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MUSIC

MUSIC; Melding Rock and High Art With the Help of 100 Guitars

By KYLE GANN

LIKE a demigod, he set everything in motion and then disappeared, leaving us to figure out how to live in the universe he created.

O.K., I'm exaggerating. But given the crucial role Rhys Chatham played in the creation of the downtown music scene, it seems absurd that he has been virtually absent for the last 13 years. A distant legend dimly remembered, he has now been brought back to life -- like so many segments of the art-rock and Minimalist scenes of the 1970's and 80's -- by the label Table of the Elements, in a handsome, sumptuously produced new three-disc set. But let's go back to the beginning.

A New Yorker, trained in electronic music and a protégé of the dronemeister La Monte Young, Mr. Chatham founded the music series at the Kitchen in 1971. He was 19. Originally a dusty loft on Mercer Street and now located on 19th Street, the Kitchen quickly became a mecca of avant-garde music, especially conceptualism and Minimalism, which was then brand new. During this period the borders between jazz and rock, on one hand, and the classical tradition, on the other, seemed as unassailable as the Berlin wall.

But Mr. Chatham had different ideas. In 1975 he started programming some of the freer jazz groups at the Kitchen, and two years later he brought in rock groups. Jazz and rock musicians, the avant-gardists protested, had their own well-established clubs to play in, while the conceptualists and Minimalists had only the Kitchen and a few other uncomfortable spaces.

Mr. Chatham gleefully persisted. As a composer he had been a take-no-prisoners Minimalist, making long pieces from electronic drones and white noise or banging repetitively on gongs for an hour at a time to bring out the harmonics. But he felt the lure of the electric guitar, and one day he started tapping the low E string to elicit overtones. His girlfriend exclaimed, "Rhys, it really sounds like you." Within months he had written "Guitar Trio" (1977), the first Minimalist piece for electric guitars, made entirely of harmonics of the E string in a repetitive rhythm.

He followed with a joyously noisy essay, "Drastic Classicism" (1981), for four electric guitars, electric bass and drums. Here he adopted a tuning based on overtones, from one of La Monte Young's sound installations, "Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Step-Down Transformer."

Suddenly, the inviolable categories of music became permeable in all directions. Visual artists like Robert Longo started rock bands. The avant-garde sculptor and filmmaker Laurie Anderson made a Minimalist

song, "O Superman," and soared to the top of the British pop charts. The rockers Brian Eno and Robert Fripp stole tape-delay techniques from the Minimalist Terry Riley. Not only did rock bands perform at the Kitchen, but Minimalists played opposite the Ramones at CBGB.

The 1980's were a genre-crashing free-for-all. In the middle of it, in 1986, Mr. Chatham followed his wife, the French choreographer Isabelle Marteau, back to Paris. The city of Pierre Boulez, Ircam, fractal music and the modernistically prestigious Ensemble Intercontemporain, it was not exactly the art-rock capital of the Western world. We've rarely seen him or heard from him since in America, even though his composing career continues at full tilt.

The Atlanta-based label Table of the Elements has been rescuing the underworld of 1970's and 80's music from cassette-recorded oblivion via releases of John Cale, the filmmaker Jack Smith, the German art-rock band Faust and the early Minimalist Tony Conrad. Now it gives us a long-overdue portrait of Mr. Chatham, "An Angel Moves Too Fast to See: Selected Works, 1971-89," in which his loud, crashing yet lyrical and never chaotic music perfectly expresses his politely exuberant, reluctant-rocker personality.

First comes "Two Gongs," the rabidly Minimalist 1971 performance in which Mr. Chatham and the composer Yoshimasa Wada tapped on two large Chinese gongs for an hour. It's good they did it, and good that it's documented, so young avant-gardists won't be tempted to reinvent that particular wheel.

The second disc contains the seminal art-rock works, including "Guitar Trio" and "Drastic Classicism," most of them remastered from old discs now impossible to find. New here is "Massacre on Macdougall Street" (1982), a 19-minute tour de force for brass octet and the drummer Anton Fier. The work was commissioned as a taped background for a dance, and the high-pitched, continuous brass parts, intentionally written beyond the players' endurance, were recorded by overdubbing. Then there's "Waterloo No. 2" (1986), which applies Minimalist repetition to the most clichéd marching-band cadences possible and, perversely, achieves a haunting beauty. I've long tried to dislike the piece and failed.

THE most substantial work on this disc is "Die Donnergötter" (1985), 22 minutes of electric-guitar-ensemble strumming. It's perfectly danceable, if you're not thrown off by the occasional three-against-four polyrhythms. But even this is only a warmup for the final disc, the long-awaited recording of Mr. Chatham's symphony for 100 electric guitars, "An Angel Moves Too Fast to See" (1989).

This huge yet surprisingly lucid and tuneful work has never been performed in New York despite several attempts to bring it here. The closest it came was a 1991 performance at New Music America in Montreal. To obviate the immense logistical hurdles of assembling 100 electric guitarists, Mr. Chatham came up with a brilliant multitiered compositional plan, dividing the music among guitar soloists, guitarists who can read music and those who can't read but can count and follow verbal directions.

The most innovative movement is the fourth, "No Trees Left: Every Blade of Grass Is Screaming." The melody results from chords bouncing around the 100-piece ensemble at regular but unsynchronized intervals. The work ends with what may be the fastest Adagio in the history of music. What the recording doesn't convey is the spatial effect of melody notes jumping among the several sections of the orchestra, but it captures the texture: transparent and melodic, not thick and harmonically vague like the electric-guitar symphonies of Glenn Branca.

Whoops. I wasn't supposed to mention that name, because of the 23-year feud between the two. But like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Philip Glass and Steve Reich, Mr. Chatham and Mr. Branca are a pair, and comparison is inevitable, especially since Mr. Branca's symphonies have been available on the Atavistic label for several years.

Mr. Branca, who learned Minimalist and microtonal guitar techniques by playing in "Guitar Trio," has developed his own symphonic guitar aesthetic and written 13 symphonies. But where Mr. Branca cultivates density, dissonance, mysticism and intricate canons, Mr. Chatham projects a clear sense of line and harmony, drawing ecstasy not from big acoustic effects but from an upbeat, joyous sense of melody and jaunty rhythms. Given the similarities of their media, the composers are as different as Scriabin and Haydn, and in analogous ways.

Of course, "Selected Works" presents a glaringly incomplete picture of Mr. Chatham, with not a note from the last 14 years. His reputation is elusive not only because of his expatriation but also because of the changeability of his muse. Developing a personal idiom over time is a career strategy, but as Mr. Chatham admits, he gets bored. In more recent works not recorded here he has re-explored serial and chance techniques, used a computer to process his own trumpet playing and, in his orchestral Fourth Symphony (1995), saucily appropriated Brahms's Fourth as grist for collage technique.

In an extensive, philosophical booklet essay, Mr. Chatham argues that the time for genre-crossing is over. Since 1990, he writes, we have needed "to circumscribe and crisply redefine each of the fields of music, precisely because the questions being scrutinized in each are not the same."

Easy for him to say now, some current boundary-blurring musicians will probably reply. But the time to explore Mr. Chatham's place in a tradition that he helped originate has finally begun.

Photos: Rhys Chatham performing in downtown New York in 1987. (Cory Pearson)(pg. 23); Rhys Chatham in his Paris studio in April. He now argues that the time for genre-crossing is over. Easy for him to say, some may reply. (Leslie Greene)(pg. 32)