AN AMERICAN SAMPLER

"The project will now go to phase three, in which I will blow this live recording into tiny bits and reassemble them into a new series of works on the computer. Then of course the band will learn those as well."

Bob Ostertag's band is feeling playful tonight.

We live in a world where Ted Turner sets the copyright cops on Salman Rushdie for citing the Flintstones's theme song without permission. And Thomas McEvilley suggests that we feel "an ethical resistance" to art based on quotation because it diminishes "the idea of Romantic creativity... and the idea of the

Phil Minton hunches in the shape of a Pompeii lava man and shrieks like Pavarotti raised by laryngitic wolves. Mark Dresser at the stand-up bass is unflappability itself while Gerry Hemingway slips from agile irritation to downright fury at his drum kit. The electronic background wash is suffering moodswings, maternal sweetness Soul."

But Bob Ostertag has taken an art of quotation and transformed it into an art of resistance: a scream of protest against the iron heel of the system, against the oppression of El Salvador, against the repression of gay rights in California, and against the silencing hand of censorship.
M2: Do the Burroughs/Gysin thoughts on cut-and-paste interest you or influence you?
Bob Ostertag: Well, my recorded stuff, it’s all about keeping stuff in context actually. Taking the recording of a Salvadoran boy and just letting it be a recording of a Salvadoran boy by using the sampling to get inside the sound and really encase you in a moment. The same with the riot things I did, Burns Like Fire and All the Rage. I have two lines I’m working on now with sampling. One is this documentary stuff. The other is collaborating with instrumentalists which is an interesting way to think about improvising. It’s a way to use technology to blur the boundaries between improvising and composing. Say No More was about taking a musician and setting him down in front of a mirror of himself. A twisted mirror, one that’s bent out of shape a bit. Hearing instead of playing in a new way.

M2: Improvisation as the hot line to God. The engine does the devil’s mopping up chore. You’re transgressing those boundaries—what’s going on here?
Bob: Those kind of distinctions don’t enter into it. With Say No More there were three main ideas. One was to find a way to write music for an ensemble that could use idiosyncratic extended performance techniques in a way that didn’t require developing a notation system. All the notation systems I’ve seen, they’re very artificial and clumsy and really end up inhibiting the performer. If I write using their own sounds, then I don’t have to deal with notation. And since they made the sounds to begin with they should be able to make them a second time. So the idea is to use compositional techniques that are more often found in Musique Concrète or computer music and use them to compose for a live ensemble.

The second idea was to rearrange a little bit the relationship of composer to musician and make it a more two directional thing. I take directly from the player and I give it back to him and then he gives it back to me and so forth. And the third thing was the idea of the relationship of the musician to his own music. Those are the three dimensions I was trying to put together.

M2: So exactly how easy is it for Joey Baron to play the first 30 seconds?
Bob: [laughs] Well I don’t know, he’s never tried, he doesn’t play in the live group. It’s just Gerry.

M2: So Gerry plays Joey?
Bob: He plays it according to Gerry. It works out very well because Gerry’s a real master of playing at low volumes but retaining his intensity. You want this almost thrash sort of energy. Gerry’s a great drummer at how to do that. I mean it’s really hard for all of them. When all of them heard it, their first reaction was, well, we can’t do it.

SCOREKEEPING
M2: Are there any kind of notational systems that help you to compare notes?
Bob: Well, they wouldn’t be able to do anything without the tape. The score is just a road map to get through the tape, so when they play, they know they’ve got eight bars of 5/4 and then a bar of this so it stays rhythmically together, but even then... When it’s becoming a live version I just conduct. Because unless I’m cueing changes here and there, it’s really impossible to keep it together. There’s one section I couldn’t think of anything to write and I just left it blank. [laughs]

M2: So how does Phil Minton notate? “Sound like Yodeling Donald Duck”?
Bob: That's the way I wrote it. Phil's started off writing things like "duck scream" and things like that. He's got technical words for all that stuff. The duck sounds are "parabuccals." He's actually studied this. There's a whole technique for speaking that they teach to people who have no vocal chords, a way to speak using your teeth instead of your vocal chords. Those duck things are all singing without vocal chords.

M2: Sounds like a political statement. How long did you keep them in the dungeon before they acquiesced?
Bob: Well, Joey didn't do it, so I guess he wasn't in the dungeon long enough. The point is not to recreate what I did on the computer. The point is to use this as a starting point and come out of it with a piece that's really for a live band and it's not a piece that we could have made any other way. So the next step is, I take the individual tracks from the live cut and cut those up on the computer and make a new computer CD out of it.

CHRONICLES OF YOUTH
M2: You need never write another new piece again as long as you live. In fact, you didn't write music for a long time.
Bob: No, I left music for about 8 years, 1980-1988, and did various things having to do with El Salvador. I started out sort of as an organizer in the United States and I worked as a writer and a journalist, and I worked on everything from The Chronicle to The Theoretical Journal of The New People's Army...

M2: We should arrange a trade subscription with them.
Bob: ...and I was one of the founders of CISPE [Coalition in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador], and I was their East Coast organizer for several years, and then they had me put out their newspaper, and then I had a big fight with them and went to El Salvador and starting working there.

M2: Would it be rude to ask what the fight was about?
Bob: It would be tiresome.

M2: But we'll ask anyway.
Bob: Well, you know, I was never a disciplined leftist. Gee, I never think of the right thing to say about it. It was all tangled and twisted in the politics of the moment. It's too beside the point. [laughs] But I still work with Sarah Miles a lot. She and I wrote a lot of articles together.

M2: So what brought you back from Salvador?
Bob: A lot of different things. I'd been doing it for eight years, and I was just emotionally exhausted. People I had known had been killed, and I was into it to the point where I had to decide if this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life. And I do know North Americans who went there and they'll never come back. They're culturally no longer Americans. And some of them [laughs] are actually pretty close friends of mine and I respect that they did. And when it sort of got to that point with me, I thought no, there are some other things I want to do. And I'm not Salvadoran, and that sort of made me think about playing music again.

HOW WE DID THINGS IN THE OLD DAYS
M2: So what were you playing before the big break?
Bob: The same.

M2: Did they have the technology then?
Bob: I, um, I had a mellotron that I made my own tapes for, which was practically impossible because they didn't want you to make your own tapes for it, so they made the tapes 3/4 of an inch wide and they put it on springs—they weren't actually looped. The springs were always breaking the tapes, you had to make your own tape because you can't buy 3/8 of an inch tape. I could never really get it to function properly. But I built other instruments. I built this one—sort of a pre-sampler—that worked pretty well. It had three reel-to-reel tape recorders and six helium balloons and a mixer.

M2: How did that work?
Bob: Do you have a pen? I could draw it for you. [lengthy explanation ensues] Got it so far?

M2: So far, yeah.
Bob: So there's two loops between the first and the second deck and the second and the third deck, then I rebuilt the middle tape recorder so I can vary the speed +/- 100%. So every time it goes through the loop it gets higher and higher, but sound that's being recorded on the middle tape deck is getting played back slower than it was recorded at, so it goes down. So if you just sang a note into a system, it would split, and if you just let the middle tape recorder stay at that slightly higher speed, it keeps splitting until it fills the whole audio spectrum. Since I'm changing the speed, I'm either taking in slack tape or putting out slack tape so I run the tape through grommets that I tie to helium balloons. The balloons pull on the grommets and they keep the tension constant on the tape. It makes a nice visual element because as the balloons go up, the sound is going up...
M2: Wouldn’t it have been easier to just inhale the helium?
Bob: [laughs] ...and that’s something you just can’t do on computer now. You have a unlimited memory per hour tape on there.

I used to do improvised gigs with Fred where I had a whole series of little cheap cassette recorders, each one modified to malfunction in a different way, and then I’d have a whole pile of telephone answering machine cassettes of various lengths, like 30 seconds, and I’d record on different cassettes and I’d swap them back and forth between machines. It’s a way to screw up the sound. That’s sort of like sampling without a sampler.

M2: Are you happier to have a real sampler then?
Bob: Oh very! [laughs]

M2: Why didn’t you just pick up an electric guitar like everybody else?
Bob: I did, in junior high school. I wanted to be an orchestra conductor, so I spent a year playing a woodwind, then a year playing a string, then a year playing percussion—I never got around to brass, actually—and I also picked up an electric guitar and then I sort of got more and more interested in the foot pedals and things, and pretty soon the guitar was sort of beside the point.

When I came back to music I had to relearn the technology from scratch. In 1978, I had a Serge synthesizer which really forced you into radical ways of thinking about music. In 1988, I had never heard the word MIDI. I really had not paid attention at all. So I had to learn it all again. But on the other hand, samplers had taken Musique Concrète and blown it open. So that was where I decided to jump in.

M2: Sounds like it was an alternative to being a conductor. This way you don’t have to pay the bloody orchestra.
Bob: [laughs] No, not quite. Even before I left I had my balloons and my mellotron, and none of the stuff I was doing was designed to emulate traditional instruments. In the early electronic music, it’s the tape music I always find more interesting than the synthesizer music.

M2: Is there anything on your sampler that didn’t make it to the commercial version?
Bob: Well I do employ their bugs. There were sections tonight where I was moving data from the hard disk through the RAM and I have it patched so while I’m feeding it the invalid parameters it makes it schizz off and go crazy. It gives me an interaction that I find more interesting than most digital stuff. Back in the 80’s I used to use modular analog synthesizers, and in a way they were much more interactive and you could never quite predict exactly what they were going to do. With analog equipment you could always abuse it and make it do something interesting. Geez, we’ve plugged the output into the output plug, but hey, doesn’t it sound cool? With computers, when you do something invalid, they tend to just crash, or do things that really aren’t musically useful. But the cool thing about this sampler is that there are ways that you can force it out of balance that actually do musically interesting things.

M2: There’s the old tale of the Beatles where they got all that great sound because they could make the needle on the VU meter go all the way over into the red. With digital equipment, the parameters are very much set. You’re not supposed to break the rules because this is offering you more than there ever was. How do you break the rules?
Bob: It’s a lot harder. Analog stuff—since you’re working with an analog of the sound—the different ways you force it—if you make a machine do something that it’s not supposed to, somehow or another you’re working with an analog of the sound, you’re not just getting garbage. So often with digital stuff, if you try to tinker you just get garbage.

I find that a lot of the problems I run into are the same problems you see written up in the business press about people who use computers in any kind of job. For example, it probably would take me 15 minutes to splice a loop together. Now I sit in front of a computer and push buttons and I have a loop, and I can push buttons again and get a slightly different version of it. Ah, that’s not quite the right one, and I poke it again. By the time I’ve poked it 20 times, my ear’s completely sick of it. I can’t distinguish one from another. I think, ah, fuck it, I’ll throw the whole thing out. And I don’t make anything.

M2: I saw The Molecules come up with a solution. They just whipped off the cover and started hitting everything with a hammer.
Bob: That’s not very digital anymore. [laughs] I miss the physical, the tactile part of it that more traditional instrumentalists get. I find the lack of physical things...
to do to be kind of a burden. I’ve got to use the time I spend doing things like splicing tape and physically arranging things because it’s contemplative time for your brain.

**M2:** So how would you design the interface between the meat and the tech?

**Bob:** You know, I’d probably use existing instruments, because there’s been hundreds of years of development in them. I think saxophone mouthpieces are pretty interesting. It’s amazing the amount of variables a good sax player can cook. I’m less interested in designing the instrument of the future than figuring out what to do with the ones we have now. [laughs] So what I was trying to do was make sure the music I make doesn’t use the electronic instruments in a way that conventional instruments perform so much better. Really, they’re so crude when it comes to really sculpting a sound in real time.

**M2:** So if someone showed up at your doorstep and said, we’d like you to design a project that would make the kind of noises you want out of a computer, would you jump at it?

**Bob:** No. That’s a decision I’ve made. I know in computer music circles there’s a fairly prevalent attitude that says if you don’t write your own code, you’re not like serious about it. I find that being an engineer and being a musician are almost mutually incompatible things. I always try to position myself right next to the designer. In the 70s, I knew Serge Tritti and when I used the synthesizer, I talked with him a lot. I’d give him feedback and there were a couple of modules he designed that probably had to do with some feedback of mine. And now I use the Ersoniq. I know the engineers there. I have yet to hear music that was made on a computer by somebody who was also a programmer that made me think, um, [big pause] that it was worth it.

**M2:** Any near misses?

**Bob:** [thoughtfully] No. You get into like the academic computer music circle and if you’re really serious about it, you write your own code. And those people talk to me and say if you don’t write your own code, you’re limited by what’s commercially available. But I find, in my lifetime, I’m not even going to be able to experiment with half of the things that are commercially available. [laughs] You know, I spend too much time learning new software as it is—

**M2:** What sort of computer do you use?

**Bob:** Homemade. I had a friend who was a Mac technician at a store, and he quit and they had a little motherboard on the shelf, so he cut me a deal on that. And then dealing with different used Mac places, I put together a drive and a power supply and built it into a cardboard box. Now it’s in a real box but that was the hard thing, because Apple doesn’t want you to do this. A repair place won’t sell you a part unless you can give the serial number of the computer it’s going into. It took me a couple of months to piece together but... it was cheap.

There’s a improvisational filmmaker I work with—Pierre Ebert. He and I do duos together. He thinks computers promote the idea that intelligence and creativity aren’t connected to your body, and we’re embarking for the first time on a path in which they’re not.

**M2:** I was told that you’re getting involved with a new computer or a new keyboard or something.

**Bob:** That’s right, CNMAT here in Berkeley, which is the Center for New Music and Audio Technology. They have a system under development that’s very sophisticated, very cool, post-sampling sampling.

**M2:** Obviously you haven’t played with this much yet. What sort of things will it do that you haven’t been able to up ‘til now?

**Bob:** Well it creates this... it’s hard to describe in terms that aren’t overly technical, but it creates the equivalent of frames in a film so that if you play a sound and stop, when you stop playing, the sound doesn’t stop, it sits right where you stopped, it’s like a film would continue to show the one image. I don’t know how to describe this system in a simple way...

**M2:** You can give us a nonsimple way...

**Bob:** What they do is, you record a sound into the system and then you periodically create FFT—fast Fourier transform—slice analyses of the sound, and then you train artificial intelligence software on those images, and then your software creates the data between the images. And it means that you can store digital audio as a series of sine waves. And since you’re doing that, you’re not dealing with massive amounts of data like you are when you do digital audio, but you’re dealing with actually small amounts of data that are highly manipulable, much more manipulable than audio.

**M2:** On another tack, is there any reason you haven’t got into the dance movement?

**Bob:** The next record is a dance record. It’s the result of the fact that I got to feeling sort of schizophrenic because when I go on tour, all the musicians I play with are straight and, er, I’m gay, and all my friends are gay, and when I go off on tour I’m like in one world and when I come home and hang with my friends I’m in another.
M2: That's kind of what I was thinking. Your natural place would be down at the DV8 or something, and they're not playing what you play, so...

Bob: Well, that's a misconception, because if you think of some of the major gay figures in culture—we're talking like John Cage—it's a bit superficial to say my natural haunt. [laughs] It's going to have Fred playing guitar, and Joey Baron on drums, it's going to have a lot of my usual suspects in the band, and four drag queens who are going to sing, and it's called Fear No Love. It's very hard, I've never done anything like it.

M2: It's a tricky one to pull off. By the time you've got it done, everybody's moved on, it's a different beat.

Bob: It's a hard one to pull off, because if you look at my different records, each one I sort of created the form in the process of creating the piece, each one is its own little genre. The problem with dance music is it's such a fixed form it's hard to bring something to it that's special. I actually want to make a record that people will accept as a dance record, so in a way I have to yield to form more than anything I've ever done before. So it's really a clash between this form that is just so rhythmic and my own personal trajectory. It's really been a struggle.

M2: Well, at last the divide between interesting music and stuff you can dance to has collapsed.

Bob: One trap I want to avoid is that sometimes I find—there are several instances I can think of right off the bat, but I won't name any of them—in which somebody has come out of a very experimental tradition, does something popular, and they announce that it's important or a big deal because they're doing it. Whereas actually, the people who made that music did it ten times better ten years before. I probably think it's interesting on its own and it's just fine and doesn't need intellectuals to come make pronouncements about it. So I didn't want to do it unless I could figure out a way to really make a contribution to it that is mine. But trying to find a balance of the record that people will play at DV8 and it won't clear the floor... [laughs]

M2: We're looking forward to your MTV video.

Bob: The video, I can tell you, will be stunning. M2