

# Gimmie two sounds and I'll make you a universe

**Robert H. King** takes a stroll through the new electronic soundscape

Live, experimental music has not had much of a presence in Scotland and given the number of people involved in one way or another (musicians, DJ's, record labels, magazines, fanzines...) it is an area that needs promoting. Stirling Arts has realised that locally, and within Scotland, there are many people (of all ages) involved in technology driven music. Working from this grass roots base, and as part of their arts development plans for Stirling, they have embarked on an ambitious concert programme that aims to bring together local and international musicians and champion a new approach to music development in an area often considered difficult and elite. They hope to work closely with other like-minded organisations such as the London Musicians Collective, in bringing many artists to this country for the first time. This is something which paid off recently with two sell-out performances from Death Ambient (USA/Japan) and Ground Zero featuring Otomo Yoshihide (Japan).

Over the past few weeks the more discerning music magazines have carried articles on the 'invisible soundtrack' or what might be described as the art of composing sound for the 'inner cinema'. This is nothing (entirely) new, musicians have been working in this area for a great number of years but with the more recent developments in portable digital recording technology, and indeed with the miniaturisation of the everyday walkman, the potentials of recording the environment and incorporating this within studio-based work to have it played back in the soundscape are only now starting to make a notable impression. Reading through the press releases and sleeve-notes of the majority of the CD's that arrived for review revealed a wealth of sound sources other than the lists of conventional instruments. The works reviewed here are pushing the envelope of established idioms and act as pointers to new possibilities in sound.

"Relief from the racket of everyday life" proclaims a flyer accompanying an impressive batch of CD's from Nottingham based Em:t. Housed in luxurious nature photography Digi-paks, these recordings have been spatially expanded: a 3-D sound imaging system which when listened to with headphones (or on your walkman) give you a sense of being placed inside the recordings. The seamless compilation Em:t 1197 is an excellent introduction to the sonic world of this innovative label, opening with a spiralling Laurie Anderson-esque piece of pop narrative groove from Richard Bone that flows into inner gamelan atmospherics courtesy of Woob, pulsing electro loops and onboard jazz tactics from International Peoples Gang and 'Waterpump' by Dallas Simpson: a field recording of Simpson walking through the undergrowth and over stones to an outdoor waterpump which throughout its 12 minutes

does have you feeling that you are there, involuntary scratching at the sounds of insects and constantly removing the headphones convinced that there really is running water in the house. This set of 9 aural snapshots has been curated with an attention to detail that is sadly lacking in a great many similar ventures. Essential.

Also from Em:t is the debut album by Slim, 0097 (there are no titles for these releases, just name and catalogue number) a smooth, seductive collection of polished urban exotica that blends drum 'n' bass, slow funk, hazy ambient textures and lush keyboards with hauntingly evocative female vocals. Another aspect of this album that sets it apart is the careful use of incidental sounds and voices that float teasingly in the background, again taking us back to the cinematic angle hinted at by many musicians. Instant and irresistible.

Last years Freeform album Elastic Speakers was criminally overlooked by the supposed 'forward thinking' alternative music press, but despite this Simon

Pyke has returned with a continuous stream bombardment of hyper velocity textures and impressions in the shape of 'Heterarchy' (Worm Interface SE01CD). Pykes skill lies in his ability to hijack sounds from the real world (the sound of bottles vibrating together on 'Late Surface' for example) and mutating them in ways that push the technology to new possibilities.

Heterarchy creates a personal inner space with slabs of noise expanding and contracting with each digital minute ushering the listener into something vast and at times claustrophobic, whilst probing microscopic rhythms get under the skin and implode at uneasy intervals. Freeform are taking a fresh route in the path of experimental electronics and as this does not embrace current trends and fads he has a difficult journey ahead of him, but this lack of engagement with any 'scene' is precisely what places Heterarchy in a class of its own. Challenging and vital.

The work of Bengé is on similar ground to Freeform in that he is producing material that refuses to be labelled, although he does go part of the way in helping by titling his album 'Beautiful Electronic Music' (Expanding Records- expandedd 296) and EP 'Polyrhythmic Electronica' (expandedd 397). Listening to these I am reminded of an old Japanese custom (no longer practised as far as I am aware) in which prior to an outdoor gathering, the host would place chirping insects and small birds in bamboo cages which in turn were hidden amongst the gardens display so as to relax the guests with their lilting sounds. Bengé takes you on a stroll through his electronic garden and invites you to listen out for the gently spiralling pulses and tones to be found amidst the floating textural soundwalls and rapidly shifting cross fades of loops, pulses and heartbeat rhythms. Each track (identified only by its time) is a different caged sound that continues to evolve with each passing, catching the possibility of something if it was left to escape. Repeated listenings outdoors on a walkman revealed new insects previously unheard but most welcome. Engaging and one to watch out for.

Brume vs Aphasia (Atmoject, AtmoCD1) can only be compared to what it must be like having an eardrum removed with no anaesthetic whilst someone whispers words of comfort in the other. Harsh, intense waves of electronics flow into moments of almost sheer silence and calm. Digital surgery being performed on naturally occurring resonating chambers soon make way for the post operative relaxation sounds of fire, wood, stones and melting snow. "Use volume with caution" advise the sleeve-notes, too late, my ears may never be the same again.

Sheffield based Discus have been quietly producing a steady flow of non linear improvised, experimental recordings for a number of years now but the release of Martin Archer's 'Ghost Lily Cascade (Discus 4CD) should see them making in-roads to a wider audience. Archer has taken the structure of solo synthesiser pieces and distributed these to nine other musicians to create instrumental lines 'in their own time, in their own locations' then re-assembling them in a series of 'chance' encounters with his computer. What has emerged is a rich, complex, yet at times simplistic miasma of timbral soundscapes. Sustained echoing chords and computer based drone reveries interweave perfectly with the dark, subtle improvisations of the source recordings. Archer has managed to produce a unique blend of control and spontaneity that remarkably manages to steer clear of studio constraints.

Bruce Gilbert (of the seminal, Wire) has taken the concept of the spoken word album to another level with 'The Haring- (WMO5CDL). Exquisitely packaged in a luxurious box with Polaroid inserts this is an intriguing collage of Gilbert's own readings, recordings of market stalls, unidentifiable noise, stream of consciousness dictation into a hand held recorder and

voice manipulations. What Gilbert has achieved here is a confusing but compelling 'sound diary' that can only be likened to picking up tantalising snippets of conversations as you pass through a crowd, honing in on one only to be led of with another. Gilberts voice is relaxed and indeed he has mastered the art of lulling the listener into a false sense of security before rushing in with shards of electronic noise. Baffling but compelling.

WMO is a label that has been set up to make available the archive recordings from the various members of Wire. To date they have issued a stream of early recordings, previously unheard slices of pure experimentation and embarked on a series of 'various artists play Wire' CD's, the first being 'Whore' (WMO4CD) featuring Lush, Main Scanner and 18 others which demonstrates the impact and influence the band have had for almost two decades.

'Brawling in an art hangout' (Lime Green Yellow Recording Company- LGY005) by Pan Techno Icon is a quirky blend of abstract pop electronica and techno minimalism that has been influenced by the transatlantic ideas of American and European music exchanges. 'Brawling...' has discernible traces of the US club scene but what is more prevalent perhaps is the influence of mid eighties electro-pop experimentation from the likes of The Normal, Fad Gadget, The The and even Blancmange. This is no slight, for that period produced some ground breaking work that paved the way for a great many artists today. A refreshing mix of contemporary beats and hazy nostalgia. Also from Lime Green is 'Experimental clothing stories' by Ch.... Inspired by cartoons and animated violence this is the berserker animators machinations of break beats skipping along the malevolent yellow brick lane whilst loony tune drum 'n' bass and inwardly spiralling dark ambient textures force their way into moments of surreal quiet all fuelled by low level bass frequencies and brain pounding beats. Bedtime stories for the deranged.

Always to the rescue of your inner calm are Tuu whose latest offering 'Mesh' (Fathom- 11078-2) is 52 minutes of drifting cavernous spatiality. The layers of ancient bells, bowls, flute, clay pots and water drums flow along on a tide of harmonium and synthesisers creating a soothing shamanistic tranquility. Tuu have shaken of the 'ethno-ambient' label that had been placed on them and moved into a new space entirely their own, one where the ever present repetitious water drum pulses are interspersed with the faint chimes of Tibetan singing bowls and the breathy insistence of the ney flute, perfectly interweave to create sensations of light, space, colour and harmony. They are absorbed in the idea of creating the perfect inner sanctuary where drones and resonant loops suspend time just long enough for the listener to restore their mind to some semblance of order in a chaotic world. This is their most accomplished work to date and worthy of everyones attention.

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Title appropriation courtesy of DJ Spooky.

