

Shadowing Capote

By Kyle Gann

Mikel Rouse



STEVE WALTERS

Rouse: in an almost karmic relationship with Tru

La Côte Basque was Truman Capote's undoing. He used to sit in this elegant French restaurant on 55th Street with the other celebrities, soaking up gossip about who was sleeping with whom, who shot her husband and got away with it, who was caught in flagrante with a German shepherd. Then he published it all in *Esquire* (in a story called "La Côte Basque"), and none of his friends ever spoke to him again. Now, decades later, two other relocated Southern boys—Mikel Rouse and myself—have returned in search of Capote's ghost. We're collecting vibes for Rouse's new opera inspired by Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which he'll premiere at the Kitchen this week.

That's "inspired by," not "based on." Rouse is so fascinated by Capote's achievement that he ventured not to set the book to music but to retrace Capote's steps, to become Capote through music. Accordingly, he spent years (since 1988) sifting through the New York Public Library's Capote archives and drew his libretto from the same newspaper accounts, official depositions, interview transcripts, letters, and diaries the author used as a basis for *In Cold Blood*—not a word of the libretto originated with Capote. The result, called *Failing Kansas*, is a nonnarrative, deliciously tuneful, more abstract response to the same horrible event that caught Capote's attention: the heartless murder of the average, upright Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, by a pair of shiftless ne'er-do-wells named Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Rouse performs the opera solo with elaborate taped musical background, plus a film by Cliff Baldwin, a longtime Rouse collaborator who has structured a film to fit the music the way composers usually cut music to fit a film. For those who have trouble calling a multimedia electronic song cycle with one performer an opera, Rouse admits, "It's like performing a 75-minute pop song."

Capote claimed, with *In Cold Blood*, to have invented a new art form, the nonfiction novel (not with total justification, for there were arguably predecessors). "Without trying to be pretentious," Rouse continues over his Chef's Cassoulet Toulousan with white beans and delicate duck sausage (normally he's a connoisseur of truck stop food and Southern barbecue), "I wanted to come up with something as new as the nonfiction novel. I spent a year and a half making sketches and thinking about it. I tried speaking the text, but a lot of people had done that, and my music is too complex to be a background for someone talking. Then I asked, what would happen if I was talking in rhythm? So I made the first section, 'The Last To See Them Alive,' and it knocked me out. It changed the course of everything I've done."

He called his technique *Counterpoetry* on the analogy of counterpoint: he overdubs himself speaking in rhythm so that the listener hears several texts simul-

taneously, or else the same text in different rhythmic settings at once. (Spreading far beyond the opera for which it was intended, Rouse's Counterpoetry has become the basis for all of his songs, notably the ones on his recent disc *Living Inside Design* [New Tone].) *Failing Kansas* contains four major scenes linked by five interludes, and the big sections follow a crescendo of Counterpoetic technique. The interludes provide relief from the verbal denseness, and the postclimax is a disarmingly simple rock tune.

Knowing *In Cold Blood* will help you catch references, but unlike Richard Brooks's remarkably faithful 1967 film, Rouse doesn't stick with the book. Where Capote intercut masterfully among scenes of the family, the roving killers, and the frustrated police investigators, Rouse spends most of his opera inside the minds of the murderers—an interesting choice of strategies, considering he's the son of a Missouri state trooper. Much of his libretto centers around the experiences that turned Hickock and especially Smith into killers. Rouse chants, "She had a flashlight and she hit me with it," referring to the nuns who beat Smith for bed-wetting, and one interlude is taken from a letter Smith's father wrote to the parole board, damning his son while ostensibly defending him. A big parrot that Smith repeatedly dreams will save him is a recurrent motif—"Yellow like a sunflower, taller than Jesus." "Fortunes in diving!" shouts an ad that inspired one of Perry's get-rich-quick schemes. The murdered Clutters hardly appear, and in Baldwin's poster for the opera, they appropriately fade out of focus behind the vivid title lettering.

"Having grown up in the South, I'm sensitive to Capote's issues," Rouse explains. "He was the most talented writer of his generation but was denied a lot of the accolades and awards that go with that stature because of his background—which was that he was

basically self-taught. But beyond that, did I relate to the Clutter family? Yeah, I knew tons of people like that, growing up on the farm. Did I relate to the murderers, Dick and Perry? In some ways even more. When I think of the friends of mine who are dead now, because they grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, I think, 'How did I get here?' When one of my good friends laid across a railroad track and is dead. Another guy I knew killed himself in Russian roulette.

"The murderers were the people who were left behind to tell the story. I'm not trying to advocate sympathy for the murderer. But in terms of where we are, with 'three strikes you're out' and Pataki being governor, *In Cold Blood* is relevant because it's saying there are no simple solutions. What Capote makes clear in that book is that everyone had a potential for something. These guys had complex lives, and they could have been something. The murders are senseless, no doubt about it. But why don't people say, when something's senseless, that there's not an easy answer? They say, 'It's senseless, let's kill them.' It's crazy."

In making this opera, Rouse has fallen into an almost karmic relationship with Capote, periodically reinforced by odd coincidences, such as a friend stumbling across a rare edition of a Capote book and giving it to Rouse, or his meeting someone who had just visited the Clutter house. "The fact that these guys were on death row for five years meant Capote didn't have a finished book until he knew the ending. It also meant that he got to know them. At the end of it all, he went to the execution, and Perry gave him a 100-page letter, which no one's ever seen. Capote was a wreck for days afterward. He stayed in his room and couldn't stop sobbing.

"I think everything you want comes with a price, and he paid the ultimate price. He wrote one of the most important books in

American literature. He delved so far into the human psyche in trying to keep true to this new art form that he destroyed himself. He never recovered."

Rouse's upbringing in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, was so down-home rural that his favorite pastime was jumping from a horse onto a moving train. (His name is pronounced "Michael," by the way; he changed the spelling himself, deliberately, in grade school.) A triple-threat artist who studied painting and film at the Kansas City Art Institute and music across the street at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, he has always written his own lyrics and still carries a sketchbook to draw whatever scene he finds himself in, in a fresh caricatural style. Being in the boondocks helped him get his start. When Talking Heads played Kansas City in 1978, Rouse's rock band Tirez Tirez was the only local group progressive enough to open for the Downtown scenesters. "David Byrne liked us," Rouse recalls. "The next time they came into Kansas City, he called and gave me tickets to come backstage. The first time we played CBGB's, in 1980, he showed up, and after that it got easier."

Tirez Tirez relocated to New York in 1979, and performed until '87. In the meantime, Rouse had also formed Broken Consort, the keyboard-sax-bass-drums quartet for which most of his instrumental music is written (their most compelling disc to date is *Soul Menu*, also on New Tone). New music's best songwriter since David Garland, Rouse is one of the few composers equally at home in theatrical vocal music and abstract instrumental genres. "Others, like the noise music and improv people," he notes, "were using vernacular instruments, but I was the only one using jazz-rock instrumentation fully scored right down to the drum set. That's the first thing I set out to do."

Once in New York, Rouse

taught himself rhythmic techniques from A. M. Jones's two-volume tome *Studies in African Music*. Believing it was possible to learn perfect pitch through hypnosis, he found a willing hypnotist, Jerome Walman, and got more than he bargained for: Walman was also one of supposedly 50 people in the country qualified to teach Schillinger technique, the quasi-mathematical methodology for composing that Joseph Schillinger developed from natural number patterns, which was adopted by composers as diverse as George Gershwin and Earle Brown. "Schillinger was never a system like 12-tone music," says Rouse. "It was a set of vocabularies you could use to help your composition whether you were doing a pop tune or whatever, in any style. It got a bad rap because Tin Pan Alley songwriters used it. I was drawn to it because it was so naturally the way I thought. Everything I'm doing now is totally intuitive, but still framed by the method. Listen to 'The Corner' [the climax of *Failing Kansas*], where it's happening on so many multiple layers you'll never get all of it."

Rouse got considerable notice in the early '80s. Then, like everyone else writing carefully notated music, laid low during the late '80s while free improv dominated the scene. One of his biggest triumphs came last winter, when Ulysses Dove's dance piece for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, based on Rouse's 1984 work, *Quorum*, was presented with six dancers at City Center; the piece has been taped for national PBS broadcast March 1 on *Great Performances' Dance in America*. *Quorum*, innovatively scored for the once-groundbreaking Linn drum machine, is probably the first work to take the drum machine outside the context of pop and use it abstractly. A source work for Rouse's rhythmic ideas,

Music

it was originally an hour and 45 minutes, but "that was the pretension of youth," Rouse confesses. "For the dance, two 11-minute sections were enough."

Rouse has also found himself in the forefront of a movement called totalism, a word coined by composers tired of critics misidentifying them as minimalists. Totalism's idea is to have your cake and eat it too, by fusing the accessibility of minimalism with the complexity of serialism. In most cases, the complexity is invested more in the rhythm than in the melody or harmony. "Minimalist harmony," theorizes Rouse, "is welded to the rhythm and doesn't have that multiple element that happens with pitches in totalism. In the music I'm doing now, the rhythm dictates the harmonic progression. I get traditional cadences and resolutions, but totally dependent on the rhythm. Totalism also focuses more on the overall structure for the piece, something that minimal-

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ism lacked."

The simplest, most recognizable level on which Rouse's totalism works can be heard in "Answer," the sixth section of *Failing Kansas*, where he cycles three phrases over and over: "I know the form," "The secret is," and "People are dumb." He sings them on a pattern of four pitches: A, F-sharp, E, F-sharp. Since three phrases don't fit onto four pitches, they go out of phase. Phrase one is on A, two on F-sharp, three on E, one on F-sharp, two on A, three on F-sharp, and so on. Listening casually, you think it's a simple repeating pattern until you try to sing along, when you realize it's as difficult as patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time. The music is so tuneful that the most illiterate top-40 fan might think he could hum along with it (until he tries), yet the dense rhythmic layers contain Nancarrowian intricacies that would require the score and a calculator to unravel. Singing his Counterpoetry songs, Rouse looks calm and suave from the elbows up, but if you look at his fingers you'll notice he's counting beats like a madman.

You don't need to be aware of the numerical tricks to enjoy the music, but they keep the surface lively and surprising. Years ago Rouse had sent me a tape of "The

Last To See Them Alive." In it he speaks the text of "In the Garden," a hymn every Protestant remembers from childhood. I couldn't figure out why the rendition seemed so moving until our dinner at La Côte Basque, when he pointed out that he retained the 6/8 meter of the hymn in his speaking, but the musical accompaniment is in 4/4 (the eighth-note being equal in both meters). The emotionalism I attributed to mere nostalgia was at least heightened (if not created) by the tension between the two beat patterns. Such tricks draw your ear into the music the way optical illusions draw your eye. The totalists have resuscitated the medieval insight that music is the medium that can translate numbers into feeling.

In April, La Côte Basque is leaving the location it's occupied since 1941, and the historic atmosphere will be lost; the fact added urgency to our dinner. Needless to say, we weren't seated in the place's prestigious front room where Capote set his fateful story, but it did gratify us that our waiter, an older man, remembered seeing him around. And if I picked up any scandalous gossip sitting there, I'm not telling. I know where my bread's buttered. ■

Failing Kansas premieres at the Kitchen, February 2 through 4. Call 255-5793 for details.

Grim Reaper

By Evelyn McDonnell

Michelle Shocked

In "Winter Wheat," a new folk ballad Michelle Shocked played in a surprise gig at the Mercury Lounge January 19, a farmer waits for the arrival of the machine that he depends on to harvest his crop each year. The lateness of the custom cutter threatens his livelihood: "I was counting on this crop to lay my mortgage down," Shocked sang. The lament of an agriculturalist in an industrial age, the song's a clear metaphor for Shocked's own creative state; "Winter Wheat" is on an album called *Kind Hearted Woman* that Shocked's own mechanical reaper, Mercury Records (no relation to the club), has refused to release. "I wish to God that they had dropped me," a frustrated but chipper Shocked told the crowd. "They don't want what I have to offer, but they don't want anyone else to have it either." "The grain is groaning on the stems," she sang about the wheat, or about her songs.

Shocked has tried to do some manual harvesting, "accidentally" touring the country the past year,

bringing material from the still-unreleased album to an audience herself. DIY-ing it "has been more financially rewarding than being on a major label ever was," she reported. In town to do the *Letterman* show, 'Shell played two nights at the Mercury, accompanied by Hot-house Flowers guitarist Fiachna O'Braonain and bassist-bouzoukist Peter O'Toole. She looked and sounded great, warning early on that her jovial mood didn't fit the songs' serious nature.

That distance from her work's emotional content once again aroused my nagging doubts about the genuineness of Shocked's clever, folksy charm. I've still never forgotten my disappointment the first time I saw her perform: Being completely taken with this punk unplugged's free-spirited naturalism; returning the next night to hear the exact same show repeated, every dimpled bit of banter intact. Six years later Shocked's tomboy-hobo-skateboard-punk persona understates the seriousness of her accomplishments and the maturity of her songs. As she hooted it up while the packed-in, sweaty audience gasped for air, I kept wondering, Are we having fun yet?

But who am I to judge a stage manner for being staged? Shocked covers her singer-songwriter-confessor mode in vaudevillian clothing; her stories tickle, she's cute as a button, and she sure can carry a tune. On *Kind Hearted Woman*—a different kind of live album, I suppose—Shocked seems to have returned to the folk song craft of her first two records (although the drummerless evening may have toned down her performance). The songs deal with grave issues—death, disappointment, exploitation—that clearly have personal resonance for Shocked, even if she chooses to tell them through fables of midwives and firebugs.

For the daughter of a broken marriage who ran away from home (or was kicked out, as one new song tells it), was institutionalized by her mom, got raped in Europe, and once lived in the famous beer-vat squats of San Francisco (OK, maybe that was fun), being dicked around by her label probably isn't the end of the world. Although at times it might feel like it. "Some of these songs have a twisted, bitter subtext," she laughed at the Mercury, then plunged into the tale of the farmer and his wheat. ■

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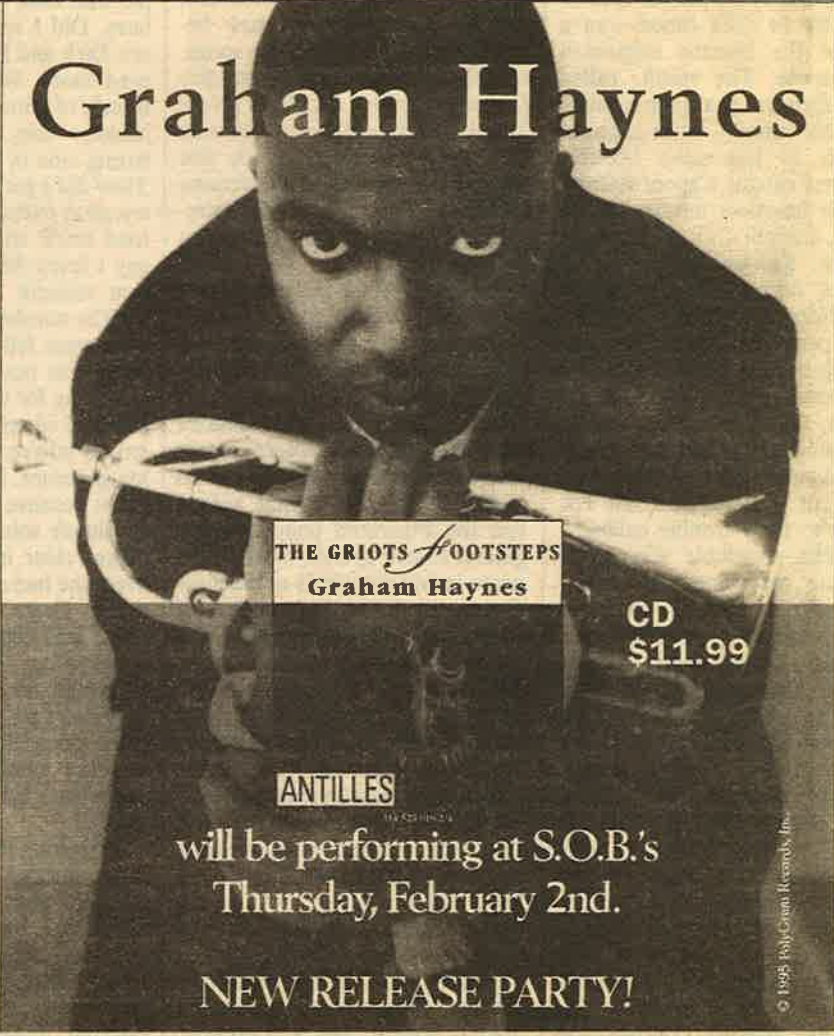
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