

# Stop The Osterizer, I Want To Get In

BY DERK RICHARDSON

ONE WAY to think about music is to consider the tensions between supposedly opposing tendencies, such as the urge to slow things down (acid rock, grunge) and the compulsion to speed things up (disco, punk, techno). You can dream up and play with dichotomies until you can't even hear the music anymore: harmonious/dissonant, loud/soft, cerebral/visceral, mechanical/soulful, corporate/alternative. No single quality can exist independently of its mate, of course, but that doesn't stop many musicians from emphasizing one side of the equation.

Sometimes the results are exquisite (the unity in Phil Spector's "wall of sound"), and sometimes they're like an annoying rash (banal New Age noodlings).

There are several reasons to think that we are in an era of deceleration: from sludgy rock tempos and Neil Young's harvest of nostalgia to Arrested Development's rural hip hop gait, the phenomenon of Gorecki's Symphony No. 3 hanging in the Top Ten of England's pop chart, and even the way techno's six zillion beats per minute can work to entrance ravers into a more intense involvement in the moment. Least interesting might be the case in which a musician simply puts on the brakes: a keyboardist named Morgan Fisher has recorded *Echoes of Lennon*, taking "Mind Games," "Jealous Guy," "Give Peace a Chance," "Imagine," and other songs to the brink of a total work stoppage. John disappears almost completely in the exaggerated spaces between the notes. (Liz Story fared deliciously, however, with ultra-deliberate piano-bass readings of jazz standards on *My Foolish Heart*.)

we don't ordinarily notice. Different sections of his two extended pieces, the epic four-part title composition and the 13-minute-plus "Snow On Water/Smoke On Snow," toss up sounds we think we've heard before — Chain saws? Alarms? A squeaky pump? Conway Twitty singing "I'll Get Over Losing You," Fred Frith's electric guitar, "queer riot in San Francisco, October, 1991" — and make us reconsider them from many angles, above all as music.

Ostertag's strategies range somewhere between those of John Cage, academic computer musicians, brutally expressive free improvisers, and Che Guevara. His first RecDec CD, *Attention Span*, manipulated the sampled music of John Zorn and Fred Frith; 1991's *Sooner Or Later* was developed from Ostertag's recording of a young Salvadoran boy burying his father. His composition "All the Rage," commissioned and performed by Kronos Quartet, is a sound track from and to the AIDS epidemic.

shoot  
 fights

With entrance into Ostertag's world comes a severe attitude adjustment. You have to curb your brain, dump your "common sense" judgments, and peel away the calluses that have built up over the vulnerable core of your senses. An angry crowd becomes an inspirational chorus. "Found sounds" become sections of the symphony. Listening becomes cultural time travel at warp speed. Time, however, jumps off the linear tracks. You have to accept both the simultaneity of your feelings and your hapless inability to control them.

Scary stuff. But nothing foreign to the visionary consciousness of childhood — that awareness characterized by unmediated concentration, unfettered by the scrutiny of parents; that state where the notion "don't mind them" becomes a mobile on which to hang a variety of different meanings. Do children naturally tolerate the coexistence of opposites and the fact that the "natural order" of things isn't necessarily symmetrical?

I was on the verge of dismissing folksinger Ferron's new instrumental album as a failed New Age attempt at musical meditation on a Korg synthesizer, when something made me hear *Resting With the Question* (Cherrywood) as Ferron in the process of slowing herself down rather than just tampering with musical tempos. You can hear melodic resonances of her earlier songs, but they move in a slo-mo dream as Ferron spreads out her emotions like creamy peanut butter on fresh white bread, with smooth, languid strokes so that the soft, air-fluffed dough doesn't ball up and tear apart.

By almost any measure, electronic music composer/improviser Bob Ostertag is an extreme radical when it comes to slowing stuff down. His raw material is the world. He digs his trowel into the wet cement of everyday life, where nothing is really permanently set, anyway, and plasters it in impressionistic smears and pointillistic dabs across the walls of our perception. On his new CD, *Burns Like Fire*, he recreates juxtapositions and situations that may already exist in our everyday world but that

Listening to Ostertag can be like looking at an aged oak. It's as if the same force that turns gnarly bark, twisted trunk, and random, crooked branch patterns into a perfect, beautiful tree is transforming these coarse and ostensibly unrelated sampled sounds into music. The "music-ness" of Ostertag's work is no less than the "tree-ness" of the oak; we're just trained not to hear it.

On Friday, March 19, Ostertag and fellow computer-assisted manipulator Donald Swearingen will perform as part of the Zero-in-Time weekend presented by Life On the Water, Cobra Lounge, Melt-O-Media, and New Music Theatre. Alvin Curran and Chris Brown, from the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music, will follow on Saturday, March 20, with piano and interactive electronics. Both concerts take place at Life On the Water, Fort Mason Center, Bldg. B, SF, (415) 776-8999. From downtown San Francisco, head toward the Golden Gate Bridge; from anywhere else, just slow down. ●