Sianed Jones in Mongolia

PLUS:
Bob Ostertag
Nicolas Collins
John Stevens
The Scratch Orchestra
Main Music Agenda

AND REVIEWS OF:
Rhys Chatham
Lee Ranaldo
Tony Conrad
Victoriaville
All the News That's Fit to Sample

Bob Ostertag talks to Phil England

Early years
I played guitar, dropped it early on. I started getting more and more devices for it and pretty soon the devices became more interesting than the guitar. Before samplers came out I did various things. I bought a mellotron and tried to make my own tapes, very hard to do because the tapes were 3/8ths of an inch wide. So I tried shaving 1/8 of an inch of a half inch tape - it's hard to do!

I had a collection of little cassette players that screwed up sounds in various ways. I'd make them do various things they weren't supposed to do. One had a variable speed in it, one I had just taken a hammer and knocked the heads out of alignment so that they were precisely antimulling the tracks. Halfway through you recorded something you could flick it over and play it backwards. I also had a whole pile of looped cassettes from answering machines, each of different length - it was sort of a primitive sampling system.

In high school I was a big fan of the electric Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix. Then I learned about more avant-garde music, John Cage, and all the early tape music people, Steve Reich's early tape pieces, Varése.

I went to a music conservatory for two years. At the end of the second year Anthony Braxton taught a seminar and afterwards he asked me to go on tour with him (Creative Music Orchestra, 1978). That was the end of school for me! (laughs) I hated the place.

Getting a Head (1980)
It's a pretty cranky system. It had three reel-to-reel tape recorders, with the tape running off the first one through the second onto the third. The middle one was vari-speed (I could slow it to a stop or increase it to twice the speed).

Say you have Fred Frith out here with a guitar, you can create two loops and with a mixer decide where to send the output. You can set it up so that something is being recorded at one speed and played back at another. By controlling the gain on the feedback you can control how long the sounds stay in the loop. Helium balloons (I would try and get Mickey Mouse, or happy birthday balloons) take up the spare tape and maintain a constant tension. You can create a situation where a single note can split and it would keep splitting until the whole audio spectrum is filled with that note. And then it would go so high that it would be out of your hearing range. It would still be recording but it would be distorting (because tape recorders aren't designed to record at that frequency), so that when you reversed the speed and brought it back it would be all mangled up.

Voice of America (1992)
That's sort of a snapshot of a particular moment in history. The first side is an improvised duet with Fred Frith. Recorded the weekend Reagan was inaugurated. It was a pretty horrible time to be in the United States. When he first got into power it was such a shock. This really bad film star. It was also the same weekend that the American hostages came back from Tehran, so there was this big patriotic outburst that was really gross. And it was also the weekend of one of the biggest football matches in the United States, the Superbowl. So without telling Fred I spent the whole weekend just recording things off the TV. Then I mixed it with some tapes I'd been collecting from Latin America.

The second side was recorded in London. It was the last concert I did for almost ten years. At that point I'd already begun to lose interest in music and my synthesiser blew up at the concert when the tech man plugged it right into the 220 volt line and it was designed to run on 110. So we grabbed Phil out of the audience - it was the first time I'd ever met him. I just had my cassette players, some contact microphones and some toy microphones. I didn't do another concert until 1988.

Politics and music
I'd been getting more and more interested in politics and putting more and more politics into the music. In the late 1970s in the United States that was very unhip to do. It was very unfashionable. Very unfashionable - guaranteed to get you the cold shoulder.

It's funny, after eight years I come back to music and it's changed completely. Because Reagan and then Bush cut the amount of money the Government gave to arts each year, so finally after eight years of it musicians decided they ought to write music about politics (laughs). Which is nice, I'm glad it's a fashionable thing again. But it certainly wasn't back then. So I felt like my musical interests and my political interests were pulling me in different directions. I just decided to do one, not the other.

Central America
I was an activist and an organiser for several years with The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador - a US group which supported the guerrillas in El Salvador. At the time it became the biggest Left group in the United States, as there wasn't much of a Left in the United States at the time. At our peak we had local committees in 300 cities. At first I travelled all around the United States helping organise these committees and keeping them going and then I
started going back and forth to El Salvador, doing different kinds of work and then working more in El Salvador — and then just leaving that group (I got kicked out - I was too maverick in my thinking) and being a journalist.

As a journalist and expert on the region
I wrote for just about anything I could. It ranged from mainstream newspapers in the United States (the Cleveland Plain Dealer or the San Francisco Examiner) and I wrote for the Guardian, I wrote for theoretical leftist journals around the world in South Africa, Puerto Rico, Peru, the Philippines, all over.

To be or not to be a Central American revolutionary
After so many years, for people who were Europeans or from the United States or Canada who were working with the Left in Central America, you always came to a point where you really had to decide what you were going to do with your life. You'd work at it and you'd work at it and you'd get into it so far, it's like OK; you have to decide are you really gonna sort of become a Central American revolutionary, which means you can just forget about everything else, because that means you have to make a commitment that is of the same kind that all the Central Americans make. And if you're gonna do that, that means you're just gonna leave your own culture behind and just immerse yourself in that. And I have friends who did that.

It's kind of a personal choice, you know, is this what you're really gonna do? You get to a point where you've been there long enough that you really understand a lot more of what's happening than you did when you first got there and you start to have strong opinions about what should be done and what shouldn't be done; and you feel like voicing those opinions, but why should anybody listen to you unless you've made the same commitment to the struggle that everybody else has? So you come to a point where there's a real gut check and you have to think about really what do you want to do. And I have friends who basically became Central American and they're completely integrated into the Central American Left and they've basically lost track of North American Culture. And I got to the point and I decided, no, Western Culture or Northern Culture matters to me and music matters to me and there's other things in my life that matters to me; and I don't think I'll ever really be a Salvadorean and I'd seen too many people die and I was having more and more differences with the Left, my ideas were always in the minority, always the minority position in the Left and it's hard to be in a minority position in an underground clandestine movement - (laughs) even if you're a Salvadorean it's hard but if you're an American (laughs) it's really hard! (more laughs). And so at a certain point I'm gonna go back and play music again, that's what I really want to do. So that's what I did.

Back into music
I had to learn about technology all over again 'cos I hadn't followed it at all. I didn't know what MIDI stood for, I'd never heard of a sampler, I really hadn't paid attention to music at all. I just came back and started looking around and it seemed like synthesizers had got much more boring. Even though the technology began to get more and more sophisticated, what you could do with a commercially bought off-the-shelf device was less and less interesting. Samplers took tape music and just blew it wide open. All of a sudden you could do all of these things that were just dreams ten years before.

It's also a way for me to combine journalism and music and make

**BOB OSTERTAG**
All The Rage
(ELEKTRA NONESUCH
7559 79332-2 CD)
Kronos Quartet & Eric Gipton (narration)
The string quartet is traditionally the medium for musical intimacy; in the hands of Bob Ostertag and the Kronos Quartet it has become a dangerous instrument for change. In response to a Kronos commission, Ostertag has taken as his raw material not just the possibilities presented by the string quartet, but those of a recording he made during a San Francisco riot in October 1991, following governor Pete Wilson's veto of a bill designed to protect lesbians and gays from discrimination, and of a text by Sara Miles which examines aspects of discrimination experienced by gays and lesbians, from the word 'queer' overheard in passing to brutal assault and murder.

'All The Rage' derives is coherence and strength from Ostertag's judicious use of these elements. Gipton's voice, closely miked to suggest intimacy, opens the piece and is soon joined by a cello line running parallel to the cadences of the narrative. When the words describe appalling, explicit violence against gays the quartet spits
my own thing out of it. It’s not important to me that all my music has some political thing to it. There’s lots of music to be made.

Ensoniq EPS
It’s set up more for improvising, I think, than a lot of machines. I just looked for something that allowed me to manipulate in real time in as many ways as I could. Most of them are just designed to play things back and they compete with each other over fidelity of playback. To me, getting the absolute nth degree of fidelity out of a machine is not nearly as interesting as what I can do with it.

There’s a lot of little tricks you can do. You can move a window around on a sample and change the direction of playback. I do a lot of things with phase shifting. Phase shifters which guitarists buy do this in a very pre-programmed, pre-set sort of way, but with a sampler you can make different copies of the sound and by forcing some sharp and some flat in some very subtle, small ways you can actually improvise with the phasing of the sound. And since phasing is how your ear locates sound in space, the difference in time between a sound gets to one ear and then the other is how you locate where it came from. So all the panning I do isn’t really panning, it’s all just phase shifts between different copies of the sound coming out of different speakers.

Each piece has its own little set of tricks.

Attention Span (1990)
I took John Zorn into a studio and said, OK, get out your alto saxophone and make every noise you can make. I sort of took an inventory of his noises, prepared them a bit, edited them a bit and made a solo improvisation with them. With Fred Firth I did the same thing except then he came back into the studio and we did duos except I was using material that I had prepared from his sounds. So the idea was sort of to use the technology to distort traditional relationships and make people hear their music in a different way. So the Zorn piece in a way is a solo because I’m playing it by myself but in another way it’s a duo ‘cos I’m using John’s material. The piece I’m doing with Fred is a duo since I’m playing with Fred but in another way it’s sort of a distorted solo with Fred playing with a mirror of himself. So one’s a solo that’s actually a duo and the other a duo that’s actually a solo and I wanted to play around with that.

Say No More (1993)
Phase One: It’s sort of Attention Span but done for a group. With Attention With this I took three musicians (Joey Baron, Mark Dresser, Phil Minton) and each one went into a recording studio separately, by himself with no instruction from me and improvised for about half an hour and mailed me the tape. Then I put the tapes together in a computer and made it into a band and really made it sound like a band. And we’re gonna release that as one CD.

Phase Two: Then I give the tape back to them and say OK learn to play this. It will be impossible and in the process it will become something else. Then we’ll play it live and record the concert. That’s the second CD. By then I’ll be in it and it’ll be a quartet.

Phase Three: I take the tape of the concert and chop it all up and make it into a new piece that’s the third CD.

Phase Four: Then they try to learn that and that’s the fourth one. So I’m hoping that it will be a four CD project. Joey can’t do the live work so Gerry Hemingway replaces him from the second CD onwards.

Making it sound like a band
I’m really excited about the project, I really like the music a lot. It’s very, very hard to do because they sent me tapes that had nothing to do with each other, I mean nothing at all. And I didn’t wanna just break ‘em down into individual sounds, I wanted to somehow respect the music that they did.

So this is a project I’ve worked on for already almost two years. And when they first sent me the tapes I worked on it for a while and then just put it on the shelf and said this is impossible, this is a stupid idea, it’ll never happen. Then I took it down a few months later and tried again and put it
back on the shelf. But then a few months later I took it down and finally figured out how to do it.

I tried to break down what they do into sort of their own language. I looked at it and said each one of these improvisers has a language. I’ll break it down into it’s smallest component parts like it’s words and then I’ll put them together in a way where they’re all talking to each other in a very tight conversation. But not down so far like it’s just generic drums. For example the drumming is not at all what Joey sent me on the tape. But if you know Joey’s drumming as soon as you hear that music you’ll say that’s Joey Baron on drums, it couldn’t be anybody else. And that’s what I wanted: to leave it theirs, but also make it mine.

There’s a danger that it’ll all sound ridiculous (laughter), I mean I have to do it right. There’s all kind of dangers (laughs). But I think there’ll be plenty of material, these are good players, when they play, things happen. So I don’t think I’ll have any shortage of material or ideas. Their vocabulary is very large.

All the Rage (1993)
- The Riot
It uses the same riot footage as

Burns Like Fire. It’s a riot that took place in San Francisco in October in (thinks) 1991. There’d been a law that had been in the works for ten years that would have made it illegal to discriminate against gay and lesbian people. The Governor of California vetoed it even though he had specifically promised to sign it in his election campaign – it was one of his platform things that he would sign the law. So we set fire to the Californian State Office building and I took a tape recorder and recorded it. Then there’s a text also, a spoken text written by Sarah Miles - it’s sort of a collage of her life experiences and mine and then the string quartet plays the riot - they play it quite literally, every time a window breaks, they play all the pitches in the sound of the glass

breaking - and they play it with the tape, right in sync with the tape.

Scoring the Riot
It’s all scored. Highly, highly detailed score, scored in a pretty unusual way. First I went through the tape and listened to all the sections of the riot and I said ‘what section sounds like music?’ Then I put it into my Ensoniq sampler and I would make an improvisation with that little section. Then I would record that section and put it into a computer. Then I would think, what is the most interesting part of this, what’s really interesting about this? Then I would use various kinds of filtering and equalisation devices to try and clear out everything except what I really liked. Then I would use frequency analysis software to have the computer pull out the pitches that were in the sounds - hard to do because the riot is very dense. Then at that point there’d be all this sound and I’d have all these frequencies but they were just sort of in space, they weren’t in any sort of musical time. So then I have to go through and listen to them and there’d be way too many, cos the riot was so dense I’d end up with all these pitches. So then
I'd just go through manually and start erasing some and moving some over a little bit and sort of shaping it 'til I had what I thought was a musical part. I listened to the parts and thought if I was going to play this what tempo would I be feeling, how would I be counting this part? I'd have to strip in a tempo map, cos the tempo changes all over the place, cos it was a riot nobody was counting a beat. So I made a map of all the tempo changes and the metre changes all most every measure and then stripped in cues to guide the quartet follow it, cos they don't have anything to guide them except listening to the tape. So for each member of the quartet on their parts there's two staffs - one is where I note what's happening on the tape and the bottom staff is their part.

Teaching Kronos
And then I spent a lot of time with the quartet teaching them how to hear the tape: Right, here the tempo changes - it gets faster - it goes from 1/4 note equals 100 to 1/4 note equals 168 and the way you get the new tempo is you listen to the woman scream and listen to the window break the time between them is a dotted 1/4 note: that's the new tempo. So they really have to listen to the tape in that way. It's a nice piece.

The text
I wanted people to be able to get inside the riot and I was worried that just the riot was such a barrage of sound that people would get the anger but they wouldn't really be able to identify with it. So I wanted a text that would be the thoughts of one person in the riot so that people would have a way of stepping inside.

My initial idea was to talk to people in the riot with my tape recorder but there were undercover cops everywhere filming and recording everything and it was really hard to explain to people in the middle of the riot that really I wasn't an undercover cop. I was a composer writing a string quartet (laughs) and that they should talk to me.

Playing with the tape
The riot stuff - I don't know of anything else like that. Usually when an ensemble plays with a tape there's a rhythm on the tape that's quite obvious that they can play with like Steve Reich's "Different Trains" for example. Or in some tape music, the live players use a click track with a headphone that gives them a click, so if the tempo isn't obvious from the tape they have a tempo in their ear. This is the only piece I know that they really have to play with the tape. And they really have to listen. They really have to be right with it. It's very hard. It's not so hard to do half way well but to do it right it's really hard (laughs).

Discography
Fall Mountain with Ned Rothenberg and Jim Katzin (Parachute, 1979)
Getting A Head (Rift, 1980)
Voice of America with Fred Frith and Phil Minton (Riff Records, 1982, reissued RecRec 1993)
Attention Span with Fred Frith and John Zorn (Rec Rec/Rift, 1990)
Sooner Or Later (Rec Rec, 1991)
Burns Like Fire (Rec Rec, 1992)
All The Rage performed by the Kronos Quartet and Eric Gumann (Nonesuch, 1993)
Say No More (Rec Rec 1993)