Kaleidoscope

Bob Ostertag's new album, Like a Melody, No Bitterness, is a new chapter in a multifaceted career. By Derk Richardson

Stick your head at random into the flow of Bob Ostertag's music a few times, and you get glimpses of what seem like three or four completely different artists. There's the avant-garde improvisor associated with John Zorn and Fred Frith in the early years of New York's "downtown" scene; the long-time political activist who recorded Sooner or Later; a 1991 CD based on the taped sounds of a Salvadoran boy burying his father; the modern composer whose piece All the Rage was recorded by the Kronos Quartet in 1993; and the performer who hangs out with "assorted misfits" in the queer community and shares the stage with underground drag queen Justin Bond in projects known as "House of Discipline" and "House of Splendor."

The 40-year-old Albuquerque, N.M., native, who has lived in San Francisco since 1989, is living proof of Heraclitus's dictum that you can't step into the same river twice. "In some of my work, I don't really make pieces," he explained recently during a phone conversation squeezed in between driving his eight-year-old daughter to and from basketball practice. I start a data stream going that you can dip into at various points. I try not to repeat myself. There are too many records out there, so I really try to approach making them with the idea that I'm making a coherent body of work that goes from A to B to C and that there not be two Bs or three Cs."

Ostertag's newest CD, Like a Melody, No Bitterness, is a spliced and edited pastiche of solo improvisations that were performed live in a sampler. It's a dense and exhilarating melange of musical mayhem, audaciously challenging and strangely beautiful. But it marks only a brief pause to document a passing phase in Ostertag's kaleidoscopic career. It doesn't sound anything like All the Rage, which derived from a transcription of sounds Ostertag recorded during the 1989 gay riot that took place in San Francisco after Governor Wilson vetoed an antidiscrimination bill, or Fear No Love, the "fierce queer dance music" Ostertag recorded in 1995 with Mike Patton, Fred Frith, Justin Bond, Lynn Breedlove, and others.

Nor does Like a Melody resemble the Say No More recordings (with percussionist Gerry Hemingway, bassist Mark Dresser, and vocalist Phil Minton), which provide an enlightening view of the methods behind Ostertag's apparent madness. The Say No More project began with Ostertag sending the musicians into separate studios to record solo improvisations. He then manipulated those tapes into a "virtual band" playing pieces he had composed from fragments of the improvisations. Then he sent that recording, along with a score, back to the musicians. After group rehearsals based on the new computer-generated material, the "real" band performed and recorded live. Ostertag then assembled fragments of the live performance into yet another CD. A fourth is in the works. Even if you followed that, you still have only a rough idea of the multifarious strategies Ostertag employs to make music.

Raised in Port Collins, Colo., Ostertag has always been fascinated with sound manipulation. During high school he sold his guitar to buy a Melotron, hoping to be able to make his own tapes for that early analog synthesizer. After leaving the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and touring with Anthony Braxton's Creative Music Orchestra, Ostertag settled in New York, where he recorded with Frith, Zorn, Eugene Chadbourne, and Charles K. Noyes, among others.

Distinguishing himself among the other improvisers, he invented his own sampler, built from reel-to-reel tape recorders that operated at variable speeds, with a single tape running through them; the tape also ran through pneumatics attached to helium balloons that moved up and down, allowing a unique kind of real-time manipulation. "I still have never found a digital device that could actually do what my helium balloons and tape recorders could," Ostertag says. "And it looked nice too."

After a few years in Manhattan, Ostertag experienced a seemingly unresolvable tension between his politics and his art. "In New York in the late 70s, if you were an artist and you were interested in politics, that was just really not cool, sort of like furtling at a dinner party," he says. "I felt like my musical interests and my political interests were pulling me in separate directions." He traveled to Nicaragua after the fall of Somoza, with the idea of producing a record for the label he and Frith had started. He ended up focusing on music for the next 10 years, throwing himself into radical political work in El Salvador. "I was quite sure I'd never go back to music," he says.

But he came to another crossroads in 1988. "After almost 10 years," he says, "I had become pretty clear that there wasn't nearly as much space in the Salvadorean left for someone with my views as I had originally imagined. If you were a gringo working in Central America, it came to the point where you had to make a decision — were you going to do that with the rest of your life? I had to say no. I have very close friends who made the decision to keep going, and they basically lost contact with first-world culture. When they come back they don't feel like this is their home anymore. As sick as it is, American culture kind of means something to me. Of course, it was a lot more complicated than that, as you can imagine. The Central American left is not a very homo-friendly environment. But mostly it was the political stuff."

With no idea what he would do next, Ostertag reengaged his musical career and recorded Sooner or Later, followed by All the Rage and its companion piece, Burns Like Fire. Ostertag also collaborated with instrument maker Oliver DiCocco, scrap-metal sculptor Pierre Hébert, and the late artist and author David Wojnarowicz on Spiral, a multimedia work commissioned for last year's "What about AIDS?" exhibit, apparently finding a way to express his social concerns in his art.

Ostertag argues, however, that music is not politics. "To me, politics and art have to do with trying to sort out the most effective way to...to effect the change you want," he says. "And although I believed differently in the 70s, music has very little to do with that. It's not just personal expression and personal honesty and integrity. Maybe All the Rage has a political theme, but I did not create that piece thinking I wanted it to make people less homophobic or more sympathetic to people with AIDS, or to mobilize queer-identified people to do one thing or another. I just wanted to make something that was honest to my own life, for the sake of making it. Besides, after spending almost 10 years fully engaged in intense political struggle and having it mercilessly drilled into my skull how hard it actually is, it's important to me that I realize that there's value in art for entertainment's sake. Political change takes a really long time, and we have to do something to entertain ourselves or we'll go completely crazy."