

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
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LESS AND LESS

Richard Teitelbaum

Jon Gibson and Harold Budd, who recently shared a pair of evenings at the Kitchen, are two California composers whose crucial roles in the development of the minimalist movements of the past 20 years have been little recognized. Gibson, based in New York since the mid-'60s, is the far better known here, though more through his associations with others (Philip Glass, Steve Rich, Terry Riley and La Monte Young) than for his own considerable contributions.

I first heard Gibson play in 1967 at the old Park Place gallery on West Broadway. It was Steve Reich's first major concert in New York after his return from California, where he and Gibson had both played in the first performances of Terry Riley's seminal *In C*. At the Park Place, Gibson played one of Reich's early minimalist pieces, *Reed Phase*.

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Listening to Gibson phasing endless streams of notes against his taped double was all the more astonishing by his use of circular breathing, a technique few Western wind players — outside of jazz masters like Roland Kirk — had mastered at that time. The newness of the repetition idiom, the continuously shifting aural focus of the phasing (which suggested an analogy to some of the op art then current) and Gibson's ability to play for some eight minutes without apparently taking a single breath, all combined to produce a startling experience. That year I had the good fortune to first hear Terry Riley's extraordinary soprano-sax *cum* tape-delay performance in his old loft on Grand Street — music he was then developing into the classic *Poppy No Good and His Phantom Band*. Much later I learned it was Gibson who had first introduced Riley to playing the soprano, and given him some early instruction on the instrument.

In the late '60s and early '70s, Gibson continued to work with Reich, played for a while with La Monte Young (whose static drone and repetition pieces of the late '50s and early '60s provided, in the opinion of many, the conceptual basis for the whole movement) and, for the past 10 years, has remained in the service of the music as the mainstay of the Philip Glass Ensemble. At the same time, Gibson has developed his own compositional direction, rooted (as he says) in minimalism and jazz. Though most of his colleagues have also grown out of jazz roots (Riley in collaborations with Chet Baker, Young with such California jazz musicians of the '50s as Don Cherry, and Reich through the Third Stream channel), Gibson's approach has remained more open and improvisatory. His compositional structures often set down a scale or sequence of notes whose "phrasing, articulation, rhythm, tempo, dynamics and feeling" are treated freely by the performer. In the past few years Gibson has concentrated on solo pieces, such as those on his most recent Chatham Square (LP 24) album. *Untitled* (1974), for alto flute, is a lyrical, gently flowing modal melody, with subtly changing groupings and phrase articulations. This piece has been used by Merce Cunningham to provide a superb foil to his dance *Fractions*, performed in this version by Gibson through an Eventide Harmonizer, which provides a simultaneous electronic double of the flute line.

Faint Pulse

At his recent Kitchen concert, Gibson returned to the ensemble format: *Variations*, described as a work in progress, began as a fairly fast-tempo pulse piece for soprano saxophone, electric keyboard, piano and vibraphone, whose textures and colors strongly suggest Southeast Asian percussion ensemble music. As the piece progresses short pauses are introduced, breaking the obsessiveness of the pulse, and then the entire piece begins, very gradually, to slow down until the sense of pulse is virtually

Japanese court music (Gagaku).

Such breakings and bendings of the pulse are simple ideas in themselves, but when applied to a style that has made a virtue of being relentless, provide an amazing and welcome contrast. If such a trend toward greater flexibility were to develop, it would not be the first time Jon Gibson's talents and ideas had contributed measurably to the new music's continued growth.

Harold Budd, who shared the bill at the Kitchen, has composed minimalist works for the past 15 years while living in relative obscurity in southern California. He has had, nevertheless, a significant influence on the development of the softer, more romantic style that has been adopted by a number of composers in the past few years. His piece *Lovely Thing* (1967) is a simple repeated chord played on the piano so softly that all the notes should never actually sound simultaneously. In the early '70s, beginning with the *Madrigals of the Rose Angels*, Budd began to write gently flowing tonal and modal melodies over slowly repeated or arpeggiated seventh and ninth chords — music sounding somehow like a cross between Satie and Coltrane (whose "After the Rain" Budd adapted in one of his own works). Budd's recent album, *Pavilion of Dreams* (on Obscure Records), offers several such pieces, including one featuring alto saxophonist Marion Brown.

Aside from the jazz connection, Budd's music (as well as that of a number of his past students such as Peter Garland, Michael Byron, David Mahler and William Hawley) has paralleled a direction taken by a number of English composers since the late '60s and early '70s, including Gavin Breyers, Howard Skempton and, more recently, Brian Eno. Though the Californian and English groups began independently, they may have had a common predecessor in Terry Jennings, a Californian whose dreamy, modal piano pieces from the early '60s were known on both sides of the Atlantic through their publication in La Monte Young's 1963 *Anthology*. Since then, such publications as *Soundings* and *Pieces* in this country and the *Experimental Music Catalogue* in London, as well as record labels such as Eno's Obscure, have enhanced communication, and Budd and Eno have now produced a collaborative album which will soon be released on the new Ambient label.

At the Kitchen, Budd performed a number of his *Preludes*, described as "a cycle of improvised works for solo piano." The pieces, composed of slow, simple melodies over repetitive harmonic progressions, were unashamedly luscious, creating a dreamy sentimental atmosphere that induced a kind of hypnagogic state between sleep and wakefulness. For some listeners the unrestrained sweetness was perhaps too beautiful to hear, but those who let themselves be taken by it were rewarded with a feeling of peace and calm.

Richard Teitelbaum is a composer, performer, musicologist, video artist and writer (among other pursuits). This is the