

MIMI JOHNSON IS LOVELY

Interview by J. Dean Kuipers

Mimi Johnson co-founded Performing Artservices with Jane Yockel in 1971 to provide non-profit management services for the swelling ranks of New York experimental musicians, dance troupes, and theater companies; among them were composers John Cage, David Behrman, Gordon Mumma, and others she met while working for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. In 1978 she created Lovely Music, because these same composers make the music that she wants to listen to—over and over. Devotees on the cutting edge of what she calls “serious” music—meaning composed, multitextural work—have supported her tastes and her label: the Lovely Music discography now includes over 27 composers and 58 titles, as well as a few essential video recordings.

EAR: Give me a profile, if that’s possible, of a Lovely artist.

MIMI JOHNSON: It’s a composer who works in composition, more than in improvisation, in the widest sense of the term composition, meaning that it might be electronic composition, but it’s composed music. It’s a person who is already somewhat known in the circles.

EAR: How so?

MJ: They’re established enough so that I’ve heard their music in concert several times. They tend to not be real young. I become interested in people after I’ve known them and their work for a while. As for a profile, it can be a man, it can be a woman, it can be blue, it can be green. For me, the person is doing composition and usually I become involved in some subtext to the music, some meaning I hear underneath that isn’t necessarily purely musical, but some other idea.

EAR: How does someone approach you to do a recording? Or do you approach them?

MJ: It happens both ways. It started off in 1978 with six composers whom I knew and asked if they would make recordings for me. That was Bob Ashley, David Behrman, Peter Gordon, Meredith Monk, John Hassell, and Blue Gene Tyranny. Those six said they were ready to go, and they all had access to studios and could actually produce a tape. I mean, there are a lot of very interesting people who might not be in a situation where they can record. At that point a lot of people were using the studio out at Mills College. Bob and David were both working there, and Blue Gene was there as well. I knew them all because I’d been working at Performing Artservices, managing music people and music projects, so I was interested in composers in general. Gradually, through one of them, I might meet someone else and become interested in someone else’s music. It’s like anything else; David Behrman thinks Fast Forward is wonderful and Rhys Chatham is wonderful and as it is I haven’t recorded either one, but I’d like to. Bob Ashley taught me about Roger Reynolds’ music, which is actually very different from a lot of the other music.

It took me a while, listening to it, to hear it. In other words, it goes from one composer to another. Most of them know each other, I think.

EAR: Do you consider Lovely Music a service?

MJ: No, it’s very personal. It’s important to me; I don’t consider myself as doing a service. Artservices was a service organization, but that’s not Lovely Music. I don’t feel I have to justify my choice of composers to anybody. My tastes are leading me to stay in a certain thing and not leading me to compete with, say, Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson.

EAR: Why is it important to you that Lovely keep producing albums of this music?

MJ: I don’t know, I can’t seem to give it up. It’s an obsession with me. I like music. I like composers. And now I’m stuck with it, after ten years. It’s just something I do with my life.

EAR: Are you a musician?

MJ: No, I’m not a musician, I am a Lovely Music. Just as they can’t stop composing, I’ve got myself into this situation where I can’t stop recording it.

EAR: What are your own musical roots? How did you become interested in music like Robert Ashley’s, for example?

MJ: An interesting question and extremely simple to answer. I grew up in the Midwest, in Illinois; beyond a couple of piano lessons and going to the Knox Galesburg Symphony Orchestra with my mom, and going to college [in Colorado Springs] and listening to pop music through the Beatles era, I really don’t think I heard any serious contemporary music until I was over 21 and I was living in France. I used to go to the Domaine Musicale and I remember going to a Stockhausen retrospective. I was just completely blown away. It was so wonderful—completely new and fabulous. The deciding factor was that one summer, in 1970—I was living in Paris; I was an American; I spoke enough French—I got a job being a go-fer for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. They were doing a European tour. There I was; I met and worked with John Cage, David Behrman, Gordon Mumma and David Tudor. These were the first composers I ever actually knew. They were actually human beings, they ate in the same restaurants I did, they had a good time, they liked to go out and have a drink in the bar. They were the first human beings that I knew who made music as their whole life. It had never occurred to me before that I would know musicians. I knew that I would know some visual artists, but not that I would know composers who composed music for a living. When I went to the Knox Galesburg Symphony Orchestra, well, it was always a combination of the college and the community and they would bring in soloists. I enjoyed it, but I remember watching them turn the pages and thinking, “Oh, just one more page.” I don’t mean that I hated it; I guess practice makes perfect there, too.

EAR: Do only musicians concern themselves with recording new music, or has the interest grown to where major labels are seeking out these artists?

MJ: I think it has. I was recently reading an article where I learned that some of the major labels have decided that there is a modest space in their catalogues for new music. They have found that people want to buy it, though not on the scale of their blockbusters. Their tendency is to focus on the recording artist, rather than the composer, you know, to focus on Murray Perahia or somebody else; they sign him and he decides to perform the works of Beethoven or Brahms, etc.

EAR: Lovely doesn’t work that way?

MJ: No, I tend to go for the composer and let them decide which pieces to record. I don’t want to sell the performer. I want to work with the composer.

EAR: What will happen to independent labels as the majors move in?

MJ: I think it’s better for us. If the major labels were to really start issuing recordings similar to Lovely Music or to New Albion or to what 1750 Arch used to do, I think that it would only help us sell more recordings. I’ve noticed that when an artist on

Lovely—John Hassell, for example—has recorded on Island Records, that it makes more of our records sell. So I’d be thrilled if they tried to steal away some of our artists. [laughs]

EAR: Considering the personal nature of your contact with these composers and their work, there’s really no threat, is there?

MJ: No. I want the composer to be widely known, because that gets more records out. The more labels that are doing our artists, the more every one of them will sell. The market is so big and so untapped, really. I can’t imagine that anyone will be afraid of that at all.

EAR: How do you know that something is “serious” music? What are your criteria?

MJ: In the 1960s and 1970s, when I first paid attention to music, new music meant exclusively what David or Bob would do. Then, gradually, the definition seemed to expand to include a more popular kind of music. It’s hard to use the term new music; it just doesn’t mean anything anymore.

Serious is sort of a bad word as well; maybe the most useful is, well, what do people use? Is it “concert” music? Something like that. Serious music, for me, can encompass anything from computer composition to writing notes on paper.

EAR: About those meanings or subtexts that you mentioned earlier: much recorded work in which verbal patterns and language are employed as music seem to be tearing apart the logic and meaning of speech. Are these composers deconstructing meanings or creating new ones?

MJ: I don’t actually know how to define the literary meaning of deconstruction; I haven’t kept up with the theory behind these things. The music doesn’t necessarily have to have words, for me, although there may be a text. I hear as much text in Maggi Payne’s record, with its electronic swells, as I do in Bob Ashley or in Peter Gordon’s, both of whom might use words. So the subtext to which I’m referring, the meaning, doesn’t need to be verbal. For example, with Bob’s work, with all those verbal pieces, they are very intricate and complicated, although on the surface they’re just words. What begins to intrigue one after a while is that there’s sort of a puzzle of interrelated events within the work and that is brought out with the music, too. So you have to listen many times in order to figure out what is going on. That’s the part of language I’m interested in—not just pure A to B, Dick sees Jane and they go to the park. It’s a poetic meaning.

EAR: Does Lovely focus at all upon performance art or music composed primarily for live, improvisational performance?

MJ: I don’t decide to record live performances, but it has been done here. We’ve done it as a composer’s choice. David Tudor’s, I think, was done live; Bob’s *Atalanta*, the big record set, was recorded live. Everybody asks, “Why was it sung in Italian?” It was only sung in Italian because it happened to be done in Rome. They made an effort so the Romans could understand it. There’s no explanation beyond that.

EAR: Is any serious music also performance art?

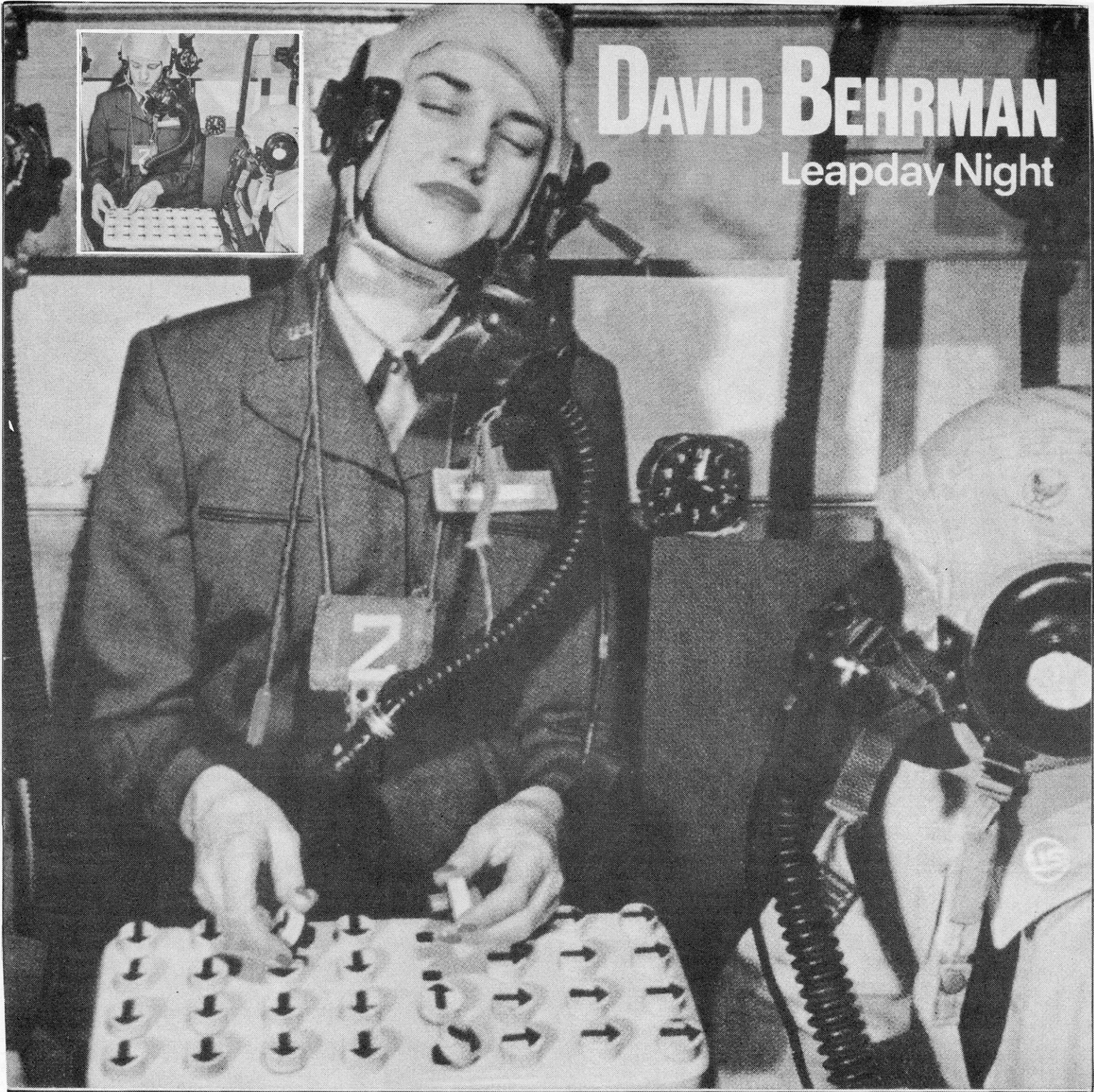
MJ: No. I don’t want to do performance art. Sometimes I wish it had never been dreamed up as an idea. It’s too all-encompassing. I’m not interested in recording sculptors who decide that they can also make sounds, for example. I want to record people who consider themselves primarily as composers and musicians. I don’t want the sound to be incidental to their art. It’s a fine line, admittedly. There are people who really do all things. You just know when people consider themselves first a composer and then a performer or sculptor. Alvin Lucier does installation pieces, but I know him well enough to know that he is a composer first.

EAR: Are these composers interesting to you because they’ve developed a musical idiom that sets them apart? How far is that supposed to carry the development of new music recordings?

MJ: I was thinking while walking over here today that there has been a gradual shift in my tastes as I have learned more about music. Stephen Monta-

DAVID BEHRMAN

Leapday Night



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gue uses a lot more traditional notation than David Behrman. So does Reynolds. So does William Duckworth. So my own horizons are expanding. But I don't think too much about defining what it is; it's just what I like. Given the fact that I became so attached to electronic means of making sounds, there has been a shift.

EAR: From what to what, in the Lovely catalogue?

MJ: I think that I shifted more from pure, unnotated electronic pieces to more notation. I think the result, for me, is similar, but I just learned about different ways of making music; therefore I'm interested in a wider group of people.

EAR: Are street sounds and ambient sounds—trucks and bells and screeching brakes—becoming a part of serious music?

MJ: That depends on who is listening, doesn't it? [laughs] I don't see why it can't be incorporated into serious music. We all know that John Cage does it. Blue Gene Tyranny does it quite a bit; he tends to tweak them a little bit, but the sounds are there. I think any source material is valid.

Look at Alvin Lucier—he's made an entire career out of sounds that exist in nature. I think they are a valid part of music if the sensibility presents them in the right way. It's just noise, but by the time Alvin fixes it or John presents it, I hear it in a different way. That's the role of the composer—to present the sound.

EAR: What does that do to our everyday sensibilities concerning noises around us? Does it change your daily walk down the street?

MJ: Well, no. To be absolutely truthful, I still think of it as noise when I walk out on the street. It is true that you can be in a state of mind, based on

whether you've had too much coffee or have stayed up all night, in which the sounds will bother you or they won't.

John's *Roaratorio* was performed last fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and it was just incredible. That piece involves a mix of prerecorded sound that was gathered all over the world; it's every sound that was mentioned in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He gathered recordings from outer space. I'm not a *Finnegans Wake* scholar, but apparently sound is mentioned in it a lot. It is one barrage of sound. If you were sitting in Dublin right now, you might hear those isolated sounds, like a baby crying, but you wouldn't hear them all at once. There are the sounds, in his piece, just as they existed, but they're thicker. I don't think that it's making my life better, as far as noises are concerned, or that I'm happier listening to sounds outside.

EAR: What's next for the Lovely Music catalogue?

MJ: I keep getting delayed on the Roscoe Mitchell recording, but that will come out eventually. After that? I'm working on finishing three right now, without anything really waiting in the wings. We—I say "we" but I really mean me—decided to issue some video tapes. I'm going to make them available to colleges and universities; libraries are going to buy them. I don't think I can handle producing really cheap video tapes. There just aren't any existing now among these composers, and it's not something I want to learn how to do. I'd like to do a recording of Fast Forward's music. He works with steel drums; it's loud and percussive and you might say it sounds pretty minimal—maximal/minimal. And pretty good.

EAR: I'm beginning to think that it has to be, in order to become part of Lovely Music.

MJ: Loud? [laughs]

EAR: No, good.

MJ: Yeah. When we have our funding together we're going to do a composer named Annea Lockwood. She has a piece called *A Map of the Hudson River*. That ought to be a lot more quiet. Those are two things I'm thinking about. I haven't actually started them yet, but they're in my mind.

EAR: Who are you going to see in concert in the upcoming weeks?

MJ: I am going to go to Frankfurt to see John Cage's opera, his first opera. It's called *Europas One and Two* and it opens November 15. That's going to be thrilling. He's 75 years old and this is his first; it's about time somebody put it on.

EAR: If you had to choose an animal, a color, and a logo for Lovely Music, what would they be?

MJ: Haven't you seen our camel? You have to notice; it's an extremely ugly camel. It's just an accident that we have this camel. The color simply looks good on the black vinyl. That day we liked the brown; maybe we'll change it. I put an ad in the New York Review of Books, and wrote it in their style; the ad goes back a long way. The ad mentioned a camel, so our designer found us this camel. He's a very friendly camel, don't you think? Sort of serious, sort of intellectual.

For a catalog or information, contact:

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