

# The mellowing of the avant-garde

By Ingram Marshall

*Much of today's New Music is surprising. Many composers have rediscovered harmony; you can even hum a few bars.*

Fifteen years ago, most avant-garde music seemed calculated to scare off the average listener with its characteristically dry, spare, aggressively grating "nonmusical" sound. One of the better known of the academic composers, Princeton's Milton Babbitt, went so far as to say once that he didn't care whether he had an audience or not, nor did it make any difference if his music was even performed—it could be "read" by those sufficiently equipped and interested.

Fortunately, New Music—or call it what you will: avant-garde, experimental, contemporary music—has broadened considerably since then, and while there are still plenty of Babbitt types around (now mostly engrossed with computers), much of today's New Music can be surprisingly attractive. Many composers have rediscovered harmony, are using melodic patterns of recognizable character (you can hum a few bars) and even quote from music's old masters on occasion.

So what exactly is New Music? Basically, it is formal music sprung from our thousand year Western classical tradition—separate from progressive jazz and rock, even though it may often share some of their characteristics. It's a form found in abundance in the Bay Area, part of a tradition of experimentation stretching back to the 1960s with further connection in the 1930s, if one considers the California pioneers—Henry Cowell, John Cage, Harry Partch, Lou Harrison. San Francisco, indeed, has an

to amaze with his personalized forms of "world music" (see listing at end for concert information). Harrison's intense interest in the cultures of the East has led him to produce music of fascinating cultural synthesis.

The meeting of East and West is a strength and peculiarity of much West Coast New Music. Since this is one of the better places in the world to study non-Western music, it isn't surprising that cross-ethnic ensembles have grown up. A group called *Kotekan*, for instance, draws on Indonesian, jazz, African and Western avant-garde sources (percussionists Tom Hemphill and Rick Kvistad named the group after the word for interlocking patterns in Balinese gamelan music). At their recent Old Spaghetti Factory concert, they played marimba transcriptions of Balinese music, some John Cage and George Crumb and some improvisations.

Other groups bridging the gap between cultures include the *Flowing Stream Ensemble*, the *Drum, Song and Dance Troupe*, the *Shadow Puppet Theater* and *Phoenix Spring*. This last group, which mixes theater, light and dance and uses traditional Chinese instruments, recently played at 1750 Arch Street, a cozy little concert space nestled in the Berkeley Hills' (841-0232). Arch Street has been featuring New Music on its varied schedule since 1973; upcoming events there will include Megan Roberts ("Small Band Music of the Seventies") and Allaudin Matthieu, founder of the Sufi Choir, who will do piano improvisations.

One of the most important New

another art space, SITE (385 Mission, 3rd floor, SF, 543-6994), has done some concerts and will inaugurate a major series of avant-garde music events in the Fall called "Sound at SITE" and funded by a grant from the California Arts Council.

The last group I'll mention isn't an ensemble, but rather a coalition of nearly all the Bay Area groups that perform New Music. Called *Music West*, it was formed last Fall when the entire month of October was given over to a festival of New Music. Now, *Music West* is going corporate (nonprofit), and promises to sponsor many more events and help coordinate New Music in the area.

### COMING EVENTS: NEW MUSIC

April 30: Bob Davis's "Ritual Moon Music," Mills College, Oakland, info 635-7620.

May 6 and 7: Port Costa Players in an all-California composers concert, including works by Janice Giteck, Marc Steidel, Alden Jenks, Carson Kievman and Daniel Lentz; University Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft, Berkeley, 642-5317.

May 7 and 8: The music, including an environmental installation, of Phil Laurie ("Zozzilla"), Mills College.

May 14: Bob Davidson concert for two pianos, a retrospective of all his music. The Cal Arts Percussion Ensemble from Los Angeles will play some of the early percussion music; Oakland composer Bob Hughes will conduct some of the chamber works from the Forties and Fifties; more recent music, related to Harrison's interest in Javanese music, will be performed on a gamelan, The New St. John's Church, Berkeley, 845-6830.

May 18 and 25: Two concerts under the auspices of Music West featuring broad range of local New Music groups; at the SF Museum of Modern Art, Van Ness at McAllister, 863-8800.

May 22: Concert of the Harry Partch Ensemble, using Partch's own handmade instruments, brought up from San Diego where they're kept. Concert will be under the direction of Danlee Mitchell and start at 2 pm, continuing on into the evening and including two films and lecture/demonstration of the instruments. Oakland Museum, 1000 Oak, 273-3585.

More events: There's a local New Music publication called *EAR*, edited by composer/critic Charles Shere (1824 Curtis, Berkeley 94702, 841-3254); or watch the New Music listings in this paper; or subscribe to the KPFA *Folio* (848-6767) to keep track of their excellent and unusual music programming. It's also useful to be on the mailing lists of places such as Mills College (the list is virtually its only publicity), the SF Museum of Modern Art and Cat's Paw Palace (841-6911) to learn of coming concerts.

## Albums of note: the new releases

By Blair Jackson

**BONNIE RAITT: SWEET FORGIVENESS.** Warner Bros. BS2990.

Since Bonnie Raitt doesn't write the songs she sings, the success or failure of her albums generally rests on her choice of material and her interpretation of that material. Like Linda Ronstadt, Raitt has a knack for finding great songs by obscure songwriters. On *Sweet Forgiveness*, she's done it again.

The tough, bluesy "About to Make Me Leave Home," penned by Earl Randall, is one of the finest songs Raitt has ever recorded. It features a slightly funky Little Feat-ish backing by her band, with snaking slide guitar lines and crisp drumming dominating the instrumental sound. "Louise,"

boob tube; "Primitive People," which pokes fun at "civilization" through a biting, disco-tinged rhythm, grows tiresome quickly; and "Wilderness Trail," an anti-hunting song which I understand has been chosen to be the first single from the album (big mistake, Fantasy), lacks any sort of subtlety at all and merely sounds dumb. All three of these songs are on side two, so I generally avoid the entire side as a result. If you've liked Joe's cute stuff over the years, however, you might disagree with me about these.

**STEVE HUNTER: SWEPT AWAY.** Atco SD36-148.

Steve Hunter first came to my attention when he was the lead guitarist

international reputation as a center for avant-garde music.

Big name New Music composers seem to visit rather than live in this area these days, perhaps due to the rather scanty support given the experimental arts in California. But there are many performance groups here, mostly of high caliber, and a good number of active composers as well.

Better known among the local composers are Gordon Mumma, David Behrman and Robert Ashley—all resident, though they rarely perform here; all are on the international tour. Behrman, who travels with the Merce Cunningham troupe, alternates with Bob Ashley as head of the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music in Oakland (632-2700, ext. 337), a lively place where every Saturday night there is some New Music activity. If you can't hear the teachers, you can surely hear their students. Among the composer-artists to have emerged from that idyllic environ, some of the more interesting have included Paul deMarinis (one of a growing number of composers who "compose" their electronics by designing their own circuits to create the music), Virginia Quesada, Bob Davis and Megan Roberts (she works exquisitely with video as well as sound.).

Paul Drescher, an East Bay composer formerly at Mills, has formed an excellent group called the East Bay Music Ensemble, associated with the East Bay Performing Arts Center (2369 Barrett, Richmond, 234-5624). Drescher, along with Peter Garland—a Berkeley composer and editor of *Soundings*, a landmark journal of New Music—is producing a gala 60th birthday concert for Lou Harrison, the legendary Aptos composer who continues

Music groups is the New Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory (564-8086), currently directed by John Adams. Their concerts, always well attended, are notable for their breadth and excellence. While some of their best performances have been electronic music by composers such as Alden Jenks, Ivan Tcherepnin and Adams himself, they excel in precision performances of instrumental works. The fact that they have commissioned many works by a broad spectrum of local composers accounts for the ensemble's central place in Bay Area music life—but, like most other New Music groups, they get precious little attention from the press.

The Port Costa Players, a much newer group in the East Bay, has been very active recently (address: 4140 Balfour, Oakland 94610). Among the group's more than 25 members are singers, dancers, actors and artists as well as instrumentalists, and their leaning is definitely toward the theatrical—evidenced in their concert at the University Art Museum, which featured all theater pieces including that increasingly popular work, "Eight Songs of a Mad King," by Peter Maxwell Davies.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is an important scene of New Music events; the SF New Music Ensemble plays there regularly, and the SF Contemporary Music Group (mostly Symphony members) will present three concerts there in May and June, mixing older moderns (Bartok, Berio) in with some current California composers (Charles Boone, Robert Erickson). Also in San Francisco, 80 Langton Street (626-5416) has presented a number of important musical events, some closely allied with performance art, the mainstay of that space; and

written by Paul Siebel (who is a little better known than Randall), has a lighter folk-blues feel and is given an acoustic treatment by Raitt. "Sweet Forgiveness," a blues-based composition by Daniel Moore, mixes a touch of funk with a tad of gospel, and the results are impressive.

*Sweet Forgiveness* is a solid album all the way, and though I can't picture it outselling Linda Ronstadt's last album (still too bluesy for most listeners, I imagine), it has a good shot at becoming Raitt's best seller to date.

#### COUNTRY JOE MCDONALD: GOOD-BYE BLUES. Fantasy F9525.

This is easily Country Joe's best solo album since *Hold On It's Coming*, which takes us back pretty far. It has the usual mix of serious and irreverent songs, love songs and "message" songs that we've come to expect from Joe, but the production, credited to Bill Belmont (arrangments by Ted Ashford), is what makes this album sound so fine.

As usual, I like Joe's serious songs best. "Copiapo," a song with a beautiful South American feel to it (there's a chanted/spoken chorus in Spanish), is one of the most stunning songs Joe has ever written. Its brilliance lies primarily in Joe's even vocals and the breathtaking instrumental arrangement. Joe's voice floats above a dramatic musical landscape featuring Terry Adams's cello, John Fuller's harp, Peter Milio's thunderlike tympani and Bill Summers's tasteful percussion. The harp-cello-tympani combination is also used nicely on Joe's powerful anti-seal-hunting song, "Blood on the Ice," which also has a strong vocal by Marty Balin.

Less effective are Joe's supposedly humorous songs. "TV Blues" is a rather silly tune about dependence on the

in Lou Reed's band a few years back. More recently he has played with Alice Cooper and a few others, and two weeks ago he jammed with Peter Gabriel at Winterland.

Not surprisingly, the guitarist has come up with a fine album of guitar-dominated compositions, most of which he wrote himself. Eight of the ten songs on *Swept Away* are instrumentals, though Hunter shows he is an able vocalist on the two songs where he does sing.

The cuts that are most instantly arresting are "Eldorado Street," which sounds as if it was taken straight from Lou Reed's *Rock and Roll Animal* album, and Hunter's version of the Byrds' "Eight Miles High" and the Beach Boys' "Sail on Sailor." Hunter's hard rocking guitar style really shines on these songs, and after all, that's what people who buy this record are going to want to hear.

#### THE BAND: ISLANDS. Capitol SO-11602.

Like every Band album since 1971's *Stage Fright*, the new record has taken a while to grow on me. But now that it has grown on me, I think it's the group's best album in years—certainly a vast improvement over last year's lifeless *Northern Lights, Southern Cross*. The Band doesn't really break any new ground on *Islands*—it all has a slightly "where have I heard that riff before" quality to it—but the songs are, on the whole, excellent. The only real clinker on the record is the group's version of "Georgia on My Mind," which features a truly abysmal lead vocal by Richard Manuel.

Typically, the best songs on the record were written by Robbie Robertson. "Right as Rain," "Let the Night Fall," "Christmas Must Be Tonight"



*Bay Area  
Guardian*

## The New Music

*Left, the Port Costa Players; below left, Paul Dresher with instruments he built modelled after traditional Indonesian instruments; right, rehearsal on Dresher's instruments for the May 14 Lou Harrison concert. See the New Music story, page 12.*

