

MUSIC

By NEIL STRAUSS

Forever Young. When composer La Monte Young sits down to perform, it might be six and a half hours before he stands up again. When he tunes his piano, it can take up to two weeks. When he starts composing a piece, it is sometimes 25 years before he finishes. La Monte Young is a musician who lives outside the confines of time; today, however, he sounds desperate.

"This is the first time I've had to play for the door in years," he frets over the phone about his upcoming concert series at the Kitchen (starting Sat.-Sun., Jan. 9-10, and continuing Jan. 12, 14 and 15). Though he's underestimating his potential draw—La Monte Young is one of the most important composers of the last 25 years, and the fact that he's even calling me asking for help is flattering—I'm eager to swing by his Soho loft to talk about his upcoming project, the Forever Bad Blues Band.

"Take your time," Young urges as I hang up the phone. He's funny with time. Though his works may seem to stretch hours into eons, not a single moment is ever extraneous. Try asking him what time it is, and he will give you the hour, the minute, and the exact second, as if each one counts. To him, time is a state, not a small event; his life work is a continuity, extended in duration from his first composition exercises in school to this Forever Bad Blues Band.

When La Monte Young says he's playing with a blues band, it's not going to be the blues as you and I know it. Not only does Young work with his own system of changes and tunings, but he pulls and stretches the blues like a well-worn dental dam.

Young's collaborator and eternal companion, Marian Zazeela, greets me at the door of their Soho sanctuary and walks me to him. Sporting an old, unbuttoned jeans jacket with cut-off sleeves, an Axl Rose-style bandanna, a tangle of gray beard tied in a knot at the end, and a "Tune It or Die" button, La Monte Young is looking forever bad. He hangs up the phone, pulls my face into his gray chest hair, and gives me a bear hug. If I had known I'd be getting a bear hug from the granddaddy of minimalism when I was begging friends to let me borrow their copy of *An Anthology* (Young's classic Fluxus/Concept Art book), barking up every tree I knew (unsuccessfully) to find tapes of his Theatre of Eternal Music band with original Velvet Underground members John Cale and Angus MacLise, and fruitlessly scouring music libraries for recordings of his pioneering serialist-minimalist work *Trio for Strings*...I never would have believed it.

Young and Zazeela quickly bring me up to date on their activities during the past few months, their sold-out performances and tremendous reviews in Germany and Austria, their cover story in *Flash Art* that oddly reprints an interview from 1972 without mentioning Young's current work, and their hope to install a *Dream House* (a continuous sound and light installation) in the apartment above their Church St. loft next month. Young picks up a white album at his feet and shows it to me sadly, pointing out that it's the first bootleg of his music since he first started writing pieces almost 40 years ago. It's a crushing blow for Young, not because his reputation is built on compositions and collaborations that have never



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been released, but because he's so careful not to let his tapes fall into the wrong hands.

The dark history of minimalism sits silently on cassettes meticulously catalogued and filed in boxes, drawers, and shelves around the loft. The white-label bootleg, a double-album voted by *Wire* as one of the "100 most important records ever made," features an early version of Young's seminal *The Well-Tuned Piano*, a rare excerpt of *Map of 49's Dream* featuring jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz and composers David Rosenboom and Jon Hassell playing with Young and Zazeela, and a side I would have gladly traded my textbooks for in high school: John Cale, Angus MacLise, and Tony Conrad performing *Sunday Morning Blues* with Young and Zazeela.

Though you may know Young as the pioneer of minimalism, the guiding light behind Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* and the sponsor of Pandit Pran Nath's New Yorkraga cycles, he's been playing his own version of the blues since before 1961, when he recorded *Aeolian Blues* with Terry Jennings, which, with its static rhythm, unique riffs and odd intensity, is unlike anything to come before it. A little over a decade later, Young had stretched his 12-bar blues into a 12-day blues, so that each chord change took 24 hours. Now, the blues are back in performable time: recent versions of *The Well-Tuned Piano* include blues breaks, and the Forever Bad Blues Band play their changes within a reasonable duration.

Just as the blues are one influence in a style of composition that encompasses everything from Indian classical music to Webern to the humming of power lines, the Forever Bad Blues Band is about a lot more than the blues. Listening to Young's *Dorian Blues in C*—the sole, two-hour piece in the band's repertoire—I'm filled with the same urgent, excited feeling I felt when I first heard something as agonizingly beautiful as Robert Johnson's "Stones in My Passway." Only Young is approaching blues from the other side, the top side, where harmonic theory and microtonal minutiae are the gates that free the flow of emotion. Partly due to Young's mathemat-

ical and compositional precision, his grasp of the real meaning of musical intervals, his deeply ingrained spirituality and romanticism, and his coherence to the universal truth of sound, there's a beauty in the piece that goes beyond math, beyond the blues, and beyond music.

After all, Young's got other things on his mind besides music. When Terry Riley first met Young at UCLA in the 50s, he was attracted to the composer because he "was the most psychedelic-looking person in the class."

With equally important performance roles as Young's in this organic band are Jon and Brad Catler, who play just intonation (fretless) guitar and bass, respectively, and drummer Jonathan Kane. With Kane boating the traps and the Catlers riffing like they've grown up on John Lee Hooker, it almost seems this is La Monte Young's first rock band. Almost. "It's a lot like a rock band," says Young as we sit down to talk about the upcoming performances, "but we play one song for two hours."

On the table in front of us sits a cassette of selected cuts by Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters—obviously Young's been brushing up on his blues chops. "One thing that led me into creating the Forever Bad Blues Band," he explains, "was the fact that over the years I would go and hear some of my old friends play jazz in clubs, and I would sort of miss it."

"You mean you would miss playing," Zazeela corrects him. Clearly, Young hasn't been missing concerts, because this new project owes a debt to his hearing Jon Catler's just intonation rock and blues groups J.C. & the Microtones and Steel Blue among other bands. (Young's even been spotted at Love Child shows.)

"The thing is that when I was playing jazz back in the 50s and toward the early 60s," Young continues, "I felt that there were many other things that I wanted to do in music, and that it would have been difficult to do those things and still have it be called jazz. It was easier to just say that I was going to do music, and eventually I didn't worry about whether it was music, and I did sound; and eventually I didn't care if it was labelled sound or not."

(Many of Young's works, like *Composition 1960 #10*—"Draw a straight line and follow it"—can be soundless.)

Now that Young has a few more decades of composition and education behind him, he feels ready to return to genre-specific experimentation, taking the modal style of *Aeolian Blues* from 30 years back and bringing to it not just the ethos of a four-piece rock band but all the frequency relationships and harmonic theory he's learned since then. The piece retains Young's minimalist keyboard signature that dates back to *Aeolian Blues*—a percussive, rhythmic drone where each chord is sustained and repeated—but now the tuning is in new, complex harmonic interrelationships, the vertical space between notes is just as important as the horizontal space in creating emotional impact, and the seventh partial (a musical area Young has staked out as his turf) is used as the source for certain minor degrees of the scale. This band is probably the only blues outfit that thinks in terms of creating clouds of overtones.

"More and more," Young continues, "I was thinking about the fact that I wanted to play blues again, and that I wanted it to be something that I could let happen in the terms of conventional concert format, because the major works that I'm willing to perform today—*The Well-Tuned Piano* and the Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band works—are pieces that I require two to three months on location to perform. I decided sometime in the 60s that I was going to stop performing the works of other people and that I was going to devote my life to performing my own works, because life is short and very few people understood my music."

The Forever Bad Blues Band is a traveling group, a way for Young to perform more often without compromising his strict performance standards. "I felt that the blues band would allow me to put my whole heart and soul into a work that would be totally serious but not as complex as *The Well-Tuned Piano* or what the Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band plays," Young continues. "So, therefore, I would be able to go in and do the sound check at four o'clock and play the concert at eight or nine and we would pack up that night and get on the train the next day and go on to the next place. This is what concert producers have wanted from me for years and years, and exactly what I was absolutely unwilling to give them."

Young tugs at his knotted beard, thinks a while, and reexamines the piece from another angle. "The greatest danger with the Blues Band is the more I play it, the more it will become a highly developed, monumental piece." Keep in mind that *The Well-Tuned Piano*, which now clocks in at almost seven hours, began as a 50-minute piece over a quarter of a century ago. Even the composition the Forever Bad Blues Band is currently playing, *Young's Dorian Blues*, dates back to 1960. To La Monte Young, a composition is an open-ended proposition.

In fact, as we sit there discussing the Blues Band, Young starts toying with the idea of stretching the piece from two hours to four, but Marian Zazeela subtly stops him. "I think the other musicians might not be happy about that," she warns.

"It's very hard on the drummer," Young reconsiders. "Jonathan Kane's hands are bleeding at the end of the concerts..."

"We have on his tech list a bucket of ice for the end of every performance so he can put his hands in it," Zazeela says, completing Young's sentence.

"His endurance has picked up a lot since we started playing together," muses Young, no stranger to playing hard and ag-