Tape Beatles plunder a media-mad culture; overwhelming realism from Bob Ostertag

IMPORTS

by Paul Ashby

Who is (are?) the Tape Beatles? When will the Apple Corps' voracious hordes of litigators go after the shadowy Iowa City collective for its use of the fab four's sacred name? How do the Tape Beatles summon the patience to listen to, sample and edit together such overwhelming amounts of culture? Their CD, Music With Sound (DOVentertainment/Canada), isn't going to explain away any of the above. But the liner notes do clarify some of the motivation behind the staggering assemblages of media soundbites, appropriated rhythms and bits of music that make up this 31-track CD: "... the result of a concentrated effort by a dedicated group of world-renowned cultural embezzlers. These aural scientists document an effort which represents the time-consuming and painstaking recuperation of a moment in our strange lives." The Tape Beatles' "publishing" company is called Plagiarism Productions. But Music With Sound is not copyrighted; the credits state "share rights extended to all. This work is in the public domain." One wonders if these people have anything to do with John Oswald, the Canadian cultural terrorist/sampler whose liberties with Michael Jackson's music and image on the Plunderphonics CD raised the ire of the Gloved One's lawyers last year. If you like your social commentary high-tech and postmodern—Negativeland's wry slice-and-dice/mix-and-match collages come to mind—the Tape Beatles may be what you're looking for to annoy your pets and drive your roommates batty. I haven't heard anything this irritating since the infuriatingly abrupt TV/radio cut-ups of Orchid Spangiafora's willfully obscure TwinTone label debut, Flee Past Ape Elf. That sound you hear is your attention span begging for some adult-contemporary wallpaper music.

Bob Ostertag's latest release, Sooner or Later (RecRec/Switzerland), is an eerie and sobering CD composed from a field recording of a young Salvadoran child burying his father, who had been killed by El Salvador's National Guard. Over sounds of buzzing flies and a shovel, the child (speaking in Spanish) says, sobbing: "Sweet Papa, Bastards! Seeing my father, I feel like I have a bullet in my heart, compañero. I'd rather die for a just cause, compañero, than end up a thief. My father told me... he was a fighter... a fighter for our people. He told me not to be a good-for-nothing, that I should be creative and brave until the final victory of those who survive. Ay, sooner or later I will avenge his blood."

Ostertag recorded the scene and sampled it into his Ensoniq EPS, then "reanimated" the event (via digital editing) by electronically treating the various segments of sound and rearranging the results into different sequential compositions. In part two of the disc, additional sounds are overlaid by the processed and sampled guitar of Fred Frith. The technological implications of the piece are dwarfed by the emotional enormity of the boy's grief; it's very hard to get through the entire 43 minutes of the CD without some goosebumps, if not tears. From Ostertag's liner notes: "There is a boy and his father is dead. And no angels sang and no one was better because of it and all that is left is this kid and the shovel digging the grave and the fly buzzing in the air. If there is beauty, we must find it in what is really there: the boy, the shovel, the fly. If we look closely, despite the unbearable sadness, we will discover it."

Paul Ashby buys titles like the above for Tower's import/indie distributor TRIP and would like to know if anyone has a spare Plunderphonics CD they'd like to trade for a tape of Orchid Spangiafora Plays Perry Kingsley?