

Jim Burton

I'm not quite sure what you mean by a "beginner". I mean, I've been at it for five years. You know, I don't regard myself as a beginner anymore, although you know I'm always a beginner in a sense of experimenting.

Ya, that's what I mean. I don't mean that limits a beginner with being a dilettante... If you've finished something, you're going to do something else then.

Hm hum, oh, I see, hm hum.

You know, just beginning from a zero point, ah, always beginning from a zero point.

Well, I should probably start by explaining that I'm not a trained musician. Ah, I was trained as a painter until four or five years ago. And I can't quite explain how I got interested in experimental music. But somehow I did. I bought a tape recorder, and I started playing around at home. And ah I got so involved in it that I didn't have time to paint any more. So I finally quit painting and decided to become a composer I guess, or a musician. And ah I started from a kind of music concrete point of view....but more live performance rather than making tape compositions. I never did care much for splicing you know.

Ya.

Making things in the studio.

You just put the tape on and let happen what happened.

I've done a few things like that, but ah mostly I'm interested in ah the progress of performance, the process of presenting things live to people. What's most interesting for me is the whole process of putting a concert together. I'm not so much interested in making ah immutable final products.....You know like objects.

Ya. And that's one of the reasons you just changed from painting.

Yeah, I think so. And then I just enjoyed the whole, you know, the live audience, The social aspect of making a concert seemed much more rewarding than making a painting and then ha ha you know trying to show it somewhere or trying to get somebody to come and look at it.

So you concepted the processes, the tape processes. Or did you use instruments or speech?

Well, at the time I was making tapes because I didn't know anything about how to do a concert. I didn't know anything about composing per se. I was making sounds. And I was, you know, just making documents of them basically, my own.

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But then gradually I learned about graphic notation and various things. So I began writing pieces to be performed. And then gradually I began to conceive of concerts as pieces in themselves.

Could you take one of these pieces for example?

Ah, it would be most interesting for me to talk about one that I'm going to do in December. I can talk about how the idea develops, you know. Ah, I come from Wyoming. It's my home state. And

my home town is Laramie, which has some famous westerns and movies and things. It doesn't look anything like what you might imagine, although.....

Wasn't WYATT EARP there?

I don't know if he ever made it to Laramie. I don't know that there were any very famous law men in Laramie. No, Laramie was a railroad town. Although it started off as a fort that ah JAUQUES LARAMIE, a French trapper, started the whole thing back in probably 1830 or around then.....

Anyway, I was out there this summer and really enjoyed my visit. I hadn't been there in a couple of years, and so I decided to do a whole concert, sort of dedicated to my home town. So now I'm working on, I'm writing some country and western pieces. Ah you know, some western music, except that it won't be played as straight, or it won't be strictly Nashville style. It'll be more, somewhat more.....ah, if there is such a thing..... "new music" style. And I'll be also using some instruments that I've been working on. I'm building my own version of a steel guitar. And I also have some amplified whiskey bottles I have a percussionist use. And eh I'm also making a large backdrop, ah which is a drawing. You know a pencil drawing.

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And it will be an enlargement of a photograph of my grandfather's bar. He had a bar years ago.

Oh, ya, do the whisky bottles come from there too?

Eh ha, no, they come from the Bowery, but there is a relationship that way.

You found it at the Bowery, or you drunk it at the Bowery?

No, I found the bottles, ha. I just needed, you know, a couple of dozen empty bottles, with lids. So, I went on my bicycle, and I found you know a basket full of empty bottles, and I brought 'em home, and I washed them out. And then I built this instrument with them....Anyway, this is a very narrative idea, you know in a way. It'll start off pretty straight.....

Ah, I'm writing one piece called "MAIL ORDER PREACHER", which is about this guy who gets married by a mail order preacher, a preacher that got his collar through the mail. And the preacher winds up stealing the girl friend, you know. And they go off, and the guy is left alone. And the melody and everything is very much like a Nashville country and western song.

BUT the way they're gonna play it will be oh somewhat in and out of tune and somewhat exaggerated. And I'm not using the guitar. So there'll be some deviation from the standard Nashville style. Yeah, it'll be mostly like starting from that as a place then, as a form to sort of improvise with. Because I like to allow performers to use their own ideas and their own techniques as well, rather than write everything all out completely.

So the ensemble playing this music then is consisting of besides the tuned whisky bottles and adapted steel guitar

And a percussionist, a bass player, JOHN DEAK of the New York Philharmonic. I should explain that I'm also involved with an ensemble called the LAST CHANCE, which is a group of us which has been playing together for three or four years now, in various ways and in various concerts. And last year we finally decided to, you know, form an ensemble, which we call LAST CHANCE, and that'll be the core. It'll be LAST CHANCE plus a couple of guest stars on trombone, flute, piano, acoustic bass, and this percussion and the steel guitar.

Ya, and have you got rooms to rehearse in, just to get the piece together. Do you just do it here in your studio?

Ah, we'll probably start rehearsals here, because I have to get everything done long before the concert, because I want to cut a seven-inch 33 record, which I want to have available at the concert.

Ah, could you talk about the process of that? It could be quite useful.

Um, yeah. First you have to get a decent tape to use to make the master, to make the mother mold, or whatever it's called. And you know that can be an expensive proposition So ha so, I'm just looking around for various friends and so forth that have access to....we don't need sixteen tracks....you know, four-track or maybe eight-track.

Do you have to go into the studio, or just pat together the material from your friends then?

Well, no, we'll go into the studio to make the recording.

Ya, you have to pay then for the studio time?

Well, hopefully I can get it for very little or nothing. I know someone that works in a studio that also has a lathe to make the master mould. And then after the master mould is made, then I can take that to some small company in New Jersey or somewhere and have the records stamped from the mould.

Ya. Are there any companies and corporations organized by musicians themselves? Or do you have to go to commercial companies?

Well, so far as I know, the way it works is that ah recording studios are independent of a company that might make the master mould. And the place that makes the master mould is independent from the place that actually presses the records. So, there's really no one complete facility. However, there is the JAZZ COMPOSERS' ORCHESTRA ASSOCIATION. And they have access to a recording studio. And they also have a distribution service. So that if someone cuts a record independently, they can distribute it for you at a much lower cost than a commercial outfit.

But are these organizations growing here because of the commercial inaccess innaces....

Inaccessibility? Slowly, I think. I think J.C.O.A. is, it's been around for at least four years that I know of. And ah, they're listing the records as growing. And I don't know how successful they are, because they're mostly new jazz, which I'm not so involved with. But they also handle other forms as well, ah experimental

music, but mostly new jazz.

So having your record, then you prepare a concert. So how to get a concert?

Well, this particular concert I was invited to do because..... I'm just sort of joking..... there's a kind of an annual JIM BURTON concert at the KITCHEN ha simply because I was connected with it....Or, at least there has been so far! So THAT one I didn't solicit. Ah, if you're just sitting around scratching your head trying to figure out where you can get a concert, ah the possibilities are determined basically by whether you feel you have to be paid for it, or whether you wanna fit the bill yourself, or you know and also what kind of audience you want to reach. So that there's several different ways of going about it. If you just want to do a concert, on your own, which is the way I think everybody starts out,

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then there are several spaces that are fairly accessible, where you might have some arrangement like the use of the space is free, but you have to take care of all the expenses..... which means that you either have to find people that are gonna play for you for nothing, and you have to do all the publicity.

So, the KITCHEN is a kind of an alternative then to all these ah closed commercial things. Could you describe more the structure of the KITCHEN, or what you're doing?

The KITCHEN began as a kind of almost a kind of workshop gallery for video artists. It was started by WOODY and STEINA VASULKA, who came from Europe and started this video place. And they were interested in music, too. And so not long after they started they asked someone to bring in some music, you know, one night a week or something like that. And then somewhere along the line when ah BOB STEARNS, who is now the business director of the whole organization.....He and I were friends at the time, and we got involved. And WOODY and STEINA had other things they wanted to do. So we sort of took over for them and reorganized it. And now it's almost completely shared between music and video, I mean in terms of amount of time and money spent. And it's all done with grants, you know, from the state council and from national endowment. There is no secret. You just keep plugging away at it, and you just keep trying.

Do you need really defined research topics, or do they give grants just for art?

Well, that was the first problem we ran into, that not too! many organizations want to fund a space, a performance space. You know, they're more interested in supporting an individual artist or an educational organization or something like that. So that was our first problem. Ah, somehow we managed to get supported anyway to some extent, I think just because there was so much interest just in what we were doing, in a certain sort of way people couldn't avoid realizing that at least something was happening. And our philosophy was basically that there was no outlet for these kinds of things. There was no consistent outlet for experimental music for example. Most of the uptown theaters, you know, were dealing with chamber groups and serial music and so forth, which was fine. But there was simply no alternative for our people, like LaMONTE YOUNG, people like JOHN GIBSON and

PHIL GLASS in the early stages and so forth.

They started out from the KITCHEN?

Ah, most of them had at least a couple of concerts in the beginning, because there was an available space, and it had a certain amount of attention and visibility. And it just sort of grew from there. So now I think it's safe to say that it is the only place in New York City that is consistently experimental.

Where is it located?

The address is 484 Broome Street, which is just above Houston Street. It's the lower edge of Soho.

So you get grants to subsist the expenses?

Well, the KITCHEN is being well enough supported now. I mean included in the budget is fees for performers plus fees for individual artists who present things. And that's all sort of paid by the KITCHEN through their grants. Working independently, or individually, ah I think each artist has his own resources. Ah, there's one individual grant called the "CAPS" Grant, which goes to individual artists, and it can be as much as \$6,000.00 which would sort of see you through the year, ha, if you're lucky enough to get one. Now there are about seven or eight of them for composers every year. So the competition is pretty stiff. There are usually three or four hundred applicants.

There is another service called the "MEET THE COMPOSER", which is also funded by the state. And they will put out some money towards public concerts by composers. They'll assist anybody that's sponsoring a concert. Ah, but usually it's not in very large amounts, you know, two or three hundred dollars, or seventy-five dollars, or whatever the size of the scale of the concert.

And the public you come in touch with.....What kind of people does it consist of?

It's reaching a larger audience. There are you know I would say it probably averages maybe thirty percent of the; audience will be general public. I'm just guessing about that figure. But usually the bulk of the audience is people that are interested in that particular artist. And then there are people who show up because

something interests them. They've heard about the person, the title of it sounds interesting, or whatever, they've heard about the KITCHEN. So it's not by any means a popular sort of orientation.

I think it's growing over its initial limits, where just a few people met to make music for other musicians.

Yeah, we used to have, three years ago we had about an average of maybe oh fifteen to twenty people was the average audience for a concert. Now I would say it's maybe fifty, forty or fifty.

Do you see that the KITCHEN is getting more important, having new music presented, facing all these commercial you know, all the weight of jazz and rock and this kind of music. I see this as a real problem here in New York, on the one side this large spread out popular music, jazz and so on. And on the other side there's just kind of a private group.

(cough) Well, this is something that now all of us talk about in various ways at various times. I don't think that there are any real answers, because I think that it's primarily an individual problem. Ah, some artist don't want to get associated with commercial adventures. And others would really like to, but you know, don't have any way. And then, consider the problems. Like, if you wanted to perform in a bar, for example. It would really be hard to play certain kinds of or many different kinds of new music in a bar. Either it wouldn't, couldn't be heard because of the noise. Or vice versa, it would drive the people out.

STEVE REICH and PHIL GLASS don't drive the people out any more.

Well, first of all, I think that they use hints of popular forms, but they aren't very literally ah..... PHIL GLASS sounds a little bit like rock or jazz.

It's like destillated.

That it's still pretty tightly confined, it's pretty tightly composed and rehearsed, which is fine. But it isn't, I don't think that it's as much of a performance art as real popular forms.