

Pitchfork

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It's been 35 years since Glenn Branca released *The Ascension* and still nothing sounds quite like it. A landmark work that fused the rigorous minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich to clanging, noxious harmonies and thundering rock volumes, the record encapsulated the fury, pathos, and raw energy of New York at the beginning of the '80s. The resulting music influenced a generation of musicians, particularly a local group of ragtag art kids named Sonic Youth whose members Lee Ranaldo and Thurston Moore played in early incarnations of his ensemble and whose 1982 debut record he released on Neutral Records. Rooted in No Wave but drawing inspiration from all corners of 20th century composition, punk, and jazz, Branca's career has seen him working with symphonic orchestras, filmmaker Peter Greenaway, and, most notably, 100-electric-guitar ensembles. He is now returning to his "rock band," presenting *The Third Ascension*, a followup to his 1981 milestone, at the Kitchen on February 23rd and 24th.

Pitchfork: How's it going?

Glenn Branca: What, that's how you're starting? Uh...It sucks?

Pitchfork: I wanted to start by asking about your new piece, the third installment in *The Ascension*, following number 1 in 1981, and number 2 in 2010. Can you tell me a little bit about how the three pieces relate?

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GB: It's four guitars, bass, and drums. It's exactly the same setup at the original Ascension. The tunings are different, I usually use different tunings with different pieces but the general idea was to create an updated version of the Ascension concept. We have performed some of them before but I'm constantly revising and updating a piece until it's finally recorded. Once it's recorded, then it's over. But even now in rehearsal I'll be making changes. I'm never happy with anything.

Pitchfork: I've seen a few modern pieces where they'll have an electric guitar in a more traditional chamber ensemble and a lot of the time it feels weirdly tacked on. Your music is so intense and has this vicious quality. How do you bring that out in the performances?
GB: Well, the conducting has a lot to do with it. I communicate to them what I want by the way I move. The very first time I ever conducted without actually playing a guitar was in my Symphony #1 and I had a guitar part in that piece and I was basically just giving cues with the guitar. But the first movement just wasn't working so I put my guitar down on the floor. We had about 16 musicians.

Pitchfork: This is at the concert, not the rehearsal?

GB: At the concert. They just weren't giving it to me. So I put the guitar on the floor and just started conducting and the whole thing just completely changed and the music started to emerge from the group, and it was clear that it was necessary for me to be indicating physically what the fuck is supposed to be happening. And since then I've just conducted, I don't play the guitar anymore.

Pitchfork: So this is a technique you developed on your own, outside of formal conducting techniques?

GB: I did what was necessary in order to get what I wanted to hear and it was amazing how well it worked. I was shocked. All of a sudden the whole band just kicked in. I do it every way that you could possibly imagine. Whatever works for the piece I'm thinking about is the way I write... I pursued that idea really intensely for many years. but then I started wanting to do other things. In a way I felt I've gone about as far with that as you could possibly take it.

Pitchfork: With the masses of guitars?

GB: Yeah. And when I reached a point where I felt I had gotten it, I wanted to try other things. I wanted to try to get that sound with a symphony orchestra and I worked on that for years. And in some cases I got it and in other cases I did not. But to get that sound that I used to call acoustic phenomena, it needs to be loud. It starts sounding like voices, it starts sounding like whole orchestras all playing at the same time.

Pitchfork: Kind of like auditory illusions.

GB: They are illusions. Everybody hears something different. And there was a point in which it had its moment. I can only refer to it as magical. When everything is happening

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just right, and the audience is right there with it. It's like the zeitgeist. It's really very subjective. And there was a point in which it just stopped.



Pitchfork: When was that point?

GB: In the '80s. It was so new. And there was absolutely no one doing anything like it. And the audience was just flabbergasted. At that time in the early to mid '80s I was getting a sound that was freaking people out. It was that crazy. It was freaking me out sometimes.

I liked rock music going back to the '60s, but I never ever had any desire to be a rock musician and when I started doing a band it was experimental music. Theoretical Girls was experimental rock. A friend of ours, Dan Graham, heard that we were putting a band together and he said, "Well I'm doing a show at Franklin Furnace, why don't you play after my show." So we had three weeks to write all the songs. Get all the equipment together. Rehearse everything and it was an immediate hit. And as it turned out there were other bands in N.Y. at the time that had the same kinds of ideas. We didn't even know about these guys. Like DNA...

A journalist called it No Wave and it stuck. I had been composing for my theater group and also for a group I had in Boston called the Dubious Music Ensemble. So I was always very seriously interested in music and when this opportunity arose I just started pushing it. And for years I called my music rock music, although I can tell you when *The Ascension* was released nobody at all called it rock music. I know at this point that seems impossible to believe.

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Pitchfork: No, I think it's very possible. It has none of the actual musical tropes of rock. You could say it rocks but it doesn't rock like rock rocks.

GB: You got it. I had been listening to people like Penderecki and Messiaen and Ligeti as well as the jazz music of the '60s, especially what Miles was doing. And I wanted to take all of that and put it into the context of rock music. There were a lot of people doing new and interesting things with rock. But I wanted to take it farther than that. My real influence was punk. I must have listened to the first Patti Smith album 300 times.

Pitchfork: I'm curious about the piece that you wrote three years ago, "The End of Music," for the New York Times. You talk about how that there have been tremendous advancements in music technology but not tremendous advancements in musical quality. Let's just imagine that you could decide: What would a bright music future look like?

GB: In my mind, I was going all the way back to the Moog synthesizer. And how this was going to change music forever. Well, it didn't do shit. The kind of electronic music that I liked was what was called *musique concrète*. But this Moog synthesizer shit was abysmal. And the way it was used in rock bands was horrifying and ridiculous. And then all you have to do is go through the various technological changes that have come since the original synthesizer. You know you got the polyphonic synthesizer and then you got samplers and it just kept progressing and every time a new one has come along, everyone said it's going to change the face of music. And what ended up changing the face of music? Two turntables and a microphone.

I liked to fuck around with both instruments and recording devices, and I would even make fun of synthesizer music by making synthesizer sounds and then slowing them down and speeding them up and changing the tone. I would use corks squeaking in wine bottles. I would use gigantic metal screws that I would slide a piece of metal up and down on. I could create music that sounded as strange as any electronic music, because you see, my opinion about electronic music is that the real composer is the guy who invented the instrument. Pressing buttons is not composing. Composing is about creating something. Nowadays, I think of myself of a primitivist. I have never had any of these electronic instruments and I have never had the slightest interest in using them. I use the computer as a tool, simply because it makes composing a lot faster. But I don't go on stage with a computer and make a lot of goofy sounds.

Music is about imagination. It's about thought. It's about creating something from nothing. Not taking somebody else's creation, like a synthesizer or a sampler, or a sequencer or a computer, and then fooling around with it. That's somebody else's creation. The creation has already been made. And it scares me that people are going to stop writing music. I don't mean music that has to be physically written down, but they'll stop using their brain which is without a doubt the most powerful tool that you could have in any art. And they're just going to jerk around with other people's creations. Make a bunch of weird noises which everyone has already heard a million times anyway.