Bob Ostertag

Back in the mid-80s, San Francisco based experimentalist Bob Ostertag was using tape loops designed for telephone answering machines in conjunction with modified tape recorders. He also created an elaborate live processing system which involved running tape between three reel-to-reel tape recorders. Both innovations prefigured the advent of off-the-shelf sampling technology. 15 years later, Ostertag is working alongside engineers at Ensoniq and helping to develop new sound-morphing technology at the Centre for New Music and Audio Technology in Berkeley. In between, Bob was out of music, completely for eight years, working as a journalist in El Salvador, and his personal and political concerns still leak through when he uses documentary recordings as source material. For example, 1991’s Sooner Or Later “encases you in a moment” in the spirit of Steve Reich’s early tape pieces, using the highly charged material of a nine year old El Salvadoran boy burying his father. Another recording in the same series, Burns Like Fire, uses audio footage from a “queer” riot Bob participated in where the Californian State Office was set alight after the Governor had reneged on his election pledge to bring in legislation outlawing discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

Ostertag is now working on the final piece in what he describes as his “Grief, Rage, Joy” trilogy, using taped laughter. “I went to a prayer meeting in Silicon Valley of a new spiritual movement called Holy Laughter and made some recordings. They’re a charismatic Christian movement which, instead of speaking in tongues when they get the holy spirit, they laugh. And I have an amazing tape of a woman in a mental institution restrained by a straitjacket, as well as some recordings of my daughter laughing.”

This month sees the release of Verbatim, the third part of Bob Ostertag’s ongoing virtual group project Say No More, an alchemical mix of digital sampling and realtime improvisation. Bob made something of a conceptual leap when he decided to use Say No More’s concrete-style compositions as a score for the original improvisors to perform as a live ensemble. Many people have come unstuck trying to compose for improvisors, but Ostertag succeeds because he’s composing directly with their material. “My gripe with orthodox notation,” says Bob, “is that in order to describe the kind of unorthodox techniques and idiosyncratic vocabulary that are the heart and soul of this music you have to resort to such clumsy notation that you end up restricting everything that happens.”

Earlier this year Bob realised his first full theatrical project involving actors, film and lights: Spiral is based on the last text of artist and writer David Wojnarowicz, written while he was dying from AIDS. In the piece, Wojnarowicz talks about feeling as if he’s turning into glass, and the piece uses a set of specially constructed glass instruments: harp, marimba, bull-roarers. In a lighter vein, when John Zorn invited Ostertag to do something completely different for his Avant label, Bob created a celebratory, hard-edged dance record with six outrageous singers from San Francisco’s community of drag queens. He has also produced a CD by a local drag duo.

“I feel like drag isn’t getting its due,” says Ostertag. “There’s so much art now that has to do with appropriation and reconceptualisation. And drag is pretty much the original art of appropriation. Since effeminate gay men were ousted from traditional performance venues they created their own and took whatever images they found in popular culture and recreated them into what they wanted them to be. So it’s all been done in the drag community since the late 19th century.”

Trans Am

For a group at the forefront of the current rock/electronica interface, Trans Am are refreshingly down to earth. “When we get up on stage,” explains guitarist/keyboardsist Phil Manley, “the big deal to us is that we’re in the right frame of mind. We call it ‘maximum love vibe’. If we’re enjoying ourselves, then that helps the crowd enjoy themselves. I think a lot of bands get up on stage and forget about the crowd or pretend that they’re not there. But you got to play your cards right or...”

Or what? The ‘dancefloor’ empties, the virtual DJ’s mood-manipulation maximises having been foolishly ignored. If it seems like the members of Trans Am might be familiar with modern DJ culture, it’s because they are. In addition to keeping up with the latest in smartly-constructed bleeps ‘n’ bloops (Manley lists Autechre and Squarepusher as recent favourites), these Washington DC-area synth-rockers are also enamoured of Techno’s ability to change the context of music creation and performance. “I definitely like to play rock shows,” Manley admits, “but I also like the idea of anonymous performer sitting behind a bank of equipment where all you can see is their faces barely lit up by the LED lights.”

Perhaps it was Trans Am’s very rock-heavy formative years that indirectly spawned their collective interest in Technotronics. Having grown up with both the hedonistic riffage of decades-odl hard rock/Metal and the inescapable post-punk squall emanating from their own backyard, Manley and high school buddies Nathan Means (bass, keyboards) and Sebastian Thomson (drums, percussion) eventually found inspiration in the machine-pop of Kraftwerk — a discovery that not only paved the way for later positive Krautrock and Techno listening experiences, but, even more crucially, lent Trans Am a robotic man-machine aesthetic that proved to be essential as the band began integrating keyboards and drum machines into their interactive realtime dynamic.

PHIL ENGLAND Verbatim and Twines (with Osorno Yoshida) are released this month on Rastassan and Creative Man Discs respectively. Bob Ostertag performs with Phil Minton in London this month: see Soundings for details.