

A La Monte Young diary

by Tom Johnson

July 4, 1973: David Behrman tells me some interesting anecdotes about one summer in the late '50s when he and La Monte Young were both studying with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Darmstadt, Germany. The concerts and classes held at Darmstadt for a few weeks each summer were Mecca for the avant-garde at that time, and young composers came from all over the world to study composition with Stockhausen, to hear lectures by Boulez and Pousseur, to check out the latest pieces by Cage, and to attend performances by David Tudor, who was reigning piano virtuoso of the new music from his former student. In any case, their work has come closer together


THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of Tom Johnson's La Monte Young Diary appeared in the July 26, 1973, issue of The Voice. This is the first of two parts of the current installment.

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Toward a more spiritual orientation

in many respects. Neither of them has much interest in total serialization anymore—or numerology either. Both have become involved with the music of other cultures. Both have stopped trying to be music theorists. Both have moved away from electronics, placing more and more emphasis on human performers.

According to Behrman, Stockhausen's composition classes, which met every morning, were the center of attention for most of the students, and they were strictly no-nonsense affairs. Stockhausen may have been a rebel in his music, but as a teacher

he was as stern and disciplined as any German pedagogue of the '50s. Most of the students responded well to this approach, but La Monte Young was apparently unimpressed. Behrman recalls that he once wandered into the class about two hours after it had begun.

Stockhausen had trouble understanding this, as it was clear to him, and to just about everyone else in Darmstadt at the time, that his word was practically gospel. Total serialization, it was thought, was the most important new development in music since the discovery of the 12-tone row, and Stockhausen's philosophical-mathematical theories were supposedly laying the groundwork for music of the next generation or two. How could Young be so blasé?

Stockhausen managed to tolerate the insolent young American student who was always late for class, clear up until the end of the session, when each student was to present the composition he had done during his stay in Darmstadt. It seems that the piece Young brought in was intricately derived from the number seven, and involved quite a bit of numerology of one sort or another. According to Behrman, Stockhausen reacted quite strongly to this brash work, which was almost heretical in the context of Darmstadt.

Apparently Young and Stockhaus-

sen are now on friendly terms, and see each other from time to time. In fact, Stockhausen's "Stimmung" and his "Aus dem Sieben Sieben Tagen" provide some evidence that the famous German composer has even begun to borrow a few ideas

September 11, 1973: I go to an avant-garde concert at Hunter College, and one of the highlights turns out to be Young's Piano Pieces for David Tudor No. 1. It is one of his early pieces, written in 1960, and the score consists simply of prose instructions explaining that the performer should attempt to make a grand piano drink from a bucket of water and eat a bale of hay. I had always thought of the piece as conceptual art and never expected it to come off in an actual performance, but I discover that I was wrong. The way Jim Burton interprets the score, the piano really starts to look like a horse, and the audience is delighted with the absurdity of the situation. So much for any theories about La Monte Young as a conceptual artist.

April 2, 1974: I run into La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela on Canal Street. He is wearing his customary long white robe, and she has on a long skirt and some attractive jewelry. Their guru, the masterful Indian singer Pandit Pran Nath is also with them, and Young starts to introduce me, but "Guruji" has already walked on. The couple are friendly and tell me they think I was perceptive in some of the things I said in earlier published entries from my La Monte Young Diary. I tell them I am looking forward to their forthcoming presentation at the Kitchen, and we go on about our afternoon shopping.

April 10, 1974: I get a call from the New York Times. They want to run a piece about Young's and Zazeela's Theatre of Eternal Music on the 28th, the date that the week-long Kitchen series begins, and they ask me if I would like to write something. I tell them I will.

A few hours later I reach Young and Zazeela on the telephone to arrange a meeting. They are pleased to learn about the forthcoming article, but not completely. Young is particularly concerned about what kind of photographs might run with the article. He says papers and magazines often try to capitalize on his eccentricities and find oddball personality shots instead of just showing something that will help people understand what his work is like. I tell him that as a free-lance writer I won't have any control over layout questions, but that I can at least report his feelings.

Under the circumstances Young's mistrust of the press seems a bit paranoid to me, but then so do a lot of other things about Young. Perhaps most extraordinary are the release forms which his performers and

technicians sometimes have to sign, stating that they will not give away any of his ideas. Of course, he has a perfect right to protect his work and his image in any way he can. And with such innovative work, and such an unusual life style, I suspect he might have had a few bad experiences with people stealing his ideas and making fun of his personality.

April 12, 1974: About one in the afternoon I ring a doorbell on Church Street. Zazeela answers and leads me up a flight of stairs to the loft where she and Young live and work. Young is singing a raga and accompanying himself on the tambura. It is the soulful Kirana style he has been learning from "Guruji," and which he practices several hours every day. There is an occasional unsteadiness in his voice, so I guess he has a way to go before he will ever master this style, but he already has pretty good control over many of the difficult sliding gestures that Kirana style singers use, and it is easy to see that this training has been feeding back into the simpler non-verbal style of his own performances.

Soon Young brings the raga to a close, and we all sit down for a light lunch. Much of the conversation involves the Orient, the two trips Young and Zazeela took to India, Young's tremendous admiration for Indian music, and particularly for the Kirana style, his conviction that it is in many ways more highly developed than Western music, and his lack of respect for more commercial and less traditional artists like Ravi Shankar.

After a while he pulls out the score for his Trio for Strings, written in 1958, just after completing his B. A. at UCLA and before beginning graduate work at Berkeley. It is a serial work, but it creeps along at the rate of about one note per minute. Young says it is his first Oriental-inspired work.

After lunch we listen to a tape of some of the impressive jazz improvising Young used to do on soprano saxophone in the early '60s. He also puts on a few sections from "The Well Tuned Piano," some experiments he did around 1964 involving special ways of tuning a piano.

As I leave, I try to put together Young's progression from slow motion serial music to the prose instructions that I used to think were conceptual art, to the saxophone playing, and the tuning experiments, and finally to his current career as a singer working with drones. It seems like an awfully wide range for someone to have covered by the age of 38, and it's a little hard to relate everything, but I can see a gradual progression toward a more spiritual orientation. I can also see an admirable idealism. Had he continued playing saxophone, for example, he would probably be quite successful in the jazz world by now, since that free modal style is now rather fashionable. But he followed the dictates of his conscience and his intellectual curiosity, and went on to other things.

(To be continued.)

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This was/is New York

by Gerald Weales

New York City, as everyone knows, is an impossible city to live in. The comfort is that it always has been. I was reminded of this recently when some work I was doing sent me back to the early years of the New Yorker magazine. There—a little more gently put, a bit more wryly recorded—were the whines, the complaints, the cries of anguish one hears on every side today. Even the same jokes. The size of the Sunday Times is not one of the real crosses of New Yorkers, particularly in this time of dwindling paper stock, but an early Anthony Fraioli cartoon (February 5, 1927) can set the stage for my remarks: it depicts "The Newsboy Who Threw the Sunday Times on the Porch" and—recurrent yok—the house has collapsed.

"One of the local peculiarities of our town which one finds it difficult to explain to visitors is the Long Island Railroad," writes Elmer Davis (September 17, 1927), by way of introduction to a list of complaints so familiar that almost any commuter should re-create it without even glancing at the piece. A parody of the other New York transportation article can be found in "The Subway Trouble Explained" (April 7, 1928), E. B. White's benignly complicated explanation of the "seventy-cent fare issue."

Even in the 1920s, the Long Island Railroad was beaten out by Ma Bell as New York's favorite institutional enemy. This can be seen in a throwaway line that crept into Elmer Davis's parody of Pulitzer Prize seriousness (April 24, 1926), in which the hero "is presently heard calling Circle 12345. Naturally, he gets Rhinelander 67890." Wrong numbers were not buried in parenthetic remarks, however, as an early Katharine Brush article (December 3, 1927) indicates. "Upon answering my telephone," she writes, "I have in my time been addressed as Mamie, as the Busy Bee, as Miss Kats, as 'Lissen, baby,' as Mr. Goldman's secretary, as Hornblower & Weeks, as Ma, as the Hartford operator, as Alice Foote MacDougall." And so it goes, for several paragraphs, an exercise that drew a letter to the editor (January 7, 1928) from Nunnally Johnson, another New Yorker regular, explaining how best to spread confusion by pretending to be the person called. Johnson, refusing to offer the telephone company the kind of comfort Brush had in assuming that the "telephoning public" was at fault, says of his prospective victim, "It is true that he is rarely the one responsible for the error in connection."

As for the perennial inconvenience of torn-up streets, it is touched on in articles as different as Frank Sullivan's lunatic "How I Became a Subway Excavator" (January 23, 1926), in which a Luxor cab "in full pursuit of a coquettish Yellow taxicab" disappears into the excavation, and E. B. White's drama review (September 1, 1928), which begins "Several shows have opened in West 45th Street lately. You can't get to one of them in a cab on account of the

pavement being torn up, but we will discuss them anyway." For more evidence on the surreal side, there is a throwaway line in Donald Ogden Stewart's "The President's Son" (December 10, 1927), a marvelous take-off on Nan Britton's revelations about President Harding, in which the narrator's mother and the unnamed President meet "in Grant's Tomb, which my mother had mistaken for the Aquarium owing to the torn-up condition of Seventh Avenue." The best of the street disruption jokes are probably a couple of quiet cartoons. When Alan Dunn's interested spectator (October 1, 1927) wonders, "I suppose they'll be tearing it up again soon," the engineer in charge of the street crew assures him, "Oh, yes, but we'll get it finished before that." Jack Markow's little man (March 17, 1928) stands amid the chaos and asks, "Pardon me, officer, can you tell me where they moved Hudson Street?"

With the torn-up streets we reach the perfect bridge—confusion—to those two favorite New York problems, the uncontrollable traffic and the irrepressible cycle of demolition/construction. By simple space count, they were already the most popular complaints of the late 1920s. "For several years now," writes Robert Benchley in "The Seed of Revolt" (May 29, 1926), "ever since they began tearing down most of the buildings in New York and erecting others in their places to be torn down next year . . ." He goes on to suggest that a fire in the wooden staging around a construction site was no accident. His point of view is that of the pedestrian, forced off the sidewalk, but his piece sounds the two persistent notes that construction critics from whatever perspective have continued to sound—the inconvenience and the apparent irrationality of it all.

"Why, that house was here when I left last year," says a surprised "Returned New Yorker" in a cartoon by W. P. Trent, Jr. (August 14, 1926). One of E. B. White's wryly sentimental little verses, "Real Estate" (January 22, 1927), finds the poet "yestreen" searching for a pond on which he once skated and finding "a 40-room apartment." As a case of dream defilement, White's effusion cannot touch a six-panel Al Frueh cartoon (October 2, 1926) in which a couple who rent a "Bright and Airy" apartment on Monday and move in on Tuesday find their view invaded by a crane on Wednesday and then, as a larger building goes up outside, the room becomes gray (Thursday), grayer (Friday), and finally black (Saturday).

Frueh had a series of parking-problem cartoons in early 1926, and Alan Dunn a gentle comment (October 29, 1927) on the perennial traffic jam in which a man, entering a

cab trapped in a solid line of cars, says, "To the Pennsylvania Station—and double fare if you make it in five minutes." If these cartoonists found the traffic problem as visually attractive as the construction debacle, the writers seemed to find the subject even more appealing. Morris Markey, the original "Reporter at Large," gave one of his columns (November 26, 1927) to a serious consideration of the traffic situation, but most of the writers tended to approach the problem with the proper spirit of mockery. "In Venice it takes 45 minutes by gondola to get to the railway station from almost anywhere," says Gilbert Seldes in a catalog of New York City oddities (October 16, 1926), setting us up for "In New York it takes either 15 minutes or an hour. This is called traffic control."

Elmer Davis's "Solution for the Traffic Problem" (September 24, 1927), which is little more than a collection of traffic jokes, includes the suggestion that Central Park be turned into a half-mile wide boulevard, a feasible plan since "no progressive administration is going to let vegetations interfere with traffic." My own favorite solution to the traffic problem can be found in Corey Ford's "How D'You Get What Way?" (January 9, 1926), and my enthusiasm has very little to do with either the solution or Ford and everything to do with the persistence and the recurrent newness of some jokes. On the CBS evening news on January 27, 1926, Eric Sevareid, in one of his infrequent attempts at levity, twinkled ponderously at a stunned audience and offered his solution to the traffic problem. It had been Corey Ford's back in 1926, when he predicted that cars would eventually stop moving altogether: "Then we can fill in the chinks between them with cement, pave the hoods, and start life over again with a clean slate."

Built into all these complaints is the assumption that nothing will be (perhaps, can be) done. In "Plans, Plans, Plans!" (June 29, 1929), Robert Benchley comments on "the Regional Plan for New York and its Environs" which has been seven years in the making and which carries its projections up to 1965. By that time, Benchley hopes "to be stuffed and standing upright in the Natural History Museum" and he suggests that, in the meantime, someone fill in a pothole on 44th just west of Fifth.

The mixture of exasperation and affection that New Yorkers feel toward their very own municipal torture chamber can perhaps best be seen in a Reginald Marsh cartoon (September 25, 1926). A couple can be seen through the window of a taxi, dwarfed by the sights (and the sounds) of New York—the elevated, a trip hammer, construction equip-

ment, backed-up traffic, a typical Marsh crowd—and we get this exchange as caption:

"Well, it's certainly grand to be back."
"WHAT?"

This is the note to end on, the wry admission that nothing changes, that we have all been here before, but it won't wash. Going back into the pages of the early New Yorker I found today at every turn, and then I ran up against an E. B. White poem with such innocence that it shook me back into the 1970s. "Natura in Urbe" (May 26, 1928) is a typical White exercise, a rueful bit of verse in which, unable to sleep, the poet takes a walk around the reservoir, contemplates a duck, and wonders why the bird is also awake. That's all there is to the poem, but a sigh rose from the page that had nothing to do with White's mild epiphany. A walk around the reservoir? At midnight?

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