, show must go on, let's get this party started.



• • •

Artists who are content merely to hone their gifts eventually come to little. The ones who truly leave their mark have the strength and the courage to explore and exploit their shortcomings. • Simon Leys

A portrait of Mats in 1993: fresh-faced, close-cropped hair, almost militaristic build, skinny, square-shouldered, metal Viking pendant on a choke chain, rolled up sleeves on a button shirt left open over a T-shirt, snazzy boots, a big generous smile and a “yes” for every and any proposition. One of the twenty-nine-year-old’s primary instruments at the time was the “fluteophone,” an alto sax mouthpiece jammed into the open end of a flute. Pitch was randomized, melody nearly impossible, but in Gustafsson’s hands it was a shatteringly brilliant, wickedly fast, piercing vehicle for dry crackle of flinty tone. The ideal post-Evan Parker device. At that time, Gustafsson was very much caught in the act of synthesizing the EP approach with a more garrulous, ballistic methodology, mostly conceptualized via Peter Brötzmann. At any moment, the Swede could swing either way. I recall hearing his playing on a CD with Gush and being astonished by the way he could go from zero to sixty in a heartbeat. It made time stop. Or maybe it made time travel seem possible. If he could get from pin-drop-quiet to screaming-bloody-murder so quickly, maybe the absolute unidirectionality of time was vulnerable. Anyway, it was an unmitigated kick.

But that bipolar approach, which Gustafsson explored in great detail over the next decade, would eventually become an albatross. I remember drummer Paul Lovens presciently telling me that our friend Mats would need to get both sides on the same table, and at the time I fought that suggestion, but now I see how right he was. For Gustafsson, I think the big breakthroughs came at this point, when he reconciled the chamber improviser with the free jazzer, not keeping them separate but consolidating them into a unique alloy of force and finesse. The seduction of sudden, sharp articulations was, it seems, hard for him to lose, but he had to open up, to see that this was something he was almost too good at. You can trace this evolution via *The Thing*, his trio with Ingebrigt Haker Flaten and Paal Nilssen-Love. It’s a group that has no problem burning rubber on a Coltrane tune or flying a kite through a White Stripes song, anticipating the lightning strike. The threesome is as buoyant or bombastic as needed, and really all possibilities are there at once, the backpack now fused to the brain, each synapse fire a possible relay, instantaneous, even that heartbeat too long to wait to get from standing still to full tilt.

It's de rigueur now for a musician to cross genres, but Gustafsson's been doing so with relish for so long that it's part of his DNA. A decade ago, he began to explore in greater detail his latent interest in garage rock; at the same time, he started playing his saxophone with electronics, turning it on its side, approaching it like Keith Rowe did with the guitar, as a tabletop device. He's a nexus. A delta, through which many different energies flow. In a way, he's not an eclectic, but a bundler, a consolidator. His music offers a communal space for jazz and punk and experimental and concrete and reggae (his first appearance on vinyl is on a reggae record!) and tropicalia and soul and Afropop and classical. To segregate his work into various categories seems a bit artificial. But underneath it all, allowing him to move so effortlessly between different spheres, he is an improviser. That's the whole show. When you hear the improviser playing improvised music, you quickly see how that deeply intuitive approach sets the tone for everything he does.

Gustafsson's accomplishment extends beyond the realm of his playing. He's an active supporter of creative music, promoting contemporary figures he believes in and historical ellipses he thinks should be brought to light. I recall when he played Mount Everest Trio for me, the glee on his face as he registered my visceral excitement. He is a guy who builds momentum. This returns us to Mats-the-enthusiast, but in this respect there's no qualification: it's a case of unmitigated joy. And his work for the community, broadly speaking, does not feel self-serving, has in fact been carried out at great self-sacrifice. I think of the festival he and Lennart Nilsson curated in Vasteras. Booking something like that is a thankless task. As often as not, the participants walk away without recognizing what has been required, as if it was their entitlement. For someone like Mats, who has played on more than his share of stages booked by some other unthanked soul, I think this was something he treated like community service. It had to be done, needed energy, required a shape and a vision, and it allowed him to put together a particular version of current creative music, an especially spectral and inclusive one at that.

My experience of Mats, over the course of twenty years of comradeship, has been one of continual amazement and admiration. He is a boundless spirit, a truly positive force in the universe. When we speak on the phone, as we do all too infrequently these days, I always find him juggling multiple projects, booking tours for his bands, leading big ensembles, producing others, hunting for new experiences. At the half-century mark, he has kindled a fresh appreciation for good health, which I hope bodes well for decades more ahead,



Mats Gustafsson (photo: Michael Jackson)

and he seems to have traded a bit of his never-say-no gusto for a modicum of reserve and selectivity. Maybe that means he's getting wise. Or old. Probably old. In any case, it hasn't made him any less significant a figure in my eyes. He remains, for me, a singular inspiration, the go-to man for spirit and joy and complete commitment.

[2014]

# KEN VANDERMARK

## Six Dispatches from the Memory Bank

### 1. Ken Vandermark / Paal Nilssen-Love

*The Hideout, Chicago, 2012*

Most recent sighting.

Ken Vandermark, playing superrelaxed horn, teamed with Paal Nilssen-Love, the Norwegian whose father was a drummer before him. If blood is carried to and from the bodily extremities by means of an insistent pulse, the Nilssen-Love bloodline bears that beat along with more erratic rhythms: swing time, pushy punctuation, scraped plinging eruption, continuous clanging crescendo, a crash-and-tumble capability to rival Fibber McGee. Having heard this twosome since they started playing together over a decade ago, I'm delighted this night to find them pushing into things unfamiliar, two set-length pieces plotted like a road trip: long stretches settle in, moving fast, the straightaways, then various side trips, maybe to gas up or grab some grub, pleasant surprises off the main drag, stops and starts, change in speed, dynamic, scenery.

Vandermark has worked with some of the best percussionists in creative music. Long partnerships with Hamid Drake, Paul Lytton, Paul Lovens, Michael Zerang, Tim Daisy—these have all had their own special character, each an intensive dialogue, whether in the context of a group or one-on-one. The relationship to drums is crucial in Vandermark's case; he's a very direct saxophonist, prefers that to more oblique rhythmic interactions (though he's capable of floating over the beat and more disjunct counterpoint, when called for), and that means the drummer is paramount. Whenever I hear Booker Ervin, I'm reminded of how important this bond is for players who dig in and plant themselves on or around a beat, and in the frame of time-based playing, that is how I hear Ken.

Playing with Nilssen-Love, Vandermark can move into the patterned, riffing repetitions that typify this part of his work, setting up something steady for the

drummer to jostle against, creating tension, building expectation, and finally releasing. But he can also move into energy—with these two there is always plenty of energy—and pure sound, as he does when he lips the clarinet, puffing burbling little tones into the stream of Paal's cymbals. In Nilssen-Love, I hear someone capable of pulling together all manner of disparate threads, drawing without prejudice from any possible musical arena. Garage rock, Latin soul, R&B, Ethiopian, these are more recent integrations; Paal has absorbed so much about bop, hard-bop, free jazz, and improvised music that they're but strands of DNA wound around the core of his concept. This makes him perhaps the perfect counterpart for Ken, whose working process has been to incorporate and synthesize the music he loves. You wouldn't know it to see him, but that's because Vandermark is a nerd. He studies day and night. At a party, wildly rowdy and full of whatever spirits have prevailed, he'll stop dead at hearing something that catches his ear, take out a notebook, and jot it down for later investigation. What I said: a nerd.

## **2. Lombard Street Trio**

*The Willow Jazz Club, Boston, 1987*

I first heard Vandermark by accident. A few blocks from my apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts, was a little club I'd never visited, really seemed like an old-man bar to me, but walking past it one evening I heard something that sounded like live music, so I ducked in for a look. The Lombard Street Trio—guitar, drums, reeds—was winding its way through a sectional tune, midset, so I found a stool and a beer, together with the three or four folks who were already there, puzzling at the serendipity. It struck me that they were very obviously enamored with Dolphy, that I wasn't so into the guitarist's sound, that the drummer had a sweet feel, and that the saxophonist was pretty good.

Boston was a great place for creative music in the '80s. Before moving there, I had driven to Cambridge three or four times a week from Providence, where I was in school. Boston was, in some ways, where I got the better part of my education, and many late nights were spent at Charlie's Tap, the 1369 Club, Jonathan Swift's, or on occasion rock clubs, university stages, or Berklee's more formal concert halls. I'm sure that more often than not Ken's father, the intrepid jazz writer Stu Vandermark, was in the house, perhaps with Ken's mom, Sunny, though I would only get to know them later, on their visits to Chicago.

After the Willow gig was done, I introduced myself and we shared a round of drinks, making the requisite lists of interests and influences, naming great

records and favorite concerts, establishing common ground. The next day, Ken and the guitarist came by my place, ostensibly to improvise together, though more time was spent listening to records and talking. We were in our early twenties. We had day jobs. All either of us wanted to do was music. Vandermark practiced and wrote and rehearsed and gigged. I set up concerts, improvised now and then, and started writing reviews. Weirdly, we almost never crossed paths.

Around my living room stereo that day, my Dolphy suspicions confirmed, I remember finding that Ken was deep into Ellington and Mingus, that he wasn't as convinced as I was of David Murray's greatness (*Ming* and *Home* being touchstones of the era for me), that he had as yet not delved into European improvised music, that he was a smart, passionate fellow with a good sense of humor, and that he loved Joe McPhee, the independent from Poughkeepsie who I'd interviewed a year earlier and who was my declared major—I'd written on him for my undergrad thesis.

Ken and I met again in the audience for some concert, where he gave me a cassette of the trio, and then I left town. I'd only heard him play that one time.

### **3. NRG Ensemble**

*Club Lower Links, Chicago, 1991*

It was late in 1990, at Southend Musicworks, that I'd first spotted Ken in Chicago. This was a shock. At first I didn't recognize him, with the flat-top, T-shirt, and Converse high-tops, his un-jazz uniform for years to come, whispering and laughing with a pretty redhead at the edge of the stage. I'd figured out who he was by the time the concert was over, reintroduced myself, exchanged numbers. But the most vivid memory from this early period was a solo he took at the dungeony Club Lower Links. He was on tenor. It was extreme, sensational. Ken was subbing for Mars Williams, who was probably away with the Psychedelic Furs, playing (as he had at the Southend gig) with Hal Russell and his NRG Ensemble. Vandermark: a rosy-cheeked, square-shouldered straight man to Russell's leering, sloping, stuttering old stand-up. I don't know whether Ken set out with something to prove, but when he stepped into the solo he uncorked, spilling out pure heat and intensity. I'd heard Brötzmann put the pedal to the metal, but this was somehow all-American, siphoning all the air in the room into an altissimo outburst that channeled Iggy and the Ramones and Ayler and McNeely into one epiphanic moment. It was the kind of event that made everyone in the room look around, smiling dopily at each other with a what-just-happened grin. Like a water main had burst. Like the place had been permeated with light. Like we'd just noticed how asleep we'd

been. We listeners were refreshed, exhilarated, astonished. And we were all looking forward to Ken's next solo.

#### **4. Vandermark 5**

*The Empty Bottle, Chicago, 1998*

I distinctly remember that night walking into the Empty Bottle and thinking: "What the hell is going on? Who are all these people?" It wasn't unusual for me to see Ken at the Bottle; he and I had been booking a weekly series there since 1996 and had a couple of Bottle Fests under our belts, so it was our regular haunt. And I'd known that he had a Tuesday night gig there, every Tuesday, just like he'd had a weekly gig at HotHouse with his group the Vandermark Quartet. Learning from the masters, he'd realized that regular gigs with the same band were the secret to a certain kind of feel, and that there were no shortcuts: you had to work the music out over a long stretch, like Monk and Ornette had at the Five Spot.

But that still didn't explain this crowd, perhaps 150 strong. To myself, I wondered if they were holdovers from an earlier rock gig, which might prove difficult for the Vandermark 5, having had set up on the floor, basically acoustic, without the sound system for support. As they kicked into the first piece, Jeb Bishop commandeering a giant riff on electric guitar and Ken and Mars Williams—frequent jousters at that time—locking horns in a furious melee above, the audience held in rapt attention, I realized: "Holy shit, they're here for Vandermark!"

I also knew it was no miracle. It came from hard work. This was the golden age for Vandermark in Chicago. The scene was hot, bustling enough to keep Seth Tisue busy chronicling all the gigs in a weekly newsletter and Malachi Ritscher hopping from set to set with his increasingly sophisticated recording gear. The infusion of Europeans had started in earnest, not just as performers, but as collaborators. Various labels, some now defunct, documented the proceedings. And there was a buzz about the city outside Chicago. European and New York writers had starting to take notice, however grudgingly, and at least one, Kevin Whitehead, set down for an extended stay. Much of this activity was the direct or indirect result of Vandermark's effort. He'd built his audience from scratch, almost one by one, making T-shirts and hanging flyers and busting ass to get the word out. Fred Anderson had paved the way with his community-oriented self-productions at the Birdhouse and the Velvet Lounge; Ken's version was more DIY punk in spirit, a generation inspired by CBGB and Slugs, in equal parts. Any week of the year, you could see Ken play three or four times, sometimes more, in different settings, at any usable





Ken Vandermark (photo: Michael Jackson)

venue. I remember gigs at Morseland, Lunar Cabaret, Urbus Orbis, the Bop Shop, Unity Temple, other place with names I've forgotten. The big crowd on Tuesdays lasted for a long time, years and years, much to the Bottle's delight. These folks were invested in the music, listening intently rather than chatting noisily like normal rock crowds. It was much like what we were doing on our Wednesday night gigs, but where those audiences changed dramatically from week to week—350 one week, 12 the next—this seemed like a more stable crew. It was a clubhouse, but it had an open door.

The music, too, had ripened. Where Vandermark experimented with many different ideas in the quartet, in V5 he built an all-terrain vehicle, able to draw on rock, new music, jazz, and free improvisation, its members willing to adequately rehearse his increasingly ambitious, sometimes heroically epic, compositions. I think the band's music was very strong, protean, gritty. It didn't just skim the surface; it was *thorough*. Sometimes I felt Vandermark kept the reins too tight, constricting action rather than inspiring interplay, but looseness wasn't the point. V5 defined a moment, an aesthetic, and a work ethic. In this, it was archetypically Chicagoan.

It was in this period, too, that I think Ken's approach to the horns began to have an effect on other reed players, enough so that it began to be possible, I see in retrospect, to configure something of a Vandermark style. When I listen to players as disparate (and distinct from Ken) as Dave Rempis and James Falzone, I hear something the germ of which seems to come from this exciting era. And from under the pads of Vandermark's Selmer—probably the beat-to-crap one he used to have, not the shiny one he got later.

## 5. Territory Band-3

*Chicago Cultural Center, 2002*

The large ensemble suits Vandermark. He likes power and contrast, twin concepts that require expansiveness and a broad palette, and both of which he finds in big groups. He's built several of his own, including the mutable Territory Band, which served as a productive vehicle for his ideas for about six years. Its third incarnation offered an afternoon gig downtown at Claudia Cassidy Hall in the Cultural Center, where Michael Orlove booked a brilliant series of free-of-charge concerts for more than a decade.

In addition to various aspects of composing for a large group of improvisors—something Vandermark had been actively participating in as a member of the Brötzmann Chicago Tentet among other larger-scale projects under his leadership—this gig made clear how international his scope had become. Here

were Swedes Per-Åke Holmlander on tuba and Fredrik Ljungkvist on reeds, German Axel Dörner on trumpet, Brit (via Belgium) Paul Lytton on percussion, and the ubiquitous drummer Nilssen-Love blowing in from Norway, alongside seven trusty Chicagoans. The music was expansive, capacious; it made room for the improvisors, providing them plenty to work with, but it had a fascinating architecture. It drew on his knowledge of European traditions, especially those of the postserial composers and electroacoustic music, and true to his heritage it brought in elements from the jazz and rock worlds, albeit deeply transformed.

But this was the moment, too, that I began to understand how far Ken's work had progressed, not only the writing and playing, but the laying of groundwork. In the early years of the new century, Ken ramped up his touring. He worked out several feasible, though grueling, U.S. driving tours—sort of a creative music chitlin' circuit—and he became a regular presence at festivals and venues across Europe, often stringing together months and months of one-hits. I've been fortunate enough to see him in different contexts across the Atlantic, and I find I have the same sort of experience I did when I walked into the Bottle that evening, seeing the fruits of his labor reflected both in the richness of the music and in the passionate response it evokes in crowds.

The out-of-town colleagues Ken had brought to Chicago for this gig with Territory Band-3—probably whittling down the last bits of his MacArthur stipend—were the same players he was seeing regularly on their home turf. As a consequence, Vandermark was seen performing in Chicago with far less frequency, a realization that made this gig somehow especially resonant for me. Not quite the end of an era, but a signal that change was coming.

## 6. DKV Trio

*The Hideout, Chicago, 2011*

The penultimate DKV gig at the Hideout. A year later, in 2012, the trio would fill the club so far beyond capacity that the police came, shortening the first set and sending me home for the night, to make space for folks who hadn't seen them play as many times as I have. But in 2011, the room also packed, I was lucky enough to be up in the deejay booth, from which I enjoyed all the intensity and joy of this, Vandermark's longest-standing band.

When I listen to DKV, I always hear a little of Fred Anderson, not only because I remember them recording together, but because the whole long-form, episodic, story-form approach to the music recalls Fred. One night at the Bottle, Anderson came so close to going past the bar's 2:00 AM closing

that owner Bruce Finkelman came down himself to worry the piece's end, and when that end arrived, I had to keep Fred from kicking into another piece because I knew for sure it wouldn't be, as players always say, "a short one."

Of course, the other link is Hamid Drake, who was Fred's musical soul mate for many decades. Drake, on a night like this one, knows exactly how to fan the flames, and Vandermark has such a sharp set of reflexes, so closely attuned to the drummer, that he's free to follow or set the pace, riffing cyclically or breaking out into a sprint. Factor in bassist Kent Kessler, who was probably Ken's closest associate for the first fifteen years in Chicago, and you begin to sense how solid all these bonds are. When the dynamic comes down, Kessler takes a delicate arco solo, and Hamid plays haunting, humming frame drum. Over this, Vandermark is drawn to something he likes to do in quiet or diffuse situations, which is to *narrate*—that is, atop a more undifferentiated sound field he'll lay a definitive melodic statement, becoming a *de facto* narrator, offering up a compelling tale for which the others make a subtle, relatively uniform backdrop.

There are certain things like this that, after hearing Ken play so often, over such a long period of time, I can almost predict, but only in a general way. They're tendencies, a kind of *inclination*. The specifics are always a surprise. And sometimes I'm completely wrong, which is also a treat. What a privilege, I think to myself, getting to hear Vandermark play all these years, in all these different settings, to check out his new ideas and watch them morph into something else. To see him work to constantly make music of real meaning, of genuine and lasting value, in a period of diminishing attention spans and the total dissolution of the recorded music industry. Rarer and rarer are the opportunities to hear him in Chicago, so when I do it feels that much more potent. But I know that seeing him less frequently reminds me how potent it is—Ken, on the other hand, has to make his playing potent every time, wherever he is, which is the real burden of the working musician.

There he is, kicking ass with Hamid and Kent, a riptide of groove pulling everything toward the giddy climax, the same pretty good saxophonist, now a magnificent one, blowing his baritone with all the force and feeling that he packed into his little solo with NRG, but informed by half a lifetime's worth of study and attention and constant work with the most stellar musicians of our time, including our man, Joe McPhee. Somehow Hamid, Kent, and Ken conclude together on a dime, the place goes bananas, and I think: stay the course, the world needs you.

[2012]

## KEN VANDERMARK AND JOE MCPHEE

### Mutual Admiration Society

Chicago. Summer of '98. The city is bustling with new jazz activity, no small part of it directly involving Ken Vandermark, a bright, articulate, unflinchingly committed tenor saxophonist, clarinetist, composer, and bandleader whose presence has been a veritable defibrillator since he set up shop here in 1989. But Vandermark's musical journey was sparked by another figure, multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee. Based in Poughkeepsie, New York, McPhee was already active in the late '60s, as New York City's originary free jazz moment was transforming into the so-called loft scene of the subsequent decade. McPhee barely played in New York; instead, working with tenor and soprano saxophones, pocket cornet, and valve trombone, he made his mark with a series of records for the Swiss hat Hut label (specifically established as an outlet for McPhee's music), forging lasting musical relationships with a core group of European musicians. McPhee's solo record *Tenor* (1976) was a revelation to young Vandermark. Twenty years after *Tenor* was recorded, McPhee and Vandermark finally performed together in Chicago in a glorious trio concert with bassist Kent Kessler, and since then they've collaborated again in various settings. Relaxing at Vandermark's apartment, the two new, yet old friends sat down to compare notes on markedly different backgrounds and startlingly compatible outlooks. A stuffed animal hiding next to the couch suggested an opening volley to McPhee.

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Joe McPhee: To begin, Ken Vandermark, try to explain why I have a platypus on my head.

Ken Vandermark: Because you're crazy!

John Corbett: Where did you fellows first meet?

JM: Ken and I met briefly in Vancouver in 1993. Ken was playing with his group, and I'd read an article in which he mentioned my name and the influence I'd had on his music. I was surprised that I'd influenced anybody's music. I went to the concert, and lo and behold, toward the end



Ken Vandermark and Joe McPhee (photo: Michael Jackson)

of the concert Ken introduced a piece of mine, “Goodbye Tom B.” I’d never heard anybody play my music; I was absolutely thrilled!

JC: Ken, you’re part of a creative music renaissance here in Chicago, and you’re very much associated with this scene, playing with a regular cast of characters week in, week out. Joe, there isn’t much of a scene in Poughkeepsie . . .

JM: No, I never play there.

JC: . . . so you’ve made your artistic life in various other places, coming into other communities. It seems a big difference between the way you two function.

JM: Curiously, I’ve worked with a regular cast of characters in Europe, Raymond Boni and André Jaume, which I’ve really made the center of my music. I play in New York occasionally, and on the West Coast. But in Europe, I was invited. In Poughkeepsie, there aren’t many presenters interested in improvised music. And my music is becoming improvised more and more. I’ve really moved away from written composition—I want to play what’s on my mind at the moment.

KV: I think Joe’s comment that one reason he wasn’t working at one time in the United States is that he wasn’t invited is part of why the scene has developed in Chicago the way it has. A lot of people here, and I include myself, had to find ways to do work, because we weren’t being asked.

In different subgroups around the scene here, people are actively trying to make it happen here. The city's big enough to make that possible. I mean, you can see creative music every night of the week in Chicago. You can in New York, too. But I think that's unusual. And to be able to play my own music, or the music of Sun Ra, Eric Dolphy, Albert Ayler, Mars Williams, Jim Baker, three nights a week, at home. That's pretty amazing, and it's been crucial to my own development. I'm aware of how fortunate I am to be able to do that. To get to that level, we have to perform. So we try to make our own circumstances. I think that's what the AACM did, too.

JM: Historically, I think what's going on in Chicago right now is going to be very important. I pretty much developed in a vacuum. I rehearse a lot in my toilet, because the sound is good in there. Then I go out all over the country and around the world to all these extraordinary little places where wonderful musicians are playing their asses off. And we find that we really have a lot in common. I find people I like, we get together, have a drink. Most of my rehearsals consist of a glass of wine, a meal, conversation, maybe watching something on the TV. That's it. We connect in another way, and the music will happen. "You can't play"? What does that mean? I've played with amateurs who play with so much heart and soul—I'd much prefer playing with them than with some "professionals" who have ego up the ass! I don't care about that. I've had some workshops where people come and play all the chord changes as fast as they can and I throw 'em out! And other people come and say they're afraid because they've only been playing their instruments a little time and they don't have a bunch of technique, and I tell them to come in. In the end we make some music. We're not looking for Charlie Tuna, the great golden performances, we want people with some heart.

JC: You didn't start out playing in a vacuum, did you?

JM: I was a big Art Blakey/Jazz Messengers, Horace Silver, and Cannonball Adderley fan. All the groups I played with played like that. There were a lot of jam sessions. I played in a group called Ira and the Soul Project: Hammond B-3, drums, guitar, vibes. We played jazz before we'd play soul music, dance and sing. I loved it. Every Friday, Saturday, Sunday night, the people were into it! Then it sort of changed. I had music that I was trying to play and it became something of a threat, people would lose their job if they did what I was doing, so they quit. When I say I developed in a vacuum, that's a little misleading, because I certainly listened to all the great music that was on record, and I went to hear the great players.

JC: Early on in your public performing life, though, you had fantastic opportunities with Clifford Thornton, Don Cherry . . .

JM: In an extraordinary situation, the day after John Coltrane died I went to a recording session with Clifford Thornton for the recording *Freedom & Unity*. The bassist was Jimmy Garrison! I mean, can you imagine, the first recording you're going to do? A few years later I was invited to do this recording with Don Cherry for a week—the whole concept of the way I organize the large ensembles I recorded for hat Hut was based on what I learned from Don Cherry. Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy—I read all the things in *DownBeat* about why you shouldn't listen to them, so I went out and bought all the records . . . don't tell me what I can't do! [laughter] I couldn't understand what they were talking about. By the time I went into the army, I took all my Ornette and Coltrane records—"Chasin' the Trane" had me dumbstruck, destroyed me! I built a record player. It ran on batteries and I put a transmitter in it. In the barracks I'd flip on the transmitter and it'd block out all the radio stations, because it was stronger than them. And nobody could hear anything except Ornette . . . [laughs]

JC: Radio Free McPhee!

JM: I painted a watercolor of Ornette, hung it inside my locker in the army. You think that didn't get me in trouble? It wasn't a naked woman, it was Ornette. There wasn't a lot of jazz in my family. My parents are both from the Bahamas. I was the first person in my family born in this country, in Miami, Florida, of all places. My parents came from a very English, British background—I didn't grow up in a Baptist church listening to gospel. The jazz that I acquired, I got through friends. And then when I got to the other side of the music, Ornette and the rest, that was a choice of my own. I found that music, and I had to seek it out. But I grew up in a very musical family. My great-uncle, Alfonso Cooper, was the leader of the Savoy Sultans. That doesn't make it come through my genes, but I did know about it. I don't know how it was for you, Ken.

KV: Well it was kind of the opposite for me. I grew up in a family where my parents, particularly my father, were listening to jazz all the time. I wasn't really exposed to contemporary popular music like rock until I went to college. As a kid, I went to lots and lots and lots of live concerts. I must have gone to Lulu White's in Boston, where I grew up, more than once a week. Saw Johnny Griffin, the Art Ensemble, Benny Goodman, Art Blakey a bunch of times. It was also important that my father never categorized things at all. We'd listen to Stravinsky, then Duke Ellington,



then Monk, then Sly & the Family Stone. It was all music, just music in the house. That made me hear Ellington and Stravinsky on the same level, not to listen to Ellington as a “jazz” musician and somehow, sub-consciously, look down on him. It was all music at this one beautiful level.

JC: A genre-blind household.

KV: Yeah. I knew there were differences. But it wasn't like he was trying to give me a musical education and using these things as guideposts. The records were on, that's all. He was into them. *Sketches of Spain*, I heard that record a billion times, I know all the solos on it from when I was a kid. Or the Webster solos from the Blanton-Webster band with Ellington. Later, when they reissued them finally, I put them on and I knew them all. That's an amazing gift. I'm still reaping benefits from that I don't even know about. I think my grandfather was an amateur musician. My father studied saxophone for a while, then he heard Charlie Parker and that was it. So there isn't a strong musician background in my family. But that listening set the stage. All this background, Lester Young, Hawkins, Coltrane. Then Joe comes, and it's this beautiful extension of all those things.

JC: What was it about hearing Joe's music that so captivated you?

KV: One of the things is the amount of beauty that comes across. As aggressive as it can get sometimes, there's a sense of remarkable beauty. I'd been listening to a lot more mainstream stuff growing up and I was starting to get exposed to more “outside,” experimental things through my father, like Archie Shepp, Sam Rivers. But I wasn't really connecting with it the way that, say, I connected with Thelonious Monk. My father flipped out the day he got *Tenor*, said: “You've gotta hear this, you've gotta hear this!” It was in the morning, he put it on, I remember it was “Goodbye Tom B,” and it was as close to an epiphany as I can imagine. The extroverted Shepp/Rivers playing, the use of overtones and shrieks, were all there, but it connected with me in an incredibly musical, melodic sort of way. It really spoke to me. It communicated to me the way Monk did, but using a different language. I heard that and literally said: “This is what I want to do. This is the way I want to go. This is the music I want to play.” It's hard to keep it from sounding trite or corny, but playing for Joe was a highlight of my life. And to have him react positively was a bonus! [laughs] From the first time I heard Joe's music to the time we played together was a fourteen-year process, a path that was really instigated by his music.

- JM: When we finally connected here in Chicago, all we needed to know was there, so it felt like we'd been playing together for years and years. It was that complete. It had come around in a circle.
- JC: There are a lot of stereotypes about free music and its relationship to beauty and lyricism—the preconception that music after the '60s got violent. This idea that beauty had to be obliterated.
- JM: Well, the first thing I'd do is just trash “freedom.” Let's trash that whole concept. There's a big distinction between freedom and license. It doesn't mean you can just shit all over everything and blow your brains out. Freedom is a work in progress. When Coltrane's music became very energetic, people thought of it as being violent, and again a mistake is made in the interpretation of what passion is. It's not necessarily anger or violence, though those are certainly part of our lives and should be reflected in what we do.
- KV: It isn't just about doing whatever you want whenever you want. There's a responsibility to make the music interesting, and that means you really have to listen and pay attention and work hard on developing possibilities. “License” is an interesting way of putting it. It's like working toward having permission to do things. Whether it's with compositions or it's freely improvised, it's about trying to find the communication center. It gets into pseudomysticism: when music's really working, you can become sort of unconscious. You've done all this preparation and listening, and you go to a situation to play—it's been like this with Joe every time—and feel like the music's playing itself. It's like you're not even making decisions. You're just a conduit. I've found myself doing things I would never do in other circumstances, doing things I don't understand how it's possible to do. Last time we played together, at the end of the concert Joe and I were playing contrapuntal statements and in very indirect ways we arrived at the very same note at the very same time, completed our statements, and that was the end of the concert. There's no way I could have anticipated where he would go, the music just happened that way. To get into a state where things like that are possible takes a lot of discipline. I work with people who take it that seriously, they don't think let's screw around and waste everybody's time. It's like: let's find some music here.
- JM: When we play we don't verbalize much about what we do or how we do it. But listening to you talk, it's like being inside my own head. I use terms like “conduit” all the time. Something equally important is the idea of sharing. It's about the life we have, the time we have on this planet,

which is not all that long. The things that are important to us become more focused, particularly as you get closer to the end, and you get to know that you're wasting a whole lot of time with some bullshit. Every time we've played together, without exception, it's been about sharing—sharing music, life, love, and humanity. And the music is something which accrues from that, I think.

KV: When music is really the most magical, it's the aural version of spending time with someone you really like being with, or just experiencing life in all its complexity. All the best music, improvised or otherwise, is an expression of those really complex things, things that are impossible to express in words. That's why I think that a lot of musicians are inspired by other art forms. I love the paintings of Franz Kline. They had a retrospective here, and I walked into that room with all those black-and-white paintings. I said, I want to play like this! Whatever he's doing here, I want to make music like that.

JM: The more we talk, the more I find we have in common. I had a very good friend who passed away in 1991 named Alton Pickens. He was an artist, some of his works are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. He had an accident, fell down some stairs—upshot was that he moved into my house for about eight years. He was really my mentor.

KV: I guess what frustrates me is when people think that we don't consider the ramifications of what we do. As if we just play off the cuff, wake up and play whatever. That sense of "freedom" as doing whatever we feel like doing, like we don't take it seriously, don't examine it, don't practice, don't study. That's so insulting. It's not to say other people can't have different opinions about it. But it's frustrating to have outsiders think they know more about it than we do. I take it really seriously, and the musicians I play with take it seriously. I see myself as connected to a long line of music from around the world. When I play I take it personally that I'm representing a beautiful history and want to do my best to contribute to it on whatever level I'm able to.

JM: For a solo recording, I borrowed the title from Val Wilmer's book, *As Serious as Your Life*. I take what I do and my music very seriously. Somebody wants to ask me how seriously, it's like this gun is to your head—how fuckin' seriously can I take it?! But at the same time [he puts the stuffed animal back on his head], there's a platypus on my head. I don't take myself very seriously at all, and I love to have a good time and laugh.

[1999]

## PETER BRÖTZMANN AND EVAN PARKER

### Bring Something to the Table

The two most influential voices in improvised reed music from Europe, Evan Parker and Peter Brötzmann, have, since they first appeared in the mid-'60s, also come to stand for very different things in free play. Parker: speed, dexterity, instantaneous interplay, refinement, razor sharpness, almost scientific technical achievement (especially on the soprano saxophone, which he has virtually reinvented), and a graciousness and cooperative spirit in collective settings that he has labeled the “agree to agree” approach. Brötzmann: raw muscle, energy and stamina, direct, elemental, a firebug’s propensity for tossing incendiary devices into complacent settings, and the indescribably enormous sound the erstwhile painter says he gets by “blowing straight through the horn.”

In 1968, Parker came from London to Bremen, Germany, to participate in a recording session that produced one of free music’s monuments, the Peter Brötzmann Octet’s *Machine Gun*. At that time, the reedmen worked together frequently, often in the context of Brötzmann’s larger ensembles or *Globe Unity Orchestra*, but also in smaller settings like the sextet on the *great Nipples*. Since the '70s, they have stood on the stage and in the studio together less often. Parker, now fifty-five, has myriad projects including his outstanding long-term trio with bassist Barry Guy and percussionist Paul Lytton, as well as his bigger *Electro-Acoustic Ensemble*, which has released its second disc on ECM—disappointingly, still neither is available domestically in the United States. At fifty-seven, Brötzmann has recently established one of the best ensembles of his career, the *Die Like a Dog Quartet*, and he’s returned to the large format again with the *Brötzmann Chicago Tentet*, as well as working with numerous more ephemeral aggregations.

This unique conversation, conducted in the heat of an Atlanta summer during the 1998 *Sounding(s) Festival*, gave the veteran improvisors an opportunity to discuss their joint and separate paths.

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John Corbett: Two ideas about what’s happened to improvised music in Europe since the mid-'60s: First, that a way of playing has evolved which

allows different people from all sorts of backgrounds to play together in a sort of common language. On the other hand, you could observe that players have developed their own idiosyncratic styles to a point that it becomes harder to play together because the approaches are so particular to those players. Babel, like a bunch of private languages. Do you see that dichotomy as a difficulty?

Peter Brötzmann: Yes, if it goes so far like Evan's way of playing the soprano, it can include everybody and it can exclude everybody. [Parker laughs] I think it depends on who the other musician is. I [don't] give a shit if it's a Japanese traditional drummer or a guy out of the good old '60s. Of course I know people I really don't want to play with, but that's not only because of the musical language, it's because I don't like them.

Evan Parker: I think you've identified an interesting state of development, but I would agree with Peter that the specificity of the language can open up and close down as circumstances require it. And that should be part of the capacity of a free improviser, to adjust the specifics of the music to the particular circumstances.

JC: I ask this because you two used to work together more than you do now. In the late '60s you played together . . .

PB: . . . for some time, sure.

EP: Well, I think the pool of players was a lot smaller if you go back that far, the number of people interested in free improvising, or free jazz, or whatever it was back then, was a smaller number of people.

PB: And we had to stick together to fight against the rest of the world, in a way.

EP: Yeah, so if you go back to that core thing, we were lucky in the sense that we'd gravitated toward the right people, or maybe the fact that we gravitated to one another has made us the right people. It's hard for us to know which way it goes. But certainly we drew strength from one another's support. And you'd have to include Misha [Mengelberg] and Han [Bennink] and Willem [Breuker] in that early period, and there was a kind of triangle axis of connections between England, Germany, Holland. We really used those three legs of the tripod to get some kind of stability. Once that stability was there, we could all afford to allow our personal preferences to predominate again and maybe even drift apart. But you see that there are still very good social relationships, I'm still playing with Alex [Schlippenbach] and Peter still has his connections with different people.

PB: And our connections to the people here in the States . . . well, it was thirty years ago, it was growing, and growing, and so everybody has a chance

to pick the people he wants to work with. And in these three decades we developed in certain different directions, which doesn't mean we aren't able to play together any more, but I think everybody has his preferences.

EP: I think probably nowadays those sorts of things are likely to happen if somebody says: "Hey, it's thirty years since *Machine Gun*, let's revisit that," or "Let's revisit *Globe Unity's* first performance." We're in that phase as far as referring to our own history. Some colleagues are no longer with us, which makes some aspects of that work a little difficult; I always think how sorry I am that John Stevens died when he did because I had the feeling that things were just about to get better for him in terms of recognition and opportunities. So that's one guy who wouldn't be there. Buschi [Niebergall], too. But that's likely to be the way we'd collaborate now, or very informally, in a jam situation. I think we've all consolidated approaches that we're working on, they're all slightly different from one another. Peter's approach is very personal to him, my thing with electronics, for example, I don't think would interest him at all . . .

PB: [Smiles] Not really, no.

EP: And some of the more musical theater things that Misha and Han do don't fit either of us particularly. Those tendencies go right back to the beginning, those appetites or qualities were always there in the individuals, but circumstances forced us to accommodate one other's specific requirements in a way that we no longer have to. I think it's as simple as that. But that doesn't mean there's animosity or anything like that.

JC: That process of making those compromises created a very particular, very interesting kind of music, one that was strong enough to still seem relevant thirty years later. Listen back to *Machine Gun*, *Topography of the Lungs*, these are records that have resonance as historical documents, but also just as music.

PB: I realize that, especially for young kids, *Machine Gun* is a classic in some way. They're really interested in the music, not just because it's old, but for them it's a kick in a way.

JC: So then that way of pursuing individual lines of interest, like you say Evan, has changed the music. It means that you're each getting into more personal, idiosyncratic areas.

EP: Well, think about this: both Peter and I have done records with Marilyn Crispell. And Marilyn in each case has adapted to what she finds coming from us—she plays very differently with Peter than she plays with me—but it's still Marilyn. She has that capacity to alter her approach according to the circumstances. So all kinds of connections are still there, I could

think of many more examples, and each of those musicians has that ability to find an approach that works in that specific context. That's a huge part of the art of free improvisation, bending the language a little bit, also the overall sense of structure, form. Things you can do in a duo would never make sense in a trio. The duo set you did with Andrew [Cyrille] was completely different in form from the trio set you did with Fred [Hopkins] and Hamid [Drake]. That's to do with real fundamentals of what makes a duo different from a trio from a quartet. Plus, added onto those almost mathematical principles, cold principles, you add the human specifics of what makes Hamid different from Andrew, and then Peter has to modify his approach to deal with that. It's a negotiated music, it's up there being negotiated while it's being played.

JC: So we're back at the fact that, regardless of the tendency toward specialization and idiosyncratic languages, the best improvisors are still people who make those adaptations. They don't force people to come entirely to them.

EP: I think everybody should meet somewhere. Halfway would be the ideal, but in some circumstances you have that overlay of: "Well, whose gig is it?" So there's an implicit thing that if it's Peter's gig I should go more to Peter's thing. If Peter comes over to my gig, it's my gig, then he's got to come over more to my thing.

PB: I wouldn't say that it is very important whose gig it is . . .

EP: But you know that comes into it sometimes. You're a different personality than me, so in your case maybe it probably would be less important than it would be to me.

JC: It could work the other way, with someone deciding to very strongly push against what the leader wants . . .

EP: That makes for a low callback rate! [laughter] But it's possible. And also it's possible, when Peter works with larger groups, that they use frameworks, structures they improvise within, specific ideas, prearranged things.

PB: Yeah, it can happen. Sure.

EP: Also, I do the same thing once the numbers get above a certain point, we have some little structural ideas about how to structure an hour's music or something. Of course you can leave it completely open, and there are contexts where that's appropriate.

JC: Can I ask you to talk a bit about each other's saxophone playing? I have a feeling that you admire one another, you're obviously good friends, and in a way you've been on the road together for decades.

- EP: The first time I heard Peter I was frightened to death. I'd never heard a saxophone make that much sound. Such a huge sound. That was something I had to try and deal with very quickly, how to match that and bring my sound up to that.
- PB: I wasn't frightened of him and his playing, but I always was ashamed in the early years because he could do things I never could do [laughs self-effacingly], things I always wanted to do, but I couldn't come close to that. So I said to myself: "Fuck that, do your thing," and that was it. But he came out of a kind of school of good British traditional saxophone players with quite an American touch, in those years.
- EP: Well, yeah, tryin' to play like Coltrane.
- PB: And I came out of *nowhere*, in a way. [Parker laughs heartily]
- EP: Yeah, it's interesting, because I wasn't sure how much Albert Ayler you'd heard. I knew all the Ayler records from before that period. But you must have been playing . . .
- PB: The ESP Ayler things came very late over to us, and I was already working the same way years before.
- EP: It's not to say you used identical things, just a broad similarity, and I wasn't sure. And I know now that you were very happy the first time you heard Ayler because you thought: "Thank God there's . . .
- PB: . . . *somebody!* Yes. Somebody, [to Corbett] I told you about the old tapes of the swing band I was in, I had these solo pieces, "I Got Rhythm" and "Dark Eyes." I have to get you a copy of that. The roots are the same. I really still play the same nonsense. Late '50s. Of course, hopefully I learned a little bit in all these years.
- EP: But the basic conception, once it's set in place then it's only a matter of working and extending within the conception rather than constantly looking for a new conception. I remember from Peter a thing that relates to that. After we'd done *Machine Gun*, Peter was looking for another piece, how can I do another piece with those qualities? You sent me a tape with the famous Illinois Jacquet solo on "Flying Home," and—you don't really read music—so Peter's way was to learn this by listening to the tape, and he wanted me and [Gerd] Dudek or Willem [Breuker] . . .
- PB: . . . three or four saxophones . . .
- EP: . . . to learn it. I got the tape a few days before the gig, and I said, "Peter, I've been trying to write it down, but . . ."
- PB: We didn't work it out. [laughs]
- EP: I didn't know anything about his swing roots at that point. That was your old affection for that stuff. Strange thing is, about twenty-five years later,



the Charlie Watts Band did the same thing, exactly, but it was all written out very neatly. Seven tenors all in unison. That solo is very popular, I think. In fact, wasn't it one of the ones that, it was on a record and thereafter Jacquet was never allowed to play it differently? He had to go back and learn his own solo. I have a feeling people would like that in free music sometimes as well. "Why don't you play *For Adolphe Sax*, Peter? We'd love to hear that solo again!" Or ask me: "Play 'Conic Section 5.' That was always one of my favorites!"

JC: Because you've made it composed music by inscribing it with a recording device.

EP: No, we're not going to open that can. It becomes composed as soon as it's played. I've closed the can.

JC: Evan, you've expressed some debt to various players I hadn't thought of, people who contributed to your conception, including John Tchicai.

EP: That's coming out more and more now, in my mind, when I'm working with repetition, and this floating thing of finding a new time over the top of whatever the drummer and bass are doing. I associate that with the way Tchicai played, especially with the New York Art Quartet, still to me underrated as a group, what they stood for. Not enough records of that group, would be great if people could dig up some more tapes. It was a visionary approach that band had. Very important contribution. For me the Tchicai thing, there are moments when I think: "You're going too far with this, stop playing like John Tchicai." Maybe nobody else hears it.

JC: Maybe that's because not so many people know Tchicai's music well enough to make the comparison.

EP: Right, and even John might say: "What? What the hell are you talking about? You don't sound anything like me." But I'd like to acknowledge his influence. I'd like to acknowledge the influence of Pharoah Sanders, in terms of articulation. A piece like "Preview," with the Mike Mantler orchestra, which I think was supposed to be a sketch for a longer piece that never happened. That would have been amazing, to hear Pharoah stretch out for twenty minutes with a background like that, in that style! That's a common point for us, Peter.

PB: Yeah, I think we were very impressed by that six minutes. It's true, [pauses] I mean, I can't hear Tchicai in your playing. Maybe it's just in your head. [laughs]

EP: I hope it is buried!

JC: Peter, your list of influences goes back to Johnny Dodds and Sidney Bechet.

- PB: Yeah, I'm still very fond of the old stuff. I still listen to that, it's nearly the only music I'm listening to. Dodds, Bechet, later on Hawkins, Jacquet, Lester, Charlie Parker of course. But to talk about the influence in my lifetime, I can mention some friends who helped me quite a lot. In the first line, Don Cherry and Steve Lacy. Musical influences, I don't know. Even when I started to listen to Albert Ayler, he was not that kind of influence. I saw historical concerts, like the last recording of Oscar Pettiford, Bud Powell, Coleman Hawkins, Kenny Clarke. That, somewhere, is in my head, and you can't get it out. So that might be an influence. Or an open-air Coltrane concert in Belgium in the early Quartet days. That was just crazy, that's what you live from, you take energy from. But I can't say there is a saxophone player who really influenced my way of playing the horn. Not really.
- JC: Where Evan decided really to limit himself to two instruments, you work with the entire saxophone and clarinet families and the tarogato.
- PB: I still like to, though the travel limits already the choice, so it comes to the standard tenor, tarogato, and clarinet, sometimes the alto. But at home I play all the others too. I would like to play the bass saxophone more, but it's impossible to travel with.
- JC: Why do you like using so many different instruments?
- PB: I love these machines; that's the point. If you enlarge the number of instruments, that doesn't mean you enlarge your voice or what you tell. You can do special things—you play the alto in a different way from how you do the tenor, and that's a special challenge.
- JC: Actually, you're both multi-instrumentalists, we're just haggling over how many.
- EP: No, two is two.
- JC: More than one, which makes it multiple.
- PB: Not really.
- EP: They're two B-flat instruments, very closely related. He plays the other woodwinds, the tarogato is a special case, so he's really a multi-instrumentalist.
- JC: But I've noticed something, that very often, Evan, if you start playing one instrument you'll play it for the whole piece. And Peter, you make changes in the middle, and sometimes you use that to structure a piece . . .
- PB: . . . yes, and it depends on what my comrades are doing, of course. It is a way to structure, so I use it that way.
- JC: Sometimes I think I can see the thought process as I see you choosing instruments, seeing which way you hear the music going or which way you want to push it.

- PB: Yes, I could agree. But what I don't like with people playing all those different instruments, like Roscoe [Mitchell] did yesterday . . .
- JC: That's the extreme version, having thirty colors, and painting one dot with each color, one at a time.
- EP: The AACM was always interested in the instrumentarium, the battery, the resources. That's part of Roscoe's approach, always has been. Braxton, too.
- JC: And it's also an old history. In the '30s, you were expected as a reed player to double.
- EP: And violin and saxophone was a pretty standard double. Which is mind-bending to me!
- JC: Renato Geremia.
- EP: He's about the only guy I can think of today who does that. Back in the '20s and '30s, it was pretty standard. With the electronic projects, I must say I can only hear the soprano; I can't play the tenor in that context. And with heavy drums, I can't hear the soprano. So there are site-specific decisions.
- JC: Then there's the paragon of the other, single-instrument perspective: Steve Lacy. Peter, did you ever play soprano? That's an instrument that you now leave off your list.
- PB: I was playing soprano in the early years, but I think soprano is no instrument for me.
- EP: Tarogato is your soprano.
- PB: Na, ja, but it's a special case.
- JC: Is there something particular about the soprano that you don't like? Frankly, I think there are more terrible soprano players these days than any other instrument.
- PB: If you think in history, you come back to Bechet, then Steve Lacy, and then comes Evan Parker. Coltrane in between. But even Coltrane's soprano wasn't that interesting for me, I must say.
- EP: [Visibly distressed] Ah, beg to differ. For me it was the other way 'round. Well, there is a case for saying that it was an episodic relationship, that tenor was Coltrane's main instrument, and that toward the end of his life he seemed to give up soprano and concentrate on tenor. Though I'd heard Bechet, the first Coltrane records and the concerts with him in November of '61, with Eric Dolphy, a very hot version of that band, that was where I first heard his soprano.
- JC: Dolphy's somebody who is a very important figure for both of you, but whose playing I don't hear reflected in any direct way in either of your

musics. The trademark Dolphy elements, the wide interval leaps, the patterns.

PB: He was a kind of influence, but the way he played all his horns was so unique nobody could touch it in a way.

EP: Dolphy's even buried deeper than Tchicai in my playing, but I think the idea of trying to make the instrument speak in three different registers simultaneously, have the whole horn speak at the same time, came from trying to deal with Dolphy. But like Peter says, Dolphy's style is so unique that if you are playing like Dolphy there's nothing more obvious. It's a tradition that *should* be extended, because in a way it's the natural extension of Charlie Parker. It's a shame that in terms of the linear development of alto playing, that seems not to have been taken further. It is phenomenally difficult to go beyond it.

JC: In a way, this gets back to the very first question—you end up with someone like Dolphy as a very idiosyncratic, highly specialized player, with all these techniques and approaches that are “his,” and perhaps that's reflected in improvisors worldwide. It's about finding very special things and then finding a way to use them together with other players. But like Dolphy both of you have also explored solo playing as well.

EP: It's a complex relationship. If I play the way I play solo in a group, it could be taken as telling everyone else they're not needed. So I have to be very careful about how I use certain techniques in a group context which I'm very confident using in a solo context. I've started to find people who trust me and can find something to do while I'm doing that, but I have to be careful. If I overdo it, I can disrupt the group feeling.

JC: Peter, you play solo less and less, it seems.

PB: Yeah, I do it still, but I don't like it too much. Every two, three years I like to go into the studio, try the things out alone. Sometimes people ask and I do some solo concerts, but to be honest I do them for the money mostly. I sometimes need the solo things just as a sort of challenge. If there is an audience, the question is: Am I able to convince, or to get to the audience? Mostly it happens to work, but sometimes it doesn't work and that's a very ugly feeling. [chuckles]

JC: There seems to be some consensus that group improvising is the real thing.

PB: Working together, for me, that's the meaning of jazz. And looking back to my early years, trying to decide what to do, to continue with painting as the main thing or the music, I think the music convinced me because of being together with all the guys and all the experiences.

JC: That idea of the living music, of music as a social activity, is still central?

PB: I think it has a lot to do with that, yes.

EP: Only thing I would say is that you have to have something to bring to the group, and a great way of finding what you have to bring to the group is to work alone. Not just practicing, but finding what ideas you can sustain in performance. You must have material that you can bring, rather than coming every time ready to be blown by whatever current crops up but without any ability to steer or create a current yourself. You have to be able to push as well as pull, to supply food as well as eat. It's not enough to come to the table hungry, you've got to bring food.

[1999]



**FIVE**

TRACK MARKS



## ONCOLOGY OF THE RECORD ALBUM

### Flat

First and most decisive argument in contemporary audio technologies: cylinder or disc? Flatness, the victor, creates two sides—later “A” and “B.” In a way, that decision establishes the first binarism in sound representation, long before “x” and “o” engulfed the question in digital. The shellac or vinyl disc presents a dialectical absolute, the literal suppression or denial of the tracks laid underneath, which by definition cannot play while the ones on top are being engaged. But the flatness of the disc was at the heart of the industry war. Cylinders used “hill-and-dale” motion, tracking the up-and-down movement of the stylus as the tube turned, while the flat record plate considered “lateral” cuts, the groove pulling or pushing the stylus from side to side while its horizontal motion is held stock still. Just a hair’s breadth away, beneath, lurks another groove, spinning at the same speed, just out of reach for the needle, which continues scraping along on its terribly flat terrain. Recall Firesign Theatre’s jokes about the absolute dialectical nature of two-sided records on *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You’re Not Anywhere at All*—Nick Danger checks to see what’s on the other side of the record, hears it backward (literally, what’s at the exact spot on the other side of the LP), and says: “It’s OK, they’re speaking Chinese!” The flat earth. Hippy comedians offer perhaps the most insightful meditation on the ontology of the record album yet sketched. Has anyone yet built a turntable that plays both sides at once? Easily accomplished, assuming the record is completely flat. And what of the fact that the word “warped” carries such strong connotations in English? The record, like the personality, must at all costs be flat. Anything else would be sick, twisted, bent, mentally unfit.



## Centered

No matter how left of center or decentered or marginal the content of a record is, played “correctly” the technology requires it to be mechanically centered. The spindle hole, in order to allow the record to spin in exactly the same radius distance at any point in its rotation, must be located dead center. Aligning the software with the hardware. Registration, aiming straight at the bull’s-eye in a ringed target (Kenneth Noland’s cover for Steve Lacy’s *Trickles*), catching the spindle hole in the crosshairs. Centeredness is the only thing that allows beat matchers to lock one tempo to another before the crossfade. The consequence of an off-center spindle, as is found on many Jamaican singles, is ebbing and flowing in the record’s representation of time: the platter plays faster as the groove moves closer to the center, slower as the tonearm floats away. Hence pitch rises and falls, drunkenly. The temporality, the tempo, of the music is gently fluxed like an accordion breathing air in and out. Space, the distance traversed by the needle on the surface of the record and the arc it traces as it spins, directly translates into time, speed, the period of one rotation divided up into asymmetrical pulses.

## Vinyl Killer

I have a Japanese toy, a souped-up, five-inch Volkswagen van, boxed with sinister faux “Big Daddy” Roth graphics and an incongruous order to “take pills! run fast!” Under the front axle a stylus dangles down like a detached muffler pipe. Placed on an exposed record album, pointed up-groove, the van’s tall radio antenna can be flipped up, setting the vehicle in motion. The van circles the record, dragging the needle along and blaring the LP’s contents from a tinny transistor radio speaker on its roof. The stylus is attached to a swiveling arm, and as it is progressively drawn into the center of the record, it ingeniously increases the speed of the van. Inversion of the normal record playing procedure: the needle is moved and the record stays in place. Here’s a concretization of the metaphors of travel and terrain, images integral to the hidden meaning of the record album. The grooves suddenly become a highway, a hypnotizing road like audio artist Lou Mallozzi’s car locked in the dashed yellow lines on a perfectly flat road in Kansas (“Traffic,” from *Usi Scruti*). But the Vinyl Killer traces an extremely convoluted path, in fact the most convoluted possible route, literally driving round and round in circles, as people say when they’re hopelessly lost. Frightening revelation of the relentless futility of the record, spinning its wheels madly but going nowhere fast.

## Random Excess

Still, at the end of the day, what makes vinyl LPs the tool of preference in spite of their futility and their A/B either-or-ness? Random access, the ability to hover over the grooved flatlands and pick a spot, any spot, to enter the potential flow of represented time. CDs, with all their advantages (and let's not start in with "for" or "against" statements, which only made us flail around wastefully in front of the manufacturing industry's all-encompassing gaze), are models of central management—someone else chooses the cue points, convenient portals into the music. Faced with very long pieces, the Swiss hat ART label sometimes distributes cues at evenly chosen spots on a disc without direct connection to musical starting and stopping; this provides possible reference points for listeners who want to go back to a particular place without fast-forwarding like an idiot every time. Perhaps some smart hi-fi company will make a CD with easily programmable cueing, so that DJs can pick their own entranceways, but still there won't be the same lingering materiality of the medium as there is with the nasty, noisy, black pancakes. In any case, until then there's the laborious "shuttling through" process that makes picking cue points on CDs more like those venomous cassette tapes and confirms my loyalty to the instant random engagement of the vinyl album. Little periscopic light peering over the record's horizon, illuminating the grooves, which, even taken as visual information alone, tell me something about the musical load they bear—where the track starts, density and rhythmic content reflected in shades of black like the varying lines of Dürer etching.

## Sorcerer's Apprentice

You'd think it was the only clear, flat surface in the house. One by one, surreptitiously, perhaps by night, the CDs cover the turntable like kudzu on a Mississippi lawn. The record player has no defense. As soon as its hinge lid finds one disc resting on it, it becomes immobilized, trapped, and what's worse mute to utter anything about it or call for help. But the CDs don't stop there. They heap atop the antiquated machine like kids playing pile-on, forming neat, straight-backed stacks or messy mounds with extruding booklets, open jewel cases, and exposed discs, at all possible pains to make the owner—namely, me—forget that the turntable is there and instead crank ten degrees to the right toward the CD machine that waits hungrily for a disc. The CD player has been designed to avoid the turntable's problems, taking bunker archaeology into account—the entrance isn't approached from above (fear of air strikes),

but discs are sucked in and spit out of the face of the machine. Audio-religious hallucination: mirrored communion wafers riding on a plastic mechanical tongue.

## **Oncology**

One day I pulled a record from my collection to check on a song's composition credit. Slipping the LP out of its inner sleeve, at once I noticed something unusual. Small, off-white patches mottled the jet-black record in a radiating pattern that looked like frost on a window. Closely observed, the patches turned out to consist of little growths, like some insect had laid eggs or deposited larvae right in the record's grooves. Looking back at the record's cover, there was a slight discoloring along the base of the jacket that I immediately recognized as water damage. Mold. A creeping, festering, spreading growth. I darted back to the album's spot in the library and pulled its neighbors on both sides. No stain on these covers, but extracting the records the same discoloration was there. "My collection has a disease!" I thought. "Jesus, I don't know the first thing about how to treat this." One by one I inspected the albums in the region until I had isolated the problem, then I sequestered them, put them under house arrest, quarantined the affected part of the organism, and threw the first record I'd found away. I scrubbed the patches off the vinyl as best I could, and I put the covers into a dry place. The cancer seems to have stopped. But I'm always a bit worried now when I take out a record I haven't listened to in some years, fearful that the tumor will have returned, metastasized, claimed the archive once and for all.

[1998]

# DISCAHOLIC OR VINYL FREAK?

Mats Gustafsson Interrogates John Corbett

Mats Gustafsson: Vinyl freak or discaholic?

John Corbett: Technically, I'm a freak. Which means my love is uncontrollable.

But I'm a music freak, most of all, and I'll take it as I can get it. I love my iPod and my CDs, too. I'm an equal opportunity obsessive.

MG: Black or colored vinyl?

JC: Generally, like my decaf, I take my vinyl black.

MG: Seven inch or twelve inch?

JC: I swing both ways.

MG: Glossy or matte?

JC: Matte is often my preferred surface, like a hand-silkscreened ESP Ayler, though the sheen of an Impulse original can get my heart racing.

MG: Stereo or mono?

JC: I've never cared. Give me the music.

MG: Why do you collect?

JC: It's how I'm wired. I buy one thing and immediately start looking for companions, for connections, for more.

MG: When did it start?

JC: I was eleven years old. Before that, in reverse order, it was baseball cards, stamps, butterflies, frogs. Never coins, I don't care about coins. But records stuck. Now I collect art.

MG: Will it ever stop?

JC: I don't buy vinyl actively anymore. I have enough in my collection to constantly surprise myself. I do love to browse, however. And I love to buy for other people.

MG: How do you sort your collection, alphabetical or by genre?

JC: Alphabetical, by genre, but a few labels (FMP, hat Hut, Bead) all by themselves, and a few specialties segregated, like Swedish and Japanese jazz.

MG: Will you ever change that order?

JC: Not likely.

MG: What is your favorite vinyl format?

JC: I like all of them, including 78 rpm. I have loads of singles, though, and find them always fascinating.

MG: Is the smell of the vinyl important to you?

JC: Sure, I like the whole package, including the odor. Unless they're moldy. I'm allergic.

MG: Is the visual aspect important to you?

JC: Supremely.

MG: How do you rank the following, by importance: smell, feel, visual, music, rarity, obscurity, weight, text/liner notes, weirdness?

JC: Music, visual, weirdness, feel, rarity, text/liner notes, obscurity, weight, smell.

MG: What record is closest to sex?

JC: Art Ensemble of Chicago, *Theme de Yoyo*.

MG: Which one is no sex at all?

JC: Anything by Men without Hats.

MG: What vinyl was the first one you bought for your own cash?

JC: Elton John, *Greatest Hits*.

MG: Which one is the latest vinyl you bought for your own cash?

JC: The Louvin Brothers, *Satan Is Real*. It was a gift for Jim Dempsey, a real country gentleman.

MG: How do you find your records?

JC: In stores or other people's collections.

MG: Are you as active hunting for vinyl today as twenty years ago?

JC: No.

MG: What records do I wanna steal from your collection?

JC: Some delicious Italian jazz LPs (Schiano's *If Not Ecstatic We Refund*), some El Saturn originals, a Milford Graves / Don Pullen duo with handmade cover, my unique 78 rpm acetates of the George Davis bands from 1949, my hand-colored original of the Sonic Youth "Kill Your Idols" seven-inch, with B-side "I Killed Christgau with My Big Fucking Dick," the two first seven-inches by the Ex, my original Black Art LP of Lee Perry's *Double-7*, Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey's debut LP on Decca, my original Mbiru copy of Julius Hemphill's *Dogon A.D.*, and a ton of blank-label reggae singles from the '70s.

MG: Have you ever been carrying boxes of Saturn records in just pajamas?

JC: You know me well . . .

MG: What is so appealing with Sun Ra and Saturn records?

- JC: The fact that they made their own, they were real DIY before those letters were ever put together. And the music is so killer. And the vinyl is so incredibly rare, in many cases. There is still much to discover, things on El Saturn that nobody's seen. I found a copy of the first Saturn single, "Saturn," on eBay, but I missed buying it. I think that might have been the only copy in existence. I love the way the early Saturns are connected to the ethos of Chicago in the '50s and early '60s.
- MG: Do you have a complete Saturn collection? Including poetry books and seven-inches?
- JC: No, but it's pretty hard to have all the Saturns. I'm not sure anyone even really knows what that would mean. But I've got a lot of them, probably, including dupes, about 150 or so.
- MG: You donated a huge Saturn collection, with written material, film footage, and music to the University of Chicago; how come?
- JC: Because we were just stewards for the material, it needed to be in an institution, for safety, for accessibility. And for us it was a burden, even though we loved it. I still have a few keepsakes from it, just discovered a Sun Ra drawing that I didn't know I had, one that the library had missed! The original cover design for *Other Planes of There*. I'm happy to have it.
- MG: Is that archive material accessible to the public? Can interested people make their own research in that collection?
- JC: Yes, it's absolutely open to the public. And there are many scholars who have already spent time in it, using it for their research. Which is especially nice, because Saturn was alternately known as Saturn Research. Ra and his manager, Alton Abraham, were very interested in research—they had a study group called Thmei Research, too.
- MG: What is your fave Saturn record?
- JC: It changes from month to month. But I dearly love *Bad and Beautiful*.
- MG: Which one is the rarest, most uncommon Saturn record you have?
- JC: I have a test copy of one of the early singles, which is crazy. And I would say that *When Angels Speak of Love* is perhaps the most rare of the regular issues that I have. I only know a few folks who have copies of it. Do you?
- MG: What is the most spectacular vinyl find you have ever done?
- JC: A single by the Portuguese group the Korean Black Eyes, covering Sly & the Family Stone's "Higher." Found it in the basement of a going-out-of-business store in Lisbon. Also, finding a copy of the Ping single with Von Freeman and the Andrew Hill Group, which I gave to you!
- MG: What is the least spectacular vinyl find you have ever made?
- JC: Men without Hats, Folk of the '80s.

- MG: What records are you still looking for?
- JC: Ones I don't really know about, mostly. And a very few European improvised music records. I'd go out of my way for a copy of Derek Bailey's *Taps*, but that's tape, not vinyl. Also want the ultrarare Japanese solo Bailey that you've got (one I will somehow steal from you, someday!). Still trying to find a copy of the Brötzmann FMP box that includes a poster with a [Nam June] Paik fragment. One came up on eBay recently, but went for obscene money. I could imagine trying to collect all the variants of Ayler's *Spiritual Unity*—blue-on-red, orange, screenprinted, offset, black-and-white, booklet, no booklet, et cetera—but I've never tried. Lucky Thompson on ABC-Paramount. Any of Harry Partch's Gate 5 originals. Mainly, I'm looking for things that surprise me.
- MG: Is looking for vinyl with fellow discaholics the most fun thing you can do with your clothes on?
- JC: I've never been record shopping in the nude, so it's hard to compare. But I would say that listening to records with my fellow discaholics is a rare treat, maybe more fun than hunting. I'm getting old. And I've paid my dues in record stores. Now I prefer a living room to pounding the racks.
- MG: What is the first section you hit, while arriving in a vinyl shop, where you have never been before?
- JC: First rule: hit the wall. Always look at what's hanging behind the desk. I used to shop at Wax Trax in Chicago in the late 1970s, and it was amazing what was strung up around the room on the walls. There were always goodies that you couldn't find in the bins.
- MG: Secondly?
- JC: In the glass display case, below the cash register.
- MG: Thirdly?
- JC: Jazz section, because you can usually tell how the store is organized by looking at how they display their jazz records. And it will tell you whether there's going to be anything good anywhere else.
- MG: The section where you would never look in?
- JC: I've found great shit in the most unexpected places. Children's records, I would rarely look there, but you never know . . .
- MG: Are you aware of the expression "hit the wall"? From a discaholic's perspective . . .
- JC: I just used it. It's a mantra.
- MG: What is your favorite record shop in the world?
- JC: These days I love to shop at Dusty Groove.
- MG: Why?

JC: Two reasons: it's a killer record store with great vinyl and an enticing selection of new and old CDs, and it's right downstairs from my place of employment, so I can visit anytime, day or night.

MG: Give us a list of your five favorite . . . here are some lists, subject to change (at any time). Rock records.

JC: Fleetwood Mac, *Rumours*  
The Fall, *Dragnet*  
The Flying Burrito Brothers, *Burrito Deluxe*  
Michael Hurley, *Hi-Fi Snock Uptown*  
Funkadelic, *Cosmic Slop*

MG: Improvised music records.

JC: Peter Brötzmann Octet, *Machine Gun*  
Bailey/Parker/Bennink, *Topography of the Lungs*  
Altena/Christmann/Lovens, *Weavers*  
Thelonious Monk, *Monk's Music*  
Albert Ayler, *Spiritual Unity*

MG: Best flexi disc releases.

JC: The ICP multiple flexi release, which is all five of the best!

MG: Best listening while cookin'.

JC: Gene Ammons, *Preachin'*  
Paul Gonsalves, *Cookin'*  
Sam Phillips, *The Fan Dance*  
Gillian Welch, *Time (The Revelator)*  
Gal Costa, *India*

MG: Favorite songs all time!

JC: No way, too many possibilities!

MG: Record labels.

JC: Saturn  
Po Torch  
FMP  
ICP  
Cramps

MG: Record label logos.

JC: The homemade inner labels for Brötzmann's BRO releases of *For Adolphe Sax* and *Machine Gun*  
FMP, circa 1970s  
hat Hut, circa 1979  
Black Ark  
Aristocrat 78 rpm inner labels



MG: Record layout artists / visual artist working with design of vinyl records.

JC: Blue Note (classic-era covers)  
FMP (Brötzmann's covers as well as the original *King Alcohol*)  
Argo (especially Leroy Winbush)  
Whoever designed the American Music ten-inches from the 1950s  
(probably Bill Russell)  
Klaus Baumgärtner

MG: Jazz writers/critics.

JC: Kevin Whitehead  
Gary Giddins  
Francis Davis  
Art Lange  
Peter Margasak

MG: Can discaholism be cured?

JC: Only like a salami.

MG: How many hours per day do you spend listening to music?

JC: Four or five.

MG: How many hours do you spend now per day sorting/categorizing your records?

JC: Hardly any, maybe one hour per week.

MG: Twenty years ago?

JC: At least one hour per day.

MG: Where is your preferred listening experience: at home, in the car, at a live concert, in the bathroom?

JC: Live concert, at home, at a friend's house, the car, at work, walking with the iPod, in that order.

MG: Is this interview too long?

JC: Just getting started!

MG: Which one, according to you, was the very first jazz record?

JC: They say it was Original Dixieland Jazzband, but I wonder if there weren't some very jazz-like 78s before that . . .

MG: Which one, according to you, is the very best jazz record?

JC: Depends on what kind of jazz, but I prefer Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity*.

MG: Is jazz dead (which is reported in the media from time to time)?

JC: No.

MG: Is there a final document of recorded jazz? Many people are referring to "Ballads" by Derek Bailey to be the final document of jazz . . .

JC: That's silly. There are great jazz records being made right now.

MG: What is jazz?

- JC: I'm not getting too deeply into this here, but it's a magic potion. Seriously, there is no simple litmus test for jazz. It is music made in a particular milieu. I like the notion that there's a list of possible, but not absolutely necessary, component parts—swing rhythm, improvisation, blues-oriented melodic language, interplay of solo and ensemble—that might be present in jazz. But there is also jazz that includes very little of these technical elements, and we know it's jazz because of the context in which it was made.
- MG: Did Ken Burns capture the history of jazz well, in his series?
- JC: Parts of it, yes, but in a very skewed and distorted way, especially the most recent forty years of the continuing history.
- MG: What book has captured the essence, the soul of jazz the best?
- JC: I don't believe jazz has an essence, I think it is an organic, flexible, expansive notion. But I love Kevin Whitehead's *New Dutch Swing* because I think it gives such a detailed and nuanced account of a particular jazz scene. I wish there were more books like that.
- MG: What is your favorite rpm?
- JC: I guess I prefer 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ , for convenience's sake.
- MG: Why is vinyl, as phenomenon, returning now? What is it in vinyl pleasure that attracts people so much?
- JC: Because it associates music, an ephemeral thing, with a physical, material object. And no matter how digital things become, we still love objects . . .
- MG: Which record can save the world?
- JC: I'm afraid the world will not be saved, in the long run. But Joe McPhee's *Tenor* will help slow down its demise.
- MG: Which record will not save the world?
- JC: Most of the recent jazz CDs I review.
- MG: How many vinyls per day keep the doctor away?
- JC: Seriously, I believe that listening to records has improved my health, kept me focused and calm, increased my libido, toned my upper body strength, and helped me avoid needing eyeglasses. Sun Ra told me that I could tell friends from enemies by putting on his music in the background; if a person came in the room and the music got quieter, he said, beware of that person, but if the music got louder, that was a true friend. Whenever you get in the car, Mats, I've noticed that the music gets much, much louder!
- MG: Can we stop now? I need to go hunting!
- JC: Let's hit the wall!

[2012]

## TWENTY-SEVEN ENTHUSIASMS

### A Spontaneous Listening Session

Show-and-tell was always my favorite part of school. In kindergarten, I presented a huge toad that I'd nabbed in the mud by the front stoop. Working as my show-and-tell proxy, my neurologist father dissected a human brain for my sixth-grade class. My high school English teacher let me lead a period dedicated to a category I had invented: existentialist music. (Selections included the Cure's "Killing an Arab" and something by the Fall.) Show-and-tell is like taking it to the stage. It's the other half of being a collector, which budded in me at the same time: you accumulate things not to own them, but to share them.

Ninety percent of what I do relates back to show-and-tell. It's as pure and simple a form of enthusiasm as I can muster. All you need is something interesting and an audience willing to pay attention. A radio DJ announces and identifies tracks, commenting on his or her set—the perfect platform for show-and-tell. Working in an art gallery absolutely requires that your show-and-tell chops be honed. Curation can allow one to merge the telling into the showing, so that the informative element is cloaked; generally speaking, exhibitions that require less didactic information are stronger, more elegant. Presenting live music, too, entails the making of choices and the creation of an explanatory context for them; more often than not in festival organizing I prefer to let the music speak for itself (though there are often program notes and press materials, adding telling to the showing). Writing about music reverses that equation, making the telling do the showing; as a journalist, you provide description in hopes that people will eventually listen for themselves.

Public presentations aside, I enjoy the intimacy of the private listening session. This special kind of show-and-tell might take the form of a night with a friend or two plumbing the collection, employing the automatist motto: free associate and your mind will follow. Memorable listening sessions have included early ones with my childhood friend Scooter Johns, communing with brand-new comedy LPs by George Carlin and Richard Pryor, formative

in every way. More recent sessions with Ken Vandermark and Seth Tisue often ended in generative dispute and a shot of Sonny Rollins. Mats Gustafsson and Harald Hult run a strictly organized blindfold test in Stockholm modeled on Leonard Feather's column for *DownBeat*, with tight protocols and competitive identification. Weekly sessions with David Grubbs were preceded by dinner and followed by a round of living room guitar duets. A beautiful evening with artists Christopher Williams and Al Ruppertsberg culminated in the juxtaposition of some insanely rare Sun Ra singles and several gonzo rockabilly CD compilations. One late-night postconcert round at Steve Beresford's London flat ended with him pointing me at a cabinet full of vintage reggae singles; he went to bed, I entertained myself until dawn.

So here we are at home, surfing different media (LPS, seven-inches, CDs, YouTube, the occasional download), with no particular goal or point, no need for one, each choice suggesting the next, moving laterally across the library, improvising the sequence, gushing about an old favorite or playing something new and not yet judged, descending now and then into the basement to retrieve the next round. In the process we bring it all back to the ur-modality for record fiends, the ultimate musical show-and-tell.

1. Big Flame. Gang of Four's promise amplified tenfold. Post-punk as overwound coil, sprung loose. Blazing, absolute, pulverizing. A bracing start for this session.
2. Ron Nagle, *Bad Rice*. A new arrival acquired in an Athens flea market, the legendary California artist and musician's underrecognized 1970 Warner Bros. LP, with roots in Philly soul, journeying to the orchestral realms of creative rock. Describing a favorite record of his, Nagle recently forged a new genre: doo-wop surrealism. Hello Dalí!
3. Hampton Grease Band, *Music to Eat*. Issued a year after the Nagle, reputedly the worst-selling release in the history of Columbia Records, HGB's wondrous debut shows how little some people know. Colonel Bruce Hampton, Ret., their zany singer-leader, beautiful long-form songs, sinewy guitar, creative writing.
4. The Shrubs, "Blackmailer," twelve-inch single. Spiky '80s British band took Beefheart to heart and let a loon loose on vocals, meticulously examining the outer edge of control. This version is psychotropically slower than the "Blackmailer" on the band's sole LP, *Take Me Aside for a Midnight Harangue*. Listen to them back-to-back.
5. H.N.A.S., *Ach, Dieser Bart! / Als Der Morgen Kam, War Es, Als Sei Nur Eine Nacht Vergangen*. Stands for "Hirsch Nicht Aus Sofa," or "No Moose on

the Sofa.” Occupied a special place of mystery and curiosity, same as Nurse with Wound, as their sound collages never related to a persona but were an elaborate fictional universe, perhaps like the Residents, but extra-oblique and northern European.

6. The Transmitters, “Still Waiting for the Ugly Man.” The first records by the Fall appeared on the wee Step Forward imprint, which immediately made this label dear to me; they put out a Lemon Kittens seven-inch, further endearment. Same year, 1979, came the enigmatic twelve-inch from the Transmitters—bleak, jumpy, with a little jazzy undercurrent like the Pop Group, the darkest song a long, creepy number on the flip titled “Curious.”
7. Picnic, “Restless.” Songs by improvisors. The band’s eponymous LP featuring the greatest snare sound ever waxed, courtesy Michael Vatcher, one minute of pure positive energy, warbled emphatically by Tiziana Simona.
8. Vivian Goldman, “Launderette.” Brilliant one-off dub-damaged post-PiL John Lydon production, wish he’d done more like this, with punk journalist Goldman warbling à la Raincoats, whose Vicky Aspinall is on fiddle, Robert Wyatt on percussion, Steve Beresford on toy piano.
9. Mark Stewart, *As the Veneer of Democracy Starts to Fade*. Moving from post-punk to post-post-punk, keeping the dub fixation, a preferred rest stop on the conspiracy theory highway. Maybe we’d throw in “Who’s Hot,” the single Stewart made as Mouth just after the Pop Group, for shits and giggles.
10. The Detroit Emeralds, “If I Lose Your Love.” To lighten the atmosphere, a single from Westbound. A falsetto moan raises the little hairs on my forearm.
11. Black Star / Lucky Star Musical Club, *Nyota*. Late-’60s / early-’70s Taarb music from Kenya/Tanzania, one of the greatest compilations ever on Globestyle, beyond exuberant. Uvulatory.
12. Gene Ammons, *Preachin’*. Overlooked jewel from Prestige Records, waxed in Chicago in 1962, featuring organist Clarence “Sleepy” Anderson. Ammons faithfully renders hymns on his boss tenor, spreading the jazz gospel. Big surprise? No solos. Unusual, maybe a producer’s idea, works like a charm. We’ll linger a bit on this mellow masterwork.
13. Van Hunt, “Down Here in Hell (with You).” Where would we be if Prince had never stopped making great songs? Van Hunt’s perverse ode to the hurts-so-goodness of relationship. “What would I do if we were perfect? / Where would I go for disappointment? / Words without hate would leave me nothing left to say.”

14. Omar, “Kiss It Right.” The makeup sex following Van Hunt’s s&m-tinged argument. Should be a neo-soul classic, plowing the field left fallow after Stevie Wonder’s best years. Builds from upright bass line, massive groove adding instruments on the sly—wait for the baritone sax and analog synth. A study in arrangement every bit as systematic as Ravel’s “Bolero.”
15. Congo Ashanti Roy / Singers & Players, “Breaking Down the Pressure.” One of On-U Sound’s most sizzling moments, from the ten-inch series known for its black-and-white covers, ear-popping volume change timed to reinforce the meaning of the title.
16. Das Racist, “You Oughta Know.” Take Billy Joel, pummel, repeat, add such rhymes as “Hack-sawed, slack-jawed, like they short a chromosome” and “I get around like a vinyl, all sales final, Lionel . . . Ritchie.” Might have to play a few more from the comic *pièce de résistance* *Shut Up, Dude*, especially “Fake Patois,” cataloging said fakers: KRS-One, Bad Brains, Shabba Ranks, Cutty Ranks, Jim Carey, even Jay-Z. Or “Shorty Said,” with “Shorty said I look like Slash with no hat on / She asked if I had a spot where we could get our smash on / Shorty said I look like Devendra Banhardt / Shorty said I look like that dude from Japan’s art / You know the dude who did the Kanye covers / Shorty said I look like Egyptian lovers . . .”
17. Shock Exchange, *Shock Exchange*. Change direction completely, frequent session tactic, to concentrate on a couple of synthesizer-based tracks by this Boston trio’s mid-’80s harmolodic mind-melter. Keyboardist David Bryant is a giant. Liner notes by Ornette Coleman.
18. Ronald Shannon Jackson, *Barbeque Dog*. Keep the harmolodics rolling with “Gossip,” Vernon Reid’s breakout moment, perhaps the greatest band in jazz-rock-funk fusion. RSJ: RIP, 2013.
19. Immune System, “Ambivalence and Spark Plugs” b/w “Submerged.” Explosive midwestern jangle-pop, all quirk and tendon, beautifully spare and homemade in the way of the first B-52s single. Stated motto: get hot, go crazy.
20. General Strike, “My Body.” David Toop / Steve Beresford / David Cunningham’s sublime seven-inch, smoothing (and weirding) everything out. A palate cleanser.
21. John Cooper Clarke, *Innocents*. Let’s dirty the palate again with the wry comic poetry of JCC, whose “I Married a Monster from Outer Space” helped me think through some early identity politics issues. On his 1977 debut seven-inch, the writer of *Ten Years in an Open-Necked Shirt* is

- backed by the grittier Curious Yellows, before he connected with the Invisible Girls and made the massive “Evidently Chickentown” and “Sleepwalk Out of My Heart.”
22. *L'Orchestre Regional de Mopti*. Malian classic featuring the thirteen-piece band (electric guitars, basses, drums, and horns in hand) posing in a canoe on the cover. Don Cherry's tune “Mopti” came from here. You can see why he nicked it.
  23. Joe Daley Trio, *Live at Newport 1963*. In those days, a label like RCA wasn't sure what to do with the avant-gardists, so a band like this Chicago-based trio with Daley on tenor sax, bassist Russell Thorne, and drummer (later saxophonist) Hal Russell could release something searching like this on a major outlet.
  24. Fripper seven-inch. Bengt “Fripper” Nordström, the guy who first recorded Albert Ayler, released private issue vinyl on his own Bird Notes label, including unaccompanied sax singles and one with him soloing over an Ornette Coleman Quartet track. Totally off, in the on-est way.
  25. Eazy Teeth, “Car Noise.” Cover art by Don Van Vliet. Synth by Beefheart roadie Paul Young, with the Captain's late-period drummer Robert Williams. Weirdo music from deep down in subterranean L.A.
  26. Nigel Simpkins, “Times Encounter.” Even weirder, from 1978, Simpkins the pseudonym for Cally Callomon, drummer of the Tea Set, manager of Julian Cope, executor of the Nick Drake estate. Post-punk sound collage, might recall Swell Maps in the deep space experimentation sense, for those who know.
  27. Rüdiger Carl / Hans Reichel, *Buben*. Let's end our session on an equally strange note with two major figures in European improvised music playing their childhood instruments, clarinetist Rüdiger Carl on concertina and guitarist Hans Reichel on viola. Buben = boys. Wistful, vulnerable, gnarly—two man-children intent at play.

[2014]

# A VERY VISUAL KIND OF MUSIC

## The Cartoon Soundtrack beyond the Screen

All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.

- Albert Camus

Some of the broadest implications of cartoon music have nothing at all to do with animated images, but are the result of what happens when the visual content is removed altogether and the listener is left to grapple with the sounds on their own terms. This has been a latent aspect of cartoon soundtracks since their inception and standardization—something potentially evident to anyone who has turned away from the screen, even momentarily, but kept their ears tuned—but it has been brought more directly to the surface as a set of historical, artistic, and commercial music projects originating in the late 1970s. In these newer contexts, we can discern something independent from the functional category of music made to accompany cartoons, something perhaps best described as a cartoon music aesthetic.

In his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942), Albert Camus fixes on a peculiar image of human gesticulation in search of a definition of that keystone concept of existentialism, the absurd. “At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them,” he writes. “A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive.”<sup>1</sup>

What makes this imaginary man’s movement absurd? His muteness, of course, the simple fact that the glass suppresses any sounds that might justify or explain his idiotic-seeming movements. The absurd is revealed through a disarticulation of the sound/image relationship: we can’t hear the man’s voice, which makes his motions seem haphazard and silly; furthermore, we can’t hear the voice on the other end of the line, which presumably prompts him. His motions are arbitrary, they lack sufficient motivation and seem over-the-



top, wooden, and stilted because they have no explanatory sounds—or, to be more precise, because while they do appear to have some auditory source of motivation, this source remains concealed. And through the obfuscation of motivation, the man's motions reveal their inherent artificiality. Here we find one of the primary texts of modern philosophy expressing one of its central concepts in terms of the denaturalization of audio and image connectedness. A silent, Merce Cunningham–like choreography of everyday gestures calculated to evoke the alienating feeling of seeing without hearing. The telephonist dancing behind the glass: a sound movie with no soundtrack.

The converse of this is also possible. Take a set of sounds that are motivated by a specific sequence of images, sounds designed to follow the contours of those images very precisely, and then remove the images: presto, instant alienation effect. In film soundtracks, a synaesthetic logic was long ago established that automatically links simultaneous images and sounds. This is a special relationship that film-sound theorist and electroacoustic composer Michel Chion dubbed “synchresis” (a combination of “synchronism” and “synthesis”), in which sounds and images are perceived as having an immediate and intractable connection, even when there is tenuous evidence to confirm such a relationship.<sup>2</sup> When sounds and images occur at the same time, they are perceived as having deep ontological kinship, and when that bond is broken, the separate component parts automatically seem foreign, strange, arbitrary, unnatural. Hence, the disarticulation of sound and image leads, in the audio register, to a sense of absurdity that is potentially as profound and disorienting as Camus's animated telephoner.

Seeds for the creation of a cartoon music aesthetic are sown in this disarticulation, this fundamental disruption of the naturalized relationship between animation and the music that accompanies it. In many cartoon soundtracks, as in much narrative Hollywood cinema, music is not meant to draw attention to itself, but instead functions to enhance the visuals, to explain them or give them depth, shape, definition, to reinforce the appropriate mood or emotion. Except in special cases in which the music itself is made thematic (as in *What's Opera, Doc?*), the cartoon soundtrack exists as an adjunct to the images, as what Claudia Gorbman describes as “unheard melodies.” The music is audible but not consciously attended to specifically because it inconspicuously conspires with the images to advance the narrative. If the music calls too much attention to itself, its artifice begins to show. It risks growing absurd (in Camus's sense of the word).

Gorbman writes: “To judge film music as one judges ‘pure’ music is to ignore its status as part of the collaboration that is the film. Ultimately it is

the narrative context, the interrelations between music and the rest of the film's system, that determines the effectiveness of film music."<sup>3</sup> This is surely true if one's aim is an analysis of the film music in situ. However, film music has often existed outside of its "natural" habitat. Imageless film music is, in fact, the basis of an entire submarket of the music industry: the soundtrack.<sup>4</sup> Soundtracks are sold independent of their images, but what we are interested in here is another kind of productive misreading or misappropriation, one in which music that has been created expressly to be experienced in tandem with an image track is separated and treated as a discrete aesthetic object. The chain can stop there, in the form of an alienated set of sounds, or this misreading and misappropriation can inspire the creation of new works based on the revealed logic of a soundtrack with absent images.

One of the things that differentiates the cartoon soundtrack from many other forms of narrative film music is the way it deals with the cut. Film music is most often designed to help disavow or "soften" cuts, to create a sense of seamlessness and continuity through what is essentially a violent and disruptive act of leaping from one time-space representation to another. Hence, many of the key film music conventions are meant to bridge gaps—between shots, scenes, segments—and create an overall sense of unity.<sup>5</sup> Cartoon soundtrack codes are largely based on film soundtrack codes, and they map these practices onto a medium in which the "cut" is actually a fiction created to simulate filmic cuts.<sup>6</sup> But in cartoons, some of the norms of music editing are also notably different; soundtracks tend to move at a very different pace—much faster—and are more sudden, drastic, and are very often cued directly to "cuts" in the image track. If you watch a Warner Bros. cartoon from the 1940s or '50s, most of the changes in the soundtrack occur in hard sync with visual edits. The practice of "mickey mousing," or creating audio isomorphs for visual events, further suggests the intimacy of sound/image links in classic cartoons.

If you do an experiment and view a conventional film segment—try, for instance, the first shark-attack scene in *Jaws*—with the sound turned off, one of the first things that happens is that the film edit points become more evident. This makes sense, because it shows that the soundtrack is doing its job of smoothing over discontinuities, setting the mood, and making the action seem all part of a whole. In the case of *Jaws*, the absence of a soundtrack makes the sequence in fact almost illegible as narrative; it certainly removes the sense of foreboding, the situation's logic, and the terror of the intercuts between placid beach and hostile ocean. Now, if you do the converse with a cartoon soundtrack and turn the screen off, you get a similar effect in another medium—the sound edit points become much more prominent, often

disconcertingly so. In this case, the image provides a rationale for the manic shifting of sounds.

The most significant revelation in the development of a cartoon music aesthetic is the realization that cuts are made invisible (better yet, inaudible, or at least unrecognizable) through their synchronous relationship with the image action. By eliminating the image, the quick edits float to the surface; shifts in music (style, arrangement, orchestration, density, texture, dynamic, tempo) become monstrous, impossible, dizzying, disorienting. In the absence of a visual anchor or motivation, the rapid-fire changes in sound begin to do something else: they take on a quality at a distance from the narrative (though arguably still related to it) and acquire more than a little sense of the absurd. Rick Altman has postulated that a “sound hermeneutic” exists in film soundtrack in which sounds tend to ask questions that are answered by images.<sup>7</sup> If this is true, then a soundtrack with no images ends up posing a lot of unanswered questions. At the fast clip typical of cartoons, with music and sound effects changing drastically all the time, it’s more like a firing line.

To demonstrate the rapidity of changes in a typical cartoon soundtrack, consider this verbal description of the major shifts in the first minute of Carl Stalling’s soundtrack for the Warner Bros. cartoon *Stage Fright* (1940). Begin: frantic theme (three seconds); bang, followed by solo trombone with plunger (six seconds); rapid upward orchestral arpeggio followed by single vibraphone chord (three seconds); Russian march motif led by bassoon (four seconds); out-of-tempo B section of theme, with same instrumentation, punctuated after four seconds by crash sound effect, then reiteration of A section of theme (eleven seconds); rapid upward orchestral arpeggio (half a second); solo violin with rustling sounds (one second); orchestral flourishes ending in upward arpeggio (four seconds); solo viola, mournful and microtonal (three seconds); hillbilly-like theme (four seconds); strings alone decelerating (four seconds); woodwinds alone (four seconds); different hillbilly theme with pizzicato strings (three seconds); interruption of theme by sinister one-note oboe and tympani, joined by strings (five seconds).

This shows how quickly the soundtrack changes character in this cartoon. But speed is a raw measurement, without regard for content. By adding narrative to the equation, we arrive at a more precise formulation for the cartoon aesthetic: suddenness. What is particular to this, then, is not simply the idea that edits happen every few seconds, but that music and sounds are constantly interrupting one another, interrupting themselves, cutting off flows, and breaking continuity. For our purposes, we can define the sudden as an abrupt change in consequence, a feeling that the narrative implies one direction but

then denies or revokes that implication and starts off down another path. Often, in cartoons, this is accomplished through drastic contrasts, emphatic changes in things like timbre, type of sound (instrumental/sound effects), and especially dynamic. Sudden shifts from piano to fortissimo are part of what gets the blood racing while listening to a cartoon. Any resting point is provisional, and calm moments are always waiting to be perturbed. All these changes represent breaks in expectation, quick-time punctuated equilibrium.

Intertextuality is undoubtedly part of the cartoon music aesthetic—shifting between styles or specific motifs, from sound effects to melodies and back. Cartoon soundtracks have in fact been productively analyzed in terms of their stylistic heterogeneity (as pastiche or collage), but they can also be assessed in relation to what they suggest formally and structurally (in terms of incongruity, discontinuity, atomization, and lack of an overarching dramatic logic). Since changes in a cartoon soundtrack are so often cued by changes in the image track, when the images are removed, so is most of the motivation for those changes. Thus the changes sound arbitrary, like hyperactive jump cuts. A jump cut represents two shots that are too distant in space or time, or both, to be seamlessly edited together. In cartoon music aesthetics, soundtrack edit points are often likewise left showing, and the reason for cutting from one sound to another—the now-missing change in image—is rendered obscure, arbitrary. To link this to Camus's image of the absurd phone conversation, the observer is once again in a situation of disarticulation: the direct visual cue for any cartoon sound is missing (like the sound of the man on the phone), and the narrative rationale for that sound is also gone (like the person at the other end of the line).

This is not unlike Karlheinz Stockhausen's notion of "moment form" composition, in which the instant of an event is never meant to imply a subsequent one. The effect is one of atomization, intensification of the immediateness of each event, a lack of encompassing compositional framework, forward direction, and motivation, and hence a lack of any sense of a cumulative linear time line. When cartoon soundtracks are separated from their images, a similar effect is produced.<sup>8</sup> This cluster of concepts—suddenness, lack of motivation, absence of justifying master narratives, immediateness, jump-cutting, and, especially, intertextuality—has been central to many disparate musical developments over the last four decades. Eclecticism, postmodernism, and the cartoon music aesthetic have grown up together. In jazz, one need only mention the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Willem Breuker, and Carla Bley to conjure ideas of stylistic hybridity; in rock and pop, recent work by Boredoms and Beck, as well as vintage tracks by Brazil's Os Mutantes, Caetano Veloso, Tom Ze, and

other tropicalia mainstays suggest a parallel development. And a great deal of the vitality of hip-hop comes from its sensitivity to intertextuality—like dub reggae, it's essentially a studio music. No surprise, perhaps, to find Schoolly D's hip-hop classic "Saturday Night" (1987) quoting the animated version of *The Three Little Pigs*, making a cartoon quotation into another intertext.

The kind of high-level alienation available in the cartoon music aesthetic attracted the attention of a number of experimental and improvising musicians in the 1970s, most notably among them John Zorn and Eugene Chadbourne. American free improvisors and composers with long and varied discographies, they performed together extensively during the late 1970s, and, according to fellow traveler Henry Kaiser, at that time they openly exchanged ideas and information about compositional strategies.<sup>9</sup> Guitarist Chadbourne's *There'll Be No Tears Tonight* (Parachute, 1980) is a set of classic country songs performed in a way that he described as "free improvised country & western bebop." His treatment of a medley of Johnny Paycheck numbers delves into the cartoon aesthetic without direct reference; in places that would normally feature guitar breaks, the solos often take a sudden and incongruous leap away from the song, speeding up to a frenetic pace or diving away from the tonality of the tune into noises or textures, then abruptly rejoining the song where it might have been before it was so rudely interrupted.

Zorn played on other tracks on *There'll Be No Tears Tonight*. In his own early solo reed music, he used rapid changes and a pervasive sense of suddenness. This was facilitated by a vast collection of birdcalls with which he augmented his alto saxophone and clarinet (often broken down into parts). With these tools, Zorn was prepared to make very fast shifts between different timbres, textures, and qualities of sound, as is clearly evident on *The Classic Guide to Strategy*, issued as two volumes in 1983 and 1985, and later reissued as a single CD (Tzadik TZ 7305, 1996). The second side of the first volume was subtitled "Cartoon Music," and Zorn's game calls often sounded like direct quotations of specific cartoon characters, especially (for obvious reasons) Donald Duck. Zorn's solo guitar oeuvre *The Book of Heads*, originally written for and dedicated to Chadbourne in 1978 (later recorded by Marc Ribot), features equally manic shifts and use of cartoonish sound effects; one of the suite's études (dedicated to Dutch percussionist Han Bennink) includes the telling direction: "From one to the next as fast as possible."<sup>10</sup> Zorn's composition "Road Runner," written for accordionist Guy Klucevsek, sports images from a Road Runner cartoon collaged into the score.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, in these settings Zorn was thinking about the cartoon aesthetic in terms of its use of suddenness, the artistic qualities of narrative interruption. "Sometimes I literally have a narrative going on in

my head, because I'm thinking of a particular cartoon segment, or I'll follow the walking up the stairs and falling off a cliff, and the 'BAM!' And sometimes I specifically think like that, and I'm sure it must come through like that to some people. And other parts in which I'm not thinking like that at all, I'm sure they've got their own narratives working. It's a very visual kind of music."<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-'80s, Zorn's music changed dramatically; where up to that point he had been using fragmented noises, he increasingly began to use fragmented stylistic references. For him, this meant throwing away the birdcalls. As he explained in 1987: "I'm not using calls anymore. I used them because I had this very fast music in my head; it moved very quickly and I was working with noises. Now I want to use genre as an equally valid material. Before, I was very proud of going through a whole concert without playing one note that was written. Now I feel like I want to include all kinds of genres."<sup>13</sup> The projects that grew out of this turn to genre pastiche are some of Zorn's best known, and they include the excellent transitional record *Locus Solus* (on which he's still using the game calls, but also flirting with rock and hip-hop genres), his extensive work with the band *Naked City*, his two outstanding studio collages using his "file card" system, *Godard and Spillane*, and the string quartet "Cat o' Nine Tails," perhaps his most directly cartoon-inspired piece.<sup>14</sup>

Another outgrowth of the emergent cartoon music aesthetic, fueled in part by Zorn's popular successes in this period, was the production and commercial release of some of Carl Stalling's work in two volumes of compiled tracks released on Warner Bros. in 1990 and 1995. The first of these two historical projects—both of which were coproduced by Greg Ford and Hal Willner—employed Zorn as a production consultant and included a short testimonial in liner notes written by him. Where Chadbourne and Zorn had taken inspiration and ideas from the cartoons, using intertextuality and discontinuity as improvisational and compositional devices, these cartoon music collections allowed listeners direct access to Stalling's work, without the images.

Thus the idea—unthinkable in the era(s) when the animations were created—of attending to cartoon music as a discrete, stand-alone aesthetic entity has been granted a sort of retroactive official legitimacy through commercial production. In his notes, Zorn praises Stalling's extremeness, compares him to Copland, Cage, Partch, Ellington, Parker, Gillespie, and Varèse, and describes his as "the music of our subconscious." Zorn's claim is true, however, because Stalling's music had previously operated at a subconscious level, without being brought to the foreground. The music's merrie melodies were unheard, their impact felt but left unrecognized, efficacious but not noteworthy. It doesn't detract from Stalling's creative genius—after all, there were

plenty of uninteresting and less effective cartoon composers—to admit that what we now hear as his music’s extremeness is, at least in part, an artifact of its being extracted from its original relationship with images and narrative.

As an interesting coda to this developing cartoon music aesthetic, in 1994 Bill Frisell, guitarist in Zorn’s *Naked City*, composed music to accompany *Tales from the Far Side*, a TV version of Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* comic strip. We’ve come full circle from the separation of sounds from moving images to the creation of music designed to help animate images that started life as still cartoons. Ironically, Frisell’s dreamy, ambient music retreats to the background, emphasizing continuity, setting context and mood, and changing slowly and deliberately. His is more like a classical Hollywood movie soundtrack, suggesting cows, sheep, and misbegotten people floating in a cloud of eerie Americana. The music is rarely cued directly to visual events. Only the sound effects are sudden. Frisell’s *Far Side* is music for cartoons without the cartoon music aesthetic.

[2002]

## Notes

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991 [1942]), 14–15.

2. Some experimental filmmakers have attempted to make films in which simultaneous sounds and images are perceived as having no relationship. See, for instance, Michael Snow’s *New York Eye & Ear*. The point is that it is quite difficult to produce the impression of material independence for sounds and images when they occur at the same time.

3. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12.

4. See, for example, the collection *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

5. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 89–90.

6. This is simply to say that, for example, the structure of a shot/reverse shot in a cartoon is not necessitated by the medium the way it is in film, but is instead modeled directly on the already extant filmic convention. Thus, codes of continuity editing, which are obviously stretched in playful ways in cartoons, are nevertheless still taken as the starting point for the creation of a consistent time-space continuum in any given cartoon.

7. Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980): 74.

8. Soundtracks have created conditions for certain composers who are not prone to use unusual structures to take very interesting chances, working with form in unconventional ways; hear, for instance, Howard Rumsey’s *Lighthouse All-Stars* playing

Bob Cooper's score for the film *A Building Is Many Buildings* and Stan Getz's score for *Mickey One*.

9. Henry Kaiser, personal interview, 1993. Kaiser told me that Chadbourne initiated Zorn into multistylistic composition, something that he had initially resisted; the veracity of this statement is difficult to test.

10. Reprinted on the back of the liner booklet to *The Book of Heads* (Tzadik Records TZ 7009, 1995).

11. Reproduced in *John Zorn*, ed. Walter Rovere and Carla Chitti (Corso, Italy: Materiali Sonori Edizioni Musicali, 1998), plates xxiv and xxv.

12. John Zorn, in Rovere and Chitti, *John Zorn*, 114.

13. Zorn, interview by Josef Woodard, "Zornography," *Option*, July/August 1987, 36.

14. Zorn's own film music can be attended to as a discrete aesthetic object, too, since it has been exhaustively documented in a series of seven volumes on Tzadik; the final volume includes *Cynical Hysterie Hour*, his soundtrack for a Japanese cartoon.



## R. L. BURNSIDE AND JON SPENCER

### Fattening Frogs for Snake Drive

First scenario: Chicago's indie-rock haven Lounge Ax, a few years back. The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion grinds its set to a stone-ground finale, the whooping crowd whipped into bubbling froth. The group's one-joke name gives Spencer a riff for the pulpit, as the bassless trio's own crazed emcee blurts "BLUES Explosion!" over and over like Don Pardo possessed by evil spirits. Perched precariously on the line between the calculation of a Las Vegas stage show and the abandon of genuine rock 'n' roll frenzy, Spencer cradles the mic and deliriously leans forward into the arms of his adoring fans, moaning in his greasiest mock Jerry Lee Lewis: "Aaaaall you beautiful people!"

Second scenario: Ellis Auditorium, Memphis, Tennessee, August 1996. Less than a block away, the Mississippi gurgles by like a coffee dream. A Japanese high-definition television team sets up to complete a blues documentary featuring R. L. Burnside's bassless trio. A "weathered" guitar case is procured—better for authentic blues, the HDTV producer opines—and a shot of whiskey is passed to "Big Daddy," which is how R. L. is known to the trio's drummer, his seventeen-year-old grandson, Cedric. "None for him, he doesn't have enough hair on his chest yet," grins Burnside. The band is almost ready to begin playing their songs, three versions of each, none of which will be exactly the same as its predecessor. But first, guitarist Kenny Brown darts back to his suitcase, brushing his long blond hair out of his face. "They say my shirt's too white," he laughs, adding under his breath. "At least they didn't say I was!"

It's a puzzler worth an extra scratch on Lieutenant Columbo's head: how does a fella like R. L. Burnside get mixed up with someone like Jon Spencer? Sure, they both lead bassless trios, but Spencer and Burnside come from separate worlds, hailing from different ends of the social, racial, geographic, and musical scale. Burnside: down-home blues guitarist and singer, lifelong southerner, onetime sharecropper, son of a sharecropper. Spencer: punk band-leader, Yankee born-'n'-bred, college dropout, son of a Dartmouth professor.

Burnside puts the premium on genuine feeling even in the most contrived made-for-TV circumstance, playing from the gut, no fakery allowed. Spencer always bites hard at the heels of kitsch, shtick, and nostalgia. At its most powerful, where it teases that dangerous edge between irony and emotion, his work still begs the sophistic question: Can the jokerman possibly be *serious*?

How, then, do we come by *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, the twosome's dynamite collision of matter and antimatter? Or for that, the Blues Explosion's new *Now I Got Worry*, an outing clearly impacted by Spencer & Co.'s close encounter with the real blues? Is it all a newfangled "fathers-and-sons" situation in which the architect of "Just Wanna Die," "Fuck You, Man," "You Look Like a Jew," and "Cunt Tease" searches for the fountain-of-punk-youth in some booze-drenched nihilist blues? In the Blues Explosion press release, Robert Gordon rehashes the tireddest old blues myth—"remember that Robert Johnson ended his life in a godforsaken country bar, crawling on all fours and barking like a dog"—and goes on to explain that R. L. is a "man who has wallowed in dog shit all his life." Does this new project involve a romance with the South, with the country, with being down-and-out, with blackness? Or is it a desperate musical search for a raw place, a "clear spot" in Captain Beefheart's formulation, where some new kind of sound can take root?

"I wouldn't want to live in Memphis," grimaces Spencer over jambalaya at a Dixie-style diner in New York City. "Anywhere in the South, in fact. I'm a fan. There's a certain kind of music I'm into. That's the only thing that really matters to me." Just back from an extensive press tour of Europe, Spencer gripes: "Nick Cave, PJ Harvey—those Europeans, they just totally miss the point of the blues. They romanticize it, get into this gothic aspect of it, but they miss the physicality of the music. They don't understand getting down." He takes an extended pause, adding with a hint of guilt: "Then again, I'm from New Hampshire. There were no black kids in my high school. There just weren't." Spencer first started making music while in college at Brown University, where he played drums in Shithaus, a sonic-terrorist outfit modeled on Test Department, Einsturzende Neubauten, the Birthday Party, and Swans. At the same time, he was busy slinging bass in a garage-rock band aimed at the Stooges and other '60s punk. Initially, that group went by the moniker Pussy Galore, 'til their pre-med guitarist capitulated to his offended girlfriend and made them change the name.

"Back then I was interested in noise and confrontation—hating everything," explains Spencer, who began shooting shock flicks in the same semiotics program that would produce filmmakers Todd Haynes and Jon Moritsugu. Like many an angsty cinematographer, he turned to sex, violence, and

scatology. “There was a lot of shit involved,” he nods. Spencer is wiry, nervous, or just plain pensive in a blue wide-collar shirt. But he’s strikingly handsome, with jet-black hair and long rockabilly sideburns. “The movies I was making were getting more physical, very graphic, and eventually I just became more interested in music. It just seemed easier: rather than make a movie, you could be right there in front of them, onstage.”

Bored with school, in the summer of 1985 Spencer quit and moved to Washington, D.C., with new friend Julia Cafritz. Together they formed a band, reaching back to Spencer’s earlier group to revive the name Pussy Galore. Disillusioned by the state of rock in the wake of no-wave, Spencer combined the gists of his Brown bands—industrial extremity and garage-rock simplicity—into an unheard-of full-frontal blast of nasty. In order to emulate the sound of ’60s low-end-less punk, he opted to go without bass, a tack he’s continued to take in his bands since then. “Rock ’n’ roll was everywhere, but it was such a dead thing,” he recalls. Though probably less well plastered on the walls of the public imagination than Sonic Youth, Pussy Galore was essential in defining the late-’80s New York underground punk scene. Taking its willfully sloppy, aggressively anti-PC stance to the limit on records like *Groovy Hate Fuck* (Buy Our Records) and *Right Now!* (Caroline) and wearing influence on its ripped and torn sleeve by releasing a cassette-only revisionist take on the Rolling Stones’ *Exile on Main Street* in its entirety.

While in the midst of band implosion, Pussy Galore recorded what may stand as its great contribution to the post-punk canon, *Dial M for Mother-fucker* (Caroline), a deep-dark hole of bilious spittle with enough energy in its metal-percussion pocket to inflame ice water. But Spencer and Cafritz had a major falling-out, which put the nail in Pussy Galore’s coffin. Spencer tried to keep the band going, recording *Historia de la Musica Rock* (Caroline), which sports a spot-on mockery of a cheapo Spanish rock LP cover and an early stab at a blues cover in the form of Willie Dixon’s “Little Red Rooster,” but the Pussy Galore idea had played itself out.

After that, Spencer played for a little while in the Gibson Bros., whose take on rockabilly had already made him a fan when they’d toured together on Pussy Galore’s first round of the States. Jeff Evans and Don Howland, Gibson Bros.’ core duo, helped reset Spencer’s rock ’n’ roll way-back machine to a time before the ’60s and ’70s, introducing him to the craziest music of their adopted home in Memphis. “I knew some of that ’50s rock and blues. I was always into the weirdo rockabilly—it’s what rock ’n’ roll is, strange music from another planet. But they opened my eyes to a lot of different things—Jeff rockabilly and country, Don more the blues.” You can hear the white-trash twang come

forward in Spencer's singing from this point on. Spencer also played a short spell with the Honeymoon Killers, the band to which Cristina Martinez had defected from Pussy Galore. Eventually, Spencer married Martinez, whose band Boss Hog currently includes Spencer in its ranks. While in the Honeymoon Killers, Spencer also struck up a friendship with drummer Russell Simins. And with Simins and guitarist Judah Bauer, in 1991, the stage was set for his most commercially viable project yet, the Blues Explosion.

"With Pussy Galore there was a plan, it was kind of a concept," suggests Spencer, a finger resting in one of his 'burns. "But with the Blues Explosion I missed having a band. I still liked music, was still buying records. We had fun, it sounded good. With the Blues Explosion there's not the same kind of confrontation, it's a different kind of band." It may not have the requisite shock-rock head kick of vintage Galore, but *Now I Got Worry*, the band's third record for Matador, packs a tremendous wallop of its own. The Blues Explosion's Matador debut, *Extra Width*, and earlier records on Caroline, Crypt, and Pubic Pop Can had set the band's raucous, good-time agenda on the table. *Orange*, the band's last long-player, explored a new region of high production values à la Stax (and Spencer notes that the band's Matador contract included copies of the cherished Stax singles box set for each member) and an infusion of hip-hop into the rockin' stew, while *Experimental Remixes* (which Spencer stresses was his idea, not foisted on him by the record company) went one further, letting folks from the Wu-Tang Clan, Moby, Beck, and Dub Narcotic retool songs from *Orange*. Some listeners thought the experiment took the Explosion too far afield. "Just because we're not 'Yo, yo, yo,'" Spencer shakes his head. "I've always thought there was a lot of rap in what we do, in the production of our records and how we write songs."

*Now I Got Worry* comes burdened with another responsibility, though, as the first release in Matador's big production and distribution deal with Capitol Records. It has obviously weighed on Spencer's mind, especially since the production process has finished. "Now that I'm in the business and promotion side of the record, sometimes I feel kind of foolish, 'cause it's such a dirty rock 'n' roll record," he admits. "If it sells a lot of copies, that would be great, but it makes me think: 'What's going on?'" Recorded at the famous Easley Studios, '70s hangout of the Bar-Kays, originally built for Chips Mohman, the record has a fantastic harshness and raw appeal. But Spencer flinches at the idea that someone would hear it as "lo-fi." "It's bad to get tagged as 'lo-fi.' Every record I've done, I've worked hard to get a good sound, and it's an intentional thing. With lo-fi, it's just like [he gestures at the interview tape-recorder] I'll turn this thing on and it sounds the way it does 'cause the amp was over here."

From the opening scream of “Wail,” *Worry*’s in-your-face sound might make more mainstream Blues Explosion fans’ (or their new major label’s) heart skip a few beats. “I don’t think I made this record just to buck against anybody who wanted to hear *Orange* part two or to buck against Capitol Records,” he offers. “I hope they don’t hear it that way, ’cause then they’re just dismissing the record.”

Spencer is in the midst of postpartum depression over *Worry*. “I’m in this period where I’m totally second-guessing it, and there’s all this big machinery gearing up. For me, it’s a more personal record. A dark one, too. Of course, I can see how a lot of people won’t see it the same way I do, because the way I sing a lot of the lyrics are indecipherable.” He lingers, then looks across the table meaningfully. “But nowhere on this record do I say ‘Blues Explosion.’” It’s still got shards of Iggy Stooze (“Rocketship”), Mick Jagger (“Firefly Child”), even a straight-up hard-core song (“Identify”), but it also has a looseness and funkiness to it that distinguish it from the rest—“Chicken Dog” even finds maestro Rufus Thomas barking (yep, Mr. Gordon, like a dog!) up the white-kid R&B tree. With the help of Dub Narcotic Sound System—alter-identity of Calvin from K Records and Beat Happening—the record stows a bit of *Experimental Remixes* feel on board in the form of “Fuck Shit Up,” a nifty “punk-dub” collage.

In the same way that Spencer’s stint with the Gibson Bros. strengthened his white-trash wannabe persona, the Blues Explosion’s cool-ass groove on *Worry* was deeply influenced by the spirit of R. L. Burnside, especially by hand-trained drummers, his son Calvin Jackson and grandson Cedric. Inspired by the Burnside record *Too Bad Jim*, Spencer invited the Mississippian to open for the Blues Explosion on a couple of tours (“We thought that’d be a weird bill, plus we wanted to see R. L.”), and inevitably the bluesman wound up onstage in Knoxville, jamming with the Yanks. One thing led to another, they made *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, and even planned to make the new Blues Explosion record together, an idea that went awry at the last minute. “I was definitely worried about whether this would be seen as something totally bogus,” he confesses. “It’s different from the John Lee Hooker / Canned Heat thing or those Howlin’ Wolf London Sessions. Those people—the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton—they were white kids who made no bones about it, they were trying to be blues bands, trying to play blues. With the Blues Explosion, that’s not what we’re trying to do at all! Those records are pretty boring, but this thing we did with R. L., it’s just weird. It’s out there!” On *Worry*, Spencer dedicates a tune: “R. L. Got Soul” takes off on the bluesman’s own “Snake Drive.” “I always like reading about how Sam Phillips tried to make an atmosphere in the studio where something could happen,” says Spencer. “We always tried

to work that way, but it wasn't until we hung out with R. L. that we had an idea how to get there."

"Sounds like shit!" Over lunch the next day, drummer Russell Simins extolls the production virtues of a reggae version of Chaka Khan's "Tell Me Something Good" on Lee Perry's *Return of the Super Ape*. "It's so great—in the face of the industry, a 'big fuck you!'" Guitarist Judah Bauer chimes in: "I like this record more than the others. It's got more of the blues influence, less pop. Playing with R. L. just reminded me of the raw, dirty guitar sound." He puts down his newest acquisition, a Dylan bootleg that he's been fondling. "But I still don't like that 'Fuck Shit Up,' man. Sounds so trendy." Simins counters: "It's a great song. It's good that you don't like it." The person who turned Spencer on to Stax, Otis Redding, et al., Simins is a seasoned aficionado—Stax house drummer Al Jackson is a hero, as well as the Meters' Zigaboo Modeliste and Led Zep whacker John Bonham. But on *Worry* the unreal time of R. L. Burnside's family clan is evident in the Simins touch. "It's raw shit!" he exclaims. "And we're into raw shit. It didn't make us change our ways or anything, it just reinforced what we already know. Made us happy to be that way."

If Spencer wouldn't move south, in spite of his love of the music, Burnside sees it from the other end of the barrel: "I wouldn't live in the cities, 'cause they done got too wild now. I had a father, uncle, and two brothers got killed in Chicago. I like the country living—you're out there by yourself."

Burnside's been out there by himself a long time. About to turn seventy, he's one of a small batch of living blues legends in the rolling, kudzu-covered hills of north Mississippi, along with Junior Kimbrough and Paul "Wine" Jones. Like many southerners, he seems to have a two-tiered personality. From the cover of *Ass Pocket*, you'd think him a raving, sex-crazed monster. Indeed, it's an offensive cartoon image by Derek Hess that seems to have rubbed everyone the wrong way: Burnside stands, his belt in hand, flanked by two bodacious blond babes, butts forward, a bottle of whiskey in the appropriate place. Spencer doesn't like it. Brown doesn't like it, and it took Burnside a week and a half to show it to his wife, Alice, who he describes as "kind of the quiet type, she don't like that dirty stuff." Whose idea was it? Matthew Johnson's, Burnside's manager and the proprietor of Fat Possum Records, the label that helped bring him out of backwoods obscurity. (Johnson's first concept reportedly was to have Spencer and Burnside both in a chariot pulled by naked women!) To meet R. L., one finds a different man altogether: he's gentle, soft-spoken, looking out through eyes marbled with blood veins, speaking through a sweet smile despite teeth that stray different directions. Spencer warns: "Sure, he's a

country gentleman, polite and everything. But you hear stories. He's someone you don't want to fuck with—that guy's a motherfucker!"

Born in Lafayette County, Mississippi, in a no-longer-extant place called Hermantown, Burnside grew up in the hill country, raising cotton and corn. As a youngster he did his share of sharecropping, working on plantations, later driving cotton pickers and combines. He's had brushes with the city, too, each time in search of more lucrative work—as a teenager in the late '40s, he moved to Chicago for a couple of years, working at a glass factory and carefully learning from the man who married his first cousin, Muddy Waters; in the early '50s, just when rock 'n' roll was finding its feet in Memphis, he relocated there two separate times to work at a steel mill.

"When I was about seventeen, I started playing a bit of the blues, just out at house parties," says the born storyteller, adjusting his Elvis-stamp baseball cap.

I tried harmonica, couldn't get that to work. Beat on the picnic drums—I can do that. But then I said I'm gonna play the guitar. My wife and all her sisters, they used to make me mad. I'd pick up the guitar and go to play, wishin' she'd go to her mother's house, 'cause they'd all go to laughin'. Then one Saturday night, Son Kibbler—old guy, played guitar, didn't have no records but he was a good'n—he was playing at one of those country suppers. I asked him if I could play the guitar, he said: "Yeah, Burnside, yeah." My wife: "You mean you gonna make a fool out of yourself in front of all these people? You can't play no guitar good enough." I was playing stuff behind John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins then, you know. People hadn't heard none of that kind of stuff. People in the other room gamblin' and stuff come in saying: "Who is that playin' that guitar now!?"

Burnside laughs: "For about a year, they only wanted me there!"

Watching Burnside's trio, it's clear how the chain of command works: Kenny Brown scopes R. L.'s left hand like a hawk, waiting for any sign of an unexpected change, and the drums follow suit. "I have to watch him," explains Brown. "Sometimes he'll get in the groove and let it goooo. And sometimes it gets really chaotic. I think that's why he likes my slide playing, 'cause I get kinda crazy sometimes." There are no twelve-bar simplicities here; it's feel music, uneven, moving with the master's decision-making know-how. Aeons of experience are in his hands: he sang spirituals in church, played every weekend with Mississippi Fred McDowell, his main mentor, and frequently went to see Howlin' Wolf, who lived nearby, with great guitarist Willie Mitchell accompanying. And the propulsive rhythms that characterize his sound are infused with the fife-and-drum tradition, the "picnic" drums R. L. once played, that

are part of the hill country's unique musical landscape. Calvin and Cedric both played with Othar Turner and his Rising Star Fife & Drum Band, while Kenny Brown recalls being the only white family on his road, watching the weekend bands across from his house: "Look over the hill, see the dust risin' from the cars comin' in, people dancing, see the light over there, hear the fife and drum going all night," he says, mesmerically. "I guess I had it drilled into my head."

"I did a lot of stagin' on plantations when I was plowin' mules," Burnside remembers. "That's what people placed the blues on—somebody had something he wanted to tell his boss man, scared to tell him, couldn't tell him but he could sing about it. I started at a time when black people couldn't go in the same place white people was. But still, the man I was working for, me and his son go out on the weekend, get drunk, stay out all weekend, didn't think anything about it."

Playing live in juke joints and house parties their whole lives, many down-home blues players never get into the studio, but finally, by the mid-'80s, Burnside had managed to record a single for the High Water label and a couple of LPs for Swing Master. An appearance in Robert Palmer's screen version of his book *Deep Blues* broke him into a less regionally confined sphere, and rightly so—his rough-and-ready style of droning, rolling, rhythm-based music appealed to a worldwide blues listenership tired of the post-funk slickness that infiltrated the genre since the '70s.

Signing with Fat Possum, Burnside put out *Back Luck City*, then, in 1994 the critically heralded *Too Bad Jim*, which became part of a potent deal Fat Possum struck with Capricorn, a deal now being settled in court. Burnside tours regularly, in the United States, Europe, even Japan, though any Sunday he's off the road you'll find him playing at Junior Kimbrough's joint in Holly Springs.

"When I first heard 'em, I thought they were into some other country-western style," Burnside says of the Blues Explosion. "We opened for them, out on tour with them for two weeks, twice. We'd be in the dressing room, drinking, he'd have me telling stories—you know how Jon is. 'Man, we oughta make a record out of that!' I said: 'You know nobody wants to buy all that.' 'You don't know, that's what people want!' he said. They sing all kinds of stuff. 'Fuck you,' you know, all that kind of stuff," he chuckles bemusedly. "We did it in one day, up in a fishing and hunting cabin up there. I asked Jon: 'What we gonna call it?' He said: 'I'll think of a name,' called me back, said: 'We're gonna call it *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*!' Burnside belly-laughs, as if he still doesn't believe it. "But it's a number one seller—young ladies in Sweden askin' me to autograph it for 'em! I say: 'That's *A Hip Pocket of Whiskey*.'"



In fact, the record's songs and stories are spotted with the kinds of expletives that are Spencer's bread and butter. Brown says he's disappointed he can't play it for his mother, but everyone again points at Matt Johnson, who apparently egged them on in the hunting lodge studio. "The swearing, we'd begun doing that onstage, because I'll swear anywhere, and I'm certainly yelling a lot. Matt really wanted that. He was out to have something with that vulgarity. He was out to shock people." Burnside shakes his head: "It's so much cussin' on there, man, it's like playin' the dozens with somebody. That stuff tickles 'em. It doesn't bother me, now that I know they like it. I was afraid I'd have a bad name from it, 'cause I've always been sitting around drinkin', private, with a bunch of men. But it's sellin' better than any album I've got out so far yet!"

"The greatest thing about playing with R. L.," concludes Spencer, "is seeing the Blues Explosion audience, who don't listen to blues and certainly haven't heard R. L. Burnside, totally digging it!" It may have a tinge of revivalism, a touch of fathers-and-sons, and its share of problematic trappings, but in this respect the team of Burnside and Spencer is driven by sheer enthusiasm, without irony, posture, or pose. That good feeling of knowing he's opening ears to something true and blue: a task Spencer seems genuinely serious about.

[1996]

## BEFORE AND AFTER PUNK

### The Comp as Teaching Tool

The point of a music compilation can be atavistic: return to the primitive form of the mix-tape. Assembling a mix-tape, for my high school friend Phil Kirk and me, meant more than just throwing together a batch of songs we liked. It had an underlying sense of challenge, an exploratory and even analytic aspect. Putting songs next to one another changed them. It opened up unknown facets, drew comparisons and contrasts, made you hear them—and, if done well, other things also—in a new light.

Three basics of mix-tape construction: creativity, competition, pedagogy. Phil and I spent hours sweating the collections, hand-decorating the cassette cases, naming each mix. And we tried to outdo one another. (Truth be told, his were always better.) We had different styles—his were more fastidiously organized and held to a specific point; mine were wilder and had a tendency to move tangentially. Would have made perfect sense if you knew us. But the drive to compete was always there. Each revelatory mix set the bar a bit higher, made us think of new approaches and parameters. He might make a mix featuring only twee new British bands, like those on Postcard, a Scottish label that we both loved. I tended to try to force together unlike things, but might be inspired by the narrowness of his focus and try to beat him at his own game.

The pedagogical angle is the hidden agenda of the mix-tape. It's got to stay in the shadows, we know, because the academic is anathema to the anti-authoritarian; outmaneuvering authority is a central driving component of home compilation. Juxtaposition of songs is in some way driven by a latent desire to experiment with putting them together and then to show someone else what you've discovered, to share the result. A new emotion, unforeseen connection, or jarring discontinuity—all of these are about going public with something you've noticed and insisting that it's worth checking out. It turns all mix-makers into teachers, if only in the sense that they teach themselves in the process.

Comp-as-mix-tape. Let's say it's like a position paper or a debate, an argument in favor of a specific line of thought. The line is the sequence of tracks and the transitions between them; the comp should be judged on the quality of those moves, the enlightenment provided by its baton passes, as well as the sheer surprise of its contents. Exhibit A: *Sick on You! / One Way Spit!*, the third installation in Soul Jazz's "Punk 45" series. Clear thesis for volume three: look for the germs of the abrasive new music somewhere between the death of hippy subculture and the ultimate codification of punk rock. Writer and punk scholar Jon Savage, who compiled and annotated the collection, details it in a descriptive subtitle: "After the love & before the revolution, proto-punk 1969–76."

This is not the pedestrian origin story. The best-known players are mostly absent—no Stooges, no MC5, no Velvet Underground, no New York Dolls, no Voidoids, no Heartbreakers, no Patti Smith Group, no Monks, no Ramones, no Deviants, no Kilburn and the High Roads, no Dr. Feelgood, no T. Rex, no Bowie. This investigation acknowledges those pioneers but fills out the story in a captivating manner, scouring the globe for glimmers of the forthcoming froth. The two preceding volumes, *Kill the Hippies! / Kill Yourself* and *There Is No Such Thing as Society*, surveyed, respectively, U.S. punk and post-punk and its British equivalent, holding each of these scenes separate. On *Sick on You! / One Way Spit!*, the proto-punk world is one, making for fascinating transitions such as the one linking Death, Detroit's all-black pre-punk masters, with the Hammersmith Gorillas, London's three-chord traditionalists. Contrasting great innovators with an amped-up bar band is instructive because it shows that these approaches were not exclusive, but complementary parts needed in the construction of punk. The same goes for the move from Cleveland's legendary electric eels to the Count Bishops; it's a link between a liberating anarchic nastiness and a bluesy come-on. The most surprising turn is probably the inclusion of "Makes Your Mouth Go Funny," a very early Cabaret Voltaire track, recorded in 1974; again, it's enlightening to consider how the nascent punk and industrial genres overlapped.

The earliest track is an outlier from 1969, "(I Wanna Love You Like a) Mad Dog" by Stavely Makepeace, an utterly UK creation bridging psychedelia, Kinks, and bubblegum pop. There's a tendency to reduce punk to drums, bass, guitar, voice, but there are plenty of alternative axes to grind on this collection. Rob Jo Star Band, from Montpelier, France, opens up space in their beautiful, sparse sound for analog synth, as does the glammy Portsmouth band Hector. The Canadian band Simply Saucer incorporate guitar-friendly electronics and theremin on their seven-minute-long, Velvets-esque "Here

Come the Cyborgs (Part 2),” segueing perfectly into L.A.’s Zolar X, ultrageeky sci-fi rocker “Space Age Love.”

There are a few familiar faces nestled within the obscurity. Joe Strummer sings on the pre-Clash “Keys to Your Heart,” by the 103ers, and Arthur Kane of the New York Dolls leads the post-Dolls outfit the Killer Kane Band on “Mr. Cool.” Biggest surprises: “Hit & Run” by Jack Ruby, a New York band featuring Boris Policeband on electric violin, and the heavy, Iggy-like power of Baltimore’s George Brigman, whose “Jungle Rot” leads so perfectly into Death’s “Politicians in My Eyes” you’d imagine there was a trans-American proto-punk pipeline. Any good comp has to pay special attention to its opener—first impressions are lasting impressions. Starting with “One Way Spit” by Debris, from Chickasha, Oklahoma, sets quite a stage, an array of electronics and slide guitar augmented by eight-inch circular saw. Never heard of them; should have heard of them. This genealogy of punk digs for roots planted more widely and diversely than other surveys have, not so much rewriting the history as complicating and enriching it, a welcome corrective.

If *Sick On You! / One Way Spit!* covers the run-up to punk, you’ll need to turn to *Messthetics* for the full story on its aftermath. Speaking of correctives, experience the work of gumshoe Messthetician Chuck Warner, who has compiled and released ten volumes chronicling punk’s diluvium, with a specific parameter: do it yourself. As a child of the post-punk years who worked at a record store in 1979 and eagerly awaited the Adam and the Ants debut, *Dirk Wears White Sox*, I take personal pride in my knowledge of the milieu, but Mr. Warner uncovers such a stockpile of British homemade, self-released music, mostly issued on singles or cassettes between 1978 and 1983, that I’m pinching myself in wonder. From the Messthetics perspective, there are major labels and then there are “major minors.” Majors like EMI and CBS got involved in punk pretty quickly, trying to cash in on the new wave; in Warner’s worldview, this warped the basic punk principle, which was in favor of autonomy and against authority. But even the well-meaning major minors, like Stiff, Chiswick, Step Forward, and Small Wonder, represented something at odds with the tenants of DIY. With the Buzzcocks’ *Spiral Scratch* EP as a mythological creation point, issued on their own New Hormones imprint, a cast of wayward characters putting out records by themselves grew exponentially.

The Messthetics series proceeds geographically, compiling in a tight but illuminating way the age of autodidacticism and the seizure of means of production. Along with CDs dedicated to Scotland, South Wales, the Midlands, and the South Coast, three volumes focused on London are astonishing, full of quirkiness and ajangle guitars, lots of tuneless singing, much of it wonderful,



and other evidence of embraced amateurism. Swell Maps, whose music was released on the major minor Rough Trade, are grandfathered in as progenitors of DIY, and their wildly all-encompassing approach does set the perimeter of the Messthetic aesthetic, which involves song form as well as experimental and electronic music, noise, and tape music. Captain Beefheart's name comes up often as a point of comparison, though nothing here really sounds Beefhearty; I think only of the Los Angeles Free Music Society as an approximate American equivalent (try to find *The Lowest Form of Music*, LAFMS's ear-opening ten-CD box set, now out of print). Featured artists include such zero-name-value groups as Mut Hutterers, Steve Treatment, George Harassment, Scrotum Poles, Tea Set, Dry Rib, and the Homosexuals.

These compilations are assembled with nerdier attention to detail, but expert sequencing and a constant unearthing of the unexpected leavens Warner's pedagogy, returns them to their original form, as mix-tape treasures that tell the story of people making sounds in the privacy of their own imagination,

without any grander ambitions of fame or fortune. The joy of play, pure glee at rediscovering the wheel, but finding it rolling along shaped and sized and colored according to a personal sensibility. Perhaps most enlightening in this respect is a volume concerning the Manchester Musicians Collective, previously unknown to me. The MMC itself shows what rich effluvia emerged from the post-punk delta, expressing affinities to the more experimentally canted London Musicians Collective, but with members that included A Certain Ratio, Spherical Objects, and Joy Division, and a sensibility deeply inspired by the fuck-you esprit of Mark E. Smith and his group the Fall.

There's something infectious about Messthetics. It's something I remember from the period, from first encounters with Prefab Sprout, Orange Juice, Kleenex, Echo and the Bunnymen, and the Teardrop Explodes. A spur, an incitement. I think it had to do with a romantic notion of what was going on across the ocean, in England, which seemed so exotic to a teenager in Iowa City. My friend Phil and I talked about making a single; in the end we stuck to mix-tapes. It was left to Phil's little brother, Brian Kirk, the quiet one who kept to his room, to go on to establish Bus Stop, one of the most important DIY labels in the United States. Bus Stop issued some seventy seven-inch singles of gorgeous self-produced indie pop, a post-punk tsunami crashing on the inland shores of Middle America, perfect fodder for future mix-tapes.

[2014]

## RAYMOND SCOTT

### Cradle of Electronica

*He turned on the car radio and that same feeling returned. Those electronic sounds did something strange to him, touched some subconscious place in his brain, made him squirm. Made his gums itch.*

When Ren & Stimpy licensed Raymond Scott's music from Columbia in 1992, only aficionados recognized his name. But he had already been an invisible force for almost sixty years, and some of his compositions indisputably rank among the most influential and durable melodies in American popular culture. Through Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons, his work continues to reach an inestimable sea of listeners. Quirky, memorable themes like "Powerhouse," which accompanies numerous automation sequences in classic Warner Bros. cartoons, arguably helped shape the postwar musical aesthetic as much as anything Elvis or the Beatles did. But rather than traveling on a public pop image, Scott's aesthetic spread subliminally, disguised as an innocuous soundtrack for animated animals.

Born Harry Warnow, son of a New York music-shop owner, in 1910, Scott became known in jazz circles in the mid-'30s as the leader of a studio quintet for CBS radio. A pioneer of zany pre-postmodern jump-cutting pastiche, he composed novelty pieces, including "The Girl with the Light Blue Hair," "Business Men's Bounce," and "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals," which appeared first on 78s, then on a series of ten-inch 33 rpm records, on Columbia. He fit somewhere between Spike Jones—whose vaudevillian City Slickers covered "Powerhouse"—and celebrated cartoon composer Carl Stalling.

In fact, Stalling adapted about twenty of Scott's melodies for use in his scores, and in 1943 Warner Bros. bought Scott's publishing outright. But Scott never wrote for cartoons himself and was in truth so indifferent to his compositions' use in this context that his widow and his ex-wife only recently learned that such pop icons as Bugs, Daffy, and Porky had danced to music from his pen.

It could have been any one of them—the Orb, Aphex Twin, Future Sound of London. He didn't hear them as individual bands, but as an amorphous cultural trend. A coterie of featureless android buzz makers. Experts could tell the difference, distinguish one repeating bleeper from another, but he was no expert. His zeal for the music wasn't aesthetic appreciation. If he thought about it, he didn't really like the music. His response came from another region altogether.

One of Scott's greatest achievements in jazz was as sociopolitical as it was musical: in 1942, he formed the first racially mixed house orchestra for CBS, seating tenor sax legend Ben Webster, trumpeter Charlie Shavers, and drummer Specs Powell alongside white musicians like pianist Johnny Guarnieri and even Frank Sinatra. This was especially significant because it brought the interracialness of the groups of Benny Goodman (with Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton) and Joe Sullivan's Cafe Society Band right into the lap of a media institution. Unfortunately, this experiment in equal opportunity self-destructed in 1945.

Scott's music continues to infiltrate the popular ear, more actively in the last five years. The producers of *The Simpsons* have adapted some of his compositions, and a 1992 compilation, *The Music of Raymond Scott: Reckless Nights and Turkish Twilights* (Columbia), unearthed some of his long out-of-print original jazz material.

Scott's eclecticism and orientalism are also perfect totems for downtown New York genre-splicers like John Zorn and Phillip Johnston, the latter of whom included a version of "Powerhouse" on his *Big Trouble* (Black Saint) in 1993 and clearly has Scott's narrative style in mind in the colorful, story-boarded tunes he writes and arranges for his midsize ensembles. Clarinetist Don Byron went so far as to devote a third of his 1996 release *Bug Music* (Nonesuch) to Scott's compositions, situating them among pieces by Duke Ellington and John Kirby. And Scott's impact can be detected far afield from jazz—strange bedfellows Devo, Gwar, Soul Coughing, They Might Be Giants, and the Kronos Quartet have all covered him. If you measure the tree by the spread of its fruit, the secret society of Scott is a towering oak indeed.

*Others must feel the same, he figured, judging by the popularity of the new electronic twiddlers. As a kid, he'd felt the stirrings when listening to his brother's Kraftwerk and Fripp and Eno records; he sat quietly while the older kids argued their merits, trying to convince themselves of the timeless value and innovative qualities of robot rock.*

But while Scott covertly, almost anonymously, implanted his music in the memory banks of several generations via cartoons, few knew his true master plan. Probably Scott himself didn't even know it. *Soothing Sounds for Baby*, a



three-record series he made for Epic in 1962, was the culmination of a secretive but extremely intense engagement with electronic music.

An early colleague of Robert Moog, Scott started building his own electronic instruments—prototypical synthesizers, a keyboard-activated theremin called a Clavivox, a device for composing film scores called a videola—in the late '40s, and this activity would earn him a five-year salaried position in research and development at Motown Records. But as he himself later admitted, Scott was neurotic about his work. He labored in near isolation at his elaborate home studio on Long Island, refused to patent or market most of his inventions, and asked Moog not to discuss his ideas with anyone. As late as the '70s, Scott was head of his own electronics research company, but he suffered a debilitating stroke in the late '80s and died in 1994.

It was the instrument he called the electronium—the prototype of which was recently purchased by Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh—for which he should probably be logged in the electronic-music history books; at present, he's primarily known in that arena for having bought one of Moog's first commercially produced synthesizers—two years after the *Soothing Sounds* recordings—for use in some TV jingles. Fifteen years in the making and functioning completely without computer help, the electronium was probably the first musical sequencer, allowing a composer to repeat and vary a selection of notes or sounds ad infinitum. Sound like the backbone of electronica? That's right—but long before digital sample and hold became a viable pop production process, Scott was making records with the electronium. Records for babies. What better place to start a movement than in the cradle?

*He felt the pangs intensifying, as if the noodly, repetitive sounds were some lost language he'd known but forgotten, a dialect discarded or repressed. He'd tried to deny it, cultivating an interest in punk, then chamber music, and finally acoustic jazz, trying to get as far from the synthetic sounds as his intellect would carry him. But he was drawn to electronic music like a bug to a zapper.*

*Soothing Sounds for Baby* was released in collaboration with the New Haven-based Gesell Institute, a highly esteemed, still active parents-aid organization that was fifteen years old at the time. Gesell provided the “special informative booklet,” and Scott provided the music—very, very strange music. Synthesized music. Unprecedented music.

Bear in mind that Walter (now Wendy) Carlos didn't release *Switched-On Bach* until 1968. Those sorts of hyperbolic electronic sounds weren't yet circulating widely in pop culture, aside from occasional theremin glisses in '50s sci-fi flicks. The word “synthesizer” didn't even really take hold in the new-music

lexicon until 1965. Yet today some freaky ambient producer could plausibly pretend he'd concocted the kitschy, crackpot sound world on *Soothing Sounds*, call it "dub pacifier," and become an instant underground smash. And any forward-thinking, backward-looking DJ could have a field day with the fourteen minutes of looping tones on "Lullaby," the first track on volume one, designated for infants aged one to six months.

In truth, it's difficult to imagine conscientious parents buying these "aural toys." Nearly admissible as kids' music, volume one's "Nursery Rhyme" has a simple melody that recalls "Three Blind Mice" (which later became a popular dub reggae motif), but it's backed by a penetrating high-pitched peep that pokes out like a really vindictive cricket—not likely to calm the savage newborn. On the second volume, designed for ages six months to one year, the short "Tempo Block" could be a fab new hit just as it is, its electro-bongo loop sounding uncannily like rhythm tracks from Sly & the Family Stone's *Fresh*. And echoes—premonitions?—of Kraftwerk waft through "The Happy Whistler," its interminable synth-bass ostinato and shifting harmonies backed by a facsimile of sheet-metal percussion.

As volume two proceeds, things get even weirder—imagine mom and dad returning to the nursery to find the record they put on for little Johnny has turned to a shifting loop of scraping and grating noises, as if someone had contact miked the activity of the squirrels in the attic. The eighteen-minute "Toy Typewriter" sounds more like Ralf Wehowsky or Oval or Jim O'Rourke than anything you'd find in the children's section at Tower today.

*The three albums all but climbed into his hands. He was preparing his parents' home for a yard sale when he discovered, nestled in a moldy box between hopelessly scratched copies of Carmina Burana and Dave Brubeck's Jazz Goes to College, a three-record set called Soothing Sounds for Baby. Without knowing exactly why, he took the albums out of the sell pile. The big-eyed, beaming infants on the gatefold sleeves just rang a bell—a decidedly electronic bell. Upon leaving he tucked them into his backpack like three little papooses.*

The three volumes of *Soothing Sounds* have been reissued in all their nutting glory on the Dutch Basta label (which has also released several records of a group called the Beau Hunks covering Scott's jazz tunes). Though the originals reportedly sold only a few thousand copies, there's no telling how far their reach actually was; it's conceivable that they warped—er, soothed—the minds of untold tens of thousands of toddlers, setting the subliminal stage for wave upon wave of electro-pablum and synth exploration alike.

*As the needle hit the scarred vinyl, the sounds floated him back to a distant neonatality. The memory became clearer with each bleep, but it was still confused, matted,*

compounded, overlaid with decades of later electronic music. The piercing high melody of “Tin Soldier,” from volume three (for one year to eighteen months), rang out in his apartment, keyboard lines slapping back like something from an Augustus Pablo dub plate, a three-note electronic drum tattoo beating a new hole in his head. How many of us are out there, he wondered, the secret children of Dr. Raymond Scott?

[1998]



**SIX**

MELODIC LINE AND  
TONE COLOR



# PETER BRÖTZMANN

## Graphic Equalizer

The word “design” has a stiff connotation. It suggests predetermination, a plan or schematic, something plotted rather than expressed. It’s a cool term, nothing improvised or aleatoric about it. Indeed, design feels about as remote from Peter Brötzmann’s aesthetic as one could get. One of the most important and influential figures in improvised music, Brötzmann is a far cry from cool. Playing saxophone or clarinet, his music can be volcanic, explosive, tender, melancholy; his music is emotive and pliant, not calculating and staid. As a visual artist, Brötzmann explores raw human images, textures, and associations. He often uses discarded materials like paper from tea and fish wrappers, coffee, tarpaper, feathers. Hardly the normal arsenal of *Mad Men*, his is a decidedly nongraphic battery of materials and techniques.

But Brötzmann has worked in graphic design as long as he’s been an artist and even longer than he’s been making music. In the late 1950s he focused on design as an art student in Wuppertal, Germany; even before that, Brötzmann worked in an advertising firm while living in nearby Remscheid, where he was born. Again, in the mid-1960s, after he had dedicated himself to the public pursuit of free music, he supported himself by working in his father-in-law’s ad agency, doing graphic design.

All along, as an adjunct to his music and the music of others, Brötzmann has made graphics: album and CD covers, posters, and flyers. Early on, Brötzmann acquired a large lithography stone, from which he produced early posters for concerts like his first trios, quartets, and a Charles Mingus concert he helped organize in Wuppertal. He simultaneously made art lithographs and promotional printworks. On a label he called BRÖ, he self-published his first two LPs, *For Adolphe Sax* (1967) and his best-known record, *Machine Gun* (1968); they sported hand-silkscreened covers designed by Brötzmann, as did his first releases a few years later on the fledgling label associated with the Berlin-based collective called Free Music Production (FMP).



Peter Brötzmann (photo: Michael Jackson)

Brötzmann's design concept, which often incorporates a unique set of block-letter fonts that he devised and fabricated in art school, set the visual agenda for FMP. Over the course of thirty-five years he made dozens of posters for the organization, finding novel ways to announce its annual festivals: the Workshop Freie Musik and the Total Music Meeting. His own graphic voice was clearly infused into the overall look and feel of FMP's productions. The thirty-seven full-length LPs and CDs that Brötzmann recorded for FMP invariably utilized jackets and booklets of his design. Some covers featured his artwork, some used only his block lettering, some were simple and direct, some quite complex, others even used backward text for the track titles.

On each of his two mid-1970s LPs, *Outspan 1* and *Outspan 2*, Brötzmann took for a cover image a sheet of aluminum—one of his favorite art materials in the '60s—that he had distressed and worked into an abstract landscape; below this, the title is hand-stamped and details are handwritten. On *Alarm*, an LP from 1981, he reproduced a fragment of the score—a graphic score, in fact—as the key image, literally showing the directions that the band had for making the music. Brötzmann has used graphic scores over the years, in some ways harkening back to formative experiences with the Fluxus movement, including performances in flux festivals in Holland. The image for Brötzmann's *Machine Gun* makes use of an appropriated icon of a gunner and a similarly détourned fragment of text from a dictionary; the title refers to the nickname trumpeter Don Cherry gave to the saxophonist in the mid-1960s. Brötzmann designed (and produced in limited edition) two different sets of playing cards, *Signs* and *Images*, which can be used by any number of players to create structured improvisations.

In recent years, Brötzmann has issued a staggering number of CDs, many of them designed by him. A renewed interest in the medium of the vinyl LP has given him a larger format—twelve by twelve inches—and he's designed some remarkable hand-silkscreened records on his revived BRÖ imprint, including a gorgeous duet with late drummer Walter Perkins, *The Ink Is Gone* (2002). For his seventieth birthday, which was celebrated in 2011 with a four-day festival in Austria, Brötzmann worked on graphics for an elaborate five-CD box for the Trost label, one of his most ambitious commercial designs.

In his graphic endeavors, Brötzmann has in fact made a body of work consistent with his music and his art, an oeuvre that undermines the presumption that design is inherently rigid. More than just the decoration of information, Brötzmann's five decades of design bear witness to a sophisticated, delicate,





Poster designed by Bröttsmann.

and earthy sensibility and a dogged sense of internal logic. His record covers and posters are passionate and thoughtful, playful and brutal, basic and human. Investigated in depth, they suggest ways that the graphic arts can be improvised and design can operate in a vividly flexible manner, drawing together and scattering and reassembling all the signs and symbols of a given project.

[2013]

# ALBERT OEHLER

## Bionic Painting

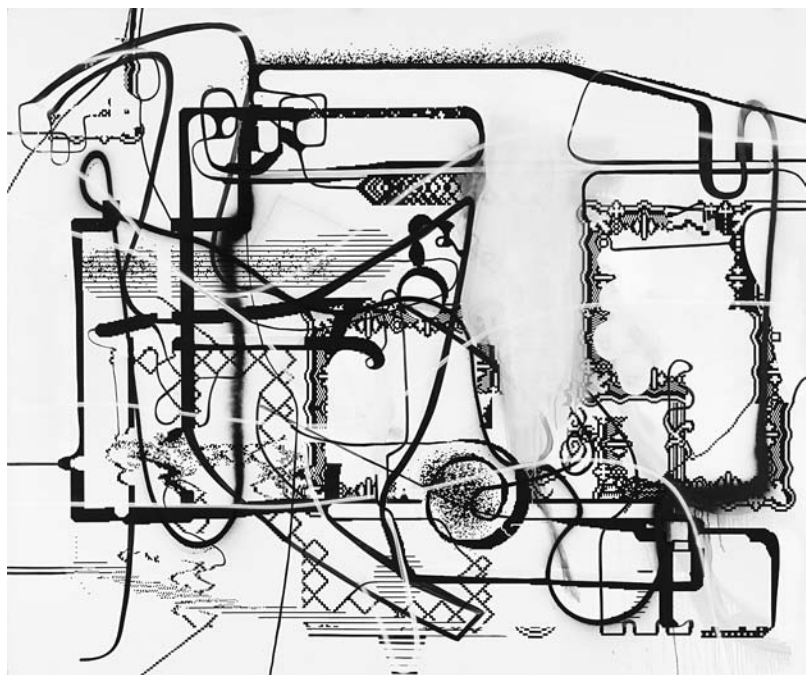
John Corbett: What was the genesis of your computer paintings?

Albert Oehlen: The words “computer art” or “computer painting” got stuck in my head. I was carrying it with me, wondering what it would be. In 1990 I bought a laptop from Texas Instruments. I did some noodling drawings on it, learning what I would get with an amount of pixels that have such a low resolution. After that I still didn’t know what would come next, but it was logical to blow it up to the average format I was working on, around two meters, and I would have this silkscreened onto canvas. First I asked around how to get rid of the stairs and squares, but when I gave up I thought it would be funny, that the machine gets only so far and it has to be completed by the human hand. So smoothing the edges and converting the stairs of pixels into curves was the first treatment.

JC: You’ve related the computer works to the early synthesizer solos by Sun Ra on his 1969/70 Saturn LP *My Brother the Wind*.

AO: What makes a jazz musician buy a synthesizer? It’s a very interesting question. What would Sun Ra have thought when he first bought a Moog synthesizer? A jazz musician should not expect too much, because he feels superior to technical effects. It doesn’t happen too often that jazz musicians start to use lots of electronics. That was what I was wondering, what I wanted. To have an alien new thing, not knowing what I would do. A handicap, maybe. I was definitely not thinking of working on the frontier of hi-tech possibilities or great effects, but was more thinking about what problems it would cause and how it would make me think and work differently. When Sun Ra was testing the instrument on this record he was shameless, going for the extremes, for the effects. He’s playing the instrument, not the music.

JC: Exploring the instrument.



Albert Oehlen, *Ohne Titel*, 2005/1994, silkscreen print, acrylic paint and oil on canvas, 200 × 240 cm (image courtesy of the artist)

- AO: Yes, playing what is special about the instrument. He plays it in a way that is right in its time; it is completely evident when it is, historically. So it is a new instrument and you hear what's new about it. He's demonstrating the instrument. It's not smart, making the best out of it, like Joe Zawinul or Stevie Wonder. That is, in a way, what I think is happening in my paintings. The limits of the time when they were made are always visible because of the bad resolution. It shows in a rough way that it is a computer image.
- JC: As I see it, looking at them with fifteen years' hindsight, the elegance of the images has been revealed over time, but the crudeness, brutality, and humor are still there.
- AO: It's an electroacoustic thing because it blends the handmade with the computer. The electronic gets corrupted by my hand; it makes you flow in and out of the computer thing. As if the computer still needs the human hand. It's a heightened technology, but it's not good enough. It still needs humans. That's the statement of that procedure, of those paintings.
- JC: The cyborg aspect is an interesting connection to Sun Ra, the mixing of the human and inhuman. I have the sense that they were both a huge

break from your previous work and at the same time they continued some of the deeper issues.

AO: They are linked to what I did before, because in the color paintings I made before I wanted to avoid composition so I reacted to what was there, I would bend elements, make them longer, always knowing what to do with certain parts, with picture elements, a certain repertoire of things to do, which would keep me away from composing the picture. These pictures came out of that, in a way. This treatment has a parallel to music. You could say the printed lines are the score and my hand bends it and smooths it and moves it in another direction, like a musician might interpret a composition. The computer drawing is like the chart, and then I “play” the drawings.

JC: That reminds me of those “improvisation” paintings by Kandinsky from the early teens. He didn’t worry about unifying the whole picture, but attended to a particular place in it, moving across the painting passage by passage, improvising it rather than composing it.

AO: Kandinsky was the pioneer, sure. Also he was more limited. Now we have many more resources to use than he did.

JC: What reaction did you get from the public to these paintings?

AO: They got ignored till not long ago. People took it too seriously, thinking that I wanted to make hi-tech art and that it was banal.

JC: Those images look different now than they did at the time. They don’t just look like a mistake, a bad printout. In a way I think we can see more about them than we could then because we’re not so concerned with the functionality of the image.

AO: Yes.

JC: You didn’t only make black-and-white ones.

AO: I made some colored ones, but basically the same but with more stuff in it. The program, the computer was more advanced. They look nice, but they’re not as interesting to talk about as the black-and-white ones. I was a bit more “free” in them and got quite close to the color oil paintings.

JC: By containing all these contradictions, you express a dialectical relationship between the manual and the electronic.

AO: It is bionic painting.

JC: That has a ’70s ring to it, like *The Six Million Dollar Man*. But they do have a very ambiguous historical reference.

AO: In the ’90s there were no new ideas about how to make an abstract painting anymore. Except that project “this also could be a picture,” which thousands of artists are still working on. The history of abstraction seemed

to be finished at that moment. I think I found a new way to extend the history.

JC: It also seems to have a lot to do with the specific status of the gesture in painterly abstraction.

AO: Yes, but it is not gestural painting. It is more *about* gestures. They have their own logic, determined by the length of the arm, the distance to the canvas, et cetera. The gesture is different if you do it with the angle of the hand, the fingers, the arm, and if you do it slow or fast. That all is completely different in the first phase, when I prepare the image on the computer. There the mouse speed becomes a parameter for the quality of the curve. The lines look different depending on how it's done. That all gets perverted: what is small gets big in the transfer; I work with the computer, the arm, and then the hand again. It makes the whole thing artificial, not natural. Later, I also used collage techniques: cutting out, reversing, moving elements. I make the painting like a hairdresser. I don't have the slightest respect for it until it is completely my creation. The "natural" characteristics of the procedure or the elements mean nothing to me. The bad resolution of the machine damages the authenticity of the drawing, and later the hand, in turn, destroys the authenticity of the computer drawing. So by working by hand on it, it is more artificial than it was before.

JC: Why did you want to stop doing the computer paintings?

AO: The computer got better and better, and it now comes close to "real" painting. So the handicap of the low resolution is nearly gone. That's why I work almost exclusively with the original motifs. There are like ten or fifteen motifs, specific images drawn on the computer, not more. I made versions using these, a couple of paintings from each; maybe some motifs only have one version, while some have six. And after a while everything was done, all the ideas in them were used up. And I didn't want to fake the aesthetics, to produce them artificially.

JC: It seems like the computer paintings also have a connection to the works that use letters. Those, too, are black-and-white and they allow you to twist the shapes and associations of different fonts, font sizes, and font weights. It's similar to the way you treat the abstract lines in the computer works.

AO: That's an interesting point. I try to bring together different reasons that a line might go a certain way. Say it spirals around a particular way—that line has different parameters. In my work it's a mix-up of different motivations for the line. When I was thinking about how to bring new

elements, I thought that typeface design has its own logic, which is a completely different thing. If you see one side of a letter, for example, it has its own logic, its own aesthetic, and it's very minimal, but you see the sense in it, even though it's only maybe a line and a curve. That sense of the different possible motivations is also there in an aggressive mark made in an abstraction. The line could have gone that direction for more than one reason. These different worlds get together in these paintings. I now discover in de Kooning's paintings more and more elements from his graphic designer background, and others that come from his interest in women's bodies. The interesting question is, if you imagine an erotic drawing of a woman's body, it still transports a lot of erotic impulse. How much can you strip it down? When will that impulse be gone? I think he wanted to investigate that question. Most of his paintings are not as spontaneous as they pretend to be. He worked on the lines; he was conscious, careful about them. He tried to see what happens when you take away much of the literal material from an erotic painting. And that problematic is similar to the one I gave myself.

JC: That connects you to him in a methodological, rather than stylistic way.

AO: That helps me to understand de Kooning's work better and to value his work more than I did before. He did that complex thinking so early, which is pretty fantastic.

[2009]

## ALBERT OEHLÉN

### Mangy—A Conversation and a Playlist

John Corbett: Let's talk about punk. I've heard you described as a punk painter and read people saying that punk was a big influence on you, but this has never seemed accurate to me. It's either a misunderstanding of punk or of you. Or both. My way of understanding punk, in its original form, was in two ways, either representing a kind of idealization of amateurism—the kind of never-played-their-instruments-before idea—or on the other hand an embrace of something like total nihilism. Those two notions don't seem very close to the heart of your art to me.<sup>1</sup>

Albert Oehlen: Punk is like skiffle. Nobody wants to hear it, but it's supposed to be the root of something good. Idealization of amateurism translated into art would not have interested me. The democratic aspect of it is nice, but that exists already. Everyone is allowed to paint. That only gets dangerous when it hangs in museums, but as they don't want to show garbage infinitely an additional thought should be involved. Besides that, one expects a special freshness from the amateurs. So what. It's interesting to me when Sven-Åke Johansson improvising falls into poetry and does things where you don't know anymore if he, as a Swede, is insecure in his German language or if he just improvises the grammar as well. Nihilism doesn't say much to me either.<sup>2</sup>

JC: I guess the broader notion that punk has for people is simply “bad attitude.” And you have certainly engaged with that from time to time in your artwork. Maybe even just in terms of antiauthoritarianism. Anyway, that seems like something basic to being a real artist, the dislike of having someone tell you what to do.<sup>3</sup>

AO: The bad attitude aspect of punk was interesting, as we didn't know what would become of it. As well as aggression, spontaneity, et cetera. But I had not much to do with it. Provocation interested me more in theory. The typical provocations were easy to find: insults, evil symbols, sex, and dis-

gusting stuff. I wouldn't ever think about that. I then came across rather by chance, how the critics particularly get angry when they feel unnoted or ignored. Sometimes even just by the absence of the aforementioned provocations. An attitude like, "I do not care about color or composition or similar," produces extreme rejection, unless it is conceptual art. With that knowledge I could work.<sup>4</sup>

JC: I've been thinking about your work in relationship to Frank Zappa, who I know was a favorite of yours. He's a much better parallel, for me—he's got humor, intelligence, belligerence, danger, stupidity, elegance, excess, virtuosity, amateurism. And if you think of the original 1950s meaning of the word, he's a total punk.<sup>5</sup>

AO: I loved Zappa and still like to listen to one of his LPs sometimes. But I got into his music when I was fourteen and there were a lot of misunderstandings and projections. When I started to listen to the lyrics much later I was disappointed, but perhaps I still don't get it. What I saw in him was extremely important to me and is still there. But, as I said, I do not know if this is true. Bringing together elements of jazz and politically ironic elements and man-made contemporary music seemed revolutionary, and probably is. The impulse to bring together incompatible things I got from there. Bizarre and extreme eclecticism corresponded exactly to my idea of a contemporary avant-garde art at that time. I have no idea who has delivered that in the world of art. Roman Opalka isn't it.<sup>6</sup>

JC: Do I remember right, did you see Zappa with Polke?<sup>7</sup>

AO: No, with Polke I saw Motörhead, when they had the song "Motörhead," but before *Ace of Spades*.<sup>8</sup>

JC: Prime time for Lemmy. That must have been incredible. I wonder what Polke made of Motörhead.<sup>9</sup>

AO: Polke knew Lemmy from Hawkwind. He recognized a girl in the audience that was a dancer with them.<sup>10</sup>

JC: You've exposed me to some pretty incredible metal, which is a genre I haven't really explored too much. I'm thinking in particular of Krisiun, which is just ridiculous. I tend to experience metal in terms of intensity, but I recall having a conversation with you in which you said you thought that intensity was not a very interesting parameter or characteristic in music or in painting. If that's true, what do you listen for in metal?<sup>11</sup>

AO: Krisiun play really fast. Stupid melodies, but their first CD is quite mangy. Intensity is in fact not what I am looking for. When I paint I am emotionless. Maybe I'll create something intense, but it's not by doing something intense or being intense. I am not a specialist in metal. Some of the speed



metal that I like has a tranquilizing effect on me. Listen to Cannibal Corpse and concentrate on the patterns they play and it will put you in a nice trance. I'd like to achieve that in my paintings, but I don't have it under control.<sup>12</sup>

JC: Mangy. I like it. Like a sick dog. Funny, your description makes metal sound like it functions the way minimalism is supposed to, and in a certain respect I think it does the job better because it is surreptitious, it sneaks up on its victim. You don't expect to be tranquilized by metal; it's supposed to stimulate you. But the patterns and the speed have a cumulative effect that's disorienting and mesmerizing. Maybe it's because the double kick drum moves faster than the heart and confuses the listener's body.<sup>13</sup>

AO: Speed metal seems to be about aggression and talks you into gnawing on your own intestines, is loud and has guitars and grunts. But what really happens is patterns and variations that, if you concentrate on them, make you dozy and peaceful. On the other hand, music or artworks that try to calm me will only achieve the opposite. Of course I am not talking about minimalism.<sup>14</sup>

JC: Do you look at op art at all? Your work seems antithetical, in a way, to those premises. I think about one collage element in a painting of yours I saw in the Paris show a few years ago that had a sort of optical effect. I love the way you neutralized it, took its hypnotic, psychedelic power away.<sup>15</sup>

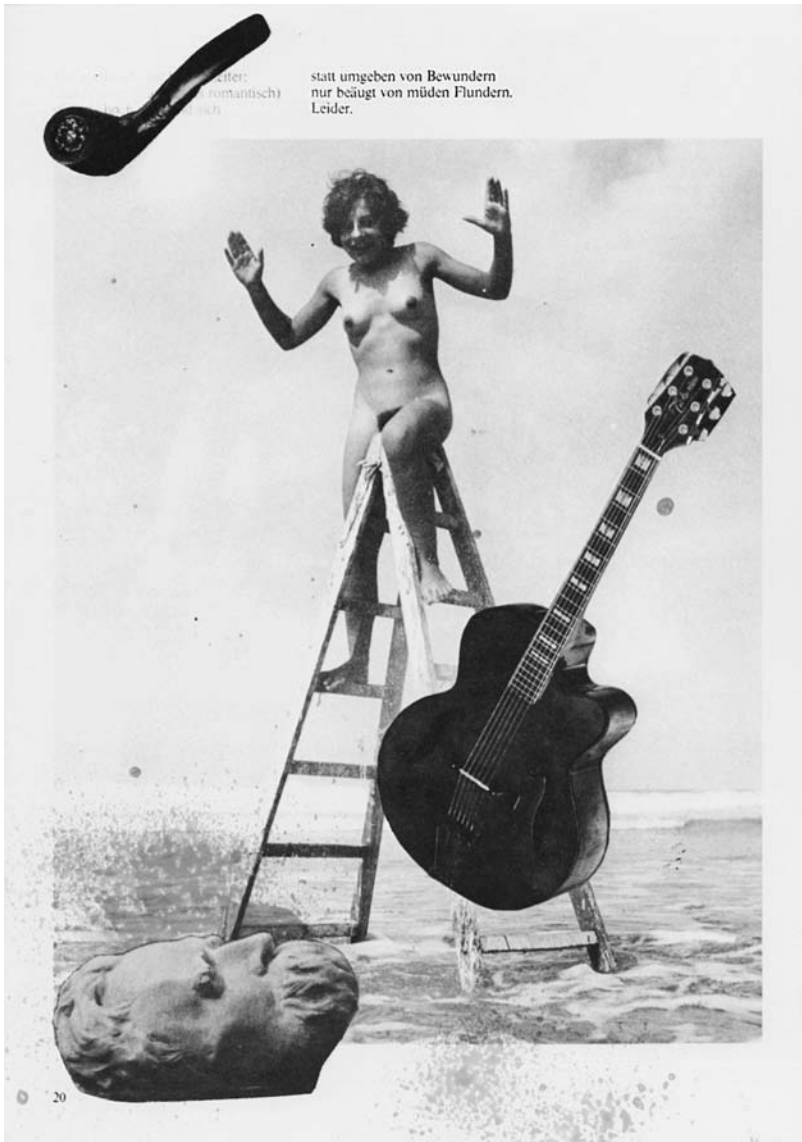
AO: Op art is, besides color-field painting, the only painting that has a physical effect on the viewer without involving the psyche. That is bad. I like to quote that in my paintings. I never thought about it, but now, as you mention it, it seems to me that I am an op artist.<sup>16</sup>

JC: So you say op art is bad, but you're an op artist?<sup>17</sup>

AO: Just kidding. But some of my paintings can make you dizzy too.<sup>18</sup>

JC: That's true, but they make you dizzy by way of the psyche, not by avoiding it. Speaking of kidding, I was thinking about humor. It can be a tricky thing, don't you think? In some artists' hands, humor can make something trivial or it can make it ephemeral. A joke can run out of steam pretty quickly; the wrong kind of humor has a limited shelf life. On the other hand, humor is essential. If you don't have a sense of humor, you risk becoming pompous, self-serious, rigid, anemic. Bakhtin suggested that laughter is basically subversive, that it undermines authority. Humor, to me, at least helps put some doubt into the mix.<sup>19</sup>

AO: You said it. Humor is a human quality and it's better if you have a bit of it. Perhaps it's also better not to think about it. There are unlimited kinds of humor and sometimes something is considered humorous and



Albert Oehlen, *Ewige Feile*, 1983, collage on paper (image courtesy of the artist)

we don't know if it is meant to be funny. In every good artwork there is a problem and the solution comes as a surprise. That is how humor works. When a really great artwork hits you on the head it will worm a laugh out of you.<sup>20</sup>

JC: How do you see the relationship between your collages and the paintings? Of course they've merged in recent years, so that some of the collage ideas came into the paintings—I'm thinking about the pieces with Spanish billboard fragments in them. I have the sense that bringing the collage elements into the pictures forced you to deal with figurative and representational imagery again, this time in the context of abstraction.<sup>21</sup>

AO: There is no relationship between the collages and the paintings, except that I use glue in both cases. That's why the paintings sometimes get called collage paintings. But that is irritating. I see them as pure paintings. The photo images are part of advertising stuff. I try to ignore what they represent. They are only there to be annoying advertising shit. I try to make that clear in my painting.<sup>22</sup>

JC: You recently visited the Willem de Kooning retrospective at MoMA. I like the way he sometimes integrated tiny magazine fragments into paintings—a mouth, for instance, in *Woman*, from 1950. First time I saw that painting I didn't notice it for a while and when I did it hit me like an electric shock.<sup>23</sup>

AO: Yes, that is great. There could be many reasons to put something found in a painting. That advertisement smile could only be painted in a caricature manner, like he did in the other woman paintings, but here as a quote it works the same way. Naturally a painter should not glue anything in a painting, especially not for an aesthetic effect. If he does, he'd better have a reason like being incapable or too lazy to paint it. I like that point of view and tried to show it in a group of paintings in 2005 that I showed in the Secession in Vienna.<sup>24</sup>

JC: Cecil Taylor once told me that he felt he'd been playing the same piece of music for many years, that in different concerts and recordings he was continuing to work on the same song. I see his comment as suggesting the notion that the work is all part of one big idea, one particular thing that he's extrapolating on rather than different discrete parts. Do you feel any resonance with that?<sup>25</sup>

AO: I think that's true. Thank God not all artists sing the same song. But what does one do when one finds out which song it is?<sup>26</sup>

JC: John Cage made a point of using things he disliked in his work—like radio or Chopin—as a way of dealing with them. Is that a strategy you've used?<sup>27</sup>

- AO: I don't have a psychological problem with things I dislike. It is rather meant to be a counterproof to the argument that the artwork as a complicated entity gets everything under control at the end. The triumph is greater when selected abominations form the base material than when I work with gold leaves and Wittgenstein quotes, while there failure would be more awkward.<sup>28</sup>
- JC: I'm fond of a description that I once heard of Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg, that he put sticks in all spokes. How do you relate to the idea of contrarianism?<sup>29</sup>
- AO: Was it Arnold Schwarzenegger who said: no pain—no gain?<sup>30</sup>
- JC: Is the idea of a kind of national identity of painters—American painters, German painters, the Belgians—of any use these days?<sup>31</sup>
- AO: Perhaps. I don't think much about it. Certainly I don't try to be a German painter. Maybe because I am one. Rainald Goetz says that every German artist has to care about the newer German history once. But then he has to leave it for good.<sup>32</sup>

[2012]

## Notes

1. The Leyton Buzzards, "I Don't Want to Go to Art School" (1979, Chrysalis seven-inch, B-side).
2. Portsmouth Sinfonia, "Leader of the Pack" (1979, Philips).
3. The Art Ensemble of Chicago, "Certain Blacks" (1970, America).
4. Bo Diddley, "Ride the Water" (1976, RCA).
5. Captain Beefheart, "Sam with the Showing Scalp Flat Top" (1975, from Frank Zappa, *Bongo Fury*, DiscReet).
6. The Residents, "Six Things to a Cycle" (1977, Ralph Records).
7. Elvis Presley, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" (1955, Sun Records seven-inch).
8. Motörhead, "Motörhead" (1977, Chiswick).
9. Chet Baker, "Polkadots and Moonbeams" (1958, Riverside).
10. The Richochets, "Yomping" (1982, Nervous).
11. Horatiu Radulescu, "Inner Time" (for seven B-flat clarinets, 1993, Montaigne).
12. Cannibal Corpse, "Hammer Smashed Face" (1993, Metal Blade).
13. Refused, "Worms of the Senses" (1988, Burning Heart).
14. Van Hunt, "Plum" (2011, Godless Hotspot).
15. Peter Brötzmann / Fred Lonberg-Holm, *The Brain of the Dog in Section* (2008, Atavistic).
16. La Monte Young, "Dream House 78' 17'" (1974, Shandar).
17. Vicki Anderson, "Super Good (Answer to Super Bad)" (1970, Polydor seven-inch).

18. Wolfgang Dauner Quintet, "A Day in the Life" (1969, MPS).
19. Slim Gaillard, "Laughing in Rhythm" (1951, Mercury seven-inch).
20. Bach, *Kunst der Fuge* (composed c. 1745).
21. John Oswald, "Dab" (1989, self-released EP).
22. Charles Ives, *Central Park in the Dark* (composed 1906).
23. News from the Shed, "Crookes Dark Space" (1989, Acta; reissued on Emanem, 2006).
24. Scooter, "The Logical Song" (2001, Addiction).
25. Cecil Taylor, *Conquistador* (1966, Blue Note).
26. Digital Underground, "Same Song" (1991, Tommy Boy).
27. John Cage and Kenneth Patchen, "The City Wears a Slouch Hat" (1942, radio play, WBBM Radio, Chicago).
28. Albert Ayler, *Bells* (1965, ESP).
29. ICP Orchestra, "Houseparty Starting" (1986, ICP Records).
30. Eugene Chadbourne, "Rake Quartet II" (1990, Fundamental).
31. Miles Davis, *Pangaea* (1975, Columbia).
32. The Ramones, "Blitzkrieg Bop" (1976, Sire).

# CHRISTOPHER WOOL

## Impropositions—Improvisation, Dub Painting

The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”

Given fifteen seconds to describe the difference between improvisation and composition, soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy once said: “In 15 seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in 15 seconds, while in improvisation you have 15 seconds.” His statement was unedited. It was improvised. It lasted fifteen seconds.

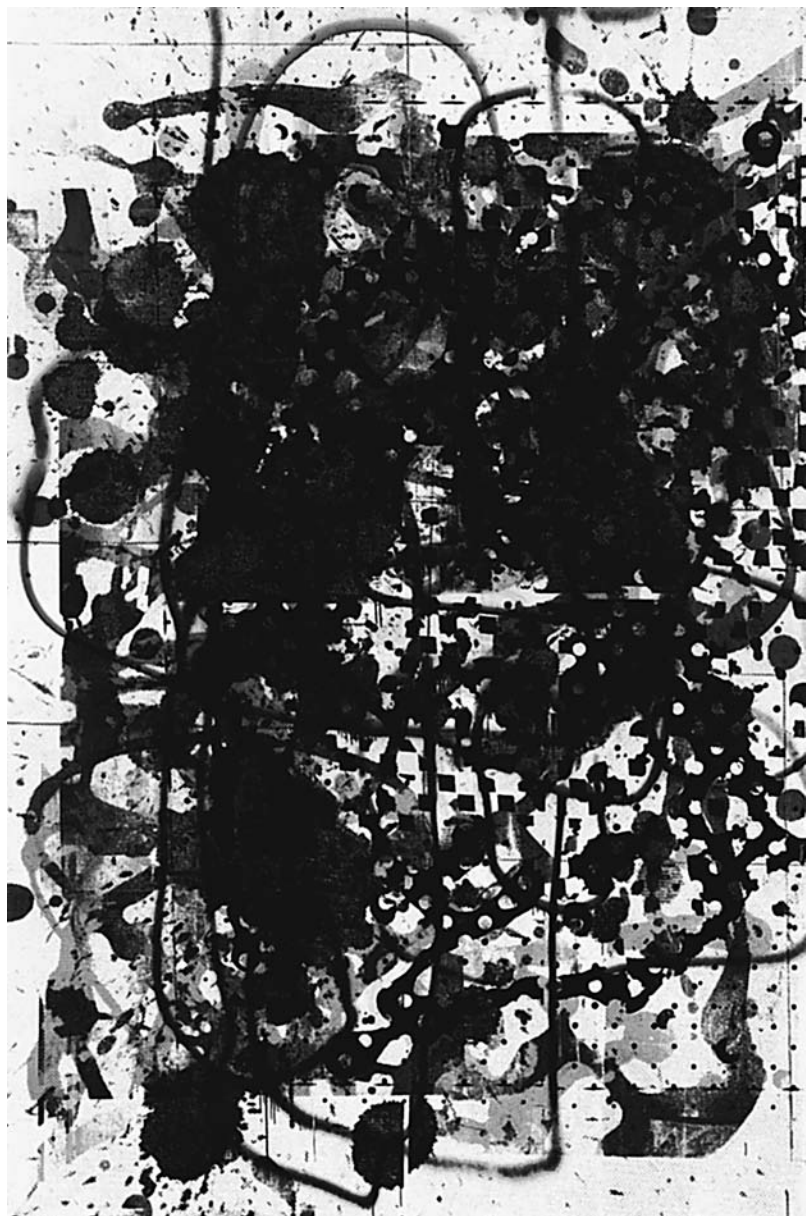
As a starting point, let’s try to hold these opposed approaches, so intimately related and yet mutually exclusive, simultaneously in mind. On one hand, the spontaneous mark or sound as an index of a thought, impulse, or action. On the other, the act of preplanning, rethinking, retracting, retooling, or editing a mark or sound. To improvise, in the purest sense, means to work without a plan and without reconsideration, to make decisions instantaneously, free from editorial oversight and open exclusively to the contingencies of the current moment. The art of improvisation, its sense of freshness and special quality of frankness, relies on a willingness to proceed uninterrupted, without second thoughts or reconsiderations. Composition, on the contrary, takes its sweet time. It assumes that all things made are due to be remade, all thoughts free to be contradicted, arrangements liable to be reconfigured, decisions open to be interrogated, tape to be spliced, manuscripts to be cut and pasted.

In the work of Christopher Wool, these two nodes of improvisation and composition can be felt as sort of twin tidal entities, each with its own force acting on the methods and processes Wool uses to create canvases, drawings, and prints. As I see it, they operate dialectically, as a means of refreshing one another, keeping the body of work from growing stale and falling into a univo-

cal mode of expression; considered in this light, the works don't seek to reify these two concepts, rather they are drawn into a state of mutual critique, subtly undermining one another's precepts. Improvisation is there to bring the unexpected to bear, to call the viewer back from the editorial/compositional hall of mirrors, while the compositional/editorial element undermines the seductive implication of "freedom" in improvisation. Sometimes one is more dominant, sometimes the other, but they're locked in a perpetual exchange, waves moving back and forth, extracting and adding energy to the work. Looking at Wool's paintings of the last decade with these ideas at the fore, and in particular keeping their application in a musical context in mind for reference—I'm thinking here of two kinds of music, especially, free improvisation and dub—offers a productive way of unpacking and understanding Wool's practice.

Wool's so-called gray paintings, which constitute an important part of his work over the last decade, are spontaneously created with black spray paint and turpentine-soaked towels. The artist himself has described them in terms of improvisation. Wool: "It starts someplace and reacting to itself progresses." Starting with linear black marks, Wool then smears and erases them partially, in the process making new marks (the gray marks of the gray paintings, in fact) of turped-down, grayed-out paint, then painting black (sometimes white) again atop them, and so on until the work is finished. These marks can be considered at once as erasures and as marks of their own; the result most often is a complex and rich interplay between gesture and interruption, between one moment's impulse and another. Think of the devil character in Captain Beefheart's "Floppy Boot Stomp," who threatens to damn the listener to an eternal present, to "pitch you from now to now, from now to now." Which marks are the "now" in these works? Wool leaves this an open question.

The gray paintings are made directly, rather quickly, in what might constitute "real time" in a painting sense. Of course, in music "real time" suggests a lack of recording, the fact of something happening in the moment, without being time-shifted, while in a visual art the painting itself is a material register of the time it took to make, thus a painting *becomes* a sort of recording. Here we encounter many of the ideas—some legitimate, some riddled with misunderstandings and clichés—that link Abstract Expressionism and jazz improvisation. The suggestion that an "action" painting is an act of pure spontaneity is one of the great myths of the movement, perpetuated primarily not by practitioners but by observers and critics. To be quite specific about this mythology, it takes as a given the idea that a gesture—particularly one that results in a sweeping, continuous, often curvilinear mark—is an index of an authentic expression, made in a single moment of uninhibited passion. This



Christopher Wool, *Nation Time*, 2000, enamel and silkscreen ink on linen, 108 × 72 inches (image courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine Gallery)



is related to the assumption that action painting is “genuine,” “honest,” “un-filtered,” and other such loaded terms, the same kinds of words associated with the “autobiographical stories” told by soloists in jazz. There are a range of different ideological subtexts to this mythology, in both musical and visual arts contexts, focused on the persistence of identity, style, and individualism, all fodder for a different consideration than this one. Suffice to say, this mythology has been the subject of an ongoing debunking, from Wool and Albert Oehlen back through Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, even further back to the original Ab Ex artists themselves. Indeed, as a litmus test, try to parse the sequence of events that culminates in any given Pollock drip painting; hardly the product of a single emotive expression, it turns out to be an elaborate construction, built in many interlocking parts, mapped in a general way and executed in the moment. Not a denial of expression, but a more circumspect conception of the expressive act and its result—a composition, not an ejaculation.

Wool’s gray paintings in fact offer a smart response to the expressionist mythology. They are made directly, improvised in fact, but they are not without an editorial component. In fact, they embed this editing into the process of improvising, as another facet of the ongoing improvisation. Rather than think of each of the lines in one of these paintings as the material of the improvisation, the expressive component, one can consider the entire piece as the improvisation, as Wool puts it, “the painting moving from point A to point Z.” In other words, it’s not that the elements of the painting—the lines, the erasures—are either improvisational or editorial. They are equally part of the painting-as-process, the notion that a painting can be pushed and pulled directly, but without recourse to the expressionist mythology of the authentic indexical mark. I see works like *This Year Halloween Fell on a Weekend* (2003) or the extensive group of untitled gray paintings from 2005 to 2009 as monumental solo improvisations, akin in stature to the great musical improvisors who worked alone. Listen to saxophonist Joe McPhee’s “Knox” from the essential LP *Tenor* or any of Evan Parker’s soprano saxophone solos. The affinity is clear: like these musicians, Wool has thought through the contradictions inherent in improvisation, he embraces the practice without naïveté, in its full complexity, as a process, as a mode of making a family of rich and durable images, all closely related to one another but each one solving the problems of its existence uniquely, at once similar and singular.

Perhaps here we can understand why some musicians have resisted the categorical distinction between improvisation and composition. Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg, for instance, prefers the more holistic term “instant

composition.” With his group, the ICP Orchestra, Mengelberg has explored methods for incorporating prescribed material—songs, structures, games—into freely improvised music-making, confounding the supposed distinction between composition and improvisation.<sup>1</sup> Wool has explored this blurred distinction in the area of his work that integrates silkscreen into the process, further debunking the expressionist mythology by means of an elaborate and sustained exploration of the continuity between painting and printmaking.

Wool is fond of a quotation attributed to Jasper Johns: “It’s simple, you just take something and do something to it, and then do something else to it. Keep doing this, and pretty soon you’ve got something.” If, in the gray paintings, this is accomplished in short order, with the artist making something and then doing something to it right away, he has also approached work in a different, more indirect way, using silkscreen as a way of introducing another method—and, importantly, another time scale—into the work. For a clear example, take *Little Birds Have Fast Hearts* (2001), which takes its title from a CD by German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. Here, the source image contains one of Wool’s wallpaper patterns with a large pour of paint covering the upper right quadrant and dripping down into the lower right quadrant. In monochromatic brown on white background, this image is printed onto a large, vertical canvas. Hence, we find a painting that uses silkscreen as the means to reproduce an image of the intersection of print and free painting. As it was with Wool’s word paintings, the point is not to create a fancy or clever method, but to produce an interesting painting; in the process, by refusing to adhere to the distinctions between printmaking and painting and between improvisation and composition, he further interrogates some of the most persistent and insidious ideas in contemporary art.

Let’s consider another group of related works, which I think of as having a certain recursive process at their core and which show in a bit more diagrammatic detail the way Wool thinks about these things. *The Flam* (2001), which takes its title from an LP by the free jazz saxophonist Frank Lowe, is another screened painting, this time a tangle of freely executed looping black spray-painted lines; part of the image has to do with the slight repositioning of the screens, with the top half shifted left so that the lines don’t quite meet. A subsequent painting, this time in monochromatic red, takes *The Flam* as its source, turning it into another silkscreen (a silkscreen of a silkscreen), which Wool enlarged, adjusted (actually moving the screens back, so the lines meet again), then scraped into and worked, thereby creating a revamped but recognizable version of the original painting. Finally, a third work was made using the second painting as a source, reverting to black-on-white, this time a more

or less “faithful” silkscreen reproduction of the scraped and worked version, but with no further scraping or working. In this transition from original free painting to silkscreen to free/silkscreen mix and back to silkscreen, we see the recursive process. A source, a treatment, a treatment of the treatment, a treatment of the second treatment, and so on. As in dub reggae, an original is used to create subsequent versions, but in the process the original loses its authority, becoming yet another permutation or variation. These are Wool’s dub paintings. When I see them, I hear echoed-out voices, sound effects, drastic shifts in the mix. They walk me into a hall of mirrors in which there are no givens, no safe assumptions, no need for originals or copies or hierarchies of value around whether an image is obtained through print or paint, through free or mechanical means. The image is there to be contemplated. Look at it.

The series of very large paintings Wool made for the Venice Biennale in 2011 and the subsequent works in the same vein extend this idea, but they concentrate on the differences between screened hemispheres or quadrants, the way that making these parts either darker or lighter or changing the resolution of the dots in the screen can totally shift the way they read. A source image, which may come as a highly amplified earlier work, is treated to a series of permutations, and in spite of the enormous size of the works Wool tries out some that he discards. The editorial component, both in terms of the construction of the works and in the assessment of their viability, is clearly central to these pieces, but it’s important to remember that they have an element of improvisation as well. While there are two distinct processes that distinguish the gray paintings from the silkscreen works, namely, the freely improvised character of the former and the mechanical process of the latter, there are some of the screened pieces that are made improvisationally.

Again, here I think of music, in particular Evan Parker’s Electro-Acoustic Ensemble. In this group a team of improvising instrumentalists is met with another team of sound processors. The music made by acoustic means—Parker’s saxophone, Philipp Wachsmann’s violin, Paul Lytton’s percussion—may be subjected to delay, stretching, shifting, and all other varieties of manipulation. Impulse and memory—the interplay of what happens in the moment and what lingers, confusing and confounding the listener into, perhaps, a state of just hearing what’s happening rather than wondering who did what and when. In Wool’s silkscreen paintings, the potential for a mix of mechanical reproduction and improvisation has opened up an equally exciting array of possibilities, forcing a viewer to look carefully at the image for what it is rather than searching for original sources or trying to parse the teleology or genealogy of a given image. Ultimately, Wool says the process itself isn’t important, and

neither are the source materials. “Each iteration,” he says, “is a next step, not ‘better’ than the last.” Pushing and pulling the image, using direct or indirect means—whatever it takes, the proof is in the pudding.

In recent works, Wool has investigated other ways of extending and recombining these methods and processes. In many new drawings, he has used silkscreen backgrounds, often made from photographs of his freely dripped or poured paintings, with hand-painted events placed atop the screened images. These seemingly casual marks are, in fact, often carefully and deliberately worked out. Wool’s point here is the creation of “a specific duality or visual opposition set up by working one way on top of another, the disjunction/coordination of two distinct actions.” Yet another incarnation of this species of work incorporates photographic images of Wool’s gray paintings, digitally edited and collaged into a new work, as the silkscreen backdrops.<sup>2</sup> Improvised paintings provide source material for photo collages that become backgrounds for drawings. Welcome again to the hall of mirrors, this time with direct and indirect methods facing off, staring at one another, creating productive tension, securing the bold new genre of dub painting.

In reggae, a hit song could become the background for another hit song or a deejay’s rhymes or the material for a dub version. Music is infinitely renewable, so abundant, as they say with affection, that it’s “like dirt.” Lee “Scratch” Perry used to plant dub plates—the wordless records used as backgrounds for toasters—in his garden, with the belief that they would sprout and grow. Like Perry, Christopher Wool cultivates his work, tilling the soil, culling his own images, grafting and hybridizing them, harvesting and then replanting, sowing seeds for a new crop. Fresh new work improvised and edited, straight to your head. Paintings like dirt.

[2012]

## Notes

1. A fan of the elder Mengelberg, saxophonist John Zorn has also deployed many of these strategies for confounding the distinction between improvisation and composition. Interestingly, Zorn came on the downtown New York scene at the same time that Wool did; a full exploration of similarities and differences in their approach would be worthwhile.

2. Wool has also made photo-etchings using this method, without the freely painted component.

# CHRISTOPHER WOOL

## Into the Woods—Six Meditations on the Interdisciplinary

### I

What a funny word it is: “interdisciplinary.”

How can it hold any meaning anymore, this train wreck of a term? What pretense of significance can interdisciplinarity bear in a fusion-mad era like ours, when telephones are televisions and stereos rolled into one, all the world’s musical genres seemingly must converge, and (as of a dozen years ago) the word “multitask” has an official place in the dictionary? In other words, isn’t *everything* interdisciplinary today?

Certainly, from within the world of art schools, the push has been toward the merger of disciplines. Painters should be performance artists. Video artists should learn to sew. Sculptors should dance. Animators should write short fiction. And everyone needs to know how to use Photoshop, QuickTime, and Pro Tools. Or at least GarageBand. For better or worse, the world of the isolated artist in her or his studio, adept at one task, focused and forever lost in the pursuit of that single medium, is increasingly rare.

But is it the end of the discipline? If everyone is a specialist at blending, in the end what do they blend? Perhaps something else is happening. Maybe there are now several different kinds of interdisciplinary. Could it be that the older synthesizing model—the late nineteenth-century *gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner or even the 1960s “intermedia” notion of Dick Higgins—which urged for a total unification of the arts, is being superseded by another way of mixing practices? Rather than all arts becoming one, this model might be seen as one in which the different media are brought into proximity. They respect one another’s autonomy. Rather than commingling, they coexist.

## II

We don't know how to solve the problems of being together. And if we do solve them, I believe that each person should leave space around himself and the other person. An emptiness between two. So that if you do go with another person into the woods, and succeed in being in the woods, it will only be because you think of yourself as independent of the going into the woods of the second person. • John Cage

The John Cage / Merce Cunningham formulation of the interdisciplinary as the proximate, as coexistence, was uniquely extreme. Work is to be developed in isolation, brought together without predetermined synchronization or advance notice of the meaning of the mash-up. The dancers dance; the musicians play. What happens between is for the audience to observe and experience. Cage and Cunningham's friendships and collaborations with visual artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and in turn the loose mentorship they all had with Marcel Duchamp, expressed ties in spirit rather than in material and method. One has the feeling that these artists were able, for a moment, to solve the problems of being together by leaving space around themselves. And around their work. A vision of interdisciplinarity that is radically open because it requires no resolution, no conforming of one modality of art to another. Independent simultaneous events occur without having to be reconciled. Asked whether he thought of his writing as music, Cage said that it all depended on whether you attended to it as writing or as music. Both mind-sets were possible, but as activities, the disciplines stayed independent. Writing was writing, music music.

## III

In the mid-1940s, an extraordinary artist named Thelma Johnson Streat started dancing in front of her paintings. The first African American woman to show at (and be collected by) MoMA, Streat was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration and worked on Diego Rivera's murals. Inspired by a multicultural *mélange* of traditional dance from Haiti to British Columbia, she gave recitals at her openings, interpreting her own visual art through movement. It's a surprising image: a young black woman, having already had her life threatened for making anti-KKK paintings, performing modern dance as a sort of ritual invocation around her watercolors and canvases. (Katherine Dunham is said to have collected her work.)



Set design artwork for “Moving Parts,” L.A. Dance Project (choreography by Benjamin Millepied), design by Christopher Wool, 2012 (image courtesy of Christopher Wool)

The most wonderfully strange idea here is just that Streat danced to paintings. Not music, paintings. And why not? Paintings give off vibrations. They hum at their own frequency, and if you pick up on their buzz they can motivate you. Streat clearly felt this. She understood the sympathetic resonance between painting and dance. Perhaps she translated one into the other and back again.

#### IV

Which is why the best way to read me is to accompany the reading with certain appropriate bodily movements. Against non-spoken writing. Against non-written speech. For the gesture-support. • Philippe Sollers

Sollers’s notion of the gesture-support has always seemed to be about more than writing. The idea of someone moving while reading, of being inspired

to sway by words on a page—such a lovely concept. But it applies as well to eating (when biting into something delicious, think of the possible gesticulations) or to listening to music or to looking at a great painting, which, à la Streat, sets one rocking on one's heels, a sort of corporeal hilarity taking over and forcing one to nod, to dance, pulling the viewer toward and away from itself in waves. Standing in front of de Kooning's *Excavation*, I am always, quite literally, moved.

Benjamin Millepied's "Moving Parts" engenders gesture-support. Here are Christopher Wool's large paintings, mounted on wheels, swiveling and rolling, dancers interacting and literally dancing with the canvases, the encounter mediated by Nico Muhly's springy score. Wool's stylized, lettristic images, which involve a dense thicket of layers arrayed in a shallow space, can be shifted at an almost imperceptible rate or quickly and dramatically reoriented. The can be angled, changing perspective, allowing the dancers to cast shadows around them. In this direct interface between dance and visual art, Millepied suggests a third possibility for the interdisciplinary, one in which it is neither totally syncretic nor totally autonomist. The work is in proximity, but there is also an affinity expressed; it's more than simply a neutral presentation of simultaneity. The result is a gesture-support: delight of motion set off by a work in a different medium.

## V

For me, moving to music is a source of joy. • Benjamin Millepied

Dance has explored the far reaches of interdisciplinarity since its birth. The special relationship it has with music, almost as a given, has allowed for the exploration of myriad configurations—music can prompt, can counter, can move off on its own. Consider Cunningham's 1964 collaboration with composer LaMonte Young, "Winterbranch," in which the latter contributes a very oblique atmosphere of stark, loud noises.

This is hardly the chronometric, time-keeping relationship of some scores to their dance—the joyful experience that Millepied mentions—but it functions perfectly as a backdrop for Cunningham's dancers and the equally uncompromising stage design and lighting by Rauschenberg. One could argue that dance, like opera, is inherently interdisciplinary. It is, nevertheless, equally a discipline of its own.



## VI

Writing about music is like dancing about architecture. • Martin Mull

The classic line, attributed to many speakers, its structure dating back to the early 1900s: writing about music is like [blanking] about [blank]. Early versions included “singing about economics.” The variant that captured the world’s imagination, though, was Mull’s formula. It pondered: What kind of translation could that be? Words can’t express what’s meaningful in music, any more than moving can tell you much about a building.

Weird thing is: there’s nothing remotely strange anymore about the idea of dancing about architecture.

[2013]

## SUN RA

### An Afro-Space-Jazz Imaginary—The Printed Record of El Saturn

Working out of a base of operations on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1950s and early 1960s, musician Sun Ra created an array of objects as distinctive in appearance as they were in sound. With Saturn Records, one of the first musician-owned labels, he issued LPs with covers that were designed and manufactured independently, some of which were handmade. By the 1970s, this was a normal state of affairs for Ra, who was by then based in Philadelphia and who, together with his bandmates, would decorate blank white records with ornate, multicolored Egyptian-themed drawings, heavy on metallic inks. But earlier in his career, Ra's record design was oriented around printed multiples, deploying a small crew of grassroots, independent, semiprofessional black designers and local black-owned businesses in the creation of his label's unique image.

Best known as one of the architects of Afro-Futurism and the pianist and bandleader who, together with his extravagantly costumed ensemble the Arkestra, traveled the spaceways making interplanetary harmonies and melodies, Sun Ra began his life with the quite terrestrial name Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama. By the time he was a teenager, Blount—nicknamed "Sonny"—was already leading his own jazz band, and a dozen or so years of barnstorming and early recordings backing R&B singers eventually landed him in the Windy City in the mid-1940s. Chicago is where Blount became Ra, literally and figuratively. Along with his musical studies, Ra was a mystic and a self-styled prophet; he was widely read in philosophy, the occult, sociology, psychology, and spiritualism, and a die-hard fan of comic books. He was befriended in the early 1950s by Alton Abraham, a young black radiology student with a keen interest in mysticism, outer space, the Bible, and science. Abraham would become Ra's manager and closest adviser for the following two decades. After Abraham convinced Blount to legally change his name, Ra formed and honed the earliest incarnations of his Arkestra, attracting musical

accomplices including saxophonists John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, and Marshall Allen, who would remain loyal members of the band for most of their lives. (Allen continues to lead the Arkestra now, fifteen years after Ra's death in 1993.)

Ra can be treated as a proto-postmodernist. In 1954 he and Abraham founded Saturn Records (also known as El Saturn), and Ra's work as a producer allowed him to draw on a huge cache of tapes he had made starting in the 1940s. From these he assembled brilliantly hodgepodge records that willfully distorted his own historical development. On the space of one side of an LP he would place his more conservative—if often eccentric and highly personal—small group swing, big-band, and bebop tracks in immediate proximity with his more radical experiments in modal jazz, Afrocentrism, exotic polytonality, and aggressive improvisation. Though this kind of time-twisting variety revue was typical of Ra's later live performances, the pianist seems to have crafted the notion in the programming of his vinyl records. But in addition to the way he juxtaposed moments in his own musical development in the sound of the records, Ra assembled his LP jackets as pastiches of old-fashioned, even corny, jazz clichés mixed together with quite sophisticated twentieth-century art ideas and nascent Afro-Futurist motifs.

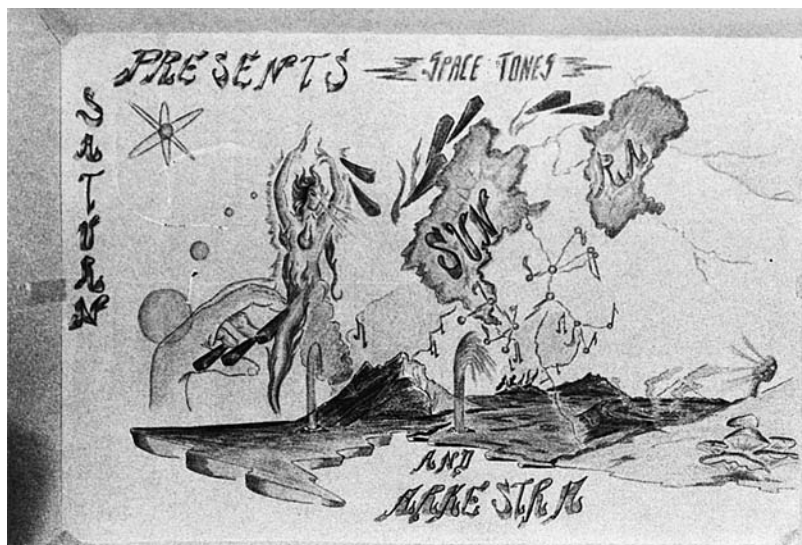
Saturn's debut release was a 45 rpm single, conventionally packaged with a blank paper sleeve, but the label had bold visual plans. In their respective notebooks, Ra and Abraham sketched out ideas for covers, mixing existing jazz and exotica tropes—cocktail glasses, dancing women, Kon-Tiki islands, Dalíesque surrealist landscapes, modernist abstract shapes, and the prevalent black and white pattern of the keyboard—with certain unique elements, such as spaceships, Egyptian imagery, and a kind of jazz apocalypse built of burning piano keys and tsunamis. Obsessed with crafting a special look, and obviously flush with optimism for Ra's artistic future, Abraham allowed himself to fantasize about the design of a Saturn limousine and plans for a high-rise Saturn headquarters. Among several artists called upon to offer graphic designs for Saturn productions was a man named Claude Dangerfield. A friend and classmate of several of the Arkestra musicians at DuSable High, Dangerfield was an avid, albeit amateur, artist. He was suggested to Abraham, who seems to have tapped him rather early on, in the mid-1950s, for cover designs.

The first designs Dangerfield submitted were great, crude color pencil drawings that incorporated many of Abraham and Ra's ideas. Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about their basic design was that, despite being ostensible plans for a record cover, they were horizontally formatted, not square, which was a problem Dangerfield rectified over the course of innumerable redesigns. Indeed, the very first Saturn LP, *Super-Sonic Jazz* (1957), has what appears to be



Proposed record cover design by Claude Dangerfield, c. 1956

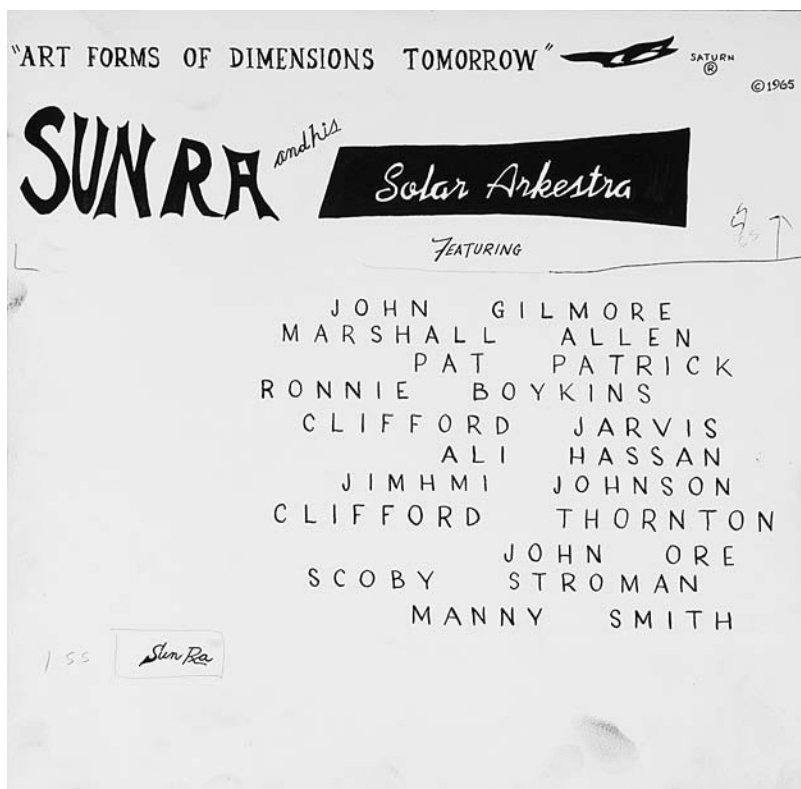
a Dangerfield cover (though he's not credited), and on the covers of many of the best-known early Saturn LPs and in many rejected designs from the same period, Dangerfield was required to cut and mix and hybridize his drawings, incorporating motifs from one into another, slowly morphing the images into something acceptable to both Abraham and Ra. In retrospect, this has had the same chronology-twisting effect as Ra's use of his earlier tapes in assembling the music for some of the LPs. For the most dramatic example, consider Dangerfield's design for *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth*, which was originally conceived in the late 1950s, fully designed in the early '60s, finally issued with the record in 1966, and then cannibalized and very slightly redesigned for use as the cover to *A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow*, issued in various volumes starting in 1974. The idea of a cover gestating over a fifteen-year period—spanning the entire decade of the 1960s, including the psychedelic movement, which Ra helped inspire—is, in the mercurial world of popular music, completely unthinkable. But Sun Ra specialized in the unthinkable, in his musical pagentry, his philosophical pronouncements, and his record designs alike. The most fully realized examples of Dangerfield's utopic-apocalyptic Ra covers include *Visits Planet Earth* as well as *We Travel the Space Ways* and *Interstellar Low Ways*. For these, the artist hand-painted color separations on Mylar (itself a relatively new technology, invented in 1952) for each of up to eight colors; these were used to make offset lithographic plates, which were printed on paper.



Proposed record cover design by Claude Dangerfield, c. 1956

One Dangerfield cover, designed for *When Sun Comes Out Vol. 1*, was a beautiful disaster, with its red ink becoming virtually illegible when printed over a dark green background on bright yellow paper.

Owning their own label allowed Abraham and Ra an unparalleled degree of control over their productions. The basic aesthetic of Dangerfield's covers is not too far from those of the other musician-owned jazz label of the time, Charles Mingus and Max Roach's Debut Records. But Saturn's production methods were quite different, and in the early period Saturn's LP covers were often made at home, in Abraham's makeshift basement printing facility. Although later versions of the debut LP were offset printed, Abraham claimed that the first ones were silkscreened. No copies of this version survive, but a release from 1959, *Jazz in Silhouette*, was first issued with a two-color serigraphed cover attributed to one H. P. Corbissero. This may well have been a pseudonym for Ra, whose earth name shares its first two initials. Clumsily lettered, sporting a crudely drawn black stencil of an eye and bright red or fluorescent orange background, it has a rough brilliance that is perfectly suited to the subtly détourned classic jazz it housed. Abraham's printing arsenal included several serigraph machines, though he used a more basic print technique in the mid-1960s. In fact, many of the records of music that Ra recorded while in Chicago would not be issued until after he moved to the East Coast in 1961. In Saturn's basement print shop, Abraham translated Ra's sketches, sent to him



Sun Ra's design for the back of *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow*, 1965

from New York along with careful design instructions including reminders to include catalog numbers on the record's spine for library reference (the archive being a consistent concern of Ra's). Ra executed his designs, which included swirling or spiky abstract automatic drawings, on tracing paper. Abraham had them redrawn in ink on board, then had a local die shop fabricate metal print plates.

On two records, *Other Planes of There* and *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow*, Ra is identified as the graphic artist. In the initial productions on both of these, the covers were directly printed onto paper (in the case of *Other Planes of There*, silver metallic paper), which was then manually wrapped around a blank cardboard sleeve. On *Art Forms*, two separate print blocks were used, one in blue ink (Ra's name) and one in black ink (the abstraction). As separate, modular print blocks, they could be combined variously, the abstraction oriented in several ways relative to the lettering. In both cases, the designs would eventually be

offset printed (again, locally on Chicago's South Side), for greater efficiency, but the originals, along with *Angels and Demons at Play*, also very likely a Sun Ra design, were first printed and assembled by hand.

Deploying an increasingly diverse pool of artists, some credited and some anonymous, Ra and Abraham continued to craft the Saturn image throughout the 1960s and 1970s. On covers like *Discipline 27-II* and *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*, a familiar strain of Afrocentrism entered the picture, while contemporaneous releases like *Sound Sun Pleasure!!!* and the stunning solo LP *Monorails & Satellites* continued to use Dangerfield motifs. Abraham turned to photolithography in certain cases, as on *Fate in a Pleasant Mood*, *When Angels Speak of Love*, and the uproarious collaged image of Ra playing a lute on *Holiday for Soul Dance*. (The latter of these points out, even in its title, the basic strategy of hybridization: tracks on the LP include "Holiday for Strings," "Body and Soul," and "Dorothy's Dance.") As his reputation grew, Ra had opportunities to release recordings on many other labels, the graphics for which were often out of his control. But for a period of about two decades, with Saturn and his accomplice Abraham, Ra created an unprecedented and wholly unique visual imaginary, a blueprint for the future of Afro-Futurism.

[2009]



**SEVEN**

THE TEXTURE  
OF REFUSAL





# HELMUT LACHENMANN

## *Hellhörig, or the Intricacies of Perceptiveness*

*We begin by turning a noisy heating vent off in Lachenmann's hotel room.*

• • •

John Corbett: It seems to me that we have an institutional apparatus that is dedicatedly against the kind of music that you compose. We saw it demonstrated last night—in a setting that was, in every other way, given over to the performance, in spite of the best efforts of everyone involved, *the building itself couldn't be quiet*. Even though the audience was quiet.

Helmut Lachenmann: The audience was wonderful. Normally, in Germany, there's a festival of coughing. It was not only polite, but concentrated. And then come those noises—maybe Cage would have loved that noise. But the presence of stupid noises reminds of one thing: that silence is a utopia. And it's always been a utopia. To have a room in which to listen to things under the level we normally communicate, this is difficult. The message or the content of such music changes a little bit. It's like the music of Anton Webern—you could say the music of Webern is a sort of silent protest against monumentality, but this is not the content, it is an aspect which comes without the composer thinking about that. One could listen through the piece and maybe through the dynamic of the form one could more or less forget the noises around it. But the first thing was: aha, this is a music that only is possible under circumstances which normally in our society are very rare, maybe not realistic.

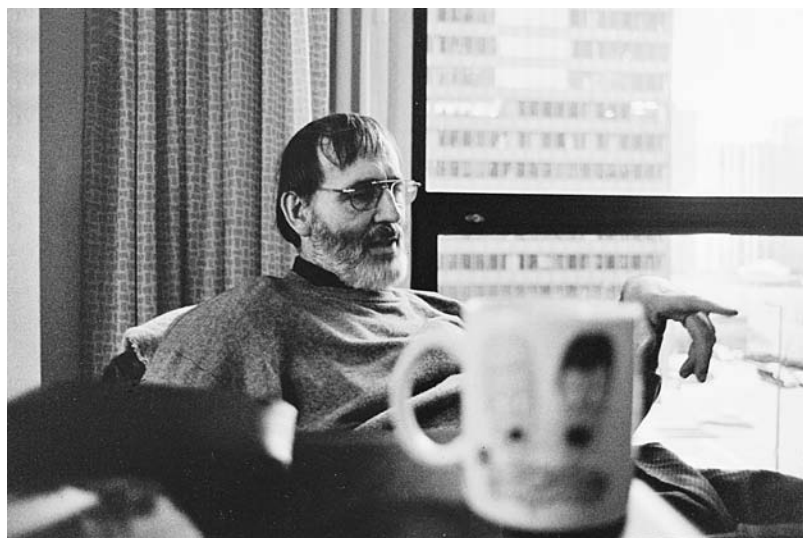
JC: The frightening part of it, to me, is that it's so automatic, that buildings have minds of their own. Any time you have an institutional context for a performance, any public space, is likely to have centralized climate control that inevitably produces sonic artifacts and that is almost impossible to turn off.



Helmut Lachenmann and his *Beavis and Butt-head* mug

HL: And it's also now in ourselves. I'm in this hotel for a couple of days, I was living with it and I didn't sleep so well but I thought, well, we're living in Western civilization and in order to have fresh air there should be a noise. So it's in myself. I'm already paralyzed or accept it. I should be much more rigid and tell them to turn it off. But sometimes I haven't the courage to say in a taxi, please switch off the music. Or in hotels, like in Champaign, the television, I had to see all these baseball games! I used to go swimming in my town, seven in the morning, and they would play music. I finally went to the master and said: "Please would you switch off the music, I would like to relax." And then comes a lady who says: "Please, I need the music to relax." So we switch on until one has died and switch off till the other has died! [laughs] I would also like to say that in my music I sometimes write a soundless sound. I have to say, sometimes let's say you are ten persons who make just this sound; one of you, if he doesn't take care, makes a little bit strained noise, and destroys everything for the other person. It's like a nonsmoking room, maybe there are a hundred persons not smoking, but if one person is smoking it's not a nonsmoker! In the moment, the democracy, or so-called, has a problem of how to deal with minorities who have rights also.

JC: It goes back to issues of whether democracy is simply majority rule or whether it means plurality. If it means plurality, then minoritarian and



specialized interests need to be taken seriously. But I think it opens up into bigger issues of wider tolerance of things like, for instance, your music. Things where there's attention to low dynamic. It's hard to find a place to listen to it even on CD.

HL: It's a little bit different. Maybe the silence there is a theoretical thing, but it is present because I can manipulate the situation. But the whole context evokes a situation in which silence exists as an idea of positive presence. But I never asked for tolerance. Tolerance means, OK he may do whatever he wants, we shall not prevent it, but we also shall not take any regard. There should be respect, curiosity for other things, and then to give room to change his habitude. That's a very active thing, not just passive.

JC: I'm talking about the fact that we don't even have contexts where one is allowed theoretically to keep to one's self but create the kind of experience that you're trying to create. But beyond that, a context where there's a respect for minoritarian interest, not only respect, but curiosity and a willingness to suspend your own majoritarian or minoritarian interest just for a period . . .

HL: A moment. And it never is time lost.

JC: And you're not asking them to suspend it for a Bruckner symphony, but for the duration of one of the pieces, which is a time investment of fifteen, twenty minutes.

- HL: Maybe thirty, but if one goes to a concert, goes to listen, he needs the ability to give space to another. Cage said, when he made his piano concerto in '58 in Cologne, Germany—there was this clock and he allowed the musicians to do whatever they wanted. So they were “free.” They were “free” and there came out all the shit which was in them! I think he was a little bit angry, which he seldom was, because they made only stupid things. But he succeeded with all these philharmonic people, with all their dignity, their professional identity, to open their selves and they had very primitive reactions. It’s a sort of investigation of society. I had the same thing with Christian Wolff at Darmstadt, he made a piece called “Wood Piece,” in which he said: “You may do whatever you want, just improvise with wood.” OK, one started [hits the table quietly], but after thirty minutes you should have seen it, it was like a madhouse, people trying to take their chairs, to destroy them. And they’re so proud about their vitality. I think if it was their wife, they would be ashamed. But now they were “free.” And Christian Wolff sat there like a doctor, smiled. There they were, making a prostitution of all their inhibitedness. Incredible, simple thing. Around Cage, this was one of the things, to provoke structures, but not only acoustic, also structures of human conditioning, behavior.
- JC: That starts to get at the issues about what “freedom” would mean, that for instance there isn’t only one “freedom,” but that “freedom” is always conditioned.
- HL: Each minute, you have to regain it. This is what Marxism, the pure one, not the administered one, said. And this makes life difficult.
- JC: I know you were pigeonholed early in your career as being a “left” composer, and I know that’s also from your association with Luigi Nono. That’s something you’ve fought in some ways. Not the general impression, but the connotation of your being a Marxist or socialist composer.
- HL: I have great respect for Marxism, still now. It has not been proved that it is all wrong. And now the situation is better and more dangerous for people at the same time. Maybe I am more left thinking, but I refuse this superficiality.
- JC: When you make the distinction between administered and pure Marxism, that gets at an important point. I hear a lot of what you talk about as being Marxist in secular clothing. For instance, the interest in revealing the means of production. Taking that at face value, not making it about simply laying bare all the administrative apparatus, et cetera, but saying, “Let’s expose the materiality of the instrument.” Another key Marxist idea, alienation effect, the Brechtian notion of distanciation, which also

can be used to find new beauties, not only, as you very eloquently put it, as a “symbol of the ugliness of the world,” but also to find beauties that are not administered through, say, the culture industry. That seems to me very much in line with the more supple Marxist thought.

HL: Yes, I think this is one thing that was brought into our consciousness by Marxism. And in the time of Marx there was also Sigmund Freud, who spoke about other realities in us, not only economic and alienated consciousness. Archaic realities. I went through Marx, didn’t read everything, *Kapital* and *The Holy Family*, and then I read that Marx wrote to Engels once: “I want to write about aesthetics as soon as I have put behind me all this shit of politics and economics.” He knew there was a layer of reality he hadn’t already considered. In my youth I was friends with a so-called terrorist, Gudrun Ensslin—one of the Baader-Meinhof Gang. My father was a minister, and her father was a minister; my father was her father’s boss. We lived in the same house and knew each other as children. Later I heard she was in prison for burning a supermarket. The father was also observed by the German secret service, but he escaped and came in my house. In the last days before dying, the terrorists began to discuss Lukács and his aesthetics! That means they knew there were realities, human needs for beauty in a very existential sense. But I investigated the background of their activities, in my opera I used her texts. Gudrun burned something, not just matches but a supermarket. Some people died. Just to give a signal of the intolerance of the Western population toward Vietnam, the things that happen in the Third World. It was another kind of McCarthyism in our country at that time. It was important to see that now there are normal persons, like me and the daughter of a minister, full of utopias and twisted ideas. And the state made terror of its own—some students, not terrorists but protesters, were killed. I was protected, I had no problems, but even I was considered *sympatizant*. I was in first place for a teaching position in Munich, and I got the news that as I seemed to be close to the communist party in Germany, which was a loud one, such persons cannot be accepted. Repression from the state, I was very moved by that. So it’s not only symbolic, but to listen more exactly to what happens. Not only to listen to the message they’re saying, but to the situation in which and how they say it. To listen to the language means to have an ear, a very conscious, sensitive, intelligent ear to every nuance. All this together is the message, not only what they say. There is a word, difficult to translate, *hörig* [enslaved by], which is when someone is sick and cannot renounce something, they need it. . .

JC: Like an addiction or obsession.

HL: And *hellhörig* [perceptive]—comes from *hören*, to listen. Some people are *hörig* toward music, they need this power, this magic situation. In this moment they do not think, because normally there was a man writing notes and knowing exactly what he has to do in order to make an effect. So this is a little bit Brecht: not only to be fascinated by such a magic thing, but to be curious about the mechanics which created that. My music always evokes a situation which is intensive, but not hiding the technical, the mechanical conditions which are producing it. Mozart may be just a wonderful paradise of spiritual things, or you can see that there was a certain time in the Enlightenment when one spirit decided not just to make ceremony in the sense of beautiful, nice, entertaining music for society, but to put attention on the structure. At that time, people respected Mozart but preferred other persons. Mozart has his dignity not with his magic, but with his breaking of magic with his spirit, which is not only an intellectual thing. This sensitivity to what is going on, for me, has a continuity to what's going on around us now. And this could help fabricate a conscience which has a sensitivity to the background. That moment that one feels the mechanism, this freedom is a sort of not-freedom, another way of being manipulated. So maybe this is an aesthetic and political context. It's interesting that the music of Webern was so-called *entartete* in the Nazi time. Schönberg was a Jew, so it was obvious. Webern himself, I think he was even a nationalist. But a system like Nazism, which didn't allow people to think their own thoughts, but to obey the ideology, such a music has a subversive quality, it makes you sensitive to things. My father was quite against the Nazis, but he said: "If I hear them speaking, aesthetically, and if I listen to the Nazi youth, and I see the floors they've left after they leave their assemblies, I know this is a criminal union." It was his sensitivity. He thought they sounded so ugly that it meant they had some instincts they were cultivating that couldn't be human. It's a little bit primitive. But it's not that in such systems you can't use magic art, because magic art you can always use. The Nazis used Beethoven, they abused it. During Stalingrad I was sitting with my family listening to the radio and there was the Fifth of Beethoven. The killing of all these people was like a very sad but emphatic funeral. People kept dying, and it got a golden [makes a halo with his hand]. This was abusing a music which once was not just magic, but was revolutionary. Against this, art has a possibility that's not pedagogical, not just intellectual. The intensity of creativity to go beyond the limits of our

manipulated thinking. I have to forget about all this when writing music. I have to concern myself with the construction of, let's say, a dialectical structure which I can feel and hear, all these possibilities, not just those things.

JC: But that's because you're not trying to impose an ideology onto your artistic practice, but to make an artistic practice that is thoroughly infused with and doesn't put aside those issues. So making yourself sensitive, suggesting that there is a connection between very basic perceptual abilities and much broader political and aesthetic issues, without trying to achieve a set of grandiose goals. Trying to achieve limited goals, hoping to make yourself more sensitive and maybe by offering these pieces to the world, to sensitize some other people too.

HL: I used sometimes to say: "The composer is the tail who moves the dog." I work with sounds, that's it. And I cannot say how to improve the world with the next pitch or such stupid things. When I was studying, it was a sort of gymnastic to say "avoid, avoid, avoid" to things which maybe were already full of intensity which wasn't mine but was there before. Not just to use it. I do not think about how to improve or how to avoid now. Now I understand better what Nono did with our studies; he didn't control my scores. He gave me texts, Ernst Bloch, other things. He didn't say, "When you are composing you are affecting things," but as a whole person, you should develop in a manner where whatever you do has to do with this idea of a freedom to find each moment again. So at that moment you don't think, "Is it critical enough? Is it radical enough?" These are all—excuse me—for the journalists. Nono, he never had to avoid something, he only had to make something. A bird doesn't have to avoid swimming. Its world is to fly. Nono was there and came into friction with society, the audience, it seemed as though he avoided everything. I was criticized about the opera: "There's no harmony, there's no melody. He wants to punish us not giving them to us." [exasperated sigh] There was nothing to avoid. I had so much to find. I try to be analytical, I can do it, but if I would teach my pupils to be analytical they would be paralyzed. They wouldn't dare to write any note, because it may be again a bourgeois music. If I am too radical [adopts the tone of someone speaking hypothetically] I am the "bad boy," and each society needs its bad boys. So how to avoid the bad boy? Now I must be the good guy again, but a good guy to refuse the bad boy . . . and so on. [laughs]

JC: You can make no steps.

HL: I get paralyzed.



JC: That thinking is paralyzing if one insists that one cannot *do* anything contradictory. Then one can't do anything. But the tools of analysis, Freudian, Marxist, and poststructuralist analysis, might allow us to see that everything is contradictory in some way. So if one understands and accepts contradiction as a basis for activity, and also understands that there is no radical gesture that cannot be misused . . .

HL: Exactly.

JC: . . . then one understands that you just have to start *working*. To me, your work is about a certain kind of self-responsibility. I have to be responsible as a listener. Yesterday, after the concert somebody made the comment that your music had made them more aware of the coughing in the room, and you said you thought that the audience had coughed particularly well that night. That's a funny statement, but it's really true and I got the sense you meant it seriously. As a responsible listener and as someone who's curious about the music I'm listening to, I don't want to cough because I want to hear. So I try to find a good place to cough, I suspend a place where I can insert it and not break the intensity of what's happening. I "play" my cough. That's part of this model situation which is slightly utopian but is also very realistic, because it's about people being responsible to themselves and understanding that responsibility in a larger context. And that also means that as a composer, it seems to me that you're free to make those decisions and not feel paralyzed. You're performing and talking about work from the '60s that's very different from the work you're doing now, but you're doing so respectfully, not turning your back on it, saying: "That was a period where I misunderstood what I should have been doing." I like that, it's a demystification of the historical process of your work. I can hear the steps you're making in the thinking between one piece and another.

HL: Exactly.

[1997]

# GUILLERMO GREGORIO

## Madi Music

I have the distinct impression of walking.

While I'm playing, that is. And it's not some kind of distracted, somnambulant shuffling, it's a dedicated, concentrated pacing, measured out like a possible drunk walking straight for a policeman: one-foot-in-front-of-the-other, tempo metronomic. A piece moved around on a Monopoly board. Meted. Metered.

The direction is there on a score by Guillermo Gregorio, Argentine clarinetist, saxophonist, composer, onetime architect. Actually it's not there, technically, in the score. It's in instructions I've been given verbally. On the score's single page there are only four shape zones (two circles, one square, one triangle with a rounded edge). Each of these zones, in turn, contains a little microcosm of other lines, circles, dots, arcs, and edges. Between the bigger shapes are straight lines with evenly spaced hatch marks on them. The footsteps. My footsteps. The score's final element is text in the upper left corner: "noise area (ff)."

I'm the guitarist in Gregorio's Madi Ensemble, and the score in question is a new one titled "Coplanar 1 + 2." The title of the piece and the group refers to a vanguard art movement from Buenos Aires that started in the '40s: Movimiento Madi.

In some respects, "Coplanar 1 + 2" conforms to the twentieth-century tradition of making graphic scores, a wide-ranging history that includes works by such disparate composers and artists as Karheinz Stockhausen, Olle Bonniér, Anthony Braxton, György Ligeti, Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, Peter Brötzmann, Alvin Lucier, and John Cage. The basic idea of the graphic score is to use shapes, colors, sizes, textures, and densities as compositional elements in a less conventionally codified way than typical musical notation does.

To do this is to invoke something like musical isomorphism. That is, using graphic notation the composer asks the musician to make choices or decisions

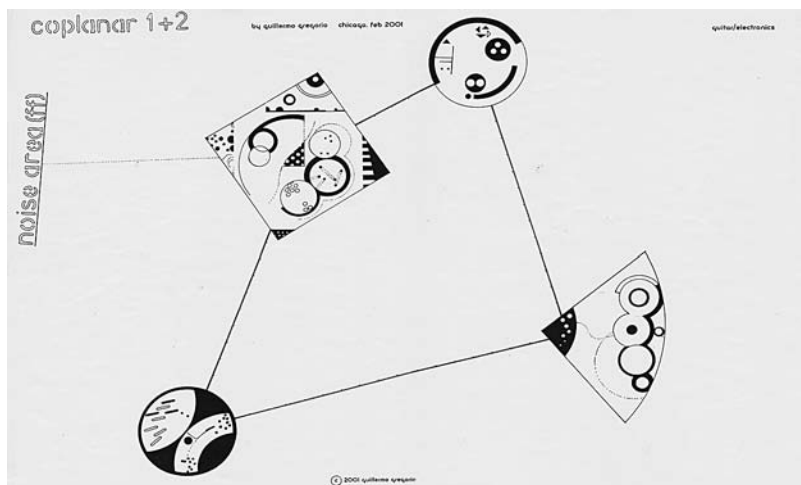
to somehow shape his or her interpretation by making an aural analogue of the visual elements. Here is a picture, make a sound of it. A faint precursor of this already exists, obviously, in conventional notation. For instance, the placement of one note higher than another note relative to a fixed horizontal plane (the staff) suggests a rise in frequency in the second note. It is literally a “higher” pitch. Reading a conventional score already requires some degree of isomorphism—translating shapes and distances into similarly shaped and extended sounds—and in turn suggests treating the staff as an index for the rise and fall of tones. (But conventional notation uses language-like codes as well as graphic likeness. It’s not entirely—or even by and large—isomorphic.)

Another aspect of this conventional way of scoring music is that it treats time as a left-to-right dimension of a score, following the conventions of Western reading and writing. To enter a score in this manner, if you deepen the isomorphic analogy and allow space to become materialized graphically, is to begin moving from left to right, accelerating and decelerating along a set of horizons (the staff), like shelves or conveyor belts, along which the music scoots. Events occur in a field that is swept like low-res video scan lines: left-to-right, top-to-bottom. Absorbed inside the space of the score, the reader-musician ambles along atop one of the staff lines, facing the abyss that lurks mysteriously off the cliff that is the right side of the page, reaching to place a high note up above, stooping to pluck a low note from below. The tempo might change, but the spatial analogy doesn’t. The musician’s disposition toward the marks on the page remains the same. There’s only one entranceway (top left) and one exit (bottom right). When a line is done, it’s a hop down to the next and ever onward, sweeping the staves in order.

One of the things that graphic composition has opened up, along with many others, is the possibility of different spatial dispositions for the musicians vis-à-vis the score.

The usual graphic score requires a key. Instructions for implementation, a user’s manual to suggest how to translate the marks into sounds. In the mid-1960s, British composer Cornelius Cardew created a massive graphic score for a piece titled “Treatise,” and what’s remarkable is that he refused to tell anyone what to do with it. No key. He supplied notes of past performances, but chose to leave the musician to figure out (which means to invent) a way of interpreting the score.

In “Coplanar 1 + 2,” Gregorio’s graphics have something Cardew-esque about them, but they’re also consistent with visual elements in a 1971 graphic score of his own. A bowling ball figure, for instance. Twisting dotted lines and parallel black bars. His is a very orderly kind of graphic score, not the rambling



sketchbook variety of the Scratch Orchestra. Gregorio was deeply impressed by constructivism, and his visual composition shows that influence unabashedly. But he is also involved in the cultural dimension of the interpretation of shapes. He is not moved by universalist ideas about synaesthetics—the notion that one shape or color evinces the same basic reaction wherever and whenever a human being encounters it. Shapes are open to immense variation, as prompts for musical activity. Think of a dot as the end of a line—as Gregorio has suggested to me—and the common reaction of playing a short sound (dot) can be shifted to something with more duration (line). The interlacing codes of spatial and temporal imagination should remain flexible, should be flexed.

What was I told about “Coplanar 1 + 2”? Pick a shape area to start with. When the piece begins, play all the subshapes within that area. Once you have done that, move to another area. To do so, you must silently count each of those hatch marks along the line that stretches to the new shape area, according to a specific tempo. (This means there will be plenty of space.) When you arrive, play all the shapes in that area. The “noise area” is a place for open improvisation. All playing in that zone is meant to be fortissimo. How you choose to interpret the shapes in each of the areas is entirely left up to you.

A coplanar is a kind of painting designed to eliminate the illusion of representation, even the kind that comes along with abstract artists and their way of composing space. Madi artists used painted shapes, separated by metal rods or pieces of wood, in an attempt to make material the space between parts in a construction, rather than relying on figural or representational forms of space. As Gregorio puts it, the idea is to “create a concrete spatial event.”

There is a second score that is played simultaneously with this one. Jim Baker plays synthesizer using the same score as I do, while Gregorio, violist Jen Paulson, cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm, bassist Michael Cameron, and oboist Kyle Bruckmann play the other score. Their score has, in addition to graphic materials, some conventionally notated melodic episodes. They have the opportunity to cross a bridge into our system of shapes (our shape system is exactly represented in their score as well), with the one limitation that they cannot circulate freely in our system, but must return straight away to their melodic-motivic system.

The first time we played the composition, at the Chicago Cultural Center, Gregorio put a graphic representation of the score in colored tape on the floor beneath us. This implicitly suggested what I feel when I play the piece—namely, that I am entering it from above, not from somewhere in the upper left-hand corner (where a normal score would start) but really wherever I want. In fact, because he put the “noise area” there, and he asks that everyone start in another part of the score, Gregorio actually precluded anyone from entering the score in the place they normally would. Coplanarity: multiple planes co-existing. Intersecting worlds, a vertiginous collapsing of space. The possible drunk en route. This is a bird’s-eye score. Appropriate image for an architect like Gregorio: the blueprint. But perhaps the shape zones aren’t resting on the ground. Maybe they float in open space, one higher than another, a Calder mobile seen from above. I swoop down on the score, perch on a shape, play it, play the others adjacent to it, then move on.

And when I do, I have the distinct impression of walking.

[2002]

# EXPERIMENTAL ORIENTAL

## New Music and Other Others

In this essay I will seek to explicate some aspects of the underlying paradigm that frames and makes sensible the use of non-Western elements in Western art music of recent vintage. Specifically, we should wonder: How does Orientalism function in the experimental tradition? And what different forms does it take within that compositional world? Though we should not avoid the fact that there can be a sinister side to the practice, it seems relevant to try to fully think through these issues before lumping all such borrowings together, bundling them up and tossing them overboard. Even if such dismissal or dressing-down were desirable, on the overdetermined cruise ship that transnational culture has now become, utopian separatism is just not feasible. As we shall see, certain of the Orientalist appropriations have long ago been reappropriated by non-Western agents and put back to use in varied ways. The move to disentangle “authentic” ethnic music from its hybridized new-music forms can be seen as a reassertion of the peculiar Western power to define (and preserve) “pure” expressions of cultural ethnicity as opposed to their “tainted” counterparts. Better, it seems, to describe the underlying epistemic framework that provides a context for American and European classical music’s overwhelming turn to the music of “other” cultures.

To elaborate the Orientalist tradition in new music of any comprehensive way would require a book of its own. What I am going to do here is simply lay out some overarching ideas and a sampling of pivotal figures and their work, primarily—though not exclusively—through the lens of the American experimental tradition and its polyglot offspring.

### **I. Experiment (Occident)**

Though its exact genealogy is open to debate, American experimental composition first acquired escape velocity from the dominant European model

in the work of Charles Ives. A widespread syncretic historical phenomenon stretching from coast to coast, post-Ivesian American experimental composition has, in its eighty-year history, incorporated people from vastly divergent backgrounds—its ranks typically swell to include Carl Ruggles, Edgard Varèse, Charles Seeger, Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, Ruth Crawford, Henry Brant, Conlon Nancarrow, Lou Harrison, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff. Later branches include the minimalists (Steve Reich, LaMonte Young, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, Tony Conrad); electronic, tape, and computer conceptualists like Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, and David Behrman; and text-based performance artists like Charles Amirkhanian, Laurie Anderson, and Robert Ashley.<sup>1</sup> But one composer's name is never left out: John Cage.<sup>2</sup>

Cage became a spokesman for experimental music, a role preceded (and inspired) by the publication of Cowell's important treatise *New Musical Resources*, written in the teens but unpublished until 1930.<sup>3</sup> Starting in the late 1930s, during a period in which Cage was beginning to utilize percussion and electronics as a way of introducing nonmusical elements into his compositions (the work that led to his development and refinement of Cowell's notion of prepared piano), he began to actively theorize his brand of experimentalism. "Centers of experimental music must be established," he insisted in a lecture in 1937. "In these centers, the new materials, oscillators, turntables, generators, means for amplifying small sounds, film phonographs, etc., available for use. Composers at work using twentieth century means for making music."<sup>4</sup> Cage's father, it has often been noted, was an inventor.

The many forms that American experimental composition has taken between that time and today have been well chronicled elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The point here is to indicate how the notion of experimentation rhetorically carries into the process of musical composition a connotation of science—of laboratory experimentation, as in Cage's proposed "centers"—and to indicate how that rhetorical turn functions to disavow any political or ideological dimension that the work might yield. There have, of course, been notable postwar composers who were both committed experimentalists and politically active, some (like Cornelius Cardew, Frederic Rzewski, and Luigi Nono) explicitly intertwining the two. But even apart from any of its specific incarnations (a few of which we will examine later), the basic association of experimentation with composing potentially configures music-making as a clean slate, without the ideological baggage of the European tradition to weigh it down. This break is clearly one of the distinguishing marks of American experimental and avant-garde composition: music is suddenly about looking for new forms, processes,

and materials. And it is also about the conducting of experiments without predicting or manipulating the results. Reflecting Cage's well-known desire to rid himself of ego and style, the experiment functions to impart the same ideological blankness, the same unpartisan pretense, and ultimately, the same universal scientificity as experimental methodology does in the realm of hard science. Where an older model of scientific inquiry as the apex of control and rationality was the discursive formation in which serialism was elaborated, experimentalism takes the image of science as inquiry and looks forward to new paradigms of fuzzy logics, chaos theory, probability, and chance.<sup>6</sup> In her essay "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," N. Katherine Hayles describes this as "the entanglement of causal determinism with an open and unpredictable future."<sup>7</sup>

It is important to recall the basic assumption behind the idea of experimental method: namely, that the outcome of the experiment is always undetermined. The hypothesis can never assume the results, but must await their appearance; experimental results then help prove or disprove the hypothesis (or, in other cases when they expose design flaws in the experimental framework, they may help redesign the experiment), but they are (at least ideally) inert, open-ended, and potentially subversive of the desired outcome. By definition, experimental data must be able to behave in a way not predicted by the hypothesis. Thus, the experiment is conceived as an excellent setting for exploration and discovery, a perfect opportunity for an encounter with the new, the unseen, and the unfamiliar.

## II. Concept

In a certain wing of experimental music the concerns of the composer shift from conventional ones of tone, dynamic, rhythm, harmony, form, and timbre to more strictly experimental ones, such as process, method, procedure, tools, framework, and even context.

Cage examined the possibilities of musical composition as process very thoroughly, especially in his many aleatory, indeterminate, or chance-procedure pieces, which he began composing in the 1950s. He initially did this work with the help of the ancient Chinese oracle *I Ching* (or *Book of Changes*) to which he was introduced in its first English publication in 1951 by like-minded composer Christian Wolff. Cage later utilized many other devices, from Hans Arp-like random collage methods to the use of computers to aid in the decision-making process of composition. Cage forecast the waning importance of preordained structure in works like his *Sonatas and Interludes* (which he wrote with the com-



positional device of flipping coins), a presence only felt as part of the overarching compositional process. “The structure . . . determined the beginning and ending of the compositional process,” he explained at Darmstadt in 1958, discussing *Sonatas and Interludes*. “But this process, had it in the end brought about a division of parts the time-lengths of which were proportional to the original series of numbers, would have been extraordinary. And the presence of the mind as a ruling factor, even by such an extraordinary eventuality, would not have been established. For what happened came about only through the tossing of coins.”<sup>8</sup> By eliminating the governing principle of structure and supplanting taste with process, Cage sought to explicitly divorce composing from “the mind as a ruling factor,” and thereby liberate sounds from their social and political connotations.

#### Subsidiary Trope: Terra Incognita

In close conjunction with the rhetoric of experimentation, we find an associated set of tropes clustered around the idea of exploration and discovery. The experimenter (and much has been made of the fact that Cage’s father actually was an inventor) is also a rugged cartographer of new lands or navigator of unknown waters, a sonic de Soto or musical Magellan. In this discursive regime, the composer is configured as an explorer looking for terra incognita. This notion of discovery of exploration helps undergird the idea that the composer is engaging in a value-free, experimental endeavor, even as it allows us to suggest the colonialist impulse submerged in its rhetoric. It is assumed that the discoverer-composer, out on the open seas of aural possibility, surely will bring back ideas and practices from distant lands, perhaps ones that can enhance the quality of Western musical life. Musical experimentation becomes microcolonialism. To be a cultured mid- to late twentieth-century Westerner, then, means to appreciate the spoils of such musical exploration, to be a healthy relativist. As Lou Harrison puts it: “Along with Henry Cowell I deem it necessary to know well at least one musical tradition other than the one into which one is born. This second acquisition ought to be ‘equivalent.’ If Haydn is known, then an equivalent court music should be learned and studied: Javanese *Gadon* for example, or Chinese or Japanese or Korean court or chamber music. It will not do to extend from Beethoven sonatas to Bluegrass banjo; the social and intellectual contents are largely incommensurate.”<sup>9</sup> In Harrison’s statement one can detect both the globalizing undertone that informs most contemporary “world music” projects and a peculiar stratification that mandates a transcultural link between musics of similar hierarchical status and social provenance. Listeners should explore, chart new territory, but make sure not

to stray from music of the same caste; breaking down cultural barriers may be a good idea, but leave class lines alone.

### III. Experiment (Orient)

An interest in non-Western, nonclassical materials was not introduced into American experimental composition through Cage's work with the *I Ching*, however. Indeed, Cowell had written long before of the potential utility of nondiatonic, microtonal scales: "Successful experiments, and the well-known practice of Oriental music, show that these tones are not beyond the capacity of the human ear. . . . Sliding tones, based on ever-changing values of pitch instead of steady pitches, are sometimes used in music. Such tones are very frequently used in primitive music, and often in Oriental music."<sup>10</sup> Cowell also suggested that the stiff, unyielding rhythms characteristic of Western music might benefit from the nuances of alien input: "Not only do nearly all Oriental and primitive people use shades of rhythm, but also our own virtuosi, who instead of playing the notes just as written, often add subtle deviations of their own." The proximity of "primitive" and "Oriental" is telling here. Indeed, it should be noted that Cowell is sometimes grouped with Leo Ornstein and George Antheil, who were arguably musical equivalents of Picasso in their overt use of primitivism.<sup>11</sup> Ornstein (composer of *Danse Sauvage*) and Antheil (composer of *Sonata Sauvage*) both professed interest in what they saw as a rawness and brutality of "primitive" cultures and sought to translate that aspect into a productively shocking effect in the West, just as Picasso had in his works influenced by African masks and sculptures.

Johannes Fabian has unpacked the way that cultural anthropology tends to position its object at a temporal distance from itself, even when the people in question are contemporaneous with the inquirer. Fabian located this in the context of a capitalist, colonialist-imperialist expansionism in which "geopolitics has its ideological foundation in chronopolitics": "Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse; it is a science of other men in another Time. It is a discourse whose referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject."<sup>12</sup> Already, right at the outset of the proverbial golden years of American experimentalism, a familiar nineteenth-century form of Orientalism helps guide an overriding interest in non-Western musics: "Oriental" music is linked, at least by persistent proximity, with the "primitive," and both are looked to for their rejuvenative powers in a period of mounting dissatisfaction with conventional Western musical civilization. The Oriental is first distanced from the West (to suggest its dif-

ference), then embraced as a potent import—it is, in Edward Said’s terms, *Orientalized*: “Primitiveness therefore inhered in the Orient, *was* the Orient, an idea to which anyone dealing with or writing about the Orient had to return, as if to a touchstone outlasting time or experience.”<sup>13</sup> What various “traditional” musics bring to the Western classical scene is a sort of shock of the ancient—they are seen as having values that were lost over the course of European art music history, or perhaps were never there in the first place. It is important, then, that these traditions be configured as old—perhaps primitive—so that they can whisper their secrets in the ear of the Western composer. Of course, this means that those traditional musics must not change, and never have. As Said suggests: “The very possibility of development, transformation, human movement—in the deepest sense of the word—is denied the Orient and the Oriental. As a known and ultimately an immobilized or unproductive quality, they come to be identified with a bad sort of eternity: hence when the Orient is being approved, such phrases as ‘the wisdom of the East.’”<sup>14</sup> In addition to positioning the Orient as this sort of timeless knowledge, another way Orientalist discourse functions, according to Said, is by empowering the Westerner to typify, generalize, and subsequently represent what is Oriental: “In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand.”<sup>15</sup> Within Orientalism the Oriental object can never represent itself, but is essentialized and represented as a combined projection of Western desires and anxieties and a reassertion of Western control. American experimentalists have consistently defined the Oriental as a generalized set of potential “new musical resources.” Cowell, for instance, only barely distinguishes *which* Oriental musical practice or practices he is referring to (in *New Musical Resources* his most specific citations are of Javanese and Siamese music, ancient Greek music, and Hawaiian music),<sup>16</sup> and he never specifies whether he means classical or court musics (of which there are many, centuries old, and hardly “primitive”), popular musics, or traditional folk musics. Note the difference from Harrison’s dictate that people should know more than one music culture; though curiously stratified and clearly elitist, Harrison is very specific about which kind of music—art/court, folk/popular—is “equivalent,” hence calling for a more detailed and less blanketlike understanding of other musics and an admission that there are art music traditions other than the Western classical lineage. Like Harrison’s, Cowell’s encounter with non-Western music was facilitated by the fact that he lived on the West Coast, and in San Francisco as a young person he spent much time studying various musical traditions, especially Chinese and

Japanese vocal technique, Indonesian gamelan, and Indian classical music.<sup>17</sup> By referring to these musics in a generalized way, Cowell retains his positional superiority, defining and then appropriating elements that help him dislocate conventional European harmony and rhythm.

Nevertheless, in comparison with the bald exoticism of Antheil and Ornstein, Cowell's early work—especially the remarkable body of solo piano music he composed in the 1910s and 1920s—remains particularly interesting and valuable in its oblique use of non-Western musics, the way that it tends to treat them as inspiration and catalyst, rather than exotic, “savage” incendiary devices to be thrown at polite concert conventions. One can, for instance, hear certain aspects of koto music in his celebrated developments of clusters and other dense voicings; and it is easy in retrospect to see his instructions to perform directly on the strings of the piano with fingers or foreign implements—abstracting the major icon of Western art music and turning it into an *objet retrouvé*—as relating to Asian string traditions for instruments performed similarly, such as the chin and kayagum. As pianist Chris Burn, a Cowell specialist, explains: “He often transferred playing techniques from other stringed instruments. These include strumming, plucking, scraping and stopping the strings, the latter to produce muted tones and a wide variety of harmonics.”<sup>18</sup> Cowell's distance from the primitivist camp is reflected in the titles of these pieces, which all relate to the mythology of the Celtic isles, his father's ancestry. In these formative and important pieces, rather than reference Asian musics, Cowell develops his own music out of them, implementing new instrumental techniques and approaching the piano (and consequently, certain entrenched aspects of Western harmony) anew. According to this model, non-Western musics provide a mirror that allows Western music to reconsider itself. In his piano repertoire, at least, Cowell resisted the lure of superficial exoticism. Composer, instrument-inventor, and resolute-outsider Harry Partch also fits this description. In the arsenal of new musical tools he created—thoroughly theorized in his book *The Genesis of a Music*—Partch too took inspiration from non-Western musics he heard as a young person in California and developed his own music from them, building his own tools where Cowell looked for a new one already waiting in the piano. Further, Partch was profoundly struck by Chinese and Japanese theatrical traditions, and he took pains to discuss his work as ritual and drama, rather than autonomous concert music.

Early on, Cage discussed the inherent possibilities of percussion and improvisation directly in relation to Asian and African American music. In 1937 he wrote: “Methods of writing percussion music have as their goal the rhythmic structure of a composition. As soon as these methods are crystallized into

one or several widely accepted methods, the means will exist for group improvisations of unwritten but culturally important music. This has already taken place in Oriental cultures and in hot jazz.”<sup>19</sup> This pair of musical archetypes provides Cage with a springboard for decades of consideration, specifically embracing certain aspects of the “Oriental” and eventually rejecting the expressive, narrative orientation of jazz.<sup>20</sup>

While teaching at the Cornish School in Seattle, Washington, in the late 1930s, Cage was first introduced to the teachings of Zen Buddhism, and Cage’s budding interest in Zen was further stimulated by his encounter with Zen proselytizer and philosopher Daisetz T. Suzuki at a lecture at Columbia University in 1945. Cage studied with Suzuki and actively read various philosophical texts (not by any means limited to Zen); his noted favorites included the gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*. In his work with words—both written and spoken—and in lectures and explanations of his working methods, Cage consistently referred to the writings of non-Western philosophers; some of his best-known writings on boredom, aesthetics, and politics are as much steeped in Zen and Indian philosophy as in Thoreau and Duchamp. He attributed his important reconsideration of the role of silence in musical composition to Hindu and Buddhist concepts. “My concern toward the irrational,” Cage remarked in 1967, “and my belief that it is important to us in our lives, is akin to the use of the koan in Zen Buddhism. That is to say, we are so accustomed and so safe in the use of our observation of relationships and our rational faculties that in Buddhism it was long known that we needed to leap out of that, and the discipline by which they made that leap take place was by asking a question that could not be answered rationally.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **IV. Conceptual Orientalism versus Conceptual Chinoiserie**

It would be false to assume that all cultural appropriations are alike. In the case of experimental music, we can trace two very basic, very different kinds of work that directly relate to and emanate from the encounter with non-Western cultures. As we have seen, these two lines may well have been closely related in their infancy—Cage’s interest in percussion music and Cowell’s initial development of techniques prepared for piano were both derived from a sheer delight in the new timbres and textures of various kinds of Asian, Indonesian, and African musics. And some of Cage’s early keyboard music clearly exploits the possibilities of turning the piano into a one-man gamelan. But where Cowell later went on to exploit other musics for their exotic appeal, as we shall see, Cage saw the use of non-Western music and philosophy as a poten-

tial strategy for the disruption of the Western preoccupation with harmony, structure, and intentionality.

Through his increasing use of Zen (rather than simple exotic musical material), Cage developed a substantially altered version of Orientalism, an Orientalism not based on acquisition of new sonic objects but concerned with posing unanswerable or indefinite musical questions. The image of the musical koan—an unsolvable riddle or paradox used in Buddhism to derail rationality—became Cage’s badge of honor, and he himself became, for many new-art followers and makers alike, a pop-Zen icon. He was known for telling Buddhist jokes, parables, and anecdotes, as well as translating into musical composition the ideas of triviality, paradox, contempt for absolute meaning, and respect for sound-as-sound. Indeed, some significant degree of Cage’s lasting public image is inextricably bound up in what he referred to (usually in the aggregate, rather than specifically) as “Oriental philosophy,” and he was seen by many as being the major figurehead for non-Western thought in America. The way that soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy characterizes late 1950s New York bohemia, for instance, says much about that close link: “Zen was in the air, everyone was reading Cage.”<sup>22</sup> Cage’s preoccupation with the irrational led him to conceive of strict systems in which he could produce random events or chance occurrences. But if we have already configured him as a prime conceptualist in contemporary music, it is necessary to see that move in relation to a persistent Orientalist orientation.

### *Ryoanji*

Cage’s conceptual Orientalism does not start by trying to import an alien idea into his work or graft an exotic element onto it, nor does it base itself around a non-Western system or sound. It is not about semblance, not about “sounding” non-Western. Instead, Cage creates the conditions for certain events to happen, the concept for which may be roughly based, for instance, in an Asian source. The resulting music, however, may have little or nothing aesthetically to do with the originary system—Cage was usually at pains to avoid such stylistic or idiomatic markers. In his 1983 composition *Ryoanji*, for example, he used the visual image of the Japanese stone garden as the starting point for the piece. He prepared paper with two rectangular areas, then in the first traced parts of the perimeter of stones (placed using chance procedures), indicating glissandi in relatively conventional graphic notation (sliding between bottom = low and top = high). This created a series of solos, each followed by a silence of unspecified length. In the other rectangle, Cage composed the accompaniment, guided by the image of the raked sand that

sits under stones in a garden; this suggested to him that he should utilize five unison parts distributed randomly (but systematically) on the page.

While referring in its title and working process to Japanese culture, the resulting piece of *Ryoanji* (of which Cage made versions for oboe, trombone, flute, voice, and bass-and-voice, all accompanied by percussion) does not resemble anything specifically Japanese at all. The instrumentation is primarily standard-issue Western classical (save the percussion part, which, in dedicatee Michael Pugliese's performances, included a rock, pod rattle, small log, and drum), and the superimposition of the two pieces—each conceived as a solo but played simultaneously—creates something that is conceptually and processually indebted to a non-Western inspiration. This is an oblique form of Orientalism, not the direct incorporative or syncretic form to which the West is more accustomed. But it is still Orientalist. Cage's use of systems—superimposed sets of rule-based parameters for the construction of works—qualifies him as one of the most genuinely experimental composers of American experimentalism. He designed the concepts and executed them without knowing for certain what the outcomes would be. (At times, like many scientists, he even admitted to cheating to get the results he desired.) But we have already seen how that cloak of ideological blankness, grounded in the scientific connotation of experimentation, does not evade the underlying value system that produces it. In other words, while Cage's conceptual work may not seem Orientalist, in the final analysis the ends never totally escape the means.

### *Persian Set*

If Cage's conceptual Orientalism stirred others into concept-based work—his progeny ranging from Fluxus composers like George Brecht and Nam June Paik to a long laundry list of academic Cageans—another lineage of Orientalist work continued unabated. That more generic type of Orientalism might be best titled “contemporary chinoiserie,”<sup>23</sup> in homage to the decorative tradition it most closely resembles. In this case, it is specially the exotic sounds, textures, instruments, voices, and shapes of non-Western music that are appropriated for use in a new-music context. These can be seen as vibing up the senile classical music scene, adding thrilling new grist to the moribund old elitist mill. But they also continue a tried-and-true tradition, well established in the nineteenth century, of exotic Orientalist musical decoration.

Consider, for example, Cowell's composition *Persian Set*. Written in 1957, while Cowell and his wife were visiting Tehran, Iran, during a world tour funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, *Persian Set* is a far cry from the systematic experimental work of Cage. Cowell characterized it as “a simple record

of musical contagion,”<sup>24</sup> and it has the air of an idiomatic study of the basics of Iranian music. Obviously indebted to late romanticism, it also sounds reminiscent of Copland’s *Americana* (Cowell, too, was composing *Americana* such as *American Melting Pot* and *Old American Country Set* as early as the late 1930s), and it is not too distant in feel from something like Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* or Ravel’s *Bolero*. Like both those widely recorded, popularized pieces, *Persian Set* has an air of pastiche and world-music kitsch about it. It borders more on easy listening music’s global exotics—extremely popular in the mid-1950s, along with tiki lounges and widespread chop suey—than on Cowell’s earlier promise of an armada of startling new musical resources. (It is interesting to note that a popular easy listening duo of that period, Ferrante & Teicher, specialized in using prepared pianos in many of their explicitly exoticist, pseudo-Polynesian pieces.) In 1958, Cage pointedly wrote: “Cowell’s present interests in the various traditions, Oriental and early American, are not experimental but eclectic.”<sup>25</sup>

Conceptual Orientalism and contemporary chinoiserie—most of the relevant experimental and new-music movements since World War II, when they have explicitly used non-Western elements in their construction, have had their feet planted in one of those two camps. The lineage of composers creating pure chinoiserie is quite strong, and certainly includes Alan Hovhaness, whose work Brian Morton eloquently sums up as combining “semi-mystical ‘Eastern’ hokum with Orthodox and Western church music, and routine ‘classical’ form . . . a hefty warning of the superficiality and blank eclecticism that lies in wait for more adventurous experimenters and that seems a particular pitfall of West Coast culture.”<sup>26</sup> Colin McPhee’s compositions, such as his best-known 1936 piece “*Tabuh-tabuhan*,” stretch the definition of “influence” by being perilously close to the actual sound of Balinese gamelan music. He studied the Indonesian court music very closely and wrote the ethnomusicologist classic *Music in Bali* while living there from 1931 to 1939. This raises the problem of the ethical dimension of its authorship.<sup>27</sup> Though on paper he may have required more specific knowledge of musical traditions than Cowell, Lou Harrison too created many works more notable for the craft of their pan-global exotic referentiality—using Indonesian scales and orchestras consisting of both Western and non-Western instruments in rather forced, lushly arranged East-West cultural grafts—than for their intellectual innovation. Unlike Cowell, Partch, and Cage, who were stimulated by non-Western musics to come up with something conceptually and/or sonically original, Hovhaness and McPhee and Harrison tended to pay homage with the sincerest forms of flattery—imitation. The political blank slate of experimentality gave



them license to imitate at will, to continue the venerable tradition of, in Said's words, "domestications of the exotic."<sup>28</sup>

To be sure, some composers have used a combination of conceptual and decorative Orientalism. The minimalists, for instance, adopted both sounds and ideas from extraneous sources, allowing them to both resemble classical Indian (in the case of drones and modalism) or West African music (in the case of cyclical polymeter) and, at the same time, to use sounds and systems derived from those traditions as tools with which to interrogate and dislocate conventional Western musical reality.

## V. Structuralist Minimalist

I am not interested in improvisation or in sounding exotic. • Steve Reich, 1969

Fifty years after Cowell had formally suggested the turn to other cultural traditions in experimental music, the impulse was still strongly felt by American composers, particularly those wishing to find a different path from both the European serialist and postserialist line and the Cagean conceptual line. For Steve Reich, Cage's compositional use of chance process had been impossible to detect, and Reich instead wanted a process that was audible as it was being performed or played back.<sup>29</sup> In 1970, after spending five months studying Ewe music with master drummer Gideon Alorwoyie in Ghana, Reich wrote *Drumming*, his landmark piece. Though he'd already been exploring phase-relation pieces in which a musical process of changing rhythmic relations between repeating figures clearly occurs, this work launched his career and cemented his reputation as one of the foremost minimalist figures. Two years later, he spent a summer studying Balinese gamelan with I Nyoman Sumandhi. Fellow minimalist Philip Glass was similarly influenced by North Indian classical music through studies with tabla player Alla Rakha in the late 1960s, and Terry Riley had even earlier been using looping and phasing rhythms. Their music, too, attempted to use complexities of cyclical time to undermine composerly practice and moreover to rethink the conventions of Western musical structure. Outspoken in his desire not to sound like the musics he was learning about, Reich posed the problem of absorbing influences: "What can a composer do with this knowledge?" His answer was specifically to suggest that a Western composer should study non-Western structures, allowing them to influence rather than seeking to imitate them. "This brings about the interesting situation of the non-Western influence being there in the thinking, but not in the sound," he concluded.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while he initially thought of writing *Drumming*

for African instruments, he decided against this so as not to be too literal. While he was clearly inspired by his transcriptions of African music and study of Indonesian musics, Reich attempted to utilize what he learned as a way of challenging the formal and structural components of Western classical music, particularly its moribund sense of how to deal with pulsed time. “What was it about Steve Reich’s ‘Drumming’ that brought the audience to its feet at the Museum of Modern Art on December 3?” asked composer/writer Tom Johnson in an early column for the *Village Voice* in 1971. “Was it the pleasure of seeing African and European elements so thoroughly fused almost as though we really did live in one world?”<sup>31</sup> Utopian syncretism is probably not what Reich had in mind, but the opacity of the process and the reliance on rhythmic structures kept *Drumming* and subsequent phase pieces from being distant enough from their source inspirations to obscure the connection.

## VI. Materialist Minimalist

Reich was equally vocal in his disdain for the other wing of minimalism, which he characterized as “this search for acoustic effect today where one repeats say piano tones over and over again until one can hear the third, fifth, seventh, ninth or a higher partial.”<sup>32</sup> Various performers working collaboratively in New York in the early 1960s, including La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, Angus MacLise, John Cale, and Tony Conrad, began examining not the underlying structure of non-Western music but the very stuff of its being, its acoustical material in physical sound. “Our music is, like Indian music, droningly monotonal,” wrote Conrad in 1966, “not even being built on a scale at all but out of a single chord or cluster of more or less tonically related partials.”<sup>33</sup> Again, this music was not so much imitative of as inspired by non-Western music; it was, indeed, much more bare and single-minded than any Indian classical music. But the other source of inspiration was domestic: Conrad reports that he and many others were profoundly troubled by Cage’s revelation that sounds could be considered music, and he suggests that this caused a serious crisis in composition.

Of course the modernist interpretation was that Cage was shifting the emphasis in composition toward the strategies rather than the materials of the traditional music composer. But for us, for me, I chose to take the more radical lesson to heart, which was boiled down into a one-word composition by Dennis Johnson: “LISTEN!” Listening as an active way of entering into the sound was an answer to the challenge of being a composer and

being invested in music. The way in which musical listening comes apart into rhythm and into melody and into pitch and timbre is something that we wanted to reduce to one instant, and indeed, then, listening at that instant produced the interaction among pitches and rhythms and timbres and melodies, all within the inner fabric of the sound which we could understand by knowing more and more about harmonic structures and exploring different harmonic structures and seeing the kinds of things that happen. So we began to develop different relationships between notes than anyone had worked with before.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting on the possibilities of single tones played on violins and violas (amplified to allow greater access to upper partials), picking the static sounds apart in the mind's ear—the influence was in the thinking, but not in the sound. Like Cowell, Conrad and company used non-Western music as a catalyst to develop and discover new musical materials from their existing instrumental means.

## VII. “Fake Tribes”: First World + Third World = Fourth World

In 1980, after Glass and Reich had already solidified their international reputations as the leading minimalist composers, trumpeter Jon Hassell released a record in conjunction with Brian Eno called *Fourth World Vol. 1: Possible Musics*. Hassell, who had performed drone-based pieces with La Monte Young's reformed mid-1970s Theater of Eternal Music and had also played on an influential version of Riley's seminal *In C*, had already issued *Earthquake Island* and *Vernal Equinox* on the Tomato label (which had also released important records by Cage and was the fortunate home of Glass's popular breakthrough *Einstein on the Beach*). These records anticipated much of the world jazz fusion of the ensuing period, with bubbling electric bass (obviously influenced by the electric period of Miles Davis) and exotic percussion, but the “possible musics” Hassell was aiming at were somewhat more complex, at least in theory. They dealt with a fantasy of new hybrid transculturation, an imaginary musical universe in which existing social and political boundaries—individuals, nations, and what Hassell specifically calls “tribes”—are overlaid with “a new, non-physical communications-derived geography-tribes of like-minded thinkers.”<sup>35</sup> *The Fourth World*.

Hassell's verbal theorization, taken both from materials issued at that time and retrospective comments, defines the Fourth World as a sort of phantom topography of alternative possibilities, a distinctly utopian interzone where all cultures mingle freely and without anxiety over authenticity or propriety.

In this definition, the Fourth World might refer to something beyond the contemporary “three,” just as one speaks of a sixth sense.

Of course, this concept tends to veil any power politics inherent in such a program, to bury the intricate hegemonic relations between dominant Western musical ideology and local music cultures worldwide. The notion that such fantasy blendings are desirable is taken as a given, and while Hassell insists that the message of the Fourth World is “that things shouldn’t be diluted” and that the “balance between the native identity and the global identity via various electronic extensions is not one that can be dictated or necessarily predicted,” his proposed merge-world of latent possibilities clearly points in the other direction to a place where new Western technologies and the wisdom of “other cultures, small cultures” are fused. In this respect, Hassell’s music continues to be fusion; taking bits of non-Western music, particularly in the form of Indian and African percussion, and grafting them onto Western structures. On Hassell’s *Dream Theory in Malaya* (“Fourth World Vol. 2”) and Eno and David Byrne’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, both from 1981, the producers go so far as to sample their non-Western elements; the material is less integrated than it is literally quoted. All these projects use an exotic-sounding, echoey mix, a long-standing trope of sonic Orientalism, usually linked to a “mysteries of the East” mentality. Reverb is also the trademark of Hassell’s electronically treated trumpet, as heard on “Houses in Motion” on Talking Heads’ *Remain in Light*, for example. Exotic new-age primitivist funk fusion: Hassell performs a little addition—the music on *Possible Music* and *Dream Theory in Malaya* is, figuratively, the simple sum of First and Third World musics. And while it is unquestionably seductive music, at least from a Western perspective, it relies on a familiar Orientalist form of seduction, preferring the slinky, superficial, exotic, ethereal artifacts of various non-Western musics over their deeper structural implications and different, clunkier, less overdeterminedly otherworldly-sounding aspects. The distinct spirit of the Fourth World lives on in many of the more recent transcultural productions undertaken by Bill Laswell, among others.

What seems especially suggestive in Hassell’s Fourth World musical concept is the overt idea of fantasizing, of creating what he calls a “faux tribe.”<sup>36</sup> In one of the “swollen appendices” to his book *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, Eno takes this one step further, documenting a role-playing game he’d come up with in which musicians were given a new identity with instructions for musical behavior; the specific futuristic identities he created included music played in “the Afro-Chinese ghetto in Osaka,” in a (presumably Brooklyn-based) “Neo-M-Base improvising collective,” by “a Soul-Arab band in a North-African

role-sex club,” by a “New Afrotech” band in a suburb of Lagos, by “NAFTA’s leading Force Funk band,” and by “a leading recordist at Ground Zero studios in Hiroshima, the largest studio in the Matsui media empire.” Eno describes a related game, “Notes on the Vernacular Music of the Acrux Region,” as “an attempt to imagine a new musical culture, and to invent roles for musicians within it.”<sup>37</sup>

Recall that one of the primary sites in Said’s initial analysis of Orientalism is the Western *imagination*,<sup>38</sup> and that one of the main activities of academic Orientalists was to invent a consistent image of the Orient. Furthermore, Said explains that the sheer number of Orientalists grew after the end of the eighteenth century “because by then the reaches of imaginative and actual geography had shrunk, because the Oriental-European relationship was determined by an unstoppable European expansion in search of markets, resources, and colonies, and finally, because Orientalism had accomplished its self-metamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution.”<sup>39</sup> To what degree is the Fourth World a mere extension of this imperialist mapping of a fantasy space of otherness into the electronic telecommunications era? The Orient was, for Orientalists, in part invented to explain and facilitate exchange—albeit exchange with no pretense of parity—between colonial powers and their distant territories. How, then, does Hassell’s fantasy of a new geography differ from this paradigm? In truth, very little.

Writer and musician David Toop’s book *Ocean of Sound* turns to Hassell’s Fourth World frequently in its exploration of the history and nature of ambient and related musics. Over the course of his “personal nomadic drift,” Toop takes one pass at Said, but instead of grappling with *Orientalism*’s critical edge, he dismisses the work as “a comprehensive demolition job on the West’s obsessive appropriation of the East” and performs a quick sleight of hand with a quotation by putting a positive spin on the idea of “unsettling influences” offered by non-Western music, citing Debussy’s always-mentioned ur-encounter with Vietnamese and Javanese music as a “catalyst for his break from the powerful influence of Wagner.”<sup>40</sup> But Toop’s sentiments lie much more with the new ethnography of James Clifford and George Marcus, the performance studies fieldwork of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, and the legacy of surreal anthropology—all of them overwhelmingly optimistic about the politics of cross-cultural inquiry—than with the post-Foucauldian institutional discourse critique of someone like Said. One can see why, quite plainly: where the latter seeks to understand the power dynamic in Orientalism, it seems to me that Toop prefers to uncritically experience and enjoy the effects of that power dynamic. If that were not the case, the ramifications

of Said's "demolition job" for the study (and championing) of ambient and Fourth World productions would clearly need to be spelled out and dealt with. Like Hassell and Eno's *Possible Musics*, *Ocean of Sound* is historically and aesthetically seductive, but its politics remain deeply impacted.

### VIII. Occidentalism or Asian Neo-Orientalism?

We are in a very subtle artistic world where there can be no direct relationships, no Western rationality, no look-what-I-made. Only coincidence. • Tom Johnson, describing a 1979 performance by Takehisa Kosugi and Akio Suzuki

Starting in the 1950s, initially through the work of Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, Western classical music was faced with a refracted version of the Oriental-experimental tradition. Into the 1960s, Takemitsu wrote pieces that utilized Japanese classical court instruments—*biwa*, *shakuhachi*, and, in the case of *In an Autumn Garden*, an entire *gagaku* ensemble—as well as composing a large number of works using the conventional Western orchestral instrumentarium.<sup>41</sup> Though Takemitsu was the best known, a wave of new music composers soon hit the scene from various Asian points of origin, all of them studying and most settling in the West. The godfather of Japanese composition, Toshiro Mayuzumi (born in 1929, one year before Takemitsu) composed his rather Western-sounding *Mandala Symphony* (1960) as a "Japanese Buddhist view of the omnipotent universe," while Somei Satoh, a composer nearly twenty years younger than Mayuzumi, also uses romantic and late-romantic Western elements, as well as material closely verging on chinoiserie. Other noteworthy figures from three generations of Asian composers working in the European and American vanguard include Kazuo Fukushima, Akio Yashifo, Toshi Ichianagi, Yuji Takahashi from Japan; Franco-Vietnamese composer Nguyen-Thien Dao; and Chou Wen-Chung from China.<sup>42</sup> Like Takemitsu, young Chinese composer Ge Gan-ru has composed orchestral scores that include parts for instruments from China and, more tellingly, for Japanese koto—hence, a trans-Asian string aesthetic allows for cultural borrowing not only *from* but *between* these traditions.

What is particularly interesting about many of these composers is that when their work considers "the Oriental," it tends to do so as it is found in Cage and his lineage (or, alternately, using a European vanguard vocabulary) as much as it does in Asian traditions closer to home. Paul Griffiths succinctly nails Takemitsu's Asian neo-Orientalism when he writes: "If Takemitsu's delight in evanescent, apparently unwilling sonorities seems on the surface to be a

Japanese trait, on further reflection it may be found to link him at least as much with Feldman, while his orchestral writing draws much more from Debussy and Boulez than from indigenous traditions.”<sup>43</sup> Several Korean composers are important exceptions. Isang Yun, who settled in Germany after decades of political persecution, integrates Asian elements drawn from his experience of listening to Korean court, particularly flute, music (hear, for instance, the extraordinary clarinet pieces “Piri” and “Riul”) while reportedly remaining “suspicious of Cage’s ‘oriental’ indeterminacy.”<sup>44</sup> Nam June Paik was born in Seoul and educated in Japan, and became a key member of the Fluxus (non) movement in the 1960s. An active composer who later stopped composing music, Paik took the Cage line in a much more extreme direction, writing Fluxus-oriented conceptual works. A younger figure, Younghee Pagh-Paan was also born in Seoul; she studied in Germany and now divides her time between Germany and Italy. In her extremely rich, modernist music, Pagh-Paan seems to put Western instrumentation and aspects of postserialist techniques into direct contact with a distinctly Korean aesthetic, without resorting to pastiche or cultural grafting.

Chinese-born composer Tan Dun, since 1986 a resident of New York City, is an excellent contemporary example of the new wave of Asian neo-Orientalist. Take, for example, his 1992 composition *Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience*: in an overtly Cagean move, he scored the piece with a part for the audience to participate by means of improvised “twittering, gossiping, and shouting.” And accompanying the recorded version, the liner booklet includes the following statement from Cage himself: “What is very little heard in European or Western music is the presence of sound as the voice of nature. So that we are led to hear in our music human beings talking only to themselves. It is clear in the music of Tan Dun that sounds are central to the nature in which we live but to which we have too long not listened. Tan Dun’s music is one we need as the east and the west come together as our one home.”<sup>45</sup> Positioned by Cage as a champion of “the presence of sound as the voice of nature,” Tan Dun’s work is made to fit snugly into the “wisdom of the East” variety of Orientalist discourse. Thus, it is interesting to consider how his work (as well as the work of other Asian, Asian American, and Asian European composers) is used to confirm and uphold contemporary forms of Orientalism, legitimizing the prevalent “East meets West” mentality. A stronger form of Orientalism is perhaps permitted by means of identity politics: the work is placed beyond analysis or critique by being created by a genuine Oriental composer. What otherwise inaccessible truth is Tan Dun’s neo-Orientalist vision offering the Western listener? As Gayatri Spivak puts it: “When the cardcarrying listeners,

the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone ‘speaking as’ something or other, I think there one encounters a problem. When they want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization.”<sup>46</sup> Where the notion of an Oriental “voice of nature” might seem an overstated Western stereotype, when articulated through the work of a onetime Chinese farm-worker “raised in a rural area filled with magic, ritual and shamanism,”<sup>47</sup> it is suddenly endowed with the irrefutable aura of ethnic authenticity. And as such it no doubt speaks more forcefully to card-carrying, hegemonic, dominant folks.

Tan Dun scored his 1994 composition *Ghost Opera* for string quartet and pipa, with water, stones, paper, and metal—the later elements composed of bowed gongs and stones, water bowls, metal cymbals, a paper whistle, and a large paper installation. The piece interweaves a Chinese folk song and a Bach prelude, as well as text and live sound effects created on the objects and instruments. “When *Ghost Opera* debuted in Beijing,” Tan Dun reported, “there were more than 1500 people. They knew the folk song and they recognized the ancient tradition, but they did not know that a string quartet could play stones along with Bach, and play paper, gongs, water and voice.”<sup>48</sup> Here, the neo-Orientalist composer turns the usual paradigm on its head, taking Cagelike nature sounds “back” to China, where they’re greeted as exotic items much the way the pipa and folk melody function in a Western setting.

This anecdote points out the dominance of Western classical norms—“proper” materials for a string quartet to use, namely, their violins, viola, and cello—in the art music of Revolutionary China (where the avant-garde and experimentalism were roundly denounced as decadent) at the same time as it slyly mocks the supposed Asianness of Tan Dun’s elemental objects: returned to their (mythic) cultural point of origin, the stones, paper, and metal are not even recognized as musical. The deep complexity of neo-Orientalist strategies is revealed: an Asian composer in the West uses techniques devised by a Western composer inspired by Asian philosophy—the work is played for an Asian audience which hears it as an artifact of the bizarre West. Orientalism is reflected back and forth like a musicultural *mise-en-abyme*.

Fragments of imperialist (exporting Western musical values through conservatory education) and colonialist (importing non-Western musical materials for use in Western art-music settings) ideologies are both found here, but the music of the Asian neo-Orientalists, at its best and most provocative, manages to subtly subvert them both.<sup>49</sup>



## IX. The Classic Guide to Strategy: Orientalism and Improvised Music

Where the connotation of scientific method in experimental composition, in part, allowed Cage and others to ignore the political consequences of their Orientalism, various modes of music-making in the experimental diaspora have had to grapple with similar ideological and pragmatic dilemmas.<sup>50</sup> For example, we find the perpetuation of some of the same Orientalist tropes—exploration, discovery, terra incognita, Eastern wisdom—within the world of freely improvised music and its associated compositional fields. Guitarist Derek Bailey frames the issue in terms of disposition toward the instrument, and he finds what might be termed a naive or *art brut* attitude among players with what he calls an “anti-instrumental” strategy:

Instruments very much in favour with this school are, naturally enough, those which are ethnic in origin or, at least, in appearance. These meet the requirement that the instrument should have a fixed, very limited capability and that very little instrumental skill is needed to play it. The idea is, I think, that because of limited opportunities for technical virtuosity, a more direct expressiveness is possible. Some of these players have shown a great interest in the practices and rituals of ethnic music and particularly what is taken to be primitive uses of the voice. So, in performance, grunts, howls, screams, groans, Tibetan humming, Tunisian chanting, Maori chirping and Mozambique stuttering are combined with the African thumb piano, Chinese temple blocks, Ghanaian soft trumpet, Trinidadian steel drum, Scottish soft bagpipe, Australian bull-roarer, Ukrainian stone flute and the Canton one-legged monster to provide an aural event about as far removed from the directness and dignity of ethnic music as a thermo-nuclear explosion is from a fart.<sup>51</sup>

At the time that Bailey originally composed this unforgiving and incisive paragraph, he was implicitly engaging in a polemic with other British improvisors like David Toop<sup>52</sup> and Paul Burwell, both of whom (separately and together in their group *Rain on the Face*) used a huge array of “ethnic” instruments and techniques; Burwell created performances called “whirled music” out of multiple players whipping drones on bullroarers. Clive Bell is perhaps the epitome of this intercultural lineage, performing on a host of different, usually non-Western instruments including Thai flute, *shakuhachi*, and Laotian mouth organ (*khene*). The difference with Bell is that, contrary to Bailey’s statement, his interest in these (quite difficult) instruments does not seem to come from a desire to skirt instrumental virtuosity; Bell is, indeed, a virtuoso *shakuhachi* player.

While some of the eclectic exoticism of that era is perhaps gone from improvised and other forms of creative music today, there is undoubtedly a persistent strain of Orientalism bubbling under in certain places. John Zorn, for instance, has consistently returned to Asian music (reportedly fascinated by Japan since childhood, he first visited in 1985 and now spends some portion of the year living there) both as a supporter of indigenous Asian creative musics—releasing records by, performing together with, and otherwise promoting the work of different composers, sound artists, and improvisors and at the same time incorporating fragments of different kinds of Asian music and speech into pastiche pieces such as “Forbidden Fruit” and “Godard.”<sup>53</sup> Zorn’s deployment of Asian women’s voices in these two collages suggests a complex sense of irony. At once, the whispy, exoticized voice can serve the traditional eroticizing-othering function in which gender doubles the intensity of a given non-Western voice’s exoticism; on the other hand, Zorn arguably pushes that stereotype past itself, mocking it, revealing it as a constructed image, and reveling in the kitschiness of such antiquated Orientalism. Of course, such ironic instances have the advantage of both embodying and disavowing the stereotype they seem to poke fun at, hence allowing both the pleasure of highly eroticized/exoticized Asian women’s voices—in the case of “Forbidden Fruit,” which is expressly about a Japanese woman’s voice (that of Ohta Hiromi), an explicitly passionate embrace, replete with sighs and coos—and providing the safety of simultaneous ironic distancing.

Zorn’s relationship to Japan is multifaceted, as is evident from a statement that was included in the liner notes to his important 1987 record *Spillane*:

The Japanese often borrow and mirror other people’s cultures, that’s what’s so great about the place. They make a crazy mix out of it all. Of course, as a foreigner one can have a very strong sense of being outside their world—there’s a certain kind of understanding that I’ll never quite get. But then again, I was always an outsider here in America. I mean, when I was growing up in Queens, with long hair, wearing weird clothes, looking like a hippie, people called me all kinds of bizarre names. . . . I perform with Japanese musicians when I’m there. I write a lot, wander around, searching for rare Japanese pop singles, go to the movies, old book and poster stores, eat incredible food, and look at girls—the same stuff I do here. . . . It’s a stimulating change in perspective, not only with regard to the music scene, but also with regard to who I am as a person, how I fit into American culture, what I am in Japanese culture.

One of the major struggles that the “new ethnographers” of anthropology in the post-poststructuralist period like Steve Tyler, James Clifford, and George

Marcus have had to face is the way that looking at other cultures has traditionally been a process of the West examining itself in the mirror. That same dilemma—going to Japan to learn about one’s own personality and identity—is epitomized in Zorn’s statement, his identification with the omnivorous eclecticism of contemporary Japanese culture and the perspective that being there provides him on himself. Perhaps that introspection is part of what has led him to pursue the investigation of his own Jewish heritage so assiduously in recent years. Some of the complexity of Zorn’s relationship with Asian culture was foregrounded a few years ago when Zorn was taken to task by some Asian American organizations for his use of images of violence against Asian women on record covers on his label, Avant. Zorn officially apologized for hurting anyone’s feelings, though in fact the images in question were almost exclusively made by Asian artists, which further complicates the equation.<sup>54</sup>

There is unquestionably an ongoing presence of Orientalist discourse in contemporary music, and as a problematic it remains complex, recursive, and impacted, as one can see in Zorn’s example. Consider the following line, a parenthetical (but telling) remark lifted from a press release for Japanese bassist Kato Hideki’s 1996 record of improvisations *Hope & Despair*: “Japanese musicians are justifiably acclaimed for their ability to see music from a very different perspective.”<sup>55</sup> The exact angles and lines of sight (or hearing) of that “different perspective” (the same terms Zorn used to describe his love of Japan) continue to be left as an undefined, reductive, and implicit stereotype, and at the same time the overarching idea of difference continues to be romanticized, essentialized, and implemented in the attempt to enliven Western musics, be they classical, experimental, creative, or improvised. Meanwhile, the political dimension of that implied difference continues to go largely unexamined.

If such a forced reading, taken from the casual pen of a PR writer, seems just *too* forced, too tenuous, then think about the following explanation of the name of New Albion Records, a California-based company with a strong connection to the minimalist tradition: “As Sir Francis Drake, noted explorer and pirate, discovered California for the Elizabethan world, New Albion discovers new musical territories for the modern world. Then as now there are savages, pagans, exotic flora and fauna.”<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the context for such Orientalizing rhetoric has changed, but the rhetoric itself stays remarkably consistent: exoticism and savagery, exploration and discovery, the conquest of fresh aural geography. In the ears of new Western musics, the other continues to be effectively other.

[2000]

## Notes

1. This chapter deals primarily with the American experimental tradition, to the exclusion of the contemporaneous European avant-garde tradition, though an analysis of the way that non-Western music is represented and instrumentalized in the work of Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, and Pierre Boulez is a necessary complement to this work.

2. Many well-known American composers, such as Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Samuel Barber, Virgil Thomson, and Roger Sessions, are normally categorized outside the experimental camp, for various reasons—Carter, for instance, comes more directly out of a European avant-garde lineage, while Copland is perhaps best thought of as an American neoromantic. Wilfrid Mellers argues vigorously for the inclusion of the more obscure composer Charles Griffes among his experimentalists; see Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music* (1965; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 145–48.

3. Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (1930; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Cage studied with Cowell at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1934, and he cited *New Musical Resources* and Mexican composer Carlos Chavez's *Toward a New Music* as especially influential to him.

4. John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," in *Silence* (1973; reprint, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 6.

5. David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music 1890–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alan Rich, *American Pioneers: Ives to Cage and Beyond* (London: Phaidon, 1995); Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: The Avant-Garde since 1945* (New York: George Braziller, 1981); Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer, 1974); Thomas B. Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: History, Instruments, Technique, Performers, Recordings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985).

6. Fruitful comparison between Iannis Xenakis's stochastic (probability-based) compositions, based on calculation, and Cage's chance operations, based on some degree of lack of calculation, provides an interesting insight into the status of science in European and American experimental traditions.

7. N. Katherine Hayles, "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," in *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 240.

8. John Cage, "Composition as Process," in *Silence*, 21–22.

9. Lou Harrison, "Cloverleaf: A Little Narrative with Several 'Off-Ramps,'" in *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*, vol. 1, ed. John Paynter, Tim Howell, Richard Orton, and Peter Seymour (London: Routledge, 1992), 255.

10. Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, 18–19. Note Cowell's use of an explicitly scientific notion of "successful experiments."

11. Hear Antheil's *Sonata Sauvage* and Ornstein's *Danse Sauvage* performed by pianist Steffen Schleiermacher on *The Bad Boys!* (hat ART CD 6144, 1994).

12. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 144, 143. See also Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Patricia

Leighen, "The White Peril and L'Art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 4 (December 1990): 609–30.

13. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 231.

14. Said, *Orientalism*, 208.

15. Said, *Orientalism*, 6–9.

16. See Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, xiv, 12, and 21, respectively.

17. Rich, *American Pioneers*, 113–16. The "Pacific Rim" influence on American experimentalism via Cowell, Partch, and Harrison, as well as other West Coasters like Cage (born and raised in Los Angeles) and Terry Riley, is often discussed in historical accounts. See Nicholls, *American Experimental Music*, 220.

18. Chris Burn, liner notes to *A Henry Cowell Concert* (Acta 7, 1993).

19. John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," in *Silence*, 5.

20. See George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 91–107. Cage did compose "Jazz Study" in 1942, a piece that went unperformed until 1992; however, his opinion changed drastically later, and in 1982 he said: "When I listen to jazz, I don't find it as interesting as people tell me it is." (Quoted in *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz [New York: Limelight Editions, 1988], 225.)

21. *Conversing with Cage*, 267. Cage's interest in Zen never led him to become a practitioner.

22. Personal interview with Steve Lacy, Berlin, October 1996.

23. Steve Reich suggests the term "chinoiserie" in "Writings about Music," in *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), 163.

24. Quoted by Dana Paul Perna in liner text to Henry Cowell, *Persian Set* (Koch International Classics 3-7220-2 HI, 1993).

25. John Cage, "History of Experimental Music in the United States," in *Silence*, 72.

26. Brian Morton, *The Blackwell Guide to Recorded Contemporary Music* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 163.

27. For a much more rewarding example of the encounter between American music and gamelan, seek out the work of pianist and composer Anthony Davis, particularly his record *Episteme* (Gramavision, 1981).

28. Said, *Orientalism*, 60.

29. The epigraph quote is from Steve Reich, "Writings about Music," 153.

30. Reich, "Writings about Music," 163.

31. Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music* (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Het Apollohuis, 1989), 26.

32. Quoted in Edward Strickland, *Minimalism Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 189.

33. Reprinted in the liner text to Tony Conrad, *Outside the Dream Syndicate* (Table of the Elements 3, 1993).

34. Personal interview with Tony Conrad, 1995.

35. Quoted in David Toop, *Ocean of Sound* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), 168.

36. Toop, *Ocean of Sound*, 123.

37. Brian Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 382–89.

38. Said, *Orientalism*, 4.

39. Said, *Orientalism*, 95.

40. Toop, *Ocean of Sound*, 21.

41. Brian Morton astutely notes of Takemitsu's best-known composition, *November Steps*, which uses both *shakuhachi* and *satsumabiwa*, "There is no doubt that the popularity of *November Steps* is due in part to a taste for musical exotica." Morton, *The Blackwell Guide*, 194.

42. In 1958, the American CRI label produced the first LP of compositions by Chou Wen-Chung. Hear also two recent CDs on CRI, one featuring work by Chinese composer Chen Yi (now living in the States), *Sparkle* (CRI, 1999); and a collection of Chinese and Chinese American composers including Ge Gan-Ru, Kawai Shiu, Luo Jing Jing, James Fei, Jason Kao Hwang, Byron Au Yong, Fred Ho, Chen Yuanlin, Ying Zhang, and Jin Xiang, *China Exchange* (CRI, 1999).

43. Griffiths, *Modern Music*, 198.

44. Morton, *The Blackwell Guide*, 318.

45. Epigram in liner text to Tan Dun, *Snow in June* (CRI CD 655, 1993).

46. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 60.

47. Mary Lou Humphrey, liner text to *Snow in June*.

48. Tan Dun, in liner notes to *Ghost Opera* (Nonesuch 79445, 1997).

49. It falls outside the scope of this chapter, but the work of a new generation of Asian American jazz musicians offers a very interesting, aesthetically and ideologically complex version of the neo-Orientalist approach, one that is deeply critical of stereotypes but does not avoid the problem by shying away from using traditional musical elements but instead incorporates them into the context of jazz and improvised music. The important development of the kind of postindustrial music, known globally as "Japanese noise," also deserves mention in this context; Japan has the reputation, among fans of aggressive, overdriven sound, of producing such music's most extreme and violent practitioners, including Hanatarash, Masonna, Merzbow, and numerous others. These were presaged, in Europe, by the so-called kamikaze jazz musicians clustered around the Yosuke Yamashita Trio, as well as guitarist Yosuke "Jojo" Takayanagi. An investigation of the valences of such violence—both within Japanese listening contexts and in the various Western contexts in which such images are most actively promulgated—is long overdue.

50. The heading for this section is taken from John Zorn's two volumes of solo reed music, which in turn take their title from Miyamoto Musashi's *A Book of Five Rings*.

51. Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 102.

52. This is the same David Toop who authored *Ocean of Sound*; he still makes records, but no longer specifically identifies himself as a free improviser.

53. “Forbidden Fruit” on John Zorn, *Spillane* (Elektra/Nonesuch 9 79172, 1987); “Godard” on the Godard Fans, *Godard: Ça Vous Chanter* (Nato 634, 1985).

54. As well as being an extremely active advocate for Asian musicians, Zorn has strongly supported Japanese visual artists, frequently using their work on record covers. Japanese-born drummer Ikue Mori designs releases for Zorn’s Tzadik label.

55. Roger Richards, director of Extreme Records, press release for Kato Hideki, *Hope & Despair* (Extreme XCD 036, 1996).

56. From a promotional survey postcard distributed in New Albion CDs in 1998.

## AFTERWORD

### A Concise History of Music

When, at the beginning of summer, thunder—electrical energy—comes rushing forth from the earth again, and the first thunderstorm refreshes nature, a prolonged state of tension is resolved. Joy and relief make themselves felt. So too, music has power to ease tension within the heart and to loosen the grip of obscure emotions. The enthusiasm of the heart expresses itself involuntarily in a burst of song, in dance and rhythmic movement of the body. From immemorial times the inspiring effect of the invisible sound that moves all hearts, and draws them together, has mystified mankind.

- *The I Ching*

#### 1

In the beginning, there was rhythm. So said the Slits. I think they were right. Derek Bailey said that almost certainly the first music was improvised music. I think he was wrong. But we could fantasize about the earliest musicians, let's say for the sake of Charles Mingus that they're *Pithecanthropus erectus*, inventing music by means of improvisation.

Caveman: [whistles aimlessly]

Cavewoman: What's that?

Caveman: What?

Cavewoman: What you're doing with your lips, that sound.

Caveman: Was I doing something?

Cavewoman: It's something I've never heard. It's not talking exactly, but it communicates, it's making me feel something. I think I like it.

Caveman: Uh, OK.

Cavewoman: Can you keep doing it?

Caveman: No. I don't remember what it was.

There, in front of the fire, music was born. And forgotten.



## 2

Mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation. • Derek Bailey

Bailey's provocative formulation relies on the assertion that music's pioneer had a will to invent something new. I'm not sure that I reckon there was such a will, or that newness seemed like a very good idea at that time, or that such an improvisational will can possibly have existed in advance of music coming into being. I doubt that someone in the nether-mists of time set out to make music, fearlessly improvising it. Instead, I imagine that music was something they were already doing in another form, along quite strict guidelines, that was subsequently called music. Music seems to me more likely to have been a by-product. I'm thinking that music came out of ritual, quite circumscribed and familiar ritual, or even a more mundane chore, some activity that produced a sound with regularities that became known, in the long run, as music. In my musical big bang, these regularities could be varied and challenged, among other methods, using improvisation, but they were not initially improvised. Another scenario.

[Cavewoman whacking a pelt with a stick. Caveman taps his foot along with the pelt smacks.]

Caveman: That's cool. Keep going. Don't stop.

Cavewoman: [stops] What are you talking about?

Caveman: I like it when you beat the pelt. I think we should call it "the beat."

Cavewoman: [holds out the stick] I have a better idea, why don't you give it a try?

There, in early hominid housecleaning, music was born.

## 3

Or maybe music was a by-product of observation and imitation.

[Cavemen crouching together in low brush, whispering, a bird sitting on a stump nearby]

Caveman 1: I have a good angle. I think I can kill it!

Caveman 2: Hold on, I'm listening.

Caveman 1: To what?

Caveman 2: It's making noises. They're so beautiful. Why can't we make noises that beautiful?

Caveman 1: Let me know when I can kill it.

## 4

Trying to pinpoint the genesis of music, we're probably looking for a date around the same time as the appearance of self-consciousness, roughly fifty thousand years back, around the first artworks, when early humans began to treat their imagination seriously. Self-knowledge made us eager to seek unknown pleasures, and music was a pleasure that rewarded self-consciousness. I think, therefore I enjoy. But there are writers like David Rothenberg who claim that certain birds apparently also take pleasure in music, specifically in singing, and that these birds do it for no other evident reason than a joy in play. If that's true, maybe birds invented music. And if that is true, we should reserve the possibility that humans stole music from the birds.

## 5

The most popular origin story for music nowadays is more intimate. In the nursery. Motherese is like vocalese for infants, the babble that moms and babes share, cooing and sighing with musical cadences. It's a very sweet image: search for the kernel of music in the lull of the lullaby. Motherese anchors the early development of music in the physical body, in the transaction between two bodies, as part of a system of learning in which, so the idea goes, a nubile mind is prepared to acquire language via nonsense poetry.

Cavemother: Goo-goo ga choob.

Cavebaby: Oh bla di, oh bla dah.

Cavemother: Shoo-bi-doo-wop.

Cavebaby: Ish-ka-bibbly, otten-botten.

Cavemother: Bo-bo-beeneatenoten.

Cavebaby: Slush-slush.

## 6

We could alternatively entertain the Slits' notion that music's origins, filmed with a Vaseline-rimmed lens, first occurred as an adjunct to sex. In the beginning, there was rhythm.

A sign on the cave door: "If the mountain's rockin', don't bother knockin'."

## 7

Maybe dance came first.

We tend to think of dance presupposing music. One dances *to* music, rather than the other way around. The music is there, then the dancing takes place. Maybe that's historically inaccurate. I have no evidence for this claim, have not even researched it, don't think I need to because I'm imagining really hard, straining to remember multigenerationally, projecting myself back into the cultural miasma, to the very moment when music was conceived. My eyes are closed. My face has the placid look of a meditator. In the distance, but growing clearer, something is happening. I'm seeing lots of movement, regular, flowing, periodic, arms, legs, a bobbing head, some marching and leaping, but no sound. Now I'm flashing forward. A week later, same general thing: limbs in orbit, stomping on the ground, thrusting motion, a sudden upward jerk that produces a grunt, a groan, then a little grunt-groan-grunt-groan pattern.

Cavewoman 1: Grunt-groan-grunt-groan-grunt-groan.

Cavewoman 2: Neat! Mind if I join?

Cavewoman 1: Sure, come on. Let's dance.

Cavewoman 2: I'm already dancing. It's the other thing, the grunting and groaning. What do you call that?

Cavewoman 1: Dunno, I just started doing it. Let's call it "rolfing." Or maybe "classical music."

Cavewoman 2: Right.

## 8

While we're astral projecting, let's take a contemporary musician back in time with us to a point not too long after music was named; we'll whisk Jim Baker there to play some freely improvised music for our paleo friends.

Baker: [blip-blip-blip, zap, boing, hissssss]

Caveman: Wassat?

Baker: [blurp, ping, blurp, ping, grackle-grackle-grackle] It's an ARP 2600, an analog synthesizer with some sticky potentiometers.

Cavewoman: Wassit do?

Baker: I'm improvising with it. Playing music.

[Caveman and cavewoman stare blankly.]

Baker: Want to play?

[Caveman and Cavewoman look at each other. Blankly.]

Cavewoman: Does it mean anything, what you're doing? Is it a code?

Baker: [buzzzzzzzz] I don't understand the question.

Cavewoman: How do you know what to do?

Baker: You can play anything you want.

[Cavewoman picks up the stick and begins to beat the pelt.]

Caveman: Grunt-groan-grunt-groan.

## 9

What if improvisation and music were invented in the same instant? People gathered at a marriage or initiation rite, everyday stuff, locked in transformational chanting, then suddenly one participant pushes away, feels what could happen if they were to change what they're doing a little bit. Primordial stirrings of a modern notion of the individual. The tingle of singularity.

Initiant: Psst. Hey, buddy, what do you think you're doing?

Chanter: Not sure, but it feels so good.

Shaman: Idiot, get back on track.

Chanter: But it's really great, what I've discovered, and it feels wonderful.

Initiant: Knock it off! You're going to screw up my initiation.

Shaman: Right now, I'm warning you!

Chanter: I gotta be me.

## 10

This is all wild speculation; nobody can tell us authoritatively about how music started. Let's continue to speculate wildly.

I would love to think that improvisation was the germ of all music. That's a swell concept, would fit snugly into a worldview in which improvisation is central. But it's too romantic. It would mean that someone had invented something out of thin air. Alas, nothing comes out of thin air. Can we talk about dependent origination? Much as I might want improvisation to be the first music, that assertion seems to me to support one of the laziest claims made about what happens when someone improvises, that it comes out of thin air. Improvised music is not a primitive form of music. Quite the contrary.

## 11

A recap: murky nebula of premusical action unfolds in multipart sequence. Sex entails repetitive motion; rhythm is in turn transformed into analogy by means of ritual; ritual spawns non-sex-specific movement from which sounds emanate; noticed and named, the sounds are referred to as music; now identified, music is available to be reinvented, improvised.

Caveman: [whistles aimlessly]

Cavewoman: Can I take it to the bridge?

## GROOVING ON

### Selected Listening

#### **Fred Anderson**

Anderson made three of his best albums late in the game, duets with drummers, all for the Thrill Jockey label. With Hamid Drake, whose comradeship he enjoyed since Drake was a youngster, he made *Back Together* (2004) and *From the River to the Ocean* (2007), and with Robert Barry, a veteran of Sun Ra's Chicago years and a regular on the Windy City creative music scene in the '90s, he made *Duets 2001*. On the latter, you can see the musicians in the old Velvet Lounge space, with its trademark wallpaper, a fond memory for many of us. To hear Anderson in an unusual larger-band setting, check out his spotlight in Ken Vandermark's Territory Band-6 on *Collide* (Okka Disk); his songbook is featured on the meeting with Vandermark, Drake, and bassist Kent Kessler, *Fred Anderson / DKV Trio* (Okka Disk). I was able to reissue Anderson's wonderful *Dark Day*, a date from 1979, coupled with a concert recorded in Italy, and another release sports some previously unissued music from a year hence with a killer quartet, *The Milwaukee Tapes*, featuring Drake and the unsung trumpeter Billy Brimfield. Both CDs came out on the Unheard Music Series (UMS).

#### **Lou Barlow**

I'll always turn at least one deaf ear to Lou Barlow: I lost upper-frequency hearing in my right ear at a concert by Dinosaur, before they added "Jr." to their name. The second and third Dinosaur Jr. records, *You're Living All Over Me* and *Bug*, are favorites from the SST era, up there with the early Meat Puppets releases. I've not followed Sebadoh, Sentridoh, or any of Barlow's lo-fi adventures with any real zest, and the reformed Dinosaur Jr. has not grabbed my attention, but he was surely ahead of the pack in terms of rethinking the aesthetics of alternative rock.

## Han Bennink

Since the '80s, Bennink has been all about paring down, stripping away inessentials, zeroing in on core juice. He's been known to tour with nothing but a snare—no cymbals, no hi-hat, no bass drum—and he can make it work. Han appears on zillions of records, some with spectacular bands, others more like a paycheck. It is your duty, of course, to search out and purchase all available ICP Orchestra recordings; a home is incomplete without them. Bennink's behind many of the best Dutch bands, from Toby Delius Quartet to Eric Boeren Quartet, and I adore the duet LP that resulted from a reunite with Brötzmann, *Still Quite Popular after All These Years* (vinyl only, on BRÖ). Some mania is obtainable from the period in the '70s when he carted gigantic metallic flotsam and played violin, clarinet, and trombone; good examples can be found on a vintage duet with Brötzmann, *Brötzmann / Bennink* (BRÖ) and a solo radio performance from 1973 that I issued on UMS, *Nerve Beats*. More solo work from that era includes LPs on ICP and FMP, hard-to-find pearls. Given his interest in duets, recent ones with pianist Uri Caine, pianists Ake Takase, Simon Nabatov, and Guus Janssen, and guitarists Terrie Ex and Eugene Chadbourne are wonderful and endlessly varied.

## Carla Bley

The required listening list includes Bley's work with the Jazz Composers Orchestra, what are affectionately referred to as the silver album, with Cecil Taylor and Pharoah Sanders, and the gold album, *Escalator over the Hill*, a jazz opera with libretto by Paul Haines. Her compositions for Gary Burton Quartet's *A Genuine Tong Funeral* make that 1967 LP mandatory as well. There's an earlier Jazz Realities outing with Steve Lacy and Michael Mantler on Debut, wonderful, impossible to find; would pay dearly to hear tapes of the same group with Peter Brötzmann and bassist Peter Kowald, apparently extant. Easier to locate are *Musique Mechanique* and *Social Studies*, gloriously wry 1980s records on which Bley's sense of humor and brilliant composing are in full form. Seek out any way to hear her compositions "Ida Lupino" and "King Kong," two of the most unusual and haltingly perfect charts in jazz; Paul Bley played them many times and very beautifully, never better than with saxophonist John Gilmore, on *Turning Point*.

## Jaap Blonk

Save Kurt Schwitters's own version of *Sonata in Urlauten*, or the *Ursonate*, Blonk's is my favorite take on the text-sound classic. Weirdly, it was pro-

hibited from being released for years by Schwitters's protective son Ernst, who proclaimed himself the only worthy performer, but the contraband original (issued on BVHAAST in 1986) has been reissued on Basta. Blonk's investigations of historical concrete poetry and vocal sound works by Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Dick Higgins, and others, vividly recorded on the solo masterpiece *Flux de Bouche* (Staalplaat, 1993), is only half the story. His own work, both as a text-sound artist and as a vocal improviser is well worth searching out. Start by visiting his website ([jaapblonk.com](http://jaapblonk.com)) and sampling the out-of-print CDs, which he keeps available as downloads; then buy some of the myriad recordings he's released on his own label, Kontrans, with working groups like Splinks and with ad hoc improvising groups such as the one on *First Meetings*, with cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm and percussionist Michael Zerang. For an interesting intersection of his musical and historical/text-sound pursuits, check out *Six Sound Poems*, a 1989 recording with his trio Baba Oemf.

### **Anthony Braxton**

Relentless self-documentation. That's the watchword for Mr. Braxton. We're the wiser for it, with a lifetime of his recordings to catch up on. I've gone back into his earliest days for inspiration of late, but there are literally hundreds of Braxton records, most of them rich and rewarding, exploring a boggling amount of terrain across nearly fifty years. I'm not such a fan of his piano playing, though he always has engaging ideas and is willing to go far out on a ledge; his chamber music and what we've heard of the operatic work is deeply intriguing, needs to be taken up by serious classical ensembles, made part of their repertoire. Here's a simple five-part menu for the dazed and confused: (1) *For Alto* (Delmark), his mandatory landmark solo from the late '60s; (2) *The Complete Arista Recordings of Anthony Braxton* (Mosaic), pricy but worth every cent in '70s restructuralist juju; (3) *Quartet (Santa Cruz) 1993* (hat ART), with the classic foursome of Braxton, Marilyn Crispell, Mark Dresser, and Gerry Hemingway; (4) *Charlie Parker Project 1993* (hat ART), with Misha Mengelberg and a fiery, swing-based band, throwing out lines like lassos; and (5) *Quartet (Moscow) 2008* (Leo), with the brilliant young guitarist Mary Halvorson. Braxton's polymorphous projects are now being issued on his own New Braxton House label, well worth trolling through on the extensive and well-compiled discography at [www.restructures.net](http://www.restructures.net).



## **Peter Brötzmann**

By the 1980s, Brötzmann had released around twenty records. Since the 1990s, he's put out a couple hundred, many of them ranking among his best. From these more recent offerings, I'd suggest starting with one disc featuring each kind of setting, building from the basic monadic unit. Solo: *Lost & Found* (FMP); duo: *Wood Cuts* (Smalltown Supersound), with drummer Paal Nilssen-Love; trio: *Yatagarasu* (Nottwo), with veteran Japanese musicians Masahiko Satoh on piano and Takeo Moriyama on drums; quartet: the *Die Like a Dog* box set (Jazz Werkstatt); sextet: *Crumbling Brain* (Okka Disk, LP only), with his Swiss trio Marino Pliakas on electric bass and Michael Wertmüller on drums, plus Keiji Haino on guitar and vocals, Mars Williams on reeds, and Peter Evans on trumpet; tentet: *10 Years 10tet* (Okka Disk); tentet plus two: *Short Visit to Nowhere* (Okka Disk). Two great box sets offer a cross section of Brötzmann's work, one with members of the tentet, *3 Nights in Oslo* (Smalltown Superjazz), one with various accomplices on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, *Long Story Short* (Trost). On Unheard Music Series, I reissued several key FMP records, including *Machine Gun*, as well as *Fuck de Boer*, a live session from 1970, the classic sextet *Nipples*, and an unreleased contemporaneous session called *More Nipples* (I wanted to call it *Extra Nipples*, but was dissuaded). Now the FMP reissues are coming in LP form from the Trost label. Collect them all.

## **R. L. Burnside**

Burnside's recordings from the late '60s, compiled and reissued by Fat Possum as *First Recordings*, have quite a different feel from the post-Robert Palmer material. I'd focus on the latter, primarily the extraordinary *Too Bad Jim*. The collision with Jon Spencer Blues Explosion is surprisingly durable; I'm amused and put off by the way Fat Possum marketed subsequent CDs like *Mr. Wizard*, but it doesn't keep them from being worthwhile. Meantime, don't miss Burnside's labelmate and friend Junior Kimbrough; try *Most Things Haven't Worked Out* and *All Night Long* for more of the one-chord tension-build blues that were the specialty of these north Mississippi musicians.

## **Ornette Coleman**

Any music-literate human must familiarize him- or herself with Ornette Coleman's quartet records from the late '50s and early '60s. Start with *Change of the Century*, but be thorough and investigate everything you can lay your hands

on. The magnificent box set *Beauty Is a Rare Thing* was issued by Rhino, compiling Coleman's Atlantic recordings. It's a great way in. Back up, buy the two Contemporary releases, *Something Else!!!!* and *Tomorrow Is the Question!*, from an era when it was imperative to use exclamation points in record titles. Then proceed to buy the Blue Note and Impulse! records (strong, informative, every one), and find copies of the LPs *Body Meta* and *Soapsuds*, *Soapsuds*, both issued with beautiful covers on the saxophonist's own Artist House label. Columbia reissued a complete version of *Science Fiction*, a fascinating session from 1971. Later in his discography, I recommend the two Sound Museum CDs with pianist Geri Allen and *Sound Grammar* from 2006.

## Compilations

The granddaddy of today's compilations is Harry Smith's untouchable *Anthology of American Folk Music*, an utterly essential series that's been newly available several times over the last decade. A few labels have specialized in comps, where some others have put out one or two memorable ones. In the latter category, look for *The First after Epiphany*, a stunning roundup of post-punk on Ron Johnson Records. Ralph Records' *Subterranean Modern* is a classic, as is *The Akron Compilation* on Stiff. Honest Jon's has been compiling early music of various derivations, including England, Iran, East and West Africa, Turkey, and a killer transnational comp called *Sprigs of Time*. Lots of folks are turning their attention to the era of 78 rpm records nowadays, but my favorite is Dust-to-Digital, whose compilations are tightly curated and gorgeously packaged—all of them are necessary. Numero Group has been assembling outstanding soul compilations (among many other projects), some of which feature the most exciting discoveries in years; I suggest starting with their Detroit gospel comp, *Downriver Revival*, which is so stirring it's just crazy, and then going back to Numero's *Eccentric Soul* series, complete set. Analog Africa and Soundway are both absolutely reliable compilers of post-'50s African music, and Soundway has compiled Columbian and Panamanian music with great finesse. When I was first digging deeply into reggae, I learned a tremendous amount from the producer-specific comps on Trojan, but later on I was a Blood and Fire enthusiast (so sad they're deceased), likewise *Pressure Sounds*, which is maybe the best of all. If you want to delve into hillbilly, old-time guitar and fiddle, bluegrass, and string-band music, and if you love the heft of old vinyl, look for LPs on the County label—these are in essence collector's collections. I'm deeply into Greek rembetika, which has been compiled extensively on many different labels; try out *Greek Oriental Rembetika*, on Arhoolie, then branch out to

feel your way around the hash dens and whorehouses of 1930s Greece. Finally, in the realm of completism, I buy all the LP compilations that the Mississippi Records label puts out (as well as most of their single-artist releases, except for the Ethiopian ones, which are redundant with CDs on the Ethiopiques label, another go-to outlet). To me, Mississippi continues the vibe of Belzona, Herwin, and Yazoo, the brainchildren of collector Nick Perls; never has a label been more insensitively reissued than the way that Shanachie has handled the Yazoo catalog. Look for the originals, wherever possible.

## Clark Coolidge

One thing that poetry and improvised music have in common, if they're done well, is that they are both irreducible. In order to accurately describe a poem or a piece of improvised music, you need to have the whole thing in front of you. It can't be paraphrased. And that irreducibility can be disorienting because it requires such an outlay of concentration. One should immerse oneself in Coolidge the way one should immerse oneself in improvised music, recognizing the disorienting feeling and embracing it. My fave of his books of poetry is the long-form sex poem *The Book of During*, but there are many different paths into his work, including the brilliant *Sound as Thought: Poems 1982–1984* and a beguiling collaboration with painter Philip Guston, *Baffling Means*. Coolidge has specifically addressed music in several instances, including *The ROVA Improvisations* and a collection of essays, *Now It's Jazz*. Few documents currently exist of his drumming, though it seems we will hear more in the future. Coolidge has a music studio in his backyard, drum-centric, beautiful Gretsch set to one side, lined with music books, LPs, and CDs. He's a huge jazz fan (vanguard and mainstream alike), and music is clearly a passionate part of the program. For now, search out *Comes through the Call Hold*, released on Ecstatic Peace, with guitarist Thurston Moore, poet Ann Waldman, and Coolidge on kit. Standing in Coolidge's basement library, looking at his vast collection of books, I realized something about record collections. I've long understood that what they represent, in aggregate, is time, and if you look at their spines you're looking at a visual marker of potential time, roughly five LPs per inch, at forty minutes per, so each linear foot equals nearly twenty-four hundred minutes or forty hours of continuous listening duration. When a collector is young, what their collection represents to them is boundless possibility, the optimism of time unspent; as the years press on, the collection comes to suggest something different, the inevitability of the unfulfilled, potential time that will never be realized. I will not listen to the bulk of my records again. I console myself: there they are if I need them.

## Von Freeman

Thank the good lord of saxophonic muses that Intuition Records was paying attention to Vonski while he was with us. Intuition released a short string of CDs, all worthy, all different. With a top-flight New York band, Freeman waxed *The Great Divide*, which might be the most inspired. I encouraged the label to record his working group, the same band that hit the New Apartment Lounge weekly for decades, the result being a relaxed live date, *The Improvisor*, paired with sessions featuring pianist Jason Moran. Freeman's appearance at the Berlin Jazzfest 2002 was released later as *Vonski Speaks* (Nessa), also featuring the New Apartment ensemble. From the '90s, there are tenor battle dates with Ed Petersen and Frank Catalano on Delmark and solid meetings with pianist Jodie Christian on SteepleChase. Listen closely to three generations of Chicago saxophone players—Freeman, John Gilmore, and Henry Threadgill—and tell me whether you hear the family resemblance. Something deep links them, a common regional phraseology, a lurking accent that refuses to leave a non-native speaker's voice.

## Kim Gordon

One of the great rock experimentalists. Gordon's contribution to Sonic Youth is a big part of what made the band so undeniable in its era. My favorite moments are the two SST records, *EVOL* and *Sister*, which may well be the best demonstration of the continuities between New York punk, postminimal classical, improvised music, and the future of independent music. Being on a bigger label like Geffen afforded the band unimagined publicity, and many of those records—most notably the fantastic breakout double-LP *Daydream Nation*—are super, but I'm arrested in the '80s, in the look and feel and sound of the twin SST monsters, with Gordon's magnetic mojo all over them. Her other projects have been numerous and worth investigating, from *Free Kitten* with Julia Cafritz of Pussy Galore to the post-sy collaboration *Body/Head* with Bill Nace. With the latter, look for a nice new single, "The Show Is Over," title and cover courtesy of Christopher Wool.

## Milford Graves

Here's a proclamation for you: Graves may be the single most important musician in the evolution of post-1960 creative music. What? Miles, Trane, Ornette, Ayler, Cecil. Yes, naturally, they are the gang. But Milford took the

risk of messing with the most guarded internal mechanism of the music, the springs and gears of the clock, breaking it up and rebuilding it, and in doing so he opened it up to something radically new, unprecedented, amazing. The implications of his music are still being felt. So, obviously listening to his music is imperative. The 1960s ESP releases are obtainable, including his duet with percussionist Sonny Morgan, the Giuseppe Logan groups, Lowell Davidson Trio, and perhaps best Paul Bley's *Barrage*. He recorded with Ayler on *Love Cry*. Do your best to find *Mohawk* by the New Art Quartet, and definitely get their ESP records; now you have to fork over for the expensive but lavish NAQ box. With guitarist Sonny Sharrock, you can hear Graves on *Black Woman*. John Zorn's support of Graves has led to his production of a string of stellar CDs, two solo, *Grand Unification* and *Stories*, one duo with Zorn (for Zorn's fiftieth birthday celebration), and one trio with Anthony Braxton and bassist William Parker.

### **Georg Gräwe**

Gräwe's two jazzy 1970s LPs for FMP are lost gems, and his various efforts with the Grubenklangorchester are small timbral masterpieces. As a soloist, he's always thoughtful and often inspired—look for *Fantasiestücke I–VIII* (Nuscope, 2003) to hear how he transmogrifies the Lennie Tristano tradition. You can hear Gräwe think on his feet in duets with Braxton on *Duo (Amsterdam)* 1991, and in a great working quartet with old comrade Frank Gratkowski (alto saxophone) and Chicagoans Kent Kessler (bass) and Hamid Drake (drums) on *Melodie und Rhythmus* (both Okka Disk).

### **Guillermo Gregorio**

The specific graphic compositions I describe were recorded on *Coplanar*, released on New World (yours truly on acoustic guitar), and similar compositional strategies can be heard on Gregorio's CDs on hat ART, *Degrees of Iconicity* and *Faktura*, and the earlier hatOLOGY releases. Gregorio's early recordings, including Fluxus-oriented work from Buenos Aires, were the subject of an Unheard Music Series release, *Otra Musica*.

### **David Grubbs**

Grubbs prehistory: Squirrel Bait (teenage band from Louisville, bursting like Pop Rocks), Bastro, Gastr del Sol, all well worth investigating in detail.

Grubbs's own thing: wonderful solo records, some song-based (*The Thicket*, *The Spectrum Between*, *Rickets & Scurvy*, *A Guess at the Riddle*, *An Optimist Notes the Dusk*) and others otherwise. The recent *The Plain Where the Palace Stood* is a majestic electric guitar record, and Grubbs's various adventures with visual artists and in the land of soundtrack composition are all characteristically engaging and rewarding. I love the duet with Loren Mazzacane Connors, *Arborvitae* (trickier to get, on the Håpna label), and projects with poet Susan Howe are among the best intermedia excursions of the last decade. Grubbs's releases on Blue Chopsticks, his versatile label, are uniformly fantastic, and a great spelunking may be had venturing into those labyrinthine openings. Grubbs penned *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), an exciting and provocative investigation of the deeper implications of recorded music.

### **Mats Gustafsson**

I'm just going to give you five faves from Mr. G's scroll-like discography: *Mono*, heavy rock-powered free jazz hits by the Thing; *The Education of Lars Jerry*, Mats alone in a superresonant space; *Jazz Pa Svenska*, northern European jazz disgorged by Swedish Azz (the only eleven-inch record I know); *Hidden in the Stomach*, smoldering sounds by AALY Trio with Ken Vandermark; and a trip into song merging the Thing and Neneh Cherry, *The Cherry Thing*. Obtain these, then fill in the blanks.

### **Brion Gysin**

New York's New Museum mounted *Dream Machine*, a solid retrospective of Gysin, in 2010. The catalog is a good key to his thinking as a poet and as a visual artist. Several CD compilations have presented Gysin's audio experiments, essential listening and also helpful, I think, to gain a full understanding of what Burroughs was up to. Definitely seek out the project with Lacy, *Songs* (hat ART), and if you can find it a rare twelve-inch single on hat Hut called *Orgy Boys*, which features Gysin reading his poems. Other go-to comps include an excellent one released by the British Library titled *The Spoken Word*, featuring both Gysin and Burroughs in vintage recordings that include the permutations poems, and another all-Gysin program on Perdution Plastics, *Recordings 1960–81*. If you can find it, seek out the Alga Marghen release *Poem of Poems*, recorded at the Beat Hotel in 1958, released in an edition of 630 copies.

## Joe Harriott

Sadly, the Jamaican-born saxophonist remains difficult to hear. The important records are the ones released in the States on Jazzland, *Southern Horizons* and *Free Form*, and the crucial Capitol LP *Abstract*. You're more likely to stumble on his Indo-jazz efforts, cool but not quite as successful as the free-bop investigations. On a particularly lucky day in a Houston record store, I found his first 78 rpm record; the early material is rewarding for specialists because, like Eric Dolphy, even in more formally conventional settings Harriott had an approach all his own.

## PJ Harvey

Chameleonic, Harvey keeps changing, and so far she hasn't hit a color I don't favor. Recent hues include the deliberately strange *White Dust*, with its harsh acoustic atmospheres and string textures, and the fierce, anthemic *Let England Shake*, but her turn toward electronics on *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea* was mighty exciting, too, and the driving "Who the Fuck" from *Uh Huh Her* is classic. The reclusive Brit's first four will be hard to ever top: *Dry*, *Rid of Me*, *4-Track Demos*, *To Bring You My Love*. Many malleable singers could be considered part of the PJ diaspora, direct or indirect lineage; I choose Joanna Newsome, Sharon Van Etten, Angel Olsen, Sam Phillips, and Josephine Foster. Harvey was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for services to music in 2013. Well earned.

## Michael Hurley

For forty years, two of the masterworks of proto-freak-folk were out of print. Michael Hurley's *Armchair Boogie* and *Hi-Fi Snock Uptown* were released in 1971 on Jesse Colin Young's Raccoon imprint on Warner Bros., and they quickly vanished from the bins. Finally, in 2013, *Light in the Attic* records reissued them, and beautifully, with miniaturized LP sleeves and even the comic-book insert. Hurley's music is that much better known for having been covered by Cat Power, but you have to hear him sing his songs, it's the only way. Snock's mix of cosmic melancholia and surreal American roots music is unique to him. These two are essential, as are several he waxed for the Rounder label in the '70s, and a very tough to find one, *Blue Navigator*, which has yet to be digitized. Hurley's first outing for Folkways was reissued by Locust a few years ago with a different title (*Blueberry Wine*) and cover; he's made intermittent records like

the wonderful *Watertower* (Fundamental) and *Weatherhole* (Field Recordings), and he issued some tasty scraps from the Raccoon period on *Parsnip Snips*. That, like all of these, can be obtained as handmade CD-Rs from Hurley's website, [snockonews.net](http://snockonews.net). Most recently, Hurley has been issuing LPs on the Mississippi imprint, new and old recordings; don't miss *Back Home with Drifting Woods*, never published 1964 recordings from his original Fred Ramsey sessions.

### **Helmut Lachenmann**

When I first got interested in Lachenmann, I could find little on record save an old Wergo LP (finally reissued as of 2011, featuring works from the late '60s and mid-'70s); now there's a plethora, most of it well made and well played. You could do worse than sticking to two labels: Col Legno and Disques Montaigne. First on my list would be the Col Legno coupling of "Salut für Caldwell," for two acoustic guitars (a boggling piece, intricate and playful), and "Gran Torso" for string quartet. I am always partial to the Arditti String Quartet, so their *Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied* (Disques Montaigne) with accompanying orchestra is on the short list, as is a beautiful recording of the superrestrained "Dal Niente" by Uwe Möckel, on volume three of Disques Montaigne's Lachenmann series. Another very strong version of that classic work featuring Eduard Brunner is nestled on a fine chamber compilation on Col Legno. Roland Keller plays the hell out of Lachenmann's piano music, including his beguiling "Ein Kinderspiel," reductions of children's songs. To hear the brittle, luminous orchestral music, try Col Legno's *Ausklang / Tableau*.

### **George Lewis**

George Lewis plays less trombone these days than he once did, so you have to go back in his discography to hear one of the greatest sackbut improvisors of all time. Definite needs include his work with *News for Lulu*, the trio with guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist John Zorn, which made a couple of doozies for hat ART. The organic trio with bassist John Lindberg and Barry Altschul, *Give and Take* (Black Saint), is another fave, and the other records he made for Black Saint, a self-titled monster, *Homage to Charlie Parker*, a duet with reed player Douglas Ewart, *Jila—Save ! Mon.—The Imaginary Suite*, and *Shadowgraph* (best of all) are all superb 1970s AACM-oriented outings. The label has made them available as a box set with two beautiful LPs of jazz featuring a group with Misha Mengelberg. I particularly love Lewis's singular studio session, *The George Lewis Solo Trombone Record* (Sackville), with



its haunting version of “Lush Life.” Very strong outings with Europeans include *From Saxophone and Trombone*, with Evan Parker, and appearances on various records with guitarist Derek Bailey and pianist Irene Schweizer. To hear the Voyager program, as stimulated by Lewis and Roscoe Mitchell, don’t miss *Voyager* (Avant), and Lewis’s compositions are spotlighted on *Changing with the Times* (New World Records). If you can find it, *Duets* (Music & Arts), the trombonist’s encounter with koto player Miya Masaoka, to whom he is married, is a lovely treat. There’s a potent new CD on John Zorn’s Tzadik label featuring Zorn, Lewis, and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, another vintage recording with Parker, Bailey, and bassist Joëlle Léandre. The electronic duets with Marina Rosenfeld on *Sour Mash* are a nice left turn. All Lewis’s scholarly writings are required reading, especially his monumental study, *Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

### Paul Lovens

Being a holdout for vinyl has probably paid off for Paul Lovens. His label, Po Torch, has been vinyl-only forever, and I have a hard time imagining him licensing the LPs for reissue—I say this having tried to convince him, unsuccessfully, to let me do so. But with the reinvigoration of the vinyl market, his steadfastness seems more like a visionary attitude than cranky inflexibility. However you do it, you’ll need to dip into the Po Torch catalog. My luck in this arena started in London in 1985, where I scored about fifteen of them, all of which I loved. Matter of fact, now that I have a complete set, I can say that his efforts may be the only ones that are flawless. There are peaks, but no deep valleys. First, try to find *Weavers*, with trombonist Günter Christmann and bassist Maarten Altena, which may be the best single document of improvised music from Europe. The Lovens duet with trumpeter Toshinori Kondo, *The Last Supper*, is magical, and the self-titled duets with trombonist Paul Rutherford long for your attention (great track name: “When I say slowly, I mean as soon as possible”). Lovens and fellow percussionist Paul Lytton maintained a stellar duo for a long while in the ’70s, well remembered on their Po Torch outings, and various records of Lovens with pianist Alex Schlippenbach will not fail you. In this realm, venture outside of the Po Torch arena to find the full spectrum of Schlippenbach Trio recordings, with Evan Parker and Lovens, starting with their 1972 debut *Pakistani Pomade* (Unheard Music Series) and coming full forward to *Bauhaus Dessau* (Intakt, 2010). Trost has just issued *Early Trios*, studio sessions predating the group’s first LP.

## **Nathaniel Mackey**

Mackey's four groundbreaking epistolary novels, "From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate," can be read with the Art Ensemble of Chicago or Griot Galaxy as a suitable backdrop: *Bedouin Hornbook*, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, *Atet A.D.*, *Bass Cathedral*. You can hear him read from *Song of the Andoumboulou* on his CD *STRICK*, with multi-instrumentalists Royal Hartigan and Hafez Modirzadeh.

## **Bernie McGann**

The sad news that McGann had died came in as this manuscript was being finished. He left some beautiful examples of his approach, most of them recorded for the Aussie label Rufus Records; the quartet session *Playground* (with Sandy Evans on tenor) was much lauded, for good reason, as was its follow-up *McGann* (with James Greening on trombone), but I especially like hearing him in a stripped-down trio setting, as on *Ugly Beauty*. A rare glimpse of his early work is now available on *1966* (Sarang Bang), playing, among other things, Ornette's "When Will the Blues Leave?"

## **Joe McPhee**

Best to take your time with Joe McPhee's music, let it settle in, envelop you, work its alchemy. First step: acquire *Tenor*, McPhee's masterpiece for solo tenor saxophone from 1976. It's been reissued on hat ART, with an unrelated recording "Fallen Angels." Now, listen to *Tenor* fifteen times. You're ready for the next step, which means getting ahold of *Nation Time*, the great LP released on McPhee's own CjR label in the early '70s. We at Corbett vs. Dempsey have issued it as part of a four-disc complete sessions box set, along with his first LP for hat Hut, *Black Magic Man*. After spending some quality time with *Nation Time*, move along to *Oleo* (hat ART), a beautiful studio recording with some of McPhee's French colleagues. Again: rinse, soak, repeat. Picking up speed, you're ready for both of his duo CDs with Norwegian drummer Paal Nilssen-Love, starting with *Tomorrow Came Today* (Smalltown Superjazz). In the process of working through his extensive discography, you can explore how his approach to solo performance has developed by contrasting *Tenor* (or any of the contemporaneous '70s solo records, such as *Glasses* or *Variations on a Blue Line*) with the 2013 solo *Sonic Elements* (Clean Feed).

## Misha Mengelberg

OK, one-stop shopping has never been easier. The complete history of the Instant Composer's Pool is now available in a luxurious box set, the likes of which have never been seen before. *Instant Composer's Pool* contains a whopping fifty-two CDs with the entire catalog from ICP records, including long-out-of-print rarities that would have been almost impossible to obtain before now. Special attention should be paid to the Mengelberg/Bennink duets. They've made it that much more enticing, expensive as it is, by including a unique Bennink artwork with each copy, as well as many other bells and whistles. Tempted as I am to leave it at that, you should try to find some more solo Mengelberg, like the one he made for FMP, *Impromptus*, which is as perverse as could be, and the Soul Note discs he made as a leader of a small group playing Herbie Nichols's music—the groups featured Steve Lacy and George Lewis or Roswell Rudd. The individual playing on these is absolutely incredible.

## Roscoe Mitchell

The early Roscoe Mitchell recordings are all must-haves. *Nessa*, which has seen to the issuing and reissuing of much of that material, both in and out of the context of the Art Ensemble, has now reissued the oldest stuff I know, quartet tapes that floated around for a long time in inferior versions. *Before There Was Sound* presents these wonderful 1965 tracks, very steeped in Ornette, but also very much Roscoe's own concept. Then there was *Sound*, recorded for Delmark in 1966, the LP that introduced the AACM into the sphere of commercially available music. The *Nessa* Art Ensemble box set should be sought by all means—five discs of mind-blowing music. Explore the Art Ensemble legacy into the '80s, including *Nice Guys* and *Full Force* (both ECM). I am fond of all Mitchell's works on Sackville, especially his 1974 solo record and the quartet with trombonist George Lewis, pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, and guitarist A. Spencer Barefield; "Tnoona" is one of the eeriest pieces of music I know. Later records to grab include *3 × 4 Eye* (Black Saint); the wild *Roscoe Mitchell and the Sound and Space Ensembles* (Black Saint), with Mitchell rapping on "You Wastin' My Time"; and the glorious *Nessa* studio record *Snurdy McGurdy and Her Dancing Shoes*. *Sound Songs* from '97 is a beauty, and lately Mitchell has been releasing music on the fine French outfit Rogueart; try the one he made with flautist Nicole Mitchell (no relation) and her group Black Earth Ensemble.

## Moserobie Records

In his landmark 1966 solo trumpet work “Jazz Death?” Lester Bowie, in character as a journalist, asks: “Is jazz as we know it dead?” The response, served softly: “It all depends . . . on what . . . you . . . know.” If you want the definitive 2014 report from the front, head to the Swedish label Moserobie Records (not mentioned anywhere else in this book), started by saxophonist Jonas Kullhammer. Moserobie scoffs at the notion. Jazz is alive and kicking, full of spit and vinegar. Buy anything under the leadership of Torbjorn Zetterberg, a bassist and composer of Mingus-like majesty, all undertaken with a hip sense of humor and the affect of a slight weirdo. Kullrusk’s CDs feature an update on the electric saxophone concept, hilarious, funky, and deep. Other go-to groups include Nacka Forum, the Sonic Mechatronik Arkestra, and anything featuring trumpeter Magnus Broo. I love the genteel duets by pianist Havad Wiik and saxophonist Hakan Kornstad (beautiful Carla Bley covers), a couple of killer outings by elder pianist (sadly deceased) Per Henrik Wallin, and all multiple reed player Alberto Pinton’s discs. A new kid on the block, trombonist Mats Ålekint, is breathing fire. Do contemporary Scandinavians make jazz? You know it.

## Evan Parker

For a short while, in the '90s, Evan Parker seemed willing to go on record with anyone interested, which resulted in output of variable interest; now he’s extremely selective, and you can basically bank on anything he makes being of significance. I think the way to go with him is to investigate his own label, Psi, through which he has both reissued out-of-print goodies from the early years and pushed forward with all sorts of projects and combinations. Like George Lewis, Parker’s studies of the intersection of improvisation and electronics—both computerized and analog—occupy an important part of his oeuvre. Do not overlook any of his ECM discs with the Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble, which has grown in ranks over the years and has become even more daring. The Evan Parker Trio, with Barry Guy and Paul Lytton, continues to be one of the richest long-standing bands in improvised music, as is the Schlippenbach Trio, another great vehicle for Parker. And since *Extended Play*, he has made five more CDs of solo saxophone, perhaps the most crucial part of his research. As with most of the major European improvisors, a complete discography and generous information can be found at the European Free Improvisation website (<http://www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk/>), a sensational repository of details.

## Liz Phair

TBT: The Brutal Truth—some artists have one great record in them. You really only need one release by Liz Phair. *Exile in Guyville* is, in its own very time-bound, postfeminist way, a brilliant and uncompromised piece of American rock history, and it seems a perfect time for its revival, to entertain the Lena Dunham generation. The next two, *Whip Smart* and *whitechocolatespaceegg*, witness the diminishment of Phair's powers in real time, but they both have redeeming features. If you get deep into *Guyville*, the compilation of her *Girly-Sound* cassettes from a few years earlier is available on *Juvenilia*, pretty fascinating. For someone so expert in snark, with an opinion on all and everything, it's interesting to see how buffeted she's been by the pop music machine, more recent projects marred by all sorts of outside intervention.

## Raymond Scott

Among the crazier packages available today, *Daisyworld / Li'l Daisy* from Japan have compiled a two-disc set with key Scott recordings from the '30s and '40s and a whole disc of covers by various bands, many of them Japanese and very obscure. The *Soothing Sounds for Baby* reissues are still in print, and for his classic material you may be able to locate the great '90s Columbia comp *Reckless Nights and Turkish Twilights*.

## Jon Spencer

Before Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, there was Pussy Galore, a massive, unfriendly kick in the groin, very much needed in their era—try *Dial M for Mother-fucker*, proceed from there according to taste. Treading the line between sincerity and manipulation, JSBE has aged a little less flawlessly than PG, but the older records still have some potency (*Extra Width*, wicked as ever), some of the newer ones carry the flag, and I stand by my assessment of *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, which works brilliantly despite its contrivance. One not to miss: *Now I Got Worry*, a sensational karate chop from 1996, somehow towering above the rest.

## John Stevens

Sometimes it's up to one person to keep it together. Were it not for the efforts of Martin Davidson over the course of four decades, our understanding of the British improvised music scene—and improvised music generally—would

be far less richly informed. With his own Emanem label and by helping Evan Parker with Psi, Davidson has almost single-handedly kept the torch lit for folks like John Stevens. Emanem is the place to go to hear his work, no question, and there's quite a lot to choose from. Don't miss multiple Spontaneous Music Ensemble records, the jazzier *Challenge*, and much more diffuse "insect music" releases like *New Surfacing*. The 1973 duet with Trevor Watts *Face to Face* offers particularly rewarding dialogue. If you can find a copy of the CD reissue (or less likely the original vinyl) of the 1968 SME record *Karyobin*, with Stevens, Parker, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, guitarist Derek Bailey, bassist Dave Holland, and liner notes by Robert Wyatt, pay whatever it takes.

## Sun Ra

George Clinton: "Well alright! / Starchild / Citizens of the universe / Recording angels / We have returned to claim the pyramids . . ." That reclamation project is well under way with the mysteries of Mr. Ra, who recorded arguably the vastest discography in the omniverse. Covering reissues since 2000, I can suggest that you proceed by label. Get anything on Art Yard, indisputably the best Ra reissuers in the biz. ESP has issued some major works, especially the double disc *Featuring Pharoah Sanders and Black Harold*. Norton has issued some fascinating LPs of Ra reading his poetry and three CDs of vocal recordings from the '50s. Many Ra releases have issued from the Transparency label, an ironically titled outfit; be careful, because they are very poorly documented, usually have no contextual information, list incorrect personnel, and are of highly variable quality. I generally avoid them, though they have landed on a few nice ones. I've been fortunate to work with Alton Abraham's son, Adam, in reissuing some great Saturn records, including *Night of the Purple Moon*, *Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue*, and *Continuation*, as well as *Nuclear War*, an extensive and superweird selection of vocal recordings under Ra's baton, *Spaceship Lullaby*, and *Music from Tomorrow's World*, featuring a bristling live recording from late in the Arkestra's Chicago period.

## Steve Swallow

A lost diamond, Steve Swallow's *Home* (ECM) features settings of poetry by Robert Creeley, as sung by the songbird Sheila Jordan. A very early outing with pianist Paul Bley and drummer Pete LaRoca is gorgeous, and Swallow's *Real Book* (ECM) is an all-star contemporary jazz effort featuring drummer Jack DeJohnette, tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano, pianist Mulgrew Miller, and trumpeter

Tom Harrell. A disc with alto saxophone legend Lee Konitz and drummer Paul Motian, *Three Guys* (Enja) shows Swallow's stuff quite nicely, but I must admit that I admire him most in the company of Carla. Their duets, quite subtle and strange and humorous (sometimes goofy), always repay attention.

### **Koko Taylor**

You can check out some of Koko Taylor's late records, where she's still ripping her vocal cords a new one, but for my money I think the required listening includes the music she made for Chess in the '60s and '70s, elegantly compiled on a single disc: *What It Takes*. On a road trip long ago, when I was driving from the East Coast, I grew so tired that I pulled off by the side of the highway in Gary, Indiana. Pitch-black night, in the near distance the fires atop steel refineries cast a hallucinatory, postapocalyptic glow. After a nap, I jump-started my vw, turned on the AM radio, and tuned it to WVON, where I heard something that made the hair on my neck stand up. On "Wang Dang Doodle," with Willie Dixon's thundering voice in the background, Taylor was singing: "When the fish scent fills the air / they'll be snuff juice everywhere . . ." I put the pedal to the metal and headed for the Windy City, knowing it was home.

### **Mayo Thompson**

Corky's *Debt to His Father* was in print for a while on Dexter's Cigar (then run by David Grubbs and Jim O'Rourke), but it's been unavailable for years. If you can find it, grab it. The earlier records by the Red Crayola have been lovingly repackaged (not sure I needed both stereo and mono versions, but hey, get freaky with it!) and are among the strangest releases of the late 1960s—which is saying something; a live record from 1967 that includes a jam with guitarist John Fahey is likewise a rewarding experience. Many of the hard-to-locate records of the '70s are now reissued, including *Soldier Talk*, *Black Snakes*, and the essential *Kangaroo?*, which contains the two-part song "Portrait of V. I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock." I am a fan of some of the latter-day Red Crayola CDs on Drag City. *Amor and Language* is my favorite of these, but there are off-kilter wonders on all of them.

### **Ken Vandermark**

Nestled within a huge discography, Ken Vandermark has made a number of songbook projects, including one with Joe McPhee as both honoree and fea-

tured soloist: *Impressions of PO Music* (Okka Disk). The two men have worked together frequently, in the Brötzmann Chicago Tentet, in smaller groups, producing many worthwhile records. Vandermark's method, aside from waxing ad hoc recordings with most of the important improvisors in the world, has been to maintain working bands, often quite a few at once. With the Vandermark 5, he featured his own music, diligently documenting the development and mutation of the group and his compositional concept. DKV Trio, with bassist Kent Kessler and drummer Hamid Drake, is the longest lasting of the bands, and they released a daunting but very beautiful five-CD set, *Past Present* (NotTwo), surveying the group's first two decades. His large ensemble, Territory Band, existed in successive iterations (each marked by a number suffixed to the band's name), and they give a good sense of Vandermark's transatlantic ambitions, with American and European musicians. Intimate duets with Paal Nilssen-Love are particularly revealing of his strengths on clarinet. Vandermark has held off releasing many solo records, but *Furniture Music* (Okka Disk) certainly shows that he's capable of making strong music without any help.

### **Voice Crack**

Probably the best way to experience Voice Crack, save having seen them perform, is via Peter Leichti's great 1993 film *Kick That Habit*, now available on DVD. I love their CDs without guests, perhaps *Earflash* and *Below Beyond Above* most of all, but Voice Crack made quite a few collaborative recordings, including *Fish That Sparkling Bubble*, with Borbetomagus, as well as efforts with guitarist/producer Jim O'Rourke, Japanese turntablist and guitarist Otomo Yoshihide, Portuguese violinist Carlos Zingaro, and several with fellow electro-acoustic improviser Günter Müller. On the Unheard Music Series, I reissued a pre-VC record *Knack On*, which has always occupied a special place in my heart, as does a *Möslang/Guhl* LP issued on FMP.





## CREDITS

The following articles were first published in the *Chicago Reader*: “Mayo Thompson: Genre of One” (1994), “PJ Harvey: Mother’s Tongue” (1995), “John Stevens: Unpopular Populists” (1996), “Joe Harriott and Bernie McGann: Flying without Ornette” (1997), “Raymond Scott: Cradle of Electronica” (1998), and “Fred Anderson: The House That Fred Built” (2010).

These articles and interviews first appeared in *DownBeat* magazine: “Anthony Braxton: Ism vs. Is” (1994), “Roscoe Mitchell: Citizen of Sound” (1996), “Fred Anderson and Von Freeman: Tenacity” (1996), “George Lewis: Interactive Imagination” (1996), “Steve Lacy: Sojourner Saxophone” (cover story, 1997), “Ken Vandermark and Joe McPhee: Mutual Admiration Society” (1999), “Peter Brötzmann and Evan Parker: Bring Something to the Table” (1999), “Peter Brötzmann Tentet: Freeways” (2000), “Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink: Natural Inbuilt Contrapuncto” (2000), “Carla Bley and Steve Swallow: Feeding Quarters to the Nonstop Mental Jukebox” (2001), “Milford Graves: Pulseology” (2002), “Sun Ra: From the Windy City to the Omniverse—Chicago Life as a Street Priest of DIY Jazz” (cover story, 2006), and “Ornette Coleman: Doing Is Believing” (cover story, 2008).

“Koko Taylor: The Blue Queen Cooks” (1994) and “Liz Phair and Lou Barlow: On Music, Sex, TV, and Beyond” (1994) were published in *Option* magazine, RIP. The latter was reprinted in *We Rock, So You Don’t Have To: The Option Reader*, ed. Scott Becker (San Diego: Incommunicado Press, 1998). “Misha Mengelberg: No Simple Calculations for Life” (1994) is the full interview from which an *Option* magazine feature was written.

“Michael Hurley: Jocko’s Lament” (1994) was meant to be the cover story for what would have been the final issue of *Butt Rag*. Alas.

“Anthony Braxton: Bildungsmusik—Thoughts on ‘Composition 171’” comes from *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*, ed. Graham Lock (Devon, UK: Stride Publications, 1995).

“Form Follows Faction? Ethnicity and Creative Music” appears in *New Histories* (Boston: ICA Publications, 1996).

Terri Kapsalis and I composed “Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound” for *TDR* (Fall 1996). When MIT Press reprinted it in the volume *Experimental Sound and*

Radio, there was an accompanying CD with an embarrassing piece by Kapsalis and me. Have fun finding it.

“R. L. Burnside and Jon Spencer: Fattening Frogs for Snake Drive” (1996) and “Liz Phair and Kim Gordon: Exile in Galville?” (1998) come from Tower Records’ *Pulse!* magazine, now defunct. Like the store.

“Oncology of the Record Album” (1998) was first published in the program book for *Steirischer Herbst ’98*, Graz, Austria.

“Out of Nowhere: Deleuze, Gräwe, Cadence” and “Brion Gysin and Steve Lacy: Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permuted” were published in *Discourse* (issues 20.1 and 2 [Winter/Spring 1998] and 20.3 [Fall 1998], respectively); the former was revised and republished in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

The essay “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others” was published in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. © 2001 by the Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press.

“A Very Visual Kind of Music: The Cartoon Soundtrack beyond the Screen” was published in *The Cartoon Music Book*, ed. Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: A Capella, 2002).

“Guillermo Gregorio: Madi Music” was written for the literary magazine *NOON* (2002).

“Mats Gustafsson: MG at Half-C” is a set of liner notes from Gustafsson’s Nu Ensemble CD *Hidros 6—Knockin* (Not Two Records, 2014).

“Sun Ra: An Afro-Space-Jazz Imaginary—The Printed Record of El Saturn” (2009) was first published by the now-kaput magazine *Art on Paper*.

“Sun Ra: Queer Voice” appears in *Queer Voice*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner (Philadelphia: ICA, 2010).

“Paul Lovens: Lo Our Lo” (2009) was written as part of a private *Festschrift* for Lovens on his sixtieth birthday.

The interview “Albert Oehlen: Bionic Painting” appears in the enormous tome *Albert Oehlen* (Berlin: Taschen, 2009).

The other interview “Albert Oehlen: Mangy—A Conversation and a Playlist” (2012) was published in the exhibition catalog *Turpentin 2012 Turpentine*, from a museum exhibition in Bonn.

“Christopher Wool: Impropositions—Improvisation, Dub Painting” comes from the show catalog for his Parisian exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2012.

“Discaholic or Vinyl Freak? Mats Gustafsson Interrogates John Corbett” (2012) was completed for Gustafsson’s extensive vinyl-oriented website, *Discaholic Corner* ([http://matsgus.com/discaholic\\_corner/](http://matsgus.com/discaholic_corner/)).

I wrote “Ken Vandermark: Six Dispatches from the Memory Bank” (2012) on the occasion of Vandermark’s 2012 residency at the Chicago Jazz Festival; it was published online at [chicagomusic.org](http://chicagomusic.org).

When he was still with L.A. Dance Project, Benjamin Millepied commissioned me to write “Christopher Wool: Into the Woods—Six Meditations on the Interdisciplinary” (2013) as program notes.

“Peter Brötzmann: Graphic Equalizer” (2013) is borrowed from a pamphlet accompanying an exhibition I curated at Rice University’s Media Center, thanks to John Sparagana.

“Voice Crack: From Nothing to Everything” comes from *ear lights eye sounds* (Luzern: Periferia, 2014).

All other interviews and essays are published in this book for the first time.



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