Creative Life: Music, Politics, People, And Machines
Bob Ostertag
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Part autobiography, part manifesto, composer and multi-cause activist Bob Ostertag’s latest book is the most lucid philosophical work on music, culture and politics since Steve Reich’s Writings On Music. Admittedly, it’s a small field, but what Ostertag has to say about contemporary music’s lazy relationship with technology is no less radical than what Walter Benjamin had to say in “The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction”, here updated to the era of MIDI and the download.

The first half of his book details the decade Ostertag took out of music to become a journalist and activist in Nicaragua and El Salvador, working alongside the likes of photographer Susan Meiselas to produce war journalism comparable to that of Joan Didion and Martha Gellhorn. His politics and his art collide when he tours his Yugoslavia Suite through the Balkans (excerpts from these road diaries first appeared in The Wire 204, back in February 2001).

The philosophy starts to appear in essays such as “Why I Work With Drag Queens”, a radical queer call to, if not arms, then long-sleeved evening gloves, celebrating his work with gender subversives such as Justin Bond. In passing, he also provides an illuminating insight into his work with people ranging from Anthony Braxton to John Zorn, via Fred Frith, The Kronos Quartet, Faith No More’s Mike Patton, Otomo Yoshihide and others.

He saves his sharpest comments for later essays such as “Human Bodies, Computer Music”, “Why Computer Music Is So Awful” and his much discussed “The Professional Suicide Of A Recording Musician”, where he explains his reasons (big label indifference, indie label incompetence, the convergence of big business and ‘liberating’ technologies as hymned by Wired magazine’s geek-fascists) for making his entire oeuvre available free from his website.

While his struggles with politics and art are, in his own words, often like “pushing water uphill”, what emerges here is a passionate, committed but endearingly modest man confronting the monsters of his age – and his country. In that, he joins the unlikely but estimable company of Emerson and Thoreau.

John Gill

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