

INTERROBANG?!

#4

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INTERROBANG?! #4

ANTHOLOGY

Designed and Edited by Sharon Cheslow

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INTERROBANG?! #4

FALL 2000

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To deal with a subject that's been on my mind for a long time, I decided to make issue #4 of Interrobang?! an anthology of writings on music and transcendence, or sound as a transcendent art. I'm interested in transcendence not only as the state of mind induced by the way we perceive music, and those that create and listen to it, but as a way of looking at the tremendous changes we have been undergoing in how we hear, feel, and use sound.

Transcendence: the literal definition is going or being beyond the limits of ordinary experience; surpassing the range of human experience or belief; inducing abstraction and visionary thinking.

Participants were asked to submit any type of writing loosely based on this topic.

-Sharon

WHY I HATE THE TAPE BEATLES: A Philosophy of Modern Music by PUBLIC WORKS

"It is finished," John said as he fled to Prague, exhausted, spent.

Like some prisoner's last words, this phrase rings in the collective cultural ether, an ephemeral epitaph on the tomb of a now-dead era. I could not be more thankful.

The passing of the Tape-beatles marks a final indignation, the last gasp of our society to preserve what it once fetishized as a privileged cultural activity, the making of "music." Finally, we might let go of this deadening apportionment of our creative efforts. While its demise has been obvious for decades, it has taken the pitiful efforts of the frauds known as the Tape-beatles to generate the necessary outrage to accept the end of a precious, and ultimately duplicitous, endeavor.

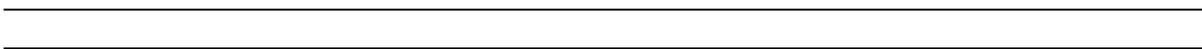
Let us be clear: The Tape-beatles were not alone. They are the final step in a history of cultural treachery that spans the 20th century. From Stravinsky to Beck, we have been taken. There have been efforts to remedy this situation. This century is littered with names like Duchamp, Henri, Cage, Russolo, and The Sex Pistols. Some were genuinely radical, others merely brutal. Yet, all these individuals still desperately clung to the "idea" of music, as if some archetypal structure, some "Platonic Form," guided their nearly unconscious endeavors. And it was, in the end, the Tape-beatles who wrote the final movement in what has become a prison, gilded by some of the most brilliant minds in our history.

In claiming to compose music with previously-constructed sounds, the Tape-beatles merely demonstrated the ultimate poverty of the modern Western musical lexicon. Why must it have been "music" that was made with "sound"? Such a question could never have been broached by these self-admitted cultural embezzlers. For it was not merely content they pilfered, but the whole of Western musical form. And this baroque crutch of musical history served them well. Able to pass off seemingly revolutionary notions such as Plagiarism®, guised in the sanitized, easily swallowed pill of musical structure, they arrived at a certain plateau of fame, experts in the intellectual currency of a clever elite. In this way they deflected any real criticism of their practice. The form, and even the content, were all part of a received language, constructed as a closed cultural syllogism which has already long since been discarded by anyone with aspirations to being genuinely radical.

But music is one of the greatest forms of artistic expression, you say. Listen to the Beethovens, the Mozarts, the Bachs. Western culture is rife with examples of such musical brilliance. How can we turn our backs on it now? What would be left? Yes, but what is left of music? Music can no longer serve as genuine expression in a society where its form has been so thoroughly co-opted in service of the market. When "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," now advertises tennis shoes, when the once immediate, historically rich form of rap so completely pervades commercial media, when classical music can only pander to the classist sensibilities of a moneyed elite, and jazz sells luxury cars, what is left? Just the hollow carcass of a once socially important expression of collective and personal experience. To even attempt to reclaim music is only to force its decaying remains into a kind of empty nostalgia for a lost unity. This language has been devoured by spectacular consumption. Mourn it. Bid it farewell. But do not assert any radical intents by resurrecting its ghosts. The necrophiles of the Corporate Western Empire have beat you to its grave.

Yes, the Tape-beatles, at best, could only redigest the market-based sentiments, the corporate fantasies, of a popular media electronically extruded into our lives. They are consumers consuming the consumed, like a starving man forced to use his own body for food. What nurturing substance music may have once offered has been long since stripped away so it might serve as a convenient receptacle for a corporately-defined affect, an emotional identity apart from ourselves, we now desire to possess.

V. Gurashvili, Tbilisi



THE LISTENING FIELD

by Pauline Oliveros

Open your heart to sound
Sound to your open heart
Open sound
Open heart
Sound to open
Heart to open
Heart sound
Sound heart
Heart open
Sound open
Sound to open your heart
Heart to open your sound
Your sound
Your heart
Sound your heart
Open to the heart of sound
Sound the heart of sound
Sound the heart of open sound
Sound to open your heart to sound
Sound to open your sound to heart
Your heart is sound
Your sound is heart
Your sound is open
Your heart is open
Your heart
Your sound
You are open
You are heart
You are sound

Pauline Oliveros is a composer, musician, writer, and teacher. More information is at
Deep Listening: <http://www.deeplistening.org/>

MUSIC AND TRANSCENDENCE

by Sharon Cheslow

I> BREAK THE BOUNDARIES

I'm interested in that moment, that transcendental moment, when time stands still and the world dissolves behind the liquefied truth. I'm interested in a certain passionate energy that lifts the veil from the rote existence most consume. It is an energy that doesn't need to rely on irony to makes its point, or kitschiness to gain attention, although this doesn't negate the need for fun and play. It is an energy that isn't afraid to break boundaries. It's heart pulsations from deep within the soul. It's absurdity in the face of normalcy. It's desire in the face of boredom.

It's the courage to confront the fear that says, "don't make a fool of yourself".

It is the fragmentation and juxtaposition of sounds in time and space.

It is an unspoken contract between creator and listener that says, "This is who I am...take it or leave it." And you know if you take it, you'll be better off for it.

DEFINE THE LIMITS OF EXISTENCE BY EXPLORING THE
BOUNDARIES OF YOUR _____.

(fill in the blank)

I recall seeing the Bad Brains in 1980 at a seedy club in Adam's Morgan (Washington, DC) called, appropriately enough, Madam's Organ. HR danced like a puppet on a string, as if he were part of some voodoo ritual based on the teachings of James Brown. We all danced along with him, flailing our bodies against each other, against the stage, letting the sounds of the rhythms jerk us along. Those rhythms...hard, fast, jazz, punk, reggae, soulful...were intense. HR taught us about positive mental attitude and exuded it from the stage. We believed with him. Positive Mental Attitude...PMA. What did it really mean? After all, he took the concept from one of those how to succeed type books. But when it translated to music it meant this: focus yourself completely on what you are doing, concentrate totally on the sounds around you, listen, react spontaneously, don't let negative thoughts distract you, be in the moment, avoid past conditionings, create something new.

Recently I heard Eddie Prevost, of the free improv group AMM, lecture about the band's attitude while improvising...it was very similar to that of HR's punk aesthetic, even though the Bad Brains were far from an improv group. The more I thought about it, I realized their attitudes had a lot in common with Buddhism. So maybe punk, free jazz, improvisation, and Buddhism are all united in their belief that in the moment anything is possible if you are open to it. I like that idea. Anything is possible. Anything is possible if you give it a try.

In considering that gender issues have taken a prominent role in the way society views the majority of creative work done by women, one area I would like to see transcendence is in the boundaries that keep genders separate and rigidly defined in music. Not in terms of gender roles or sexuality per se, but in terms of how women are seen as a creative other, and thus are constantly having to define themselves either as part of this other or apart from this other.

If I could take the countless hours I've spent in discussions with both men and women alike theorizing how and why these boundaries exist, and instead devoted them to my own creativity, I'd probably have at least twice the creative output. It is precisely because of this lack of voluminous creative output that women are not recognized for their creative contributions, especially in music.

It is important to learn the history of women's oppression and creativity, as well as philosophical ideologies relating to the role of women in culture (and specifically with regard to aesthetics). But this can become a creative block. Because we, as women, become so thoroughly enmeshed in having our identities defined in opposition or in relation to the prevalent male dominated structures, that we are unable to focus on our creativity in its own right...the way men are allowed to do....and encouraged to do.

II> a three act play on music and transcendence

Act One (1997)

6.26.97

The summer of transformation. Everyone feels it. We need more of a sense of urgency. There's no time to waste.

7.2.97

On tour with the Electrolettes: I ran into Kathleen. We chatted for a bit and professed our love for current electronic music. This is where some of the most innovative creative energy is nowadays.

8.22.97

I'm reading Richard Hell's novel *Go Now*. He's always been one of my favorite writers. Two things he wrote early on have forever stayed with me: 1-the best works are those which simply inspire their perceiver, which give one a sense of one's own amazing possibilities. 2-if you choose to live you must take responsibility for your actions and always hold your head high by virtue of the very fact that you accept responsibility for everything you do your life carries as much meaning as it can possibly bear...the act of resisting the impulse to cringe at one's own "performance" is what constitutes "courage".

8.30.97

I watched *Chappaqua* today, a great movie with Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, The Fugs, Ornette Coleman, and cinematography by Robert Frank. Why is it that there was so much more of an emphasis on breaking down boundaries back in the '60s?

9.2.97

Some of the best musical performances can be frightening or disconcerting. My ultimate music experiences have been those that create a situation whereby the music cuts through blocks and opens the listener up to new experiences.

9.18.97

In a case of synchronicity, I'd dreamt about finding a Zombies record album with a Sonny Rollins sleeve jacket. Then later that day I found a Sonny Rollins album that I'd been looking for, and at Julianna's I noticed she had just been listening to the Zombies.

9.25.97

There is something in the air. I think as a culture we're on the verge of another breakthrough. It's as if the course of events since World War II (and the imminent threat of death due to the atomic bomb) have mirrored the stages of grief.

11.6.97

It is an evil force in our society that turns art - acts of creation - into commodities. Creative mythologies are nothing more than media lies and manipulations. The truth is about real people, doing what they love. Success is creating and expressing oneself, and being true to oneself, because society tries to repress and control our creativity.

Act Two (1998)

2.2.98

Musical energy doesn't always have to come from physical movement. Energy can come from the progression of sounds or the passion behind the performance or the poetry of the concept. Or the stillness inherent in everyday life. Or the spontaneity of thought and action. Actions not only create an intensity of focus, but are comments on the self as performer, playing on the audience/performer dynamic/hierarchy whereby the one on stage is not only the one who is watched, but who watches.

2.8.98

Last night I saw Jurrasaic 5 with Cut Chemist on turntables at Justice League with Windy. The audience was alive with enthusiasm, the band ripped it up with beats and rhymes and scratches. Quite a refreshing change of pace from most rock shows.

2.12.98

I met Natasha at Seth's birthday party and had an inspiring conversation with her about music and transcendence. She's knowledgeable on the subject since she's a freelance music writer (having written music reviews for the Village Voice), and studied religion at Barnard. What I want is more dialogue like this, a new community that spans cities & unites friends from different scenes, an avenue for people to express themselves in whatever way they know best with no boundaries or limitations.

2.15.98

I want to set up shows combining rock and roll with experimental electronic music, to try to create a dialogue between both communities. My first attempt didn't work out, but I tried... The Electrolettes were supposed to play with Lesser, but Jay got food poisoning.

4.20.98

I think rock and roll is based on sexual energy, which is an aspect of it I love, but I like the idea of taking it to a different level. There is so much of the rock n roll lifestyle I dislike- the drug & alcohol abuse, the fame, the insularity, the alienation. What is the point of performing to people if the only contact one has with an audience is up on a stage? At home I mostly listen to electronic music. What I like about a lot of current electronic music, and many of my older favorite records, is namely the element of sound collage or evocation of visual imagery through the mix of different sound structures and emotions and textures and tempos.

8.8.98

My favorite artists and musicians are those who believe in absolute freedom of expression. Unfortunately, the world of avant garde and experimental music is just as male dominated as rock and roll, and thus restrictive to women. Music making should come from the ear, from the sounds in one's environment, from the rhythms inherent in one's body, from the space one inhabits. I've always felt that some of the most radical and profound elimination of structures in music can be found in those musicians and composers who used improvisation to achieve a transcendence of some sort...be it spiritual, political or aesthetic.

8.26.98

I've been thinking about the idea of blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction, subverting the ideas of representation, as in the photography of Cindy Sherman. What if documentation was a work of art in and of itself? Or if lyrics took the form of essays? I like the idea of blurring the boundaries. It's one of the qualities I like about photography - that it documents a particular time and place, but also represents the photographer's choice of object as an expression of the artist's subjective viewpoint.

10.17.98

Last night I went to a party and had great talks with Dustin and Lauren about electronic music and sound installations. It got me very excited to be talking to my friends here in SF about our interest in exploring the medium of sound.

10.19.98

I'm working on my sound installation. I hooked the infrared motion sensors to the electrical appliances, and it wasn't as difficult as I'd originally thought.

10.31.98

It turns out the trumpet player I'd been so enthralled by at one of the installations at the Lanai Motel sound/art event is in Eliane Radigue's class with me (she's one of the original composers of musique concrete). Randy and I talked a bit about sound installations. Later, it dawned on me that he's the person I'd envisioned performing with me in my installation.

Act Three (1999)

3.5.99

I talked to Daan about what it's like being a female musician. He put forth the idea that maybe the whole 20th century white male avant garde tradition was a reaction to female power.

9.11.99

Saw Wet Gate last night...an inspiring collage of film and sound loops, based on the use of three film projectors. It reminded me of the film collages Jacques used to do here in the early 90's.

10.1.99

Set up my sound installation at the debut of Haus de Snaus, which featured Blechtum from Blechdom, an electronic duo (Kristin & Bevin) who use live computer processing and sampling. Along with Deerhoof and Matmos, they're one of my favorite local groups.

10.22.99

Talked to Pauline about how I couldn't find enough information about female composers who experimented with improvisation in the 60's. In Michael Nyman's seminal book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, there is mention of only one woman, Charlotte Moorman. Pauline explained that unfortunately there weren't that many women improvisers back then because there was no support, and very few women had the courage to break through the force field the men created to keep women out. She added that even today, women need a lot of support and courage in order to succeed in the male dominated music world.

III> THE BODY POLITIC

Power is an illusion. If political systems are like biological systems, then no one part has more power or authority than another, because if one part gets out of balance, the organism dies or becomes sick. Politics are a way of regulating the body, and the body is sick caused in large part to the patriarchal system that has taken over for so many centuries. The rise of feminism has been an attempt to redress this imbalance. Capitalism also is a system that causes imbalance due to its capacity to keep some parts of the body healthy while neglecting the well being of others. The only way for the body to stay healthy is for each individual to identify their role in keeping things in balance. Part of the sickness in our society has been in the way we have overregulated ourselves to the point of constriction. We have obstructed the blood flow. In transcending constructs of gender and creative boundaries, we can loosen this tightness. One could even say that the notion of conceptual systems is constrictive. But the challenge, as I see it, is to balance a critique of systems that aren't working within a larger ideological framework that says systems in and of themselves are illusory.

For those of us working in creative systems, we must let loose the rigid boundaries that have choked our breath, slowed our blood, and prevented the greater whole from developing to full potential and well being.

I create because I am, because I am a living human being, because I am inspired by both men and women, because I dream and think and feel and want to express these symbols, ideas, and emotions. The other is neither myself nor those outside of myself who happen to be labeled female. There is no meaning in either a universal sense of mankind (which includes women) or a fragmentary duality of gender division. The other is an imaginary construct, imagined by those who need to see women as in and of something defined by men and, as such, can easily dematerialize...if we want it to.

ON ART AND MUSIC

by Jay
Stuckey

Benjamin Buchloh: So it would be perfectly all right if someone fell on his knees in front of one of your pictures and broke out in tears, as Rothko demanded for his paintings?

Gerhard Richter: Unfortunately it's not possible for painting to have such an effect. In that respect music is much better off.

When Sharon asked me to write an article on music as a transcendent art, I thought of the above excerpt from an interview with the artist Gerhard Richter conducted by Benjamin H. Buchloh. While Buchloch appears to be injecting his own platform against modernist thought by heavy handedly and melodramatically stating that Rothko "demanded" that people "break out in tears" in front of his paintings, there is a kernel of truth embedded in his statement as to what Rothko wanted to achieve with his paintings. Richter's succinct reply to Buchloch's opinionated question is where the real question begins. He states that painting is unable to have an impact akin to transcendence. That music is better suited to such a task.

A couple of days ago I was re-reading Clement Greenberg's essay 'Towards A Newer Laocoon', in preparation for a class [I was teaching], in which Greenberg says the Impressionists used the phrases of Romantic music in discussing their work. He expands his thoughts on music: It was discovered that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an 'abstract' art, an art of 'pure form'. It was such because it was incapable, objectively, of communicating anything else than a sensation, and because this sensation could not be conceived in any other terms than those of the sense through which it entered the consciousness. Earlier in his essay he talks about music's relation to other art forms....It's remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium, as well as because of its resources of suggestion, music had come to replace poetry as the paragon art. It was the art which other avant-garde arts envied most, and whose effects they tried hardest to imitate. Without wanting to get too caught up in Greenberg's personal musings on art, I think it can be agreed that the above excerpts give an almost objective description of music, its abilities, and its comparison to other art forms. So we have Greenberg saying that the objective of modern painting (Abstract Expressionism) should be to achieve the same goals as music in that it is purely abstract, with the ability to communicate a sensation in a manner particular to its medium, and Richter saying 48 years later that painting is still unable to achieve such a goal.

I think one element of music that Greenberg overlooked is its accessibility and portability. With the invention of the Gramophone in the late 1800's, music became

more accessible, and was subsequently able to reach a far larger audience, than ever before. Although the same could be said of art with the invention of the printing press, more of the original product is lost in the reproduction of painting than in music. A reproduction of a painting subverts the size of the actual painting and how it relates to the human body. One also loses all tactile sensations, and can even lose trueness in color if a painting is poorly photographed or printed. Music reproduced on the other hand, can lose certain qualities after numerous generations of recopying, but recopying to such an extent is not a common experience. The loss in quality of certain elements in music reproduction is for the most part negligible when compared to reproducing painting.

Going back to the physicality of a painting, one confronts another hurdle. The end product in painting is a physical mass, which is the opposite of music. So now to have a transcendental experience with painting, one has to either be able to afford the cost of a painting, so they can live and interact with it, or go to a gallery/museum where the work is hanging. If one travels to a space to see a painting, this brings about another question: does the idea of a transcendental moment imply that it is a solitary experience? In certain cases one would say no, but at the same time one often combats the distractions of other people and their opinions when in a gallery.

The last difference I want to address between painting and music as a way to bring about a transcendental experience is the two different senses they both employ. Painting is primarily a visual sensation, and music an aural one. The act of looking at a painting involves a certain level of focus I feel is not mandatory when listening to music. When looking at a painting you are primarily doing just that, and you have most likely traveled to a gallery with that intention in mind, but when listening to music one could be driving a car or walking down the street. This is where music gains an upper hand. As Greenberg describes it, music has the power of suggestion and the ability to convey a sensation like no other art form. I will never forget driving down Rock Creek Parkway in Washington, D.C. and hearing 'Puss' by the Jesus Lizard for the first time. It was in my opinion a transcendental experience, where, for the length of the song, I was no longer in my truck, but in an abstract space where sensation prevailed over physical reality. The same can be said when I first heard James Brown's 'Guess I'll Have To Cry Cry Cry' in my apartment in Chicago. The song had such an impact on me, that when I listen to it today memories of that original sensation still occur. However, I can not whole heartedly agree with Richter's statement. I have had transcendental experiences in Rothko rooms at the Phillip's Collection in Washington, D.C. and at MOCA in Los Angeles. While Mr. Buchloh would jump at the opportunity to call me a liar or delusional romantic, painting can not be so quickly written off. The impact of standing in an ideally lit room surrounded by the atmospheric haze of four Rothko paintings that dwarf the viewer in size is overwhelming. But, the conditions for me, were right. They could have easily been upset by another viewer whose opinion I disagreed with. So I state that music's ability to transport someone are far greater than painting's because of music's accessibility / portability, and it's element of surprise. For painting to have such power the conditions have to be right, whereas with music one can unexpectedly be hit by an emotion they weren't prepared for while engaged in another activity.

Jay Stuckey is a painter, musician, and teacher living in LA.

interview: WITH TERRE THAEMLITZ

by Marc
Kate



I don't feel that I can speak for you by way of an introduction. Maybe you could pretend that you're writing it....

I'm Terre Thaemlitz. I don't know what kind of overview or what angle of my music you're more interested in...I primarily produce electroacoustic music like direct digital synthesis, but I also produce different styles like deep house or jazz, I kind of have this style called 'Fag Jazz' (it's like a jazzy deep house,) computer generated piano solos....

Music styles are so often ascribed to a certain type of personality or an expression of a certain type of soul or personality that, moving in between all these different styles, stepping in and out of musical identities without having any musical background, is a metaphor for the different types of identities and personalities we have to step into in society on a

daily basis. De-essentializing identity politics.

At the same time with the electroacoustic stuff, what I do is I start out with some audio sample, either a source sample or somebody else's music, and treat that like a footnote. I'll use computer synthesis to process off of it and produce new sounds and put it through a different aesthetic framework than the original. Part of that has to do with the recontextualization of content and subjectification of information. You're familiar with it enough to know that it's noisy and crunchy sounding. Pulling out the line noise and the distortions and the fuck-ups of the software and hardware itself and exploiting this idea of the sound of the periphery, which is a metaphor for a cultural periphery.

How much do you think your process and the music you make is a metaphor for these things you're talking about

and how often is it the very thing?

Always a metaphor. Music is a discourse in the same way that text and anything else is. Especially when you start dealing with structure, or abandonments of structure. You're still dealing with parameters of a discourse. That's one thing that plays into what we'll get to later with the ideas of music and transcendence, and trying to take music as a kind of extra-social type of experience or something that has extra-social potential. In fact, when you're dealing with constructed instruments that have built-in limitations, whether they're acoustic or digital, you're always working with something that somebody else has set out in front of you. Interpretations of sound...everything is always going to be contextualized. So it's never about 'the real thing.' And I'm also not really interested in a truth of meaning or truth of content. It's more about what truths are circumstantially relevant.

In your writings and interviews you make a lot of references to Ambient music, almost like TM like this institution. In terms of the fluidness of the digital synthesis versus samples that are very loaded, how do you feel that's played out in most ambient music?

I think that most Ambient producers aren't interested in it. The term Ambient is really confusing now because there are still people who are into the early nineties type of ambient as a kind of Techno extension. Then there's a lot of digital synthesis stuff going on now, especially coming out of Europe - really minimal - that they try to pass off as digital synthesis, but it's really just minimal noise that's done analog if you really listen. [laughter] I

think that overwhelmingly in electronic music, and especially in Ambient music, there's a real interest in people not clarifying content. People who are into Ambient tend to be more into spiritual elaborations if they do say anything. And then there's the German minimal stuff where nobody says anything, you know what I mean?

Or even have their name on the package.

Yeah. In either case, you're dealing with processes of silence, which in some ways, if you analyze it, like if you're a critic and think about it and talk about it, then ok this silence of the artist is in some way also about a silence of process that Ambient music is trying to bring to the forefront. But nobody's really bringing it to the forefront, you know? The press isn't really interested in it and the musicians aren't interested in it, so....

How much do you find that you have in common this new wave of music coming out of mostly Germany?

I mean, obviously, stylistically I have things in common, but at the same time there are real differences. If you listen to my stuff, or somebody like Ultra-red, I think there's definitely a more American thing that is about letting source material and associations come out a little more. Whereas in Europe, it's getting towards a really minimal sound-as-sound. Which is, ultimately, a formalistic gesture. Radically conservative.

Maybe I'm thinking this because when we were both on tour with the Mille Plateaux people, we really realized how American we were compared to the other producers. Not just in terms of generalizing, "Oh, Americans love to talk about politics." Which is

obviously not true. But in terms of stylistic approach, it's interesting to see the differences come out.

What about the Mille Plateaux angle and the whole crowd that associate with that kind of level of theory and music. Do you find that ends up being very apolitical despite its high theoretical baggage?

I've definitely talked with the Mille Plateaux people a lot. The one thing that made me uncomfortable for a long time was that I was the only person writing or actually generating content deliberately. The label people were ascribing a content onto the artists that, really, the artists themselves were not invested in. Now Ultra-red is doing stuff through Mille Plateaux and Autopoises is doing text.

Do you find that, despite that, a lot of the artists, with their heads in that space, are essentially still just creating this humanist, high philosophy, ungrounded?

I think it's pretty much going to be a convention when you're dealing with something that's relegated as a creative process. You're always going to have this distinction between the critics and the artists.

Of course, I'm interested in convoluting those things in an attempt to actually deconstruct them and maybe get away from them or change them. But by and large, people who make the music are more interested in the sounds and turn to music as a kind of non-literal discourse. When people turn to something that's so abstract, in some ways it's an attempt to abandon or try something other than the literalness of words. Which is the standard musician versus press or versus critic paradigm.

What do you think about people like Spooky and the whole Soundlab crew doing...

You're going to get me in trouble again. [Marc laughs] Actually, Soundlab and Spooky aren't really connected anymore, and I believe Soundlab has made an effort to distance themselves from Spooky. But I think that they're all invested, in various ways, in a kind of utopian Humanist pluralism that ultimately homogenizes rather than gives voice to difference. I've expressed that before and I get in trouble every time because Paul [Miller/DJ Spooky] likes to email people and yell at them.

Isn't that creating a dialogue?

No, they are one-way diatribes. Just because two producers both write and both us high-falootin', postmodern jargon, people instantly think, "Oh, Paul Miller and Terre Thaemlitz are on the same wavelength." We really have very little do with each other. He has said in response to my work that Queer identity politics don't touch on issues of multiculturalism, and I think he is full of shit. He is basically invoking a heterosexist race politic that is blind to a shared interest in strategizing identities of empowerment in response to dominant Hetero-normative Western culture. Not to mention totally ignorant of everything I have ever produced, written and said in interviews against ethnic and audio imperialism, including imperialism within the Illbient scene. Basically, all of my experiences with anything Illbient have always been overshadowed by straight White boys speaking Ebonics. Nobody wants to talk about the fact that it's a lot of salt with a little pepper. There are certainly serious problems with a type of White Academic dominance in Queer theory that needs to be addressed, but to

then say Queer identity politics excludes issues of race is like saying the dominance of straight White men making electronic music excludes Paul himself from making music, and in terms of financial success he's more successful than any electroacoustic producer I know by a long shot. It's an oversimplification which precludes the possibility for a real complication of issues, and I think that's a dangerous subtext for someone talking about representing a unified multi-cultural front giving props to everyone. I'm not interested in representing everyone. I'm interested in people representing their own experiences, helping facilitate that representation if I can, receiving help from others in representing my own experiences when they can, and still being critical of superficial alliances that ultimately conceal important differences which need to be investigated. Diversity is not about social equilibrium or seeing your own concerns in everyone else. That's a Humanist trap that ultimately imposes one concept of the 'Human Condition' over that of another. Diversity's about acknowledging a type of chaos or cultural schizophrenia - living with people in whom you can't see yourself at all. Where the fuck do the Puerto Rican female-to-male transsexual Gay men lay their identity alliances in Paul's world?

I'm going to back up. We were talking about the early nineties Ambient music often floating through spirituality and that sort of thing... why do you think that happened?

I think a lot of it is because the Techno community itself was very heavily invested in a lot of those things and I think that issues of transcendence were really buzzy at the time. I think that's also why it fell away. It was too loopy and ethereal to really have much

of a long-term stay. It really verged on something religious or cultic. You know, Ambient music from the seventies as the word was originally used by Eno was about trying to draw attention to an environmental condition. It wasn't just about the music being soft, or the music being in the background, it was about listening to music in which the environmental context was also an influence in how the music was perceived. Then around '81, [Haruomi] Hosono [of Yellow Magic Orchestra] wrote that introduction in the comic book, "Globule" where he talked about trying to take Ambient music to a club or social context with his Monad Music label.

I think that's where the first historical shift happened. I think that Eno was more invested in an existential crisis of isolation and a loss of focus, and Hosono was about this loss of focus as a metaphor for club culture or for a peripheral alternative to dominant musicology and dominant pop music. So that fed this thing that ultimately happened in the late '80s and early nineties. Not many people trace it like that, but that's what I do.

How did you come to a place of writing about the implications of your music?

Basically, as soon as I thought about the idea of releasing stuff and having it heard by an audience, I felt compelled to contextualize it and elaborate. Part of that was because I had a cultural criticism background and I was involved in a lot of community-based activism and lot of that was about defining context. So from the beginning, I've been concerned about presentation and in some ways trying to play on that, and be sarcastic and allow humor - cynical humor to play a part in the compositions.

I noticed, especially with the "G.R.R.L." cd, it's extremely cynical. [laughter] You also use the word "cyncerity" in describing it, how much does sincerity come into play with your approach to your work?

I think the way that you're using "sincerity" and the way that people usually talk about sincerity in terms of music production - I'm really not interested in that because I don't think that it's relevant. "Intention" is the word that I would use. I think that sincerity ultimately comes down to nothing when it comes down to - "what are your intentions and were you successful in outlining those or presenting some portion of them to people?"

I'm thinking about sincerity, almost as a flipside to cynicism. How often do you approach something without that jadedness? Or do you find that that just doesn't play, that's not a conceptual element?

Well, I want to like what I do, and I do like what I do - if I'm allowed to say that - [laughter] and for me that's important. I don't want to release crap, you know? I don't want to make compromises that I'm not comfortable making. And for the amount of money I'm making, I might as well just hold to my values because nobody's coming close to anything that would be worth selling out for. So in that sense, I approach it seriously.

Do you find that in your work, or do you even try to create in your work, a visceral element?

Well, yeah, like the random volume changes - having very quiet passages and then, suddenly some very loud burst or something that might not only shock people, but make them get

up and try and turn down their stereo. Then they go back and they realize now it's too soft and they have to turn it up again. For me, that's about trying get people involved or to acknowledge their role in the listening process, that they're actually contributing to it and to actually catch themselves in a position of adjusting things.

Is that an active way of disrupting the traditional Ambient music listening experience?

Yeah.

Another thing that strikes me about Ambient music is how it's generally written about and acknowledged in terms of some sort of purity because it's so minimal. I just find that really disturbing.

Yeah. In general, Minimalism can actually be more concealing than something really layered. You think, "Oh, all these layers, something's getting lost." Well, when you're dealing with something really minimal, like minimal painting or something, there's a way to look at it that's about trying to get closer to a perception of a kind of material context of production or perception. But at the same time, if you just go for the idea of "form is form" or "sound is sound" like some minimal sine wave thing that goes on for sixty minutes, what it's really about is "what kind of ideological framework facilitates this kind of production and distribution?" And then that whole process gets concealed behind this sine wave that's speechless. It's a silence really. It's not about sound; it's ultimately about silence. That's why, for me, when you get so dry and minimal it's not interesting anymore because the only thing that's talking to me when I listen to it is the capitalist infrastructure and it's obviously being done in a

way that's of no concern to the artist who produced it.

In what way?

Like if somebody's just doing this sound-as-sound type stuff, then in some ways it's about conceding to whatever circumstances are going to facilitate the music's recording, distribution, commercialization and sale. The less the artist says, the less explicit the artist is, the more they're capitulating to the operations, to the whole workings that they're in.

So I'm obsessive/compulsive in the other direction where I'm always trying to elaborate in miniscule detail what the possible consequences are, and what my limitations of vision might be.

Do you not then spend a great deal of time considering your work as consumer objects?

If I'm doing something for distribution and that's what's going to happen with it, then I feel that I should.

Then to what degree do you end up getting trapped by that? By spending so much time...

This is the thing: people believe that if they don't talk about it, then they're not trapped by it. For me it's more interesting to be actively involved in the things that limit me and confine me rather than pretend that they're not there and basically shirk responsibility. Because a lot of my music deals with issues of cultural transformation or political agendas, then I think that it would be really ridiculous of me to then not address the mechanisms that get my music into the hands of my audience.

Obviously culture has shifted a tremendous amount since when you started, but in what

ways has that affected your strategies and aesthetic decisions? How have you shifted with it?

I think the diversification of the styles that I produce in now is part of it. Also, trying to keep myself out of this model of musicians who produce a lot of things over a number of years, but are honing their style or honing their technique. For me, it's about appropriating style. Style is always about appropriation and reference; it's not about uncovering some inner self or something.

But, essentially, you are honing...

I hone techniques, but I'm not honing some sort of over-all expression of who I am as an artist. The projects still have individual contents by-and-large. I have my ongoing themes that come from my own interests and my own experiences, but I try and have each project have a distinct theme or approach to it. I also try and make them sound different from one another and use different types of processing in them.

Ambient music sort of grew up on the periphery of dance music, which is so visceral and so specific to the body - so how much do you think that your music plays into that level of visceral experience?

I feel like you're approaching it from the dancer's point of view - "the visceralness of dance music."

But if you're a DJ, you're interacting with that.

Yeah, I think that there are always these other issues that are more important to me than the visceralness of it, so I guess I don't really have an answer for you because I don't really think

about my music in that kind of way. For me, the idea of a visceralness isn't really important compared to an idea of context of playback and performance. So for me the interesting thing about a type of Ambient performance environment, or a Techno dancefloor, wouldn't be "Oh, this bass line coming out and hitting my body!" What it would be is the whole framework of the type of space, the type of people inhabiting the space, how they're interacting with one another. That, for me, is the material interest that I have in it, as opposed to a purely sensory thing.

It's interesting to hear that you came out of DJing with beat-oriented music that is so often about creating these contexts where this idea of escape and release can happen. But your work so flies in the face of that because it's so grounded and so specific about talking about the elements it encounters. I'm hard pressed to think of much dance music that doesn't do the exact opposite, that tries to be essentially nothing but a visceral escape.

I think it's really important to talk about dance music, not in terms of pulling the compositions out individually and considering what each one has to say, otherwise you'll just find out that, yeah, it's the same trappings as when we were talking about formalistic, minimal approaches towards Ambient music or something. The interesting content that comes out of dance music is the context of the dancefloor and that really overrides, or preconditions what the producers and DJs are bringing into that environment. But people on the dancefloor still want to do what you're saying - try to think about the music as just the sounds itself. But really, the sounds are meaningless. That

is why it's important for producers to talk about their intentions as opposed to letting the greater condition do the talking for them.

How much spiritual possibility do you think there is in music?

Um, I'm not interested in that. I think that the music industry is overwhelmingly ascribed with emotionalism and spirituality. With Ambient and Electronica, you have Ethno-Ambient - like audio Imperialism where everybody thinks that World Music is somehow about showing that we're all the same. Really it's about showing that within the Western, white, upper-class, First World, we have a way of looking at the world and all these different ethnicities where we can take their music, or take their sculptures out of their temples and look at them and appreciate them as art in the same way that we appreciate our own music and art. It's ridiculous that people feel this type of tribal communion. I shouldn't say, "ridiculous," I should say "dangerous" that people emphasize communion through world musics when really, I think it's important to talk about the differences of the contexts of production and performance and what it means to take the music out of context and perform it in another context. I'm not advocating some sort of weird musical separationism or anything where it's bad to listen to that type of music here, but I am saying that there is a way that you can be responsible in using certain types of sound sources by discussing their implications.

But can you talk about spirituality in music and spirituality specifically in Ambient music, without resorting to non-Western music? A lot of Ambient music certainly goes right there so quickly - like spiritual equals Other - but can you talk about

it without placing it in those terms?

The other thing would be what I consider to be just Humanist spirituality that's also associated with a kind of tripping-out.

It's hard to talk about spirituality in music without getting into the Ethno-implications because a lot of spirituality is also attributed to a type of ideology that associates "primal humanity" with spirituality, where escaping First World, Western culture is a metaphor for returning to the spiritual self - the non-hampered by Western, dominant culture self. Of course, everybody thinks for some reason that every other culture is living perfectly happy, in communion with nature and we're the only ones that aren't. Which is stupid. So I think there is always that invocation of the ethnic Other as a solution. Otherness is presented as this Utopian escape, transcendental solution. I'm coming from an approach [where] Otherness is about alienation and attempts to try and compensate for alienation through organization and identity politics in a strategic way. So that's where I come head-to-head with the dominant musicology approach towards spirituality in music.



There are two different versions of Otherness going on. One is saying that Otherness is the solution. Then even within identity politics, either racial or sexual identity politics, there's also this attempt to ascribe a type of truthfulness of experience that then supercedes other people's experiences. Like, "I'm a gay musician. So my music speaks for gay people and is about a gay experience." I would never say anything like that. Whenever people ask me, "Is there an inherently queer sound?" No. What are you talking about? It's all about contextualization. There is a way in which identity politics often gets caught up in that same trapping of spirituality and essentialization of identity. That there is some sort of essence or core of truth out there that supercedes society.... I think that what people are really trying to get to is a way to talk about subjectivity. Which is very different than talking about spirituality.

Marc Kate is a member of I Am Spoonbender.
You can find him at <http://www.iamspoonbender.com/>

FIXED MUSIC

by **MAGGI
PAYNE**

I was being interviewed the other day, and the "why do you do tape music" question came up again. It occurred to me that aside from the control one has in the studio setting and the ability to do many things that just aren't possible in live performance (or financially feasible due to the number of samplers, etc. it would take to perform live), that there are a couple of other factors involved.

When I do a fixed composition I have absolutely no excuses. I take complete responsibility for any imperfections in the mix, the sounds themselves, the structure, etc.. It is what it is. I could always wish for more or better, but it is the final product.

When my compositions are played back in a concert setting I prefer to be present - and to run the console myself. That way I can hopefully equalize and make subtle level changes to more closely match what the piece sounded like in the original mixing environment, or I can choose to take advantage of special characteristics of a specific venue to enhance or adjust the sound of the piece.

I also often listen to both live and taped music with my eyes closed. In my own music I like to think of taking people out of themselves and into the musical spaces that I create, so that they no longer feel "in the place where they're sitting" but in this kind of virtual world that I've developed. I like to take them on a journey with me if they are willing to come. If people are conscious of their current surroundings it makes it a bit harder to accomplish. Since so much of our perception is visual - I believe it's around 85%, when one closes one's eyes or otherwise has less visual content to contend with, one can focus much more directly on sound.

Maggi Payne is a Bay Area composer, musician, recording engineer, teacher, and video artist.

Information can be found at <http://www.lovely.com/bios/payne.html>

GENETIC ALGORITHMIC MANDALA

BY RANDY NORDSCHOW

3 2 2 1 2 1 5 8 2 3 6 [1 6 2 4 5]
4 6 1 1 3 7 5 2 1 5 8 1 6 9 2 5 6
1 3 2 6 5 5 1 9 4 2 9 2 4 2 8 6 9
9 1 2 7 7 5 [2 4 7 5 3 1 6 5 2 8 4]
8 2 3 6 [1 3 9 5] 1 3 1 8 9 4 6 5
2 3 8 [1 3 5 6 7 5 8 2 1 4 6] 1 5
9 3 5 6 2 2 8 6 2 1 8 1 9 2 6
[1 9 4 6 7 2 5 3 8] 7 4 5 7 9 1
2 6 4 1 4 5 1 4 3 3 4 1 [1 2 3 6]
1 3 7 5 2 1 4 6 1 1 9 5 8 4 5
9 4 6 7 [4 2 1 1 5 1 3 7 9 1 8]
5 7 9 [1 5 8 2 3 6] 2 1 4 6 1
5 8 6 1 5 4 1 3 4 2 1 4 6 7 4
2 4 5 5 6 5 9 3 [1 5 9 6 1 4 2 8]
1 3 7 6 7 4 6 2 6 1 7 2 8 1 6

Randy Nordschow is a composer and interdisciplinary artist living in San Francisco.

I LISTENED TO THE MISSION...

by Melissa Klein

I. (*¿De dónde eres? ¿Adónde vas?* Where do you come from? Where are you going?)

Why in Spanish do we say *estar* instead of *ser* when we speak of death? Is death a state of such impermanence?

How many times riding home tonight on Valencia Street will I have to swerve out of the bike lane to make room for cars being valet parked?

Dime, como se dice en español--"I should have done it, but I never did"?

What do those cholo boys think when they see me, another white girl with her shabby bag, armed with thirteen quarters for the laundromat?

Why is it that in English we say "to give birth" and in Spanish *dar luz*, "to give light"?

Did I feel better walking down the street when my boyfriend was from El Salvador?

What was he like, your father, before varicose veins wound themselves like vines around the brown trunks of his legs?

If I grew up in a middle-class family but now make under a thousand dollars a month am I middle-class or poor?

What songs did you say your mother sang to you?

Why do I feel so embarrassed when white people order burritos in terrible Spanish?

Does it seem like yesterday or forever ago, the first time your newborn baby clutched your finger in her tiny fist?

Am I writing this to be read by someone like me?

Were you a baby again that night, swaddled in ether, nodding to the lullaby of heroin?

What's going to happen to my friends who are being evicted so that their landlords can make more money?

Did you feel it would never be the same, after Neil died of AIDS, after you lost your teeth?

Who lived in my apartment twenty years ago?

Did you see them, the jaguars, when you held out the lantern in front of the house, the darkness so thick it strangled the screeching of the monkeys?

What will this neighborhood be like five years from now?

Tell me again, what was it like, seeing the sun rise over the Mississippi?

Will I even want to live in this city five years from now?

Can you still taste it in your mouth, all these years later, pie from the diner where they called you Princess Blackfoot because you had no shoes?

If I've lived in the Mission for 5 years is that long enough to call it home?

Can you feel the rumba rhythm slapping your palms, when you hit the tumbadora with your callused hands?

If artists and bohemians are the shock troops of gentrification, am I the enemy?

Do you remember back, before, when that bar was a *panaderia*, when your tongs picked out buttery cookies with the colors of the Mexican flag running into one another?

Am I the enemy or just myself?

How many gray hairs will sprout in the black bristle of the immigrant's mustache before he fulfills his promise-- "*Algún día*, I will return to my country"?

What do I mean when I say I want community?

Could you hear the semi's whining down the highway from your childhood sickbed where you lay for nearly a year with rheumatic fever?

Has too much time passed for me to ring my neighbors' doorbell, ask them to tell me their names, tell them my own?

Where are they now, the trains that laid you down to sleep?

Why in Spanish do we say *estar* instead of *ser* when we speak of death?
Is death a state of such impermanence?

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Where are they now, the trains that laid you down to sleep?

(¿De dónde eres? ¿Adónde vas? Where do you come from? Where are you going?)

II. I listened to the Mission...

Do you hear us, the voices of those that were here before you?
Hush, hush. Listen. Are you listening? Sometimes nowadays you can barely hear us, over the cold whir of bills spit out by the bank machine, over the insistent metallic chirp of the cellular phone.
But we will speak to you if you let us, the bones of the Ohlone, the Irish graves in the Mission cemetery. Shhhh.

I listened to the Mission...

What did she tell you?

She said:

I need these things to wake me up. Heroin and café con leche. Young mothers hustling their little ones late late late to school. Fathers with proud faces and bowed shoulders, standing on Cesar Chavez, waiting waiting for a job. Chug of the bus, exhaust fumes, breathe in, breathe out. *Pan dulce*, exhale of hot sugary breath from bakery doors.

I need these things to put me to sleep. Distant foghorn from across the bay. Ambulance swaying across the midnight streets. Lullaby the mother sings to her two daughters, each one born on a different side of the border.

I am the hurry hurry of the junkie, and the languid jangle of the *paleta* cart. I am the wild guitar of the rockero and the punk girls wet with one another's sweat and the sad uplifted horns of the mariachi band.

I am yellow marigolds in cold November. I am altars for the dead. I am *calaveras*, candles for ancestors. I am incense, water, bread.

I am Aztec dancers whirling in sage and feathers. Turn, turn, turn, turn. I am the four directions. Look left, the hills rise like the humps of camels, clumped with dry grass. Look straight, the telephone wires are strung across the streets and black birds perch on them like sheet music. Look right, a woman bends to lift her child. Look back. *La historia es la historia.* Look back, look back, look back.

I need to catch bedraggled pigeons in my hand of wind. I need the sun to burn off all the fog. I need the rain to rinse the clouds with grey. A girl daydreams at the bus stop, imagines the world is upside down, imagines the scraggly palm trees are mops, imagines palm trees swabbing the dirty sky.

Friday night I am cholo boys with hard struts and soft eyes, smoking *mota*, kicking it on the street. Friday night I am fierce-ass chola girls whose hair swings to their hips, whose hips swing to a hip-hop salsa beat.

Saturday night I am the woman who waits for cars, the woman who thinks, "High heels make me a little taller. Wish they were high enough to raise me up off the squalor of these streets. Wish I could find a man to treat me right and raise us up some little ones, just him and me. Wish just for once my luck would turn out right."

I listened to the Mission...

What did she tell you?

She said:

Some come early, some come late. But you are my child too. I will unbind your clumsy tongue. I will give you words and words. Hold your ear to the thump thump of the bassline. Dip your pen into the black tar of my streets. Tell my stories.

You are my child too. Come, come closer. *Ven. Abrazame.*

OXBOW TOUR DIARY

by Niko
Wenner

May 1999: Nine years after the first Oxbow show, August 1990 in London, we have at last made it to Japan, ostensibly in support of our latest record "Serenade in Red" for 4 shows in Tokyo, and one show each in Nagoya, Osaka and Himeji. To visit Japan is a dream come true for me. And to have Oxbow play in Japan is simply delightful - literally filled with delights. There is no better way to say it. This short tour of 7 dates and 12 days would not have been possible without the hard work of the wonderful people at Unchain Records, who were also kind enough to include us on their new compilation cd, and the great band 54-71. Many others had a hand in helping out: thanks to them, and also to the many cool bands that we had a chance to see, and play with.

When talking about going away, I have to compare the experience to coming home: I am struck again now, upon returning to my home in the Mission District of San Francisco, how frowny (the opposite of smiling), unfriendly and generally unpleasant the people are that live here. But maybe everyone, everywhere, is this way and I can only notice it, here. I suppose this is a good reason to travel: among strangers in an unfamiliar culture one doesn't have to be a part of things. That precisely the distance that is created by being a stranger in a strange land, can be a blessing.

We had the opportunity to play with 54-71 a number of times, and I must say that I was always impressed with the intensity and concentration with which they performed. The seriousness they bring to their music and its performance is something that I value highly. The stripping away of the music they create to an expressive minimum - that is, the use of the least material necessary to create and transmit their intentions, thoughts and emotions - is very effective, powerful, and touching. It was a joy to be in the room each time they played. I really can't imagine a better band for us to play with. Because I like them, and because they pushed us to be our best.

On a personal note, I was struck again by the physical toll that is exacted upon my body by our music. At the end of the tour I half jokingly express that I feel as though I have been to see a Dominatrix. That is, how I imagine I might feel after a good session of having someone beat me up in a sexual context. However, this is not just a flippant remark. At our best, the communication, tenderness, sharing, give and take of physical intimacy, is also part of the joy of playing Oxbow music. The giving away of everything, holding nothing back, the loss of inhibitions and the fearlessness, the freedom and wildness and the disconnection with reality that are all part of good sex are also part of playing Oxbow music. The nasty rutting sweaty simplicity of fucking, and the beautiful disintegration of 'self' and communion with, what for lack of a simpler term is commonly referred to as 'God' are at best, a part of the experience too. Perhaps these are things best left unsaid....

But my body shows signs of wear. Blood, cuts and abrasions on my fingers and hands and forearms from the strings, wood and metal of my guitars; red, swollen bruises on both my hands from knocking and pounding on the guitars every night; a bruise on my left middle finger where I squish it suddenly without thinking between my guitar and a speaker cabinet one evening; a sizable bruise on my right hip from repeatedly knocking the guitar against it; bruises on my knees -- I guess from falling to them in front of my speaker cabinets; and fingernails cracked and split from contact with the strings. These physical results of playing our music are related to the lack of inhibitions and withholding of nothing, I was talking about above, but also are the result of more mundane, non-sexual things. Like simply, a physical interface with an instrument where the limits of skin, bone and muscle are reached before the limits of sound. That is to say: my damned body gives out before or during the shaping of the sound, and the result is cuts, blood, and bruises. I feel like a teenager, examining my body in wonderment as it changes: "How did this happen?"

Japan is a beautiful wound from which I will not recover. I can not wait to return.

Niko Wenner records and performs with the SF band Oxbow.

GLENDALE VOODOO

by NICOLE
PANTER

I have sweat on my upper lip, it tickles, the cotton dress sticks to my lower back. I stand, stock still, trying not to close my eyes as the walls close in on me. He has drawn a circle in cornmeal around us on the concrete floor. The rooster screams, panicked as if he knows what's coming. The curved blade of the machete lying on the floor winks at me in complicity. It is airless inside this garage in Glendale. It's you, I think, not the rooster they want. I feel weak and dumb and sick and dizzy. The congas beat, the watchers chant, Ellegua, Father, Chango. I feel my legs then feet move, give in to the drummers, my body goes stiff, it slips away from me, this shell, I am not here, I stamp my foot, my hips roll, my shoulders shake and dip/eyes roll back into my head it does not matter. The saints are here, in me, I cannot see, it does not matter. A little girl dressed in white runs up to the edge of the circle, does not cross the line, drops a bunch of marigolds at my feet. I am me, and I am shared with others. Sweat pours from my body. I am soaked in this windowless, sealed room. A woman moves toward me, on her knees the whole way. She reaches across the line, touches the hem of my dress, touches her fingers to her lips. She backs away still on her knees. I stamp my feet, the crowd ripples as if I have kicked them, I dance, they nod, the drummers drum. He touches my face, hands hot and sticky, the blood of the rooster. I rub my face, rub my body, the blood of the rooster marks me there on my white dress mixes with my sweat, I hear a foot slap it is mine. I cannot feel the effort the motion takes. What I am is shared with others. I am a saint. I am a horse. My back stiffens, jaw clenches shut, head thrown back, arms flung out rigid. A dog running on the slack of a long leash suddenly taut, I am pulled back into my own white girl's body right here, right now.

Nicole Panter is a writer and teacher living in LA.

interview: WITH JEAN SHEPARD

by Allison
Wolfe

MANY HAPPY HANGOVERS TO YOU!

An interview at The Grand Ole Opry, November 20, 1998

Whenever I mention female country music trailblazer Jean Shepard, most people, even classic country music fans, don't seem to know who I'm talking about: who she was, who she is. In a way, I find this surprising, because Jean Shepard was among the first few female country artists on the Grand Ole Opry in the 1950's. Gifted with a strong, warm, incredibly beautiful voice, Jean Shepard emerged on the country music scene as a solo artist, at a time when most female country musicians performed only as part of family acts. Ever resilient, Jean Shepard has overcome many hardships, including childhood poverty and the tragic death of husband Hawkshaw Hawkins in the plane crash that also took the life of friend Patsy Cline. Opinionated and out-spoken, Jean Shepard has championed the cause of preserving traditional country music in the face of a modern, corporate, mainstreamed Nashville. Jean Shepard continues to perform to this day as a long-time member of the Grand Ole Opry, where my father, sister and I had the chance to catch up with her backstage. Here is a document of our conversation:

Where, when and how did you get involved in music?

I was born and raised in Oklahoma; we migrated to California when I was 11 years old, right at the end of World War II. I was in high school when a bunch of us girls got together to form an all-girl band. Porter Wagoner didn't have a first all-girl band! We weren't real good, but everybody thought we were 'cause we were a bunch of girls, and girls just didn't play guitars and drums and things back then.

I had the pleasure one night of singing with Hank Thompson. And he took my little acetate recording to Ken Nelson at Capitol Records and said, "I think you should sign this little girl. I think she's gonna be a big star." Well, Ken Nelson told Hank Thompson, "Hank, I don't think that there's any place in country music for women." But Hank said, "But every band needs a

girl singer, don't they?" So I was the "girl singer" for a long time. We did the "Dear John Letter" with Ferlin Husky and it sold a million records, and I went back and I said, "Do you still think there's not a place in country music for women?" Ken Nelson became my mentor, and he's 87 years old and still alive and a wonderful man. He meant a lot to my career.

When the "Dear John Letter" sold a million records, Ferlin Husky and I wanted to go out and work road dates. But I couldn't leave the state of California because I was under age. So my mother and daddy went to court and signed Ferlin Husky as my guardian so I could leave the state to work. We worked for a couple of years like that, and then I went to the Ozark Jubilee and worked for a year with the great Red Foley on the first country televised show that ever amounted to anything really.

I joined the Grand Ole Opry on November 21st, 1955. I can remember it very well because November 21st is my birthday. I didn't know they were going to hire me. A gentleman by the name of Jim Denny was the manager at the Grand Ole Opry, and I had talked to him about becoming a member, but I didn't know what was happening. Back then, in November they had what they call the DJ Convention. Now they have it in October and they call it the Country Music Awards. I wish they still had the DJ Convention. It got really big, but back then you got to know the DJ's, and these DJ's each had a personality, and we got to know them on a first name basis. But anyway, Mr. Denny was making a speech introducing all the DJ's to Nashville, and he said, "By the way, we'd like to welcome the newest member of the Grand Ole Opry, Jean Shepard!" And there I was, 21 years old! If I'd had false teeth I would have dropped them! He just said it out of the blue, and then he looked at me and smiled and he said, "Happy birthday Jean!" He knew it was my birthday, and a very well remembered one.

You were very young when you started playing music. What instruments did you learn to play and what was the process of it?

I play a little bit of guitar and I can accompany myself on a little bit of the piano. When we had the all-girl band, we needed a bass fiddle player. Back then there weren't many electric basses around, so guess who got stuck with the big upright bass? I did. My mother and daddy went and hawked every bit of furniture in our house to buy me my bass fiddle. They were very supportive all through the years.

Did you also play the drums? I read that somewhere.

Yeah. I wasn't very good.

Can you tell me more about the Melody Ranch Girls?

Everyone thought that was Gene Autry, but the Melody Ranch Girls happened before I knew Gene Autry had a place called The Melody Ranch. This man in Hanford, California had a big dance hall called Noble's Melody Ranch, and he managed us and booked us. So that's where the name Melody Ranch came from, from Noble Fosberg in California.

Are there any Melody Ranch Girls recordings in existence?

No. A couple of them have since passed on, but I'm still in contact with a couple of the girls. They all started getting married, and their husbands got jealous, so we kind of went by the wayside. I think my sister might have some of those old recordings.

You seem to have a reputation as a strong woman who has made it all on her own, as a solo artist, at a time when most female country artists were either part of a family group or a husband and wife team.

Years ago, you just didn't go on the road unless you were with a brother or a husband or a family, or people would just look down their noses at you. I was under age, but that was also the reason for Ferlin Husky being my guardian. Wilma and Stoney [Cooper] were husband and wife. Rose Maddox worked with her brothers, Maddox Bros. and Rose. Kitty Wells worked with Johnny [Wright], her husband. Lulu Belle and Scotty were also husband and wife. They were all family, so to speak. But I didn't really realize that I was "solo" until a woman told me; I never did give it any thought. I just did what I wanted to do. I'm a very strong-willed

person, very outspoken-- sometimes too much so, probably.

Along those lines, I was also wondering what kind of obstacles you have faced or struggled with as a female artist throughout your country music career?

Allison, it was a man's world back then. It was really hard as a female artist. There were really only about three of us back then: Kitty Wells, Rose Maddox, and myself. I guess the three of us probably opened more doors for the ladies now, and I'm just proud to have been a part of that.

I met Hank Williams, Sr. Someone introduced me to him-- he wasn't feeling any pain at the time-- and I loved this man. He said, "Well young lady, they tell me you want to be a country singer." I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Ain't many women in country music." I said, "No sir, but I'm fixin' to change that!" He looked at me and gave me a little lop-sided grin and said, "Well, good luck to you, sweetheart!" But I was just thrilled to get to meet him; he was a big influence on me.

Back then there weren't too many women per se. Kitty had out a couple of records, and I'd seen Rose Maddox with her brothers, but there weren't many women really that you could look up to, that you could follow.

Well, you were one of them!

I had to make my own way. I was very fortunate to have some very wonderful people like Ken Nelson, Ferlin Husky, Hank Thompson, and a bunch of great guys from Bakersfield, like Buck Owens. Buck was my rhythm guitar player on a lot of my earlier records. These guys were like brothers to me. They encouraged me and were always there for me.

The '50's, and especially the '60's, must have been really exciting times for country music, what I see as a sort of golden era, when the Nashville Sound was starting to get national and pop chart attention. Also at that time a lot of female artists were really coming on strong. So many incredible country women singers came out of those two decades. Can you talk about the climate of country music in Nashville, and elsewhere, at that time, and about the community of female country artists that may have existed back then?

Even though it makes me older, I am so happy that I was a part of the '50's and '60's, because, you're right, it was the golden era of country music. Everybody says it's gonna come around back to that. But it won't come back to that until you get some artists who will be true to the roots of country music.

Back then in the '60's, Patsy Cline came along; later on, about '64 or '65, you had Loretta Lynn and Dottie West. Tammy Wynette came along in about '66. I thought it was wonderful. The doors were opening so fast for the females. It was wonderful, because I know what a struggle the first few of us had. It made me proud to feel that I'd been a part of it and had helped any of the women in some way. Some of these gals were just knocking the keys right off of the pianos and the jukeboxes, and so many of them became superstars. I loved every one of them. I can't think of one that I disliked or didn't enjoy some of their music at some point. And they were good gals. Patsy Cline was a very strong-willed person. So was Tammy Wynette. Tammy was sick a lot later in life, but she was a strong-willed person, she knew what she

wanted, and that's my kind of person.

Do you feel there was personal and professional support amongst the women?

Oh yeah. I always felt that if I couldn't hold my own with any of them, then I needed to get out of the business. Even today, and I'm 65 years old, I would not be afraid to go onstage with Reba McEntire, Wynona-- that's the daughter, isn't it? That might sound dumb, but if they're not really associated with the Opry, and they're not, I don't really know them. But I wouldn't be afraid to go onstage with any of them. A lot of people might think I'm being conceited, and I don't mean that. But I know that I can still sing a darn good country song-- if they wanna sing country. Now I can't do none of that pop stuff, but if they wanna sing country, I'll jump in there and sing with any of them. The success of the women has been tremendous. We can do anything that men can do, as far as music, you know. Now, I can't go out there like my husband and lift a hundred pound sack of horse feed, but I'd try it!

You seem to have done a lot of work standing up for people and causes you believe in.

It got me in trouble a lot!

But it's admirable. Some of the things I've heard you struggled for included bargaining for better union scale for your band members, supporting Vietnam veterans, and other causes. It sounds like you have acted on your beliefs and been involved in things that were important to you. Were people hard on you when you spoke out?

Oh yeah, were they ever! The disc jockeys stopped playing my records! I took a stand for country music. I lost my recording contract because I stood up for traditional

country music. People would walk up to me and tell me that the DJ's had stopped playing my records. I didn't know what to tell them.

We played a big show up in Michigan one night with Bill Anderson, Jim and Jesse, Sonny James, etc. Some people came up and told me that the radio stations wouldn't play my records. So when I went up on the stage that night, I said, "We've been getting a lot of complaints that the DJ's won't play our records. The only thing I can tell you is to call the radio station and tell them that if they don't play Ernest Tubb or Carl Smith or Jean Shepard or whoever you want to hear, that you won't buy your car from Joe's Used Car Lot or go to the grocery store that they advertise for, because they won't play what you want to hear. The only thing a radio station can offer you is service. It's a service. If you hit them in the pocket book, they might stop and think more about what they're doing." People clapped and screamed, but when I came off stage, there was a man standing there who drew back his fist and said, "I ought to hit you!" And I said, "Well, if you feel froggy, jump!" I was wondering who this guy was! I'd seen him before. I realized it was the disc jockey from the local radio station who had introduced me that night. He said, "Thanks to you, Monday morning the radio station will be bombarded with people wanting to hear Ernest Tubb, Kitty Wells, Red Foley and Webb Pierce!"

And why not?!

Exactly! I said, "Are you a country music radio station or not? Go ahead and hit me, and then I'll turn the other cheek and you can hit me on this side too, and then you'll work for me for the rest of your life!" I figured I'd get pretty plain with him. I got his attention, at least.

My record company at the time, United Artists Records, called my husband and told him, "You need to tell Jean to tone down her little speeches she's been giving on stage." But my husband Benny said, "Uh uh, I have to live with her! You tell her! Besides that, she believes in every word she says, and who am I to tell her that she's wrong? If she believes in it, then that's good enough for me." I was just standing up for an industry that had been good to me, and I hope that somewhere along the way that I have been good for the industry.

My sister and I are very interested in your involvement in the "Back to Country" movement.

You know, now, the most popular radio show on WSM, the Grand Ole Opry station, is on every Saturday morning from 6 o'clock to 10 o'clock, the Eddie Stubbs show. He's a great DJ; he won't play anything past 1970, and they can't handle all of the requests. There's so many. And now I notice that throughout the day, once in awhile you'll hear a Lefty Frizzell song or Ernest Tubb. There's hardly a week that goes by that I don't get a letter from some DJ saying that they're trying a couple hours of traditional country.

With the advent of the '60's Nashville Sound, do you think that the move to "cross over" to pop eventually destroyed the country music tradition?

Country music got lost in the shuffle. Country music became big business. A few months ago here, a guy called a record company producer and said, "I got this real good-looking kid I want you to take a look at." The producer said, "Does he wear a hat?" And the guy said, "No, but he will." "How does he look in a pair of tight jeans?" And the guy said, "He looks pretty good." They went through this 30-minute rigamarole, and do you

want to know what the last question asked was? "Can he sing?" If you can sing, it's a plus!

I don't believe you should be judged on how you look. I'm 65 years old, and I still sing a darn good country song. But if you don't have a big belt buckle, a big hat on and a tight pair of jeans: This is a shame!

The Grand Ole Opry hires these artists, which is great. But what makes me mad is that these artists make an Opry appearance only once every seven years. Well, I'm sorry, the Grand Ole Opry means more to me than that. It has meant more to me than that over the last 43 years. If you want to be a member of the Grand Ole Opry, then o.k., we want you one weekend out of every month. If that's too much to ask, then we don't need you. The Grand Ole Opry, at this point in time, needs all the help it can get. It's been through a lot of changes; some of them have been good, a lot of them have been bad. I'm very plain-spoken about this. What are they gonna do - not play my records?! I like some of the new country, but don't use the Grand Ole Opry just because you think it's a feather in your hat. Respect it enough to give it one weekend out of the month. That's not too much to ask, is it?

I remember when we had to make 26 Saturday nights out of the year in order to be a member of the Grand Ole Opry. One year, New Year's Day fell on a Saturday, and I had in 25 appearances. On New Year's Day you could triple your money, so I'd booked this date for about \$4,000, which was big money 30 years ago. But Bud Wendell, the Opry general manager at the time, came up to me and said, "Jean, you've only got in 25 Saturday nights. We need all the help we can get on New Year's Day, so you make sure you're here, and we'll call it even." I had to cancel that big-paying

date to fulfill my obligation to the Grand Ole Opry. But I did it because I love the Grand Ole Opry, and I love what it has stood for all these years.

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

(Benny Birchfield, Jean's husband): Wait! Did you ask about Patsy Cline?!

We touched on that briefly, just briefly. Usually people ask that! This might sound terrible, and we don't mean it, 'cause Patsy was great. But so many times, that's all they ask! This little girl called me and bugged me for six months for an interview. Finally when she came in, she didn't say three words to me before she said, "Tell me all about Patsy Cline!"

(Benny Birchfield): People try to find out about Patsy Cline through Jean Shepard! Patsy Cline's kind of like Hank Williams, their images are much bigger dead than when they were alive. They've made her into a mythical icon, but they waited 'til she was dead.

Which is such a shame. It's really sad. She could have enjoyed it while she was alive! There's an old song, it goes, "Love me now while I am living. Do not wait 'til I am gone, and then chisel it in marble, warm love words on ice cold stone." Give the flowers while they're living, because it means a lot more.

(Cindy Wolfe): Was there an actual name for the "back to country" organization in which you were involved?

A.C.E., the Association of Country Entertainers. There's a bad story that goes along with that. Tammy Wynette, George Jones, Barbara Mandrell, Conway Twitty - about 15 artists got together to do this. I was out of town when they had their first meetings; I didn't know

anything about it. I got a call one day and was told they had started this association. Conway Twitty was in California and asked them to call me to be a board member, because I truly believe in country music. When they called, I said I wasn't sure. I wanted to go down and see what they were all about.

It was the year that Olivia Newton-John had won Country Female Singer of the Year. She made a public statement that she wanted to come to Nashville to "meet Hank Williams." She didn't know he was dead! So me and my big mouth, I got up in front of a bunch of disc jockeys and said, "I think I would have known if one of the Beatles had died!" I couldn't believe that this woman said she wanted to meet Hank Williams, when he'd been dead for 20 years! I knew right then that country music was gonna be in for some trouble.

But anyway, I had agreed to serve on the board. The word got out that A.C.E. was a sour grapes organization, blah blah blah. Bill Anderson was in on it too, and he said the DJ's were calling him and threatening not to play his records. But after they all started this organization and got the non-profit status and everything-after a couple years or so, they all started dropping out like flies, because they just didn't want to be known as sour grapes. But I hung in there for quite awhile.

George Jones and Tammy Wynette were married at the time, and this organization was born at their house. I called Tammy and said, "We need to close down this organization, because nobody seems to want to be a part of it anymore. I wasn't in on it when it first started; I'm just on the board trying to do what I can to help country music." Tammy said, "Don't close that organization down. Please keep it going. It was born at our house, and we

have to keep it going." Don't get me wrong, I love Tammy, but I said, "Tammy, that's all well and good, but you haven't paid your dues in two years!" And this was true.

And let me tell you another thing! This is gonna shock the world. I've never told this before, but I'm getting ready to retire, so it doesn't matter anymore. I lived in a \$250,000 home. I borrowed money on my home from this bank, with the understanding that George and Tammy and Barbara Mandrell and all these people would go out and work a show, one a year, and pay this money back. Well, guess what? Nobody paid that money back. I should never have done it, but I'm not ashamed of it now. I had to file bankruptcy, and not one of them came to my rescue. But that's o.k. If they can live with it, then so can I! I have completely forgiven them, but as far as I'm concerned, they let country music down. Don't worry about letting Jean Shepard down, 'cause I can bounce right back like a rubber ball. They did a couple of dirty turns, and you're the first person I've ever told this to, publicly. Print it, 'cause what are they gonna do - not play my records?! It hurt me that my friends did this to me. I wasn't even involved in the first place; they got me involved.

I thought it could be good. People told us we should never have this organization. But the songwriters have an organization, the musicians have a union, the booking agents have an organization. When the country music entertainers decided to form an organization, the whole industry went berzerk, and I don't know why. I've never figured it out. I thought it could have been a great organization. One good thing that came out of it, the organization got the Grand Ole Opry to recognize

the entertainers; therefore, we got hospitalization and retirement benefits, because of A.C.E. I love country music. It's been good to me; it's been good to my family. I thank God every day that I've been able to make a good living doing something that I love so much. Up until the time I had my first hit that sold a million records, I lived at home with my mother and daddy, when I was 18 or 19 years old. The music business was so much fun back then, and it has been throughout the years. But after I sold a million records, it got to be a big job then. And over the last forty or so years, it's been a big job, but it's been a job that I've enjoyed. Now, I don't have to depend on it for a living anymore, so I'm beginning to enjoy it again. But I have to be truthful, while there's good talent out there now, I still like Ernest Tubb and Red Foley and Webb Pierce and Carl Smith and Kitty Wells. These people are the backbone of country music. And Kitty Wells, at 78 years old, is still out singing. She's a beautiful and wonderful lady.

O.k. Well, one last thing, I just wanted to say happy birthday, and was wondering what you'd be doing on your birthday tomorrow.

I'll be singing on the Grand Ole Opry! It's also my 30th wedding anniversary. It's my birthday, it's my 43rd year at the Grand Ole Opry, and it's my wedding anniversary - all three on the same day. I'm a Scorpio, just made it! My mother's birthday was November the 8th, my sister's birthday's the 14th, mine's tomorrow, and my husband's crazy!

Allison Wolfe is a singer and writer who lives in Washington, DC, and records/performs with the band Bratmobile.

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