



Vaudeville and jazz mix in a kind of punk cabaret

BY DAVIDA SINGER

The zany performance orchestra Coochoohandler just finished a nearly sold out four-day run at The Kitchen with a show they call "The Myth of Cosmogonia." The group of eclectic musicians (Paul Braucher, Tom Burnett, Matt Hausmann, and David Yearwood, plus guests Elliott Levin and Michael Leonhart) can next be caught locally in December at Baby Jupiter's on Stanton St. They're also playing as the official band for the 1998 New York Fringe Festival next summer.

Who are they, and what exactly do they do?

"This all started with David (bass) and Matt (drums) 20 years ago, when they were in kindergarten together in Alton, Illinois," Burnett explains after a Friday night show. "The recent New York incarnation began when Paul was Matt's art teacher in college, four or five years ago. They formed a band that opened for the soaps at Cucaracha Theatre. I was in those soaps, and I play keyboards, so we started jamming together. From that, we created a full show, 'The Box Game,' which ran at Cucaracha in the summer of 1994."

Coochoohandler came about that fall — the name derived from a character in James Joyce's 'Finnegan's Wake.' Their work is billed as a "post-Freudian Jazz-Punk Cabaret, moving freely from chamber music to freak show."

"We did gigs showing up as different bands," says Burnett. "This is certainly a culmination of three years' work. 'The Myth of Cosmogonia' was an idea that grew out of a big space we had to fill up. We collaborate with the writing, and the music (mostly done by Yearwood) is jazz, rock and roll, classical influences, and free form improvisation

mixed in."

The show is "exhausting," he tells me. A combination of avant garde jazz with tongue-in-cheek vaudevillian presentation.

The story takes place in the mythological land of Cosmogonia, a place "where our imagination can run wild."

"There's a metaphoric relationship to our world," Burnett, 43, who directs the piece, reports. "But it's really a whacked out children's show for children of all ages."

The lush primal set, complete with digital video work is done by guitarist-painter Hausmann, Rani Saha and Kevin Scott. Some of the cast are improvisation artists from Burn Manhattan (at NADA), and all parts of the whole seem to ooze into each other, or as Burnett notes, "we all overlap."

Organizing so many people (about 30) on "no money," ("We did the whole production on \$2,000"), has been the only nightmare. So Burnett hopes for an audience response of "feeling good, and appreciative of the crazy energy we put into this."

"The way we work our shows," he adds, "is we have mix and match from all our gigs. Then we build, add, subtract. This particular show we'd love to do a lot. We're looking at the college circuit right now. It could be a 'Stomp' or 'Blue Man' kind of thing. This is just a logical next step for all the members of the band. We need some plot development, but then again, it's not so far off."

No myth intended.