

ANNIE GOSFIELD NOTES FOR ECSTATIC MUSIC APRIL 16 2015

Annie Gosfield: sampling keyboard
Billy Martin: drums and percussion
Roger Kleier: electric guitar
Steven Bernstein: trumpet, slide trumpet
Briggan Krauss: baritone saxophone, alto sax
Brian Drye: trombone

In 2014 Judd Greenstein approached me about presenting a concert at the Ecstatic Music Festival. I've always led my own band, but in recent years I've spent more time composing notated music for contemporary classical musicians, so I leapt at the opportunity to put together a 21st Century avant noisy dream band (complete with horns!) to create a new program inspired by instrumental 45 RPM singles. This was a chance to explore a genre I love: from Johnny Guitar Watson's "Space Guitar" to Funkadelic's "Maggot Brain" I have always had a weakness for these wild instrumental wonders from 50's, 60's, and 70's.

This very personal, slightly skewed take on danceable instrumental tunes depends on a great, grooving band. In a perfect world (for me, at least), 2015 would be the year of the "Twenty Megatons From Above" distorted shortwave radio dance craze. If that doesn't happen, I'm still thrilled to make music with this remarkable group of musicians. The festival's one requirement is that every project must involve new collaborators. I actually met most of tonight's players in the 90's at the old Knitting Factory on Houston Street (the lively, funky, very mixed new music venue where my own band first played in New York City). This is the first time I've had the pleasure of working directly with most of this group (impromptu improvisations don't count, nor does my relationship with Roger Kleier, which goes back to being childhood sweethearts). This project is a happy combination of trying something completely new while catching up with old compadres/new collaborators.

My first step in writing the music was to comb through my library of recordings of new and old found sounds (analog synth samples, ancient feedback, jammed radio signals, and a new stash of vacuum cleaner recordings) and experiment using these sources as melodic and rhythmic elements in instrumental songs. A series of vacuum sounds took the place of a bass riff, for example, and a shortwave snippet assumed the instrumental duties of a tremolo guitar. I started my work far in advance by pursuing my favorite addictive pastime, editing samples and poking through my own sound archives. (It's my substitute for whittling - the hours fly by as I happily sculpt, tune, and EQ the sound of an early 20th Century blast furnace.) I took these edited samples and turned them into the bare melodic bones of instrumental songs. The process for each piece was different: Some were structured in advance, with horn arrangements and sampler parts completely written out; some were simply a head chart; and others were rough textural fragments that I brought to rehearsals. It's a great pleasure to work with Billy, Steven, Roger, Briggan and Brian. Their personalities and varied backgrounds are an important part of the process.

Individual titles follow...

Rattling Beeps and Serging Sweeps incorporates an old Serge analog synthesizer that I recorded in Saint Louis, Missouri and its sweeping, buzzing, rattling, oscillating self, which stands in for kind of a fantasy space age fuzz organ. Billy Martin's encyclopedic knowledge of different approaches to the time signature 6/8 made working on this one especially fun.

Electric Sweepers and Vacuum Creepers focuses on the sounds of my one childhood sonic phobia, the buzzy roar of a vacuum. I tuned, edited, and layered many sounds of vacuums that were recorded in Hoover's labs in Glenwillow, Ohio, ranging from their 110 year old original "electric vacuum sweeper" through their newest model. Tuning is an important part of the process of developing a new vacuum; recordings are made in house in order to "strike a balance between the sense of quiet and the sound of power." I was given access to recordings of vacuums being turned on and off; cheerios, beads, and other items being vacuumed on a variety of surfaces; and the vacuums being emptied. Thanks to Hoover for providing the sounds and letting me explore the not so dark recesses of my childhood fears. We all developed this one together, with the horns (like the vacuums) striking "a balance between the sense of quiet and the sound of power." The piece starts with a recording of a vacuum being turned on, and ends (not coincidentally) with the sound of a vacuum being turned off.

Depth Charge is based on samples made from a mighty Arp 2600, an analog synthesizer from the 1970's. Each note on the sampler's keyboard triggers a different bleep, blorp, or series of analog events. Modern technology has allowed me to spread a wide array of sounds under my fingertips, sparing me the time consuming task of having to reroute pesky patch chords for each different set-up. Horns echo the space-age synthesizer sounds in a tip of the hat to King Tubby and Studio One dub techniques.

Buzzed Beyond All Recognition uses altered electric guitar sounds, some of which are, in fact, buzzed beyond all recognition. The classic tradition of the guitar instrumental gets a black eye from a fistful of nasty altered samples.

Second Avenue Junkman is a comparative oldie: it was written for my band's performance at the first Festival of Radical Jewish Culture, curated by John Zorn, at the Knitting Factory in New York. It was inspired by stories of my grandfather, Abraham Starobin, looking for scrap metal on Second Avenue with his donkey cart and his donkey (who was named Nikolai and stabled on Prince Street!) He wasn't called a junkman, he was called a scrap metal dealer, but "Second Avenue Scrap Metal Dealer" just doesn't have the same ring. Many decades later, I moved to Second Avenue, and although it's changed drastically, I still look out the window and think about my grandfather.

Twenty Megatons from Above is driven by a low pulsing sample of a shortwave radio, punctuated by historical recordings of decades-old feedback, an early 20th Century blast furnace, a snippet of my vocoded voice recovered from mid-eighties Los Angeles, and even more shortwaves, some of which have been modulated into a rhythmic scramble.