

# Abstract Rock, Psycho-Acoustics, and Schubert

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By Tom Johnson

Contrary to some common misconceptions, the music coming out of SoHo these days is not all minimal, is not all cool and intellectual, is not all influenced by John Cage, is not all conceptual, and is not all like a Philip Glass concert. Perhaps the only safe generalization one can make is that the genre has many different sides and forms new ones every few weeks.

Peter Gordon's latest music, presented at the Kitchen on October 9, is extremely sensuous. It is expressed through a slick pop-rock language with simple harmony, and strikes out boldly, seeking large audiences and large spaces. Its main purpose is to generate a new pop-classical hybrid, and I suspect that the style has been influenced by Brian Eno, Terry Riley, and probably others.

The main work of the evening was a prerecorded tape, eventually to be issued as an LP, which goes under the delightful title *Star Jaws*. There are saxophone solos, teenage-love lyrics, synthesizer effects, and conventional bass and drum parts, pretty much the sort of thing one finds on commercial rock albums these days, but in the background there is also quite a bit of intellect and abstraction. At one point the line "Life is boring ever since you went away" is repeated about 20 times over a shifting accompaniment. At another point I started listening to two saxophones in the background and discovered that they were revolving around themselves in a strict permutation process. At another point a series of five-beat horn lines shifted against a four-beat drum rhythm. Most of the numbers are instrumentals, one running almost 10 minutes.

For a low-budget, do-it-yourself project, *Star Jaws* is very well-produced. With the help of the recording facilities at Mills College, a fine recording engineer and musician named "Blue" Gene Tyranny, a number of talented friends, and an extraordinary amount of patience, Gordon managed to maintain high standards of performance, recording, and mixing throughout. I think one would be hard pressed to make any significant improvements with all the money in *Black Rock*.

Rhys Chatham's latest music, presented by the Experimental Intermedia Foundation on September 29, is not sensuous at all. It is expressed through an extremely soft, high-register electronic tone with no harmony whatever, and it presents itself gently, content with a tiny audience in a tiny space. Its main purpose is to investigate how we perceive sound, and I suspect that the style has been influenced by the composer Maryanne Amacher, and probably many acousticians and psycho-acousticians.

The audience that night was confined to a small portion of a quiet loft space at 537 Broadway, enclosed in white drapery. Chatham sat at the center with a couple of electronic tone generators and some mixing and amplifying equipment. After a brief explanation, the music began,



Peter Gordon's music is sensuous. Rhys Chatham's music is not. Both work comfortably in SoHo.

but it was a long time before I could hear it. Eventually I began to perceive a barely audible whistling, which rose and fell in gradual increments. The loudspeakers were nowhere to be seen, and the difficulty of locating the sound was one of the appealing mysteries of the music. Another was the way the tone would disappear and reappear. Sometimes it would rise beyond my range of hearing, or soften to a point where it really was inaudible, but often I was not sure whether I was hearing it or not. Everyone has extremely soft little ringing sounds in their ears all the time, and Chatham's music is close enough to those sounds that everything gets mixed up. Reality and illusion take on a new dimension. Of course, our individual ears vary quite a bit, and when I compared impressions later on, I found that some people had heard more of Chatham's music than I had, while others had not heard as much. Someone who was 80 years old, or who had a hearing defect, probably would not have been able to hear any of it.

One could say that Chatham's music does not have a purely musical form, since the main thing that guides its progress is the composer's desire to demonstrate certain aural phenomena. Nor can Chatham take complete credit for those portions of the concert that were really produced by our own inner ears. But even if you prefer to consider it psycho-acoustic research rather than art, you must still admit that this is the kind of research that which could only be done by a musician with a pair of very keen ears, and that it provides us with some unprecedented listening experiences.

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