

David First

Privacy Issues

(droneworks 1996 – 2009)

Liner notes for XI Records CD XI 134 (2010)

"History is a spiral, like the groove on a record," Robert Poss (founder of Band of Susans) once told me, echoing the 19th Century Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt. Every artist returns to an earlier generation of practitioners, materials, ideas. One is tempted to measure innovation by the absolute width of the displacement between the new and the old, but the richness of a work can be better traced in the details of the groove itself, the specific wiggles that led from A to B. David First has run alongside grooves cut by earlier American Minimalism, but his idiosyncratic path has been characterized by a skittering all his own.

Those earlier tracks were scribed by a group of composers thoroughly radicalized by John Cage. By the end of the 1950s it was obvious that Cage had fundamentally redefined music by calling into question so many of its longstanding assumptions. The rug was pulled out from under many composers born in the late 1930s and 40s. Some merely retrenched, stuck to the traditions they had studied, and hoped that Cage would fade away in a manner befitting a charlatan. But others – Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, Pauline Oliveros, LaMonte Young, Philip Glass (to name a few) – felt compelled to re-examine what they had been taught. This was a cathartic, but often none-too-gentle, process: as Lucier recalls, "after I heard Cage for the first time in Rome in 1960 I stopped writing music for a year and just ate pasta and drank wine." Glass' *Music in Parallel Fifths* can be seen as tearing down the entirety of Western music theory to the year zero – going back to the first rule of counterpoint, violating it, and seeing what kind of musical world might evolve along this new branch.

The work these composers created grew out of a radical rejection of large chunks of their past. They are now identified largely by the innovations they developed to fill the new potholes they had created: electronic technology, phase patterns, drones, prose scores, quasi-scientific articulation of acoustic phenomena, etc. Several of them referenced non-Western "serious" music in their own work, but it is worth noting that few seemed comfortable addressing Pop or so-called Jazz – arguably the most vibrant and visible musical forms of the 1960s and 70s.

Born in 1953, David First is a member of a subsequent generation, which was spared the wrenching rupture with the past that had so traumatized their teachers and mentors. Composers who came of age in the 1970s were presented with a buffet laden with musical possibilities: Indian music or rock and roll, Cage or Couperin could be heaped onto one's plate in equal portions, with no regard for the "inappropriate" mingling of diverse scents and sauces. Most significantly, no one choice seemed to necessitate corresponding rejection of anything else.

The products of this musical smorgasbord could be heard in the art spaces and clubs of New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, where Rhys Chatham's *Guitar Trio* grew from the union of his studies with LaMonte Young and Maryanne Amacher with his enthusiasm for the visceral acoustic splendor of the New York Dolls and the Ramones; George Lewis drew on his experience with the AACM as he programmed his

computer to improvise; John Zorn's ensemble tactics sprang from the unlikely confluence of Christian Wolff's "co-ordination" scores and Carl Stalling's cartoon soundtracks; Arthur Russell brought dance music into art spaces and art strategies into dance record production. Some of these musical hybrids were more satisfying than others, and the whiff of eclecticism often hung in the air, but there was a pervasive, exhilarating sense that anything was possible, that a composer could draw on his or her entire record collection, that nothing was off-limits. This was, in a sense, everything that Cage had promised but stopped short of practicing.

As a composer living in New York through this period, I thought I had heard all possible permutations of musical styles. But early in the spring of 1987, as I sat on a panel at BACA Downtown in Brooklyn screening tapes for their "New Territory Award" (a little bit of money and a concert in their space), a piece by David First came over the speakers. This was something unexpected and truly different: pulsing electronic textures that derived their rhythm from the beating patterns of closely-tuned pitches – as if Alvin Lucier and Philip Glass had gone on a blind date to CBGBs. On paper this would appear an impossible match: Lucier, the master of the ephemeral, had accomplished Christian Wolff's goal of "reducing the tempo to zero" -- I could think of no music less likely to set one's foot tapping. Yet First heard rhythmic potential in the interference patterns of the closely-tuned sine waves that Lucier sent spinning across the room in compositions like *Still and Moving Lines in Families of Hyperbolas* (1973-74) – David put the beat in beating patterns.

Previously composers had struggled with drifting circuits and balky tuning dials as they strove to create steady drones or controllable beating patterns; but David's work with his "World Casio Quartet" exploited the shift from analog to digital audio technology that took place in the 1980s. Casio had recently introduced a series of portable digital music keyboards that offered a wide range of sounds at an affordable price. Their oscillators were extremely stable, and could be micro-tuned up or down a few Hertz, ostensibly to match the concert pitch of acoustic musical instruments. Now David could precisely tune each of the four keyboards in the Quartet to a slightly different, carefully determined frequency such that the same key played on any pair of keyboards would produce a beating pattern at a different tempo; these tunings were chosen to generate a specific set of cross rhythms. The psychoacoustic effect of the beating induced that magical "inside of your head" aura of Lucier's work, but the new instrumental timbres would not have been out of place on a club stage, and the rhythms were, well, rock solid.

I loved it. I don't recall if the panel was unanimous in its support of David's music, or if I somehow browbeat my colleagues into accepting my opinion of this singularly weird work, but David got the prize.

David had only started the Quartet a few months earlier (it was just one of his musical projects at the time.) The group played at Phil Niblock's Experimental Intermedia Foundation in the fall of 1987. A year later I saw them at the Kraine Gallery in the East Village. David remembers:

In sound-checks with the WCQ I used to love to search for the resonant frequencies that would cause heating ducts and windows to rattle, at which

point the sound person would always apologize, not realizing I was mentally noting them all and would exploit them mercilessly during our set. Probably the best thing we ever did in this regard was a piece called *Plate Mass* at the 1989 Bang on a Can Marathon at the old R.A.P.P. Arts Center. It was pretty glorious – vibrating things everywhere – and people continued to bring it up to me years later. In fact, it sounded so good from where I sat that I couldn't bear to end it and decided to go a couple of minutes past our allotted time. I was summarily called up by one of the BOAC organizers the next day and told I'd never play Bang on a Can again. And apparently I haven't. But it was a beautiful thing to behold!

By late 1989 David wound down the Quartet, which reformed briefly for a reunion concert at The Knitting Factory in 1991. Few recordings exist. It would have been difficult to capture the immersive quality of the experience with even the best recording gear of the time and, as David observes, the cassette recorders most commonly used to tape concerts back then "always wreaked havoc with drone music". The only published recording I know of is "Strange Over", a studio track on *Resolver*, his 1991 CD for O. O. Discs.

David has gone on to produce a wide range of projects, from his band The Notekillers to *Operation: Kracpot* – "the sound of the earth and brainwave manipulation meet Gestural Manipulation." This set of CDs documents a decade of music created subsequent to the demise of the Quartet, and it builds on the psychoacoustic edginess that made that group so remarkable, so fresh. David continues to take advantage of subtle but significant technological and economic shifts that make possible the previously impractical: the evolution of his drone-based music demonstrates a continuous search for higher resolution, greater stability and richer timbre that has led through a series of both hardware synthesizers and programming languages; *Kracpot* mines an array of real-time ionospheric data now available on-line and accessible through recent web tools. At the same time he shows an uncanny knack for opportune low-tech, low-cost solutions, swapping synthesizers and software for cheap radios and slide whistles without degrading the quality of his work. He values the richness of the ensemble format, the musical artifacts that can only arise when people play together. David's textures have grown denser and lusher over the years, but my attention is still drawn to the rhythm of the beating patterns, the stuff in-between, the presence in the white space.

Back to the spiral. Like Lucier, First evokes a musical experience unique for every listener, an experience that floats somewhere in the inner ear rather than manifesting itself on the page of a score or in the data on a CD. But his path diverges when he re-attaches our bodies to our ears, and brings a distinctly earthy underpinning to these airy phenomena. The groove of David First's musical history brings his work up alongside its antecedents, but displaces it by experiences and concerns that had no place in the music of these other composers or that earlier time. This is David's record.

Nicolas Collins
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