

D e s e r t P l a n t s

Conversations with 23 American
Musicians

Copyright © 1976 by Walter Zimmermann
(except where otherwise noted)



DESERT PLANTS

Many things then come out
in the repeating that make a history
of each one for any one
who always listens to them.
Many things come out of each one
and as one listens to them
listens to all the repeating in them,
always this comes to be clear about them,
the history of them
of the bottom nature in them,
the nature of natures mixed up in them
to make the whole of them
in anyway it mixes up in them.
Sometime then there will be a history
of every one.

From THE MAKING OF AMERICANS by Gertrude Stein,
copyright © 1934 by Harcourt Brace Jov., Inc.;
copyright © 1962 by Alice B. Toklas.
reprinted by permission of the publishers.

Introduction

One rainy day in Cologne I decided to go to America to visit musicians there, talk with them, and find out.

What?

I didn't know at the time, but at least to find out what they have in common besides being different.

So I took the next charter flight to New York, one suitcase with the necessary clothes, a tape recorder, two mikes, a camera, tapes, IVES' MEMOS, GERTRUDE STEIN'S THE MAKING OF AMERICANS, JOHN CAGE'S A YEAR FROM MONDAY, JEROME ROTHENBERG'S AMERICA A PROPHECY, and my little red scrapbook, which at the beginning just had a few basic addresses in it such as FELDMAN, WOLFF, and CAGE.

I found a forty dollar per week hotel in Greenwich Village, which was close to most of the New York musicians I wanted to visit. The first thing I did was to find out if CAGE really lives on Bank Street. Yes, it turned out to be his studio. He was busy working on a piece about the weather. THOREAU'S JOURNALS were all over the work tables, and it was a mess you find in people's places who work hard. He told me about some people I should go see first. And if I THEN still felt I should have a conversation with him, I should come back. The next day I visited the CENTER FOR NEW MUSIC to ask GREGORY REEVE for more addresses. He had a whole wheel full. He told me about his center, that it's the only place in New York which lets the people know about what is going on and where in new music. And that it takes a lot of his time to let them know.

On that evening I was invited to dinner at RICHARD HAYMAN and BETH ANDERSON, both editors of EAR, an independent paper about the new music scene in America. CAGE characterizes EAR in his article "THE FUTURE OF MUSIC": "The difference between closed-mindedness and open-mindedness in music is made readable by the difference between any issue of PERSPECTIVES IN NEW MUSIC and any issue of EAR." Richard told about the financial problem of keeping it alive, and Beth was very enthusiastic about the growing activity of American women composers and the newly edited booklet WOMEN'S WORK.

The next days I spent on the phone arranging dates. Among them was LA MONTE YOUNG, who I would be calling up at least a dozen times during the following six weeks. And he would each time ask me if I had come up with any money yet, and that he would think again about giving me an interview. Well, finally he agreed to printing one of our phone calls.

I had my first conversation with PHILIP CORNER. He lives in an apartment on 96th Street, where you leave your shoes outdoors. I sat down on the floor, put the mike up close to him, and then began to tape. And Corner began to talk so fast that it was hard for me to follow. I felt like a cat being thrown into a swimming pool. Finally back in my hotel room, as I played his tape over and over again, I began to understand that it was very important to me that I had met him right at the beginning. His talk was about how to use the place you live in not as a boundary but just as a place to look out from. And if you feel the place, is a boundary, then the boundary is first of all in your own mind. And that challenged me to forget part of the time some of my prejudices, something that would be necessary in going to see all these different characters.

The other person CAGE told me to see was JIM BURTON, because he built up the KITCHEN into one of the few places in New York where new music is performed. Jim is remarkable for one who is doing everything with his own hands, from the

conception of a piece through the building of instruments to the staging of it.

PHIL GLASS next interested me because of his hand-made universe of sound and his working together with his group and how that helps the music. The conversation went back to his original motivation to making his kind of music. And it was basically a longing toward leaving European ways of musical expression.

There was no way to have a conversation with STEVE REICH about that. But he wrote something down for me about where his music led him. When I arrived at his house during a heavy rain, he told me, "You must love music or be a duck." The talk with ROBERT ASHLEY was somehow a conversation about a conversation. He put conversations on stage and tried to get mixed up with the other person as much as possible. So he talked about how it's done, and what happens doing it, and that it is important for him to be conscious about from which persons one builds up his ideas.

With new ideas about techniques of conversation, I went to Middletown, Connecticut, to meet ALVIN LUCIER, who showed me how stuttering can be poetry, and how to make people more aware about their physicality within environments. In New York again I listened to JOAN LA BARBARA'S voice producing multiphonic sounds and overtones. I've never heard that done so beautifully except perhaps by Tibetan monks. She described her technique of singing clearly enough to let other people try to do it themselves.

Before leaving New York I wanted to visit JOHN CAGE again. I set up the tape recorder, and it was broadcasting FM stations. So I tried to fix it, and we began. After five minutes talk the noise still hadn't disappeared. So, I exchanged the mike and began again. This time I was getting nervous, but his unique humor, eased the situation, and he opened my eyes to see technology as something which, can bring our attention back to nature. His piece about the weather is probably the only contribution to America's Bicentennial which calls for a new revolution.

Next I met CHRISTIAN WOLFF in a German Wurst Haus in Cambridge. The Bavarian music in the background and the somewhat rough atmosphere of the restaurant reminded me too much of my own basic character, to adapt very easily to the clarity of his refined ideas. I was impressed by his careful integration of experiences he made as an avant-garde composer, into his politically conscious uniting now.

HORTON FELDMAN was fascinating to listen too also, but from a completely different point of view. I felt like a son. He was sitting in an antique upholstered easy chair, and I was put into a Shaker child stool. He took the part of the composer who is left alone. So he said that what the young generation has to learn again is how to be lonely, and that the young generation doesn't listen any more. Actually, listening to him, and especially to the long pauses between what he said was a good exercise to learn it again. And then he said that if something is beautiful, it's made in isolation. His music actually is very beautiful.

From Buffalo I flew to Toronto over Lake Ontario, which divorces the U.S.A. from Canada. I was curious to see what DAVID ROSENBOOM was doing with his brainwave music research. And he is very into it. So I let him talk and at the same time listened to his brainwaves processed through a synthesizer into sound. What you see, is an astonishing valuation of that what he's saying through what the sounds are pointing to. RICHARD TEITELBAUM liked to be photographed in

front of a map of Canada's population density, but so that the sparse population areas can be seen. Actually he talked so softly about his THRESHOLD MUSIC that he was very often on the threshold of acoustical understanding. He opened up for me a dimension that electronic music, much better than any other music, provides possibilities of self-experience. PAULINE OLIVEROS, who came from San Diego to perform her CROW OPERA at DeKalb showed me that even instrumental play can lead you to the awareness of yourself in locking on of the playing to body rhythms. She is one of the few I know for whom art and life are intensely one. So far I had reached the Midwest of America, and didn't have any more money to go to the West Coast. So I cancelled my flight and made a phone conversation with JAMES TENNEY, who gave me enough Information about what's going on there to make me feel very sorry not to get there. TENNEY does a lot of digging out of unknown or forgotten composers of PARTCH's generation.

About one of the composers TENNEY mentioned I got some funny stories from J.B. FLOYD, a pianist from DeKalb. In Mexico City he met CONLON NANCARROW, who was in the Spanish Civil War and has lived in Mexico afterwards writing player piano music which sounds absolutely fascinating. GORDON MUMMA, who is writing a book about NANCARROW, helped me out with material. Again in New York I met CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE who worked with TENNEY at CAL ARTS. He likes Javanese cigarettes, Boesendoerfer concert pianos, and is searching for the "golden sound". He has a really good ear to shape overtones out of the piano.

Then I listened to CHARLES MORROW between a dozen phone calls, which surprisingly enough didn't disrupt his flow of thoughts. He's a very busy and energetic person experimenting with his voice on Indian songs, animal sounds and children's speech. He's doing rituals to turn the people on to the powers in themselves, one step away from the performer-listener separation.

In the conversation with GARRETT LIST, who is organizing the KITCHEN concerts right now, we talked about how to distinguish the superficial from the basic in the music going through the commercial channels. And about the whole world kind of feeling, which can only exist when each locality has its own strength.

Meanwhile, a letter from JOHN MC GUIRE reached me from Cologne, where he has been carefully composing for five years now. He writes that he had first to leave America to see how one's imaginative make-up is defined by the environment that one lives in.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI just came back from Rome, and so our intense talk was about the political scene there and here and what musicians can do to help the revolutionary movement. I began more and more to think about my situation as a musician at home. Also, he said some things

about the political situation here in America that can't be taken serious enough.

In Urbana I met suntanned LARRY AUSTIN who came from Florida to a computer music conference to talk in an easygoing way about his realization of IVES' UNIVERSE SYMPHONY, employing the computer for the unplayable parts. And I finally visited BEN JOHNSTON, who was so self-forgetful, telling unforgettable stories about HARRY PARTCH, who was the most stubborn and independent fellow of them all, who wanted to reduce alienation but became alienated. For six weeks I had practically every second day a conversation. And every day shifted my understanding to a better one....and I hope the English formulation of my questions as well. Nevertheless, the book is stuffed with clumsy formulations resulting from the spontaneity of my reacting and having just a limited repertoire of English language knowledge. And that sometimes produces funny situations, so please laugh.

I know that the realistic transcriptions of the dialogues, leaving in the background sounds, the "um", "ah's", "likes", the coughs and the laughs sometimes make it harder to understand what we want to say. However, it strengthens the attention to far more interesting things, namely allowing the reader to follow the FLOW OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

The efforts to form spontaneous ideas, the forming of words on the spur of the moment, and the adapting to one person's individuality, to challenge him to his most personal statements, these efforts failed as often as they succeeded. But each failure helped me understand. And that growing of understanding gives the book its basic tendency. And this is also the reason that I'm leaving basically the sequence in which I met the people. And I think this is the best way to let the reader understand.

Meeting all these people made a lot clear in myself, about my view of American musicians and what I'm going to do as a musician returning to Europe. How to SUBSIST during a time where practically no attention is paid to individuals if they are not useful for any commercial tools. And what puts these Individuals into a situation where they are challenged to think about the nature of their integrity, and that because of their integrity become alienated. From there they are getting to understand the necessity to do everything to reduce alienation. So I found out what they have in common besides being different.

The ways of SUBSISTENCE.

How to survive under hard conditions and the resulting beauty and vigour of this existence, which is one precondition for the necessary revolutionary changes.

This book is dedicated to the memory of HARRY PARTCH, because I feel that he lived in the essence all that of what it means:

TO BE A DESERT PLANT