

America...Switzerland.

Despite the anomaly of The Rolling Stones and others exporting black American music to white middle class American kids who knew not the musical culture of their own country, the USA has been the reigning cultural force across this planet since the end of World War II. I grew up with it. As with all empires, collapse is guaranteed, but it's taking its time. Always assuming an anti-hierarchical stance, I eyed the dominant and dominating culture with distrust. I eventually played in the States in 1980, determined to figure out what made me sceptical of this all devouring behemoth.

Having negotiated the 'train to the plane' in reverse, I arrived ready to play. Located in the cellar of an exotic aquatic shop in the West Village, Studio Henry appeared to be one of the few venues for improvised music in NYC. There, I witnessed John Zorn, Charles K Noyes (good name for a drummer), and Ikue Mori (also playing drums) perform short, dry, and (to my ears) quite unrewarding compositions. The audience included me, Elliot Sharpe, his then girlfriend, and a couple of others who showed their Super-8 films the following night (featuring a plucked chicken controlled with puppet strings writhing all over a flickering TV, which I found much more engaging).

I had nowhere to stay and, having no money on my person, the manager of Studio Henry offered me the couch. He insisted that he lock me in; otherwise, I might be joined by others of the street also looking for free accomodation. A posse of ravenous rats rushed about their business for most of the night. Legs tucked up under my chin, I don't think I slept a wink.

On another visit, the predicament of citizens without money was reinforced when I stayed in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The taxi driver dropped me off before we got to Tompkins Square Park; there was no way he was driving down there at night, as the last time someone had thrown a brick at his car. I stayed in Elliott Sharpe's apartment - his dog ate my toilet bag. At least the remains of it lay in front of the sleeping and clearly satisfied beast

early next morning. What is remarkable is that he must have eaten my razor as well, as it was no where to be found.

On another occasion I stayed at an apartment on the Bowery, literally stepping over the sleeping (or unconscious) bodies of the homeless as I made my way past shops as boarded and padlocked as Fort Knox. The message from the Bowery was decay, fear, neglect, and extreme wealth as stretch limos glided past human detritus. The language in which Third World poverty brushes up against First World extravaganza could be witnessed in the colonial takeover of cultures from around the world. Whatever took your fancy, you could simply snatch it, castrate it, and market it. Nonsuch Records specialised in just that. To my surprise, I discovered not one but three Gamelan orchestras in Manhattan - all nice, middle-class white guys tuning into the vibes of Bali. This 'melting pot' theme reinforces the classic descriptor of New York culture, but in my view it's a cultural puree where little survives the blades of the blender. At the time, I thought of free improvisation as a safe but unsellable bet; no way could anybody make a commercial success of this...by now a number of musicians have proved me very wrong, very wrong indeed. Back then, another question posed itself. Could anything ever again in terms of originality, structure, or language arrive in time before our species disappears? At the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (and I'm sure many other music schools around the world), they are now teaching improvisation - not jazz - improvisation. Look at what happened to jazz after all the practitioners got degrees and PHDs?

A fire had raged through Phill Niblock's loft in Central Street, and windows were missing. Outside and inside, consequently, it was mouth-chattering winter cold. Rugged up with everything I could wear, I watched a singer's breath freezing with each utterance. Phil's own art is a paradigm of loss. For years he visited eastern European countries (usually in the Soviet block), recording on film the actions of workers and peasants going about their repetitive tasks. Stunningly beautiful footage. Along with Communism, these tropes of physical labour are now gone - replaced by vulture capitalism and machines, if replaced at all. Phill is a major contributor to the contemporary arts and not an exploiter, but what we are left with is a comfortable simulacrum of human haptic skills.

But I'm quite sure the actual work on the ground was hard, uncomfortable, and relentless.

I both heard and played concerts at such legendary places as The Kitchen or (later) The Knitting Factory. Over in the West Village, I heard Sun Ra's band (the whole band) play to about 10 of us in the audience - it was another freezing night, but they still did the whole 'Space is the Place' show - all dressed up and slightly embarrassed. Since you know they were earning only the cash through the door, it was a pitiful realisation of the state of many musical lives in NYC. This was Sweet Basil Jazz Club on Seventh Avenue, also the first time I met and heard Cecil Taylor. The crowd was bigger (maybe 30), but then the pavement wasn't iced up on that occasion - he played nonstop for 90 minutes, having just got off a plane from Europe. The fact that he was very repetitive didn't bother me; the physical endurance and output was phenomenal. Some years later in the loft where I lived in Berlin, I saw Johannes Bauer and Fred Van Hove play with even more intensity; in fact, I was concerned for Johannes' health. I thought that he might literally run out of breath and expire right there.

When you read the histories generated by musicians in NYC, you could get the (false) impression that the whole avant world was all ears. A development like Fluxus depended more on its self-documentation and promotion to convince itself of its own validity than those who came later to worship. The proven way out of the avant ghetto was demonstrated by making pop records (Laurie Anderson), or easy listening minimalism, or both.

In the mid 1980s I worked (a slight euphemism) with Eugene Chadbourne, and he organised a tour through the USA. The venues were similar to those I had experienced in NYC, except that often we were clearly playing the wrong kind of music in bars where the clientele were less than enthusiastic. We played an improvised music that included cut up and pastiche of various popular genres. After a particularly dismal evening in a very long and empty bar, a guy came up to us and handed over a piece of paper with a list of some 20 songs he had identified from our noisy barrage ...and with a knowing smile, he left. I couldn't keep up with Eugene in the promotion stakes. At every town, he would be on the

radio selling the show, and at every show he would be selling his cassettes and CDs. A new suitcase of merchandise would appear every few days at the next town's Greyhound station to be exchanged with the empty one we had just arrived with. This low level capitalism also required as much stamina as a Cecil Taylor concert, but weeks of it. For the alluring story of the LP *Kultural Terrorism* and the ensuing legal battle with Deutsche Grammophon, click here:

https://jonroseweb.com/c_articles_kultural_terror.php

One night in San Francisco, I attended a Chadbourne solo concert. It was running pretty well as expected when an apparition suddenly appeared with a large stinking fish, a guy shouting at Eugene to 'take the fuckin' fish, you fuckin' wanker' or else. As the fun atmosphere descended into the dismal dark, he pursued Eugene around the stage with the fish, our retreating guitarist trying to placate this upstaging raving nut job. It got very dark indeed. 'Mind where you are stepping', suggested Eugene, as the guy jumped on his Dobro guitar. Bedlam as the other musicians who had been invited to join the Chadbourne show erupted backstage in a mixture of fear and elation. Eugene called for the venue's nonexistent manager. In an adjacent room, a fight had broken out between the fish guy trying to run off and a musician who was up for the hero thing. Fish guy gets away. All dissolved into stories about fights and gigs, and anyway who was this guy of the stinking fish? According to my friend, ear to the ground, and colleague Bob Ostertag, it turns out the fish man invented an analogue synth, but his company went bust, and he went crazy ...not wrong there.

Another tour found me playing half a dozen concerts in Florida. To my amazement, I had a fan who organised the whole thing for me. He was the recording engineer at The Stetson Christian Girls' College, an unlikely day job for a fan of free improvisation. I played a bracing solo with an interactive violin bow powering various electronics at the college chapel in front of some very white Christian girls. They sat there like statues of the virgin until I had finished what maybe they understood to be an oral training for hell. There was no applause ...stillness covered the void ... does anybody have any questions, I offered, still no reaction, so I turned to place my violin back in its case, and seconds later, when I

looked up again, the girls were miraculously vanishing - it seemed like into thin air, but then I noticed the Alice in Wonderland door. My impresario sound engineer was impressed that the Christians had stayed that long ...the next concert after Stetson had Sam Rivers in attendance ...quite a switch! I was staying with a doctor and his ('I think I need to take off my brasierre') flirtatious wife. Do you wanna see something really disgusting, he asked me one night? Sure, I said. He searched and failed to find a splatter video, but the loss was made up for the next day as we headed off to Disney World. Apparently, some people come here to commit suicide and so I asked the guy at the desk if he had any numbers on this? 'You some kind of pervert', he yelled, 'where you from anyway, get away from here'.

The outstanding late guitarist Davey Williams lived not on the other side of the railway tracks but, somehow, right in between two sets of tracks by a siding. On the same tour as the Christian girls, we played in a club in Birmingham that was entirely covered with rolls of bright red plastic but no windows. It felt like being inside a gift wrap about to be presented at a seven-year-old's birthday party. Was this art, I asked? 'No', said Davey, 'it's music'. Davey combined surrealist tendencies with obsessive research and some extraordinary self-taught guitar playing. In his collection were LPs of recordings of World War 2 fighter planes. No battle scenes, just the sound of lonely planes swooping their way though the Alabama sky. And yes, the sound was engaging and beautiful.

My marathon concert for New Music America at a large and understandably hostile bank in Houston, Texas appears earlier in Memoire 9.

For some reason as I write this, gnawing away, another memory comes barging into my 'granulars' ... and it has nothing to do with America at all; in fact, the story takes place in the antithetical land of the Swiss.

The head of this small recording company shall remain anonymous, as he should - forever. 1989 lay on the cusp of the CD replacing the LP, and I had sent a recording to this guy to see if he would publish it. Yes, he would and we needed to meet soon to sign a contract. I was on tour in Austria and offered to go to Basel (about 5 hours by train) to where he lived in order to do so. Oh no, he suggested; let's meet in the waiting room of (an obscure) railway station about 90 minutes from Basel. A bit weird, but I agree, and we meet at said railway station and sign contract. 'Can you recommend a hotel near here where I can stay? Oh, there is nothing here, you will have to go to Basel. Any chance of a lift in your car? Oh, no, I have things to do'. And so, after travelling all day, I make my weary way to Basel by train, starting to walk away from the station to look for a hotel. As I am walking slowly down the street carrying a cello, violin, and back pack, I become aware that I am being followed. As if in a spy drama, out of the corner of my eye I spot a car keeping a steady pace with my steps. It's him! He comes to a halt, winds down the window, and asks if I have found a hotel yet? The creep! Oh, there are some hotels in the next street, he suggests, and drives off. Somewhere I still have that contract.