Bob Ostertag’s name is probably unfamiliar to most people. But if you know it, it could be from a number of contexts: as an improvising musician; a composer; or a journalist and activist. I first came across Ostertag’s work in the early 1980s, when he was involved in the avant-garde improvised music scene active mainly in New York and Europe. Ostertag collaborated with guitarist/composer Fred Frith and percussionist Charles K. Noyes on the wonderfully strange and inexplicable *Getting A Head* (1980) and with Frith and singer Phil Minton on *Voice of America* (1982). During the late 70s and early 80s Ostertag also performed with Anthony Braxton, Eugene Chadbourne and John Zorn as part of larger improvising ensembles. Ostertag stood out in this world because he performed using experimental electronic instruments and recording devices, while most of his colleagues played traditional instruments in unusual ways. He also stood out in introducing direct reference to contemporary politics through the use of found sounds on tape.

“Cheap rent, I learned, is more important to fostering a vital art scene than grants, galleries and so on.”

— Bob Ostertag

I lost track of Ostertag after *Voice of America*, only to be surprised by his appearance on stage with a sampler at the 1989 Victoriaville Music Festival, as part of Fred Frith’s Keep the Dog group. I was surprised again when he presented his multi-media *Balkan Suite* at Montréal’s Festival International: Nouveau
Cinema/Nouveau Medias in the fall of 2000, this time working with interactive digital video and a live performer as well as sound. In fact, Ostertag is full of surprises. As it turns out, he really did take a break from music-making for several years during the 1980s. Following a disastrous accident that destroyed his hand-made synthesizer, he temporarily abandoned music to concentrate all his energies on Latin American politics. The Sandinista movement in Nicaragua had recently overthrown a decades-old dictatorship, while El Salvador was mired in a protracted and extremely violent civil war. As Ostertag describes his feelings at the time, “What was the point of another little show at an obscure underground venue for a handful of in-the-know hipsters when death squads in El Salvador were murdering over two hundred people a day, American aid to the regime was ramping up, the revolutionary movement was gaining momentum by the day, and there was simply no time to lose?” He spent his years in Latin America as a journalist, occasionally returning to the US to lecture and do fundraising. Since his return to music, Ostertag has been very productive, and continues to refuse to repeat himself. He now frequently incorporates visual media into his performances (often in collaboration with Québécois animator Pierre Hébert), and with works like All the Rage (1993, a commission for the Kronos Quartet) and PantyChrist (1996/99, with Justin Bond and Otomo Yoshihide), he has brought avant-garde practice and queer politics together. He has also continued to write, notably as a blogger for The Huffington Post, coauthor of The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organiza-


“It is striking that the technology NATO used to bomb Yugoslavia is the same technology I use to make music, which is also the same technology used to make the computer games that simulate real-life wars.”

— Bob Ostertag

In his new book, Creative Life, Bob Ostertag describes the unique path he has followed, and tries to make the connections that are not always obvious or clear. Many of the texts that make up the book have been published elsewhere, but in the most divergent forums, ranging from Mother Jones to Musik-Texte, from The Wire to QuestionCopyright.org, so that bringing them together in a single volume is an important step for Ostertag in making clear the ideas and motivations behind his work. He acknowledges that the worlds he has inhabited, as a queer person, a political activist and an avant-garde musician, have often seemed entirely separate from one another, but he has frequently been able to bring them into productive contact with one another. One thing Ostertag is not afraid to do is to criticize his allies and colleagues: with bracing forthrightness, he calls out mainstream newspapers for the dishonesty of their “professional standards;” the avant-garde for its political indifference; mainstream gay culture for its dullness; the Sandinistas and FMLN for strategic blunders; and, in one memorable short essay, academic computer music for being “awful.”

“I have always thought the notion that there is such a thing as ‘gay art’ was ludicrous, and I have never been interested in being a ‘gay artist.’”

— Bob Ostertag

Creative Life contains personal histories; extended reports from Latin America; a journal of Ostertag’s tour of the Balkans with Yugoslavia Suite (an intense experience!); appreciations of artists James Magee and David Wojnarowicz; and essays on the intersections of experimental media, queer politics and technology — all rooted in the artist’s practice and experience. In some ways it’s a complicated, perhaps even messy book, but its intensity, clarity and directness are refreshingly tonic at a time when the art world often seems sunk to its neck in academicism, careerism and outright fraud. This book, and Ostertag’s practice, give one hope that there can still be such things as an “avant-garde,” and that people working in culture need not choose between art and political engagement.

Bob Ostertag has made all of his music to which he holds the rights available for free download on his website at http://bobostertag.com/music-recordings.htm.

Chris Gehman has been balding for several years, but has yet to achieve the rigorous baldness of Bob Ostertag.