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With a Tinge Of the Riff

By JON PARELES

Friday was the night of the riff at the Kitchen, when three avant-rock bands — Dr. Nerve, Blast and the Slash Orchestra — opened a series called "Gruppen: Chamber Music for the 21st Century." The series, which continues through Saturday, presents "composer-led ensembles," which are more often found in rock, jazz and downtown new music than in classical chamber music.

Through the concert, riffs were socked out, broken into shards, strung together, layered, tossed away or obstinately repeated. Generally, the compositions used discrete blocks of sound, every pattern soon to be broken. Development meant textural thickening rather than melodic or harmonic evolution; each change, as planned, was a jolt.

Dr. Nerve, an eight-member band (two trumpets, two saxophones, vibraphone or keyboard, guitar, electric bass, drums) from New York City, offered a bristling, caustic update of 1970's progressive rock. Nick Didkovsky, Dr. Nerve's guitarist and composer, writes shifting, odd-meter rhythms and melodic lines that hop around the chromatic scale. Often the music turns into a dissonant lattice of riffs, with saxophone flurries or skittering vibraphone lines erupting as improvisations, in proportions only the composer could predict. There were echoes of Soft Machine, Zappa and King Crimson, but with less breathing space or melodic respite. The music is brash, tricky, obnoxious and proud of it.

The octet was joined by the Soldier String Quartet, an electrified string quartet, in three pieces called deconstructions. With improvisations and



Sozanne DeChillo for The New York Times

The band Dr. Nerve performing at the opening of the series "Gruppen: Chamber Music for the 21st Century."

pre-existing material cued by Mr. Didkovsky's conducting, the music was about interruption and entropy; shards of melody surfaced from twittering, glowering orchestral textures. "Rite," using Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," merely smudged Stravinsky's riffs with modest irreverence. The music may have been more fun to play than to hear.

Blast, from Holland, includes alto saxophone (Wim Van der Maas), guitar (Frank Crijns), drums (Ruud van Helvert) and either baritone saxo-

phone or electric bass (Dirk Bruinsma). In compositions by Mr. Bruinsma and Mr. Crijns, the basic style was minimalist funk using circular, overlapping saxophone lines. There were also guitar solos influenced by Robert Fripp with notes stretched like taffy to savor biting dissonances, jokey vocals by Mr. Bruinsma and honking, squiggling saxophone improvisations. As with Dr. Nerve, the music was quick-changing and intricate, but it grew monochromatic.

The Slash Orchestra rode on James Lo's muscular, unswerving drumbeats and Konrad Kinard's electric-bass riffs, with Wayne Frost adding guitar noise and Steve McAllister (credited with "processing") throwing more distortion into the mix. Mr. Kinard also sang, in a baritone voice like a relaxed Jim Morrison, about love and the Devil. By and large, the Slash Orchestra is a relatively conventional funk band; it could be playing in clubs if it didn't take so long to tune between each song.

La Monte Young Band Explores Sonic Space

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

During La Monte Young's performance of his genre of blues, accompanied by the Forever Bad Blues Band at the Kitchen on Sunday night, an enormous haze of sound rose from the electronic instruments and drums. The playing seemed to create an auditory space with its own dimension and depth, within which the music took place. As in Mr. Young's other works, the listener was always discovering something about that sound, the way it shimmered around the edges or seemed to change color. Sharply emerging were drum beats, and here and there muscular electric guitar licks, variations on simple patterns that resembled traditional blues but that had a very different effect.

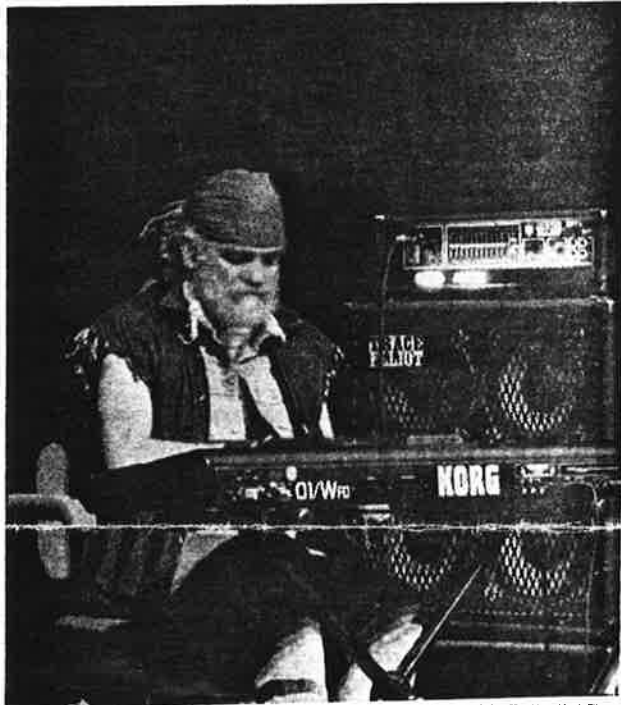
When the playing stopped, after two hours of continuous projection at high volume, a high-pitched ringing continued despite the silence. It was a sign of trauma to the ear, but its pitch was eerily precise, as if it were a high internal overtone created and reinforced by an evening of sounds all in the same musical mode, produced by instruments all tuned using La Monte Young's signature method.

That tuning rejects the "equal tempered" spacing of notes of the piano and most Western instruments; equal temperament is actually a mistuning that makes relationships between notes slightly inexact for the sake of flexibility. Mr. Young (and others who have followed his example) uses "just intonation" in which tuning is precise. The result is that each note finds echoes in the overtones of another; there is more reso-

nance and unexpected reinforcement between the notes. Mr. Young has specialized in exploring that unusual sonic space. With the creation of such works as "The Well-Tuned Piano," he became an almost archetypal figure of the musical counterculture, devoted to varieties of Indian music while acting as a pioneer of Western Minimalism.

In this case, "Young's Dorian Blues in G," as the evening's improvisation was called, was part of the Gruppen series of new-music groups at the Kitchen. The piece harked back to Mr. Young's early musical career when he played jazz and learned blues from listening to Charlie Parker. His own variety of blues dates back to before 1961: he made alterations in the regular 12-bar series of simple harmonies that can characterize the blues, and used a single modal scale without any chromatic alterations. When this approach was combined with just intonation (on the Korg synthesizer, played by Mr. Young, and on the electric guitars, played by Jon and Brad Catler), that shimmering cloud emerged, and the music took shape within it. Mr. Young may also have some historical justification for his approach to blues tuning: blues often involves microtonal bending of notes and does not attain its expressivity through modulation but through melodic twists; it is personal, vocal music and is not directly connected with ordinary instrumental intervals.

But despite the articulated rhythms of Jonathan Kane's drumming and the imaginative playing of Jon Catler, this was not the blues of personal narrative, revealing a pri-



C. M. Hardt for The New York Times

La Monte Young in performance on Sunday night at the Kitchen.

vate and pained world. At first it seemed almost bland, as if drained of blood; melodic tensions were muted by the consonant musical surroundings. Chords were sustained for long periods. There was intense burning during the performance, and magenta and pink lighting — by Marian Zazeela, Mr. Young's wife — that slowly changed with the music. (Additional performances are tonight,

Thursday and Friday). Finally, however, the music emerged as an intriguing combination of blues, 1960's happening, Eastern esthetic, rock and Minimalism. The point was not confession but contemplation, not a private world but an abstract one. The music left its impact in that ringing internal overtone and in the sense of immersion in a distinctive musical world.