

**BOB OSTERTAG,
ATTENTION SPAN,
Ⓢ REC 33/RIFF 14.**

Slam Dunk / *Sleepless*. 43:16.

*Ostertag, digital sampler, playing samples of: John Zorn, as;
+Fred Frith, et al; +Ostertag playing Frith samples. *Oakland,
CA 12/89; +NYC, 9/89.

**BOB OSTERTAG,
SOONER OR LATER,
Ⓢ REC 37.**

Part One / *Part Two*. 43:37.

Ostertag, digital sampler, playing samples of: Chaquito, vcl,
and +Fred Frith, et al. San Francisco, 1-6/90.

Improvising musicians have always taken a utilitarian approach to new technology. Without it, they'd never have gotten as far as using one-string fiddles, let alone pianos and saxes. The keyboard sampler – on which, as you know, you record a (usually short) bit of sound, then have the freedom to play it across the several octaves of a keyboard, forwards or backwards or in a repeating loop – is so seductively useful, musicians have taken to it quickly. Of course, some folks have philosophical qualms. Like it or not, the sampler is parasitic – a mimic with no voice of its own. Some musicians hate to be sampled, hate to play with keyboard players who appropriate their sounds.

There are two schools of keyboard sampling. (We're not talking about the other kind of sampling: looping bits of old pop and other stuff to back rap records.) You can "pass" for another instrument, if you know how to manipulate a clean sample in ways natural to the original instrument. Hear for example David Weinstein's artful phantom trombone and other ear-fooling mirages on Zorn's *Spillane* (3/88, p.63).

The other approach is the digital descendant of painstaking spliced-tape *musique concrete*, which stressed artificial sonorities even where the source material was easy to identify. Bob Ostertag, involved in creative electronic music since the '70s, mines that tradition on *Attention Span*. For "Slam Dunk," he plays samples taken from recordings of John Zorn's alto, and improvises with them live at the keyboard. Zorn's style is choppy already, but not in quite the same way Ostertag's 26 miniatures in 23 minutes are. (For contrast, one segment is 14 seconds of straight alto, all or part of the source material.) Overall, these pieces aren't saxophonistic anymore. They're congested, jumbled, jumpy. At times he gets effects strikingly reminiscent to the old *concrete* style itself.

For the six-track, 20-minute "Sleepless" on the same CD, guitarist Fred Frith plays along with Ostertag playing Frith samples. The plastic sound of new-music electric guitar is ideal for the set-up. Fred's style, with its distorted long notes and tumbling dissonant chords, inspires Ostertag's blend of *concrete* and mirage approaches. There are times when you're clearly listening to not-a-guitar, times when guitar and replicated sound are hard to sort out.

The half-hour first part of *Sooner or Later* begins with a harrowing 44-second excerpt of "a young Salvadoran boy burying his father, who had been killed by El Salvador's National Guard," Ostertag explains. Chaquito is crying, mourning, vowing to carry on the fight, to avenge his father sooner or later. "There is the sound of the boy's voice, a fly buzzing nearby, and the shovel digging the grave." In contrast with *Attention Span*, this source is less

radically transformed. There's some intensive multiplying and phasing of voice and shovel, slices looped and deployed in five or ten second sections. Weeping is abstracted but not disguised, and the sonic vignettes never move far from the sound of escaping breath, anguished voice, metal breaking earth. Chaquito's task is Sisyphean, his hate perpetual, profoundly disturbing. The endlessness of his nightmare is the point – truly powerful political art is rare, but this is some. The effect is mitigated/muted on the half-as-long part two, where a droning Frith sample enters the mix. It's busier, faster, more distant and merciful, more "musical" and less affecting.

Kevin Whitehead

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