

## **do-it-yourself DOWNTOWN**

by Arnold Dreyblatt, 1995

*The New Music Scene in New York 1970-1984*

When speaking about the developments among New York music composers within the last twenty years, it's perhaps a too often used cliché to speak of American individualism, eclecticism and a "do-it-yourself" culture. Yet, from the perspective of Europe, where I've been based since leaving New York in 1984, the contrast seems all too clear. The explosion of creative activity which centered around New York in the early sixties mirrored developments in the arts as a whole, so we might at first take a look at the birth of this "New Music" scene within a larger cultural context.

In the States there has always been very little vertical movement between large-scale official art and what one might call the independent non-academic alternative. Avante-garde theater directors couldn't produce in a State theater or opera house without renting it themselves; experimental films and art video tapes would only rarely be shown on television and radio stations don't commission composers.

As I began work in music composition, an important model for me had been the approach of American experimental non-narrative film. This important movement, still relatively unknown in Europe, has been unofficially led since the sixties by Lithuanian immigrant poet and filmmaker Jonas Mekas who proposed a "Personal Cinema" as an alternative to the Hollywood. In lieu of the production baggage of producer, cameraman, editor etc., filmmakers in the sixties took control of the means of production and distribution, utilizing inexpensive home movie technology, setting up a network of unofficial cinema "cooperatives" and publishing critical journals.

At the same time Experimental theater groups such as the Living Theater, Bread and Puppet Theater, as well as the theaters of Richard Foreman and the early Robert Wilson rented their own spaces and did their own advertising; drawing from a group of non-paid performers to "do-it-themselves". Poets organized their own readings outside of the academy, and published each others works in a tradition dating back to the fifties. Judson Church on Washington Square, where groundbreaking Fluxus performances organized by another Lithuanian immigrant George Maciunas took place, also witnessed the stylistic development of the Downtown Dance scene, with Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Yvonne Rainier and many others.

In the early seventies I had been working with film, video and electronic music at the Center for Media Study at Buffalo, N.Y. At that time, Buffalo had become center of experimental activity in Film, Video Art and Music Composition. In late 1974, under the influence of a performance by Alvin Lucier with the Creative Associates in Buffalo (with whom I was later to study), I abandoned my work in visual arts and began making acoustic sound installations. But my interest gradually developed in the direction of a more traditional model of music performance.

This is the model that had been initiated by a now well-known group of American minimalist composers in the early sixties - Steve Reich, Phil Glass, Terry Riley and La Monte Young. It was a model largely based on the rock or jazz band/composer who performs with his own ensemble - a small amplified group formed expressly to perform his own compositions. In reaction to the currents of the time, both in the avant-garde and in the newly exciting pop world, composers also sought an

alternative to the official academic milieu: compositions left unperformed for years, orchestral commissions, and an elite university audience.

The early career of La Monte Young is an interesting case in point. With an extensive background in serialism (studies with Leonard Stein, an assistant of Schönberg) and Free Jazz (with seminal members of Ornette Coleman's first ensemble), Young was exposed to John Cage on a visit to Darmstadt in 1959. After composing a number of conceptual Fluxus-Cagean compositions, he formed his own ensemble in 1963, exploring his ideas in static composition, the overtone series, tuning systems, etc. The ensemble included Tony Conrad (later experimental filmmaker, and video artist), John Cale (founding member of the Velvet Underground), his wife Marian Zazeela (star of notorious "Camp" filmmaker Jack Smith's classic underground film "Flaming Creatures"). In those early years "The Theater of Eternal Music" performed for extremely long periods almost daily in La Monte's loft in downtown Manhattan, and it was probably the first highly amplified music by a composer with his own ensemble, in his own space, with an audience of fellow artists and friends who just happened to just drop by.

When I dropped by that same loft almost ten years later to study with La Monte Young, I had just turned 22. Reich, Glass and Riley had already made their mark and were headed "uptown". By this I mean literally that performances by their ensembles were starting to take place outside of the "ghetto" of downtown Manhattan for audiences that had relatively little knowledge of their beginnings in the "downtown" alternative art scene. Laurie Anderson was just becoming a "star" of the downtown art world and her meteoric ascent was still a few years off after "Oh Superman" became a hit in England. La Monte and his wife had become a disciple of a North Indian singer, had abandoned black attire for white, and was just beginning a period of unlimited support by a sibling of a philanthropic family in Texas. He was to be withdrawn into inaccessibility and largely inactivity until this support was terminated nearly ten years later.

Meanwhile, in a world unto its own, an identifiable scene had been flowering in downtown Manhattan, inspired by the activities of a handful of pioneers in the sixties. Alternative visual art spaces, cinemas, dance venues, and concerts were springing up overnight in storefronts, lofts, and unused Churches. A generation of composers and performance artists, poets, etc., many with familial connections to the "Fluxus" movement of the sixties, were performing weekly and were documented a few days later by composer Tom Johnson in a downtown newspaper called the "Village Voice". Filmmaker and minimalist composer Phill Niblock formed the Experimental Intermedia Foundation with choreographer Elaine Summers, and in his loft on Center Street produced hundreds of often informal concerts a year by young and old, known and unknown downtown composers.

At around the same time, students and young associates of such composers as Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, Joel Chadabe, and David Tudor began arriving in town. Many had met each other at the "Chocorua" concerts in New Hampshire in 1973. This influx of a younger generation, represented two new directions. The Group "Composers Inside Electronics" led by John Cage collaborator turned composer David Tudor included Linda Fisher, Ralph Jones and John Driscoll and video artist Bill Viola. They, along with Nicolas Collins, Ron Kuivila (students of Lucier), Paul DeMarinis (student of Behrman and Ashley) and many others created a

live performance music for homemade miniature electronics and later micro-computers. As an alternative to academic electronic and computer music often performed in tape playback and utilizing stationary giant university synthesizers and mainframe computers, this movement paralleled the young composers who, in the tradition of Harry Partch, constructed their own acoustic musical instruments, experimented with new tuning systems and (often superficially) absorbed non-western influences.

Other students of Ashley and Behrman, upon meeting those with similar interests in New York, began synthesizing a music reflecting an adolescence tuned to rock music. In 1975, composer Arthur Russell, as music director of the "Kitchen", organized a concert including David Van Tieghem, Rhys Chatham and Peter Gordon. It was a prophesy of changes to come. Beginning in 1977, the art scene gradually shifted to the "East Village" where small Galleries and Performance Art Spaces were springing up and gaining immediate media attention. "CBGB'S" and the "Mudd Club", where many of the new wave of pop bands got their start became venues for composers on Sundays and off nights. "The Kitchen" in Soho began attracting a fashionable "club" crowd. Rhys Chatham drew on his experience as a student of La Monte Young in creating an extremely high decibel minimal overtone music for the rock band format of electric guitars and drums. Others followed suit, and Glenn Branca who expanded the form to electric guitar symphonies became the more famous in a rivalry with Chatham reminiscent of that between Steve Reich and Phill Glass in the sixties (who played in who's ensemble first?).

By the time I left New York, minimalism had run its course, economic hard times would set in and public funding for the arts would plummet from its peak in the seventies (still minuscule by German standards). Gravitating around "Roulette" in Tribeca and other spaces in downtown Manhattan a group of improvising composers/musicians, distinct but sometime overlapping the "Free Jazz" scene, created a post-minimalist and post-modern performance network in which vocalists and instrumentalists, each with a recognizable individualized and often idiosyncratic style, group and regroup for performance and recordings in different constellations under rotating "band leaders". John Zorn became widely known as one of the more prominent composer /organizer/ producers of this well of performers, quoting from pop, film music scores, cartoon soundtracks and jazz and rock riffs.

It's now over twenty years since successive waves of New York and related American composers in other cities have toured European New Music festivals, recorded LP's here and been played regularly on the radio. Berlin, and other pockets of interest in West Germany and other European countries have maintained contact to the latest developments in the new music scene in New York and the rest of States. Yet one cannot help but wonder, that this continual exposure has had relatively little effect on the interests of most young European composers. The European academic music world continues with its own festivals, record labels and institutional support as if these eccentric Americans had never been here. In contrast to Europe, the New York scene has always been capable of absorbing individuals from very diverse backgrounds: jazz, academic, rock to auto-didact. At its best, when not bogged down in trendiness and incestuous infighting, New York has been a non-exclusive meeting point without boundaries which has encouraged synthesis, eclecticism and originality; a testament to the possibility of discovery and invention as a social activity.

It is perhaps fitting to dedicate this brief article to a number of young composer/performers who have died within the last few years: Arthur Russell, Phil Harmonic, Julius Eastman and Jim Pomeroy.

Originally Published in the Catalog to the exhibition, *US Arts*, Berliner Festspiele, 1995.