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The New Music

A Guide To
Recordings

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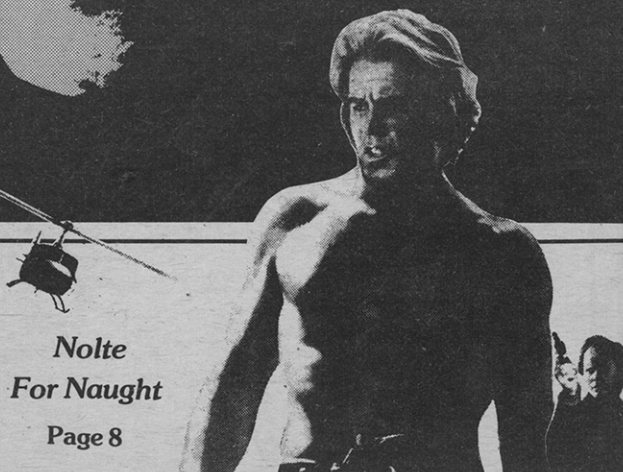
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The New Music

A Guide To Experimental Recordings

by Joanne Nestor

Today's experimental or avant garde music is often regarded by the general public as unlistenable or hard to understand. Many people, through lack of knowledge or interest, consider it "machine music": cold, mechanical, without thought or feeling; or "noise": unstructured, random sounds. It is true that "machine music" and "noise" do exist, and are sometimes passed off as music, but such generalizations about experimental music, whether electronic, jazz or

classical in influence, are misleading and are often more a block to real understanding and enjoyment than is the music itself.

Certainly today's more adventurous music owes a lot to composers Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Stockhausen and Varese, among others, for without them modern experimental music would have no foundation. But jazz experimentalists such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane have also contributed directly to the way many composers, experimental and otherwise, approach musical challenges.

The invention of the electronic synthesizer radically changed the course of progressive music. It permits the composer the artistic freedom of being able to produce, with one instrument, virtually any sound he can imagine, within the limits of his musical abilities, his acoustical knowledge and his mastery of the techniques of electronic music.

The contributions of Terry Riley, one of the most influential of the modern composers, have laid a firm groundwork in certain techniques, which has inspired the music of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and countless others.

Riley spent his early musical years studying in Europe and he was once part of the experimental La Monte Young Group. He has perhaps made more extensive use of tape loops, in both studio and performance situations, than any other composer.

His approach to music sounds simple on first listening, but his use of electronic keyboards, saxophone and a multitude of tape recorders creates a rhythmic fluency that shades and shifts constantly without altering the original pattern of his work. His fascination with phasing and repetition has set precedents for a whole generation of younger musicians, and it is Riley's commercial breakthrough that has been chiefly responsible for the attention now being paid to many musicians who are bridging the gulf between the avant garde and popular audiences. What follows is a list of some of the more interesting of those artists.

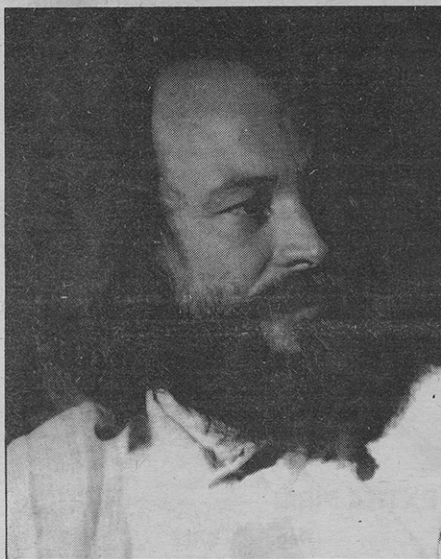
Some of the most remarkable music of the last few years has come from the collaboration of Robert Fripp and Brian Eno. Together they have recorded two albums. *No Pussyfooting* and *Evening Star* on the Island/Antilles label. The first, *No Pussyfooting* originally released in 1973 and reissued, contains two horribly named pieces, "The Heavenly Music Corporation" and "Swastika Girls." Don't let the titles put you off.

Side one is "Heavenly Music" recorded in 1972 featuring Fripp on a Gibson Les Paul modified by his own electronics, aided by Eno operating two modified Revox A77 tape recorders. The sound is of heavy bass chording over which Fripp's guitar soars and swoops. "Swastika Girls" employs a repetitive technique, with Fripp on Les Paul and Eno playing a VCS3 synthesizer with digital sequencer, and operating a modified Revox A77 tape recorder. The keyboards and guitar create a metallic, swirling sound, continuing hypnotically until Fripp's guitar enters to provide contrasts and release from the tension of the repetition. Eno's compositions rely on rhythm, abstract analysis and mathematical calculations, and have a strange, other-worldly beauty.

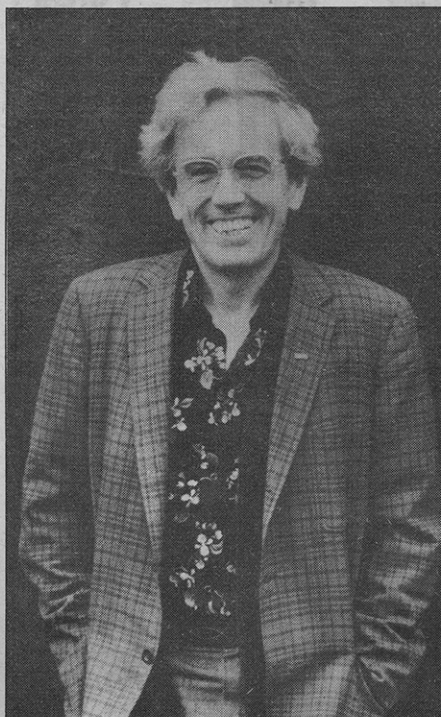
A surprising number of arts-related record companies have sprung up with the purpose of presenting new music that might otherwise never be heard, the progressive inclinations of major record companies being what they are.

Obscure Records, founded by artist-composer Brian Eno, is one well worth hunting for. Featuring works by Gavin Bryars, Eno, John Cage, Michael Nyman and others, obscure has re-released its entire catalog — seven lps — and includes one new release Harold Budd's *The Pavilion of Dreams*.

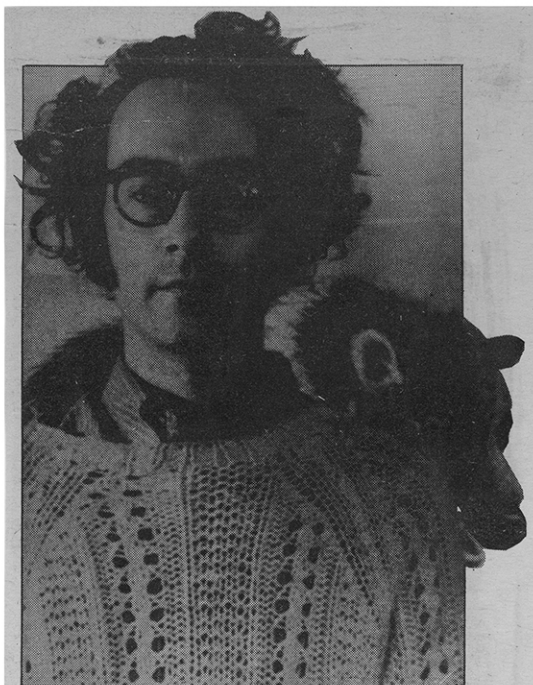
The group called Mother Mallard's Portable Masterpiece Company had to resort to forming their own



Terry Riley



Robert Ashley



David Behrman

record label, Earthquack Records. After being turned down by several major record companies because they weren't commercial enough, they felt by owning their own company they could have total artistic control over the way their music should be heard. They have two releases. *Mother Mallard's Portable Masterpiece Company* (EQ 0001) and *Like a Duck to Water* (EQ 0002). Both are exceptional works in synthesizer art. Earthquack has a mail order service (write Earthquack, P.O. Box 842, Ithaca, N.Y. 14850) cutting out distribution problems.

Lovely Music is a new progressive record label that has music that will appeal to anyone. Based in New York, it was started by Mimi Johnson and Kermit Smith of Art Services, and features SoHo artists — some familiar, others unfamiliar — who have made their livings performing their "art" live.

So far they have released six stunning debut albums that should have a significant impact on people interested in the arts. Their purpose is to reach a large cross-section of the record buying public.

John Hassell's *Vernal Equinox* (LML 1021) is an approach to primitive jazz. Hassell plays trumpet and Fender Rhodes accompanied by various percussive instruments (congas, shakers, talking drum, mbira, bells etc.). The result is an exotic blend of dark and moody African rhythms in a jazz setting, played in an unusual way.

Meredith Monk's *Key* is the most adventurous of the six releases. Conceived as a whole, it is meant to be played from beginning to end, side one and two consecutively. Monk, along with the voices of David Ira Sverdik, Dick Higgins, Lanny Harrison, Mark

Monstermaker and Colin Walcott performs what she terms invisible theatre. The voices are strange, as if appearing from nowhere; they have no identity per se and the invisible theatre works well on record. Recorded live in various lofts and studios, the voices and instruments (electric organ and Jew's harp) are also effective in a natural setting.

Robert Ashley's *Private Parts* (LML 1001) is a personal favorite. He recites two stories which can be followed for what they say or for how they sound, without paying attention to the words. Ashley's voice is sensual yet transparent, allowing the listener to concentrate on the dreamy music that goes with and against him.

David Behrman's *On the Other Ocean* (LML 1041) is an album of very relaxed, ethereal electronic and acoustic sounds. Side one, the title work, features David Behrman: electronics, Maggie Payne: flute, Arthur Stidfole: bassoon and Kim 1: (a computer) harmonic changes. Side two "Figure in a Clearing" features Behrman and Kim 1, with David Gibson on cello. The amazing thing about this album is that Kim 1, a microcomputer, is programmed to sense order and timing in which the pitches are played. It reacts and harmonizes with the other players. "On the Other Ocean" is reminiscent of Fripp and Eno ventures and it also has the tranquillity of Eno's "Discreet Music." It is recorded live.

Blue "Gene" *Tyranny* (LML 1061) is the most commercially appealing of the six Lovely Music records. Blue Gene plays synthesizers and a multitude of keyboard instruments and is also featured on other Lovely Music recordings. Side two is the more interesting of the two, blending narration, singing and instruments into a distinctive sound.

Lovely Music is distributed through Jem Records and available at discriminating record stores.