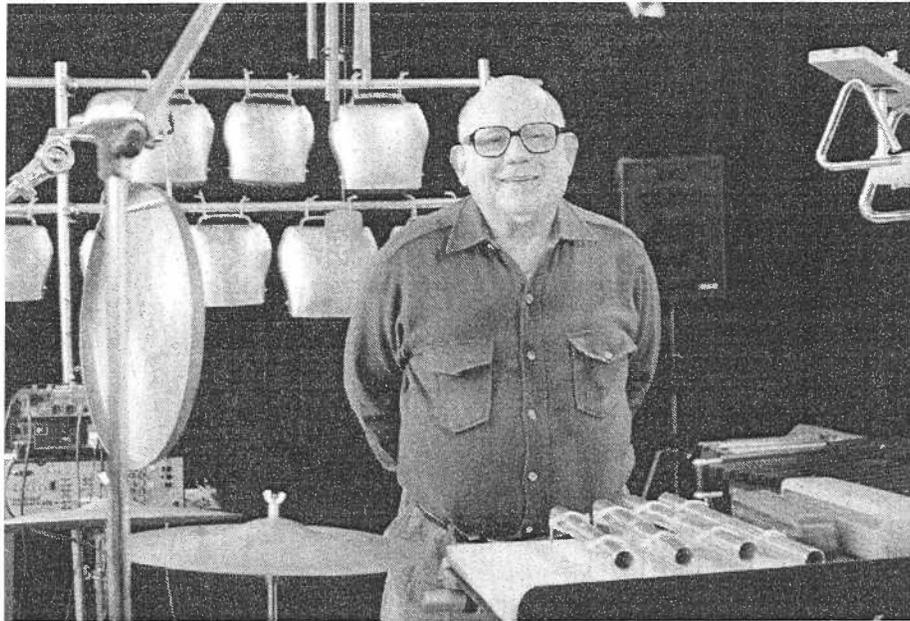


Eric Richards makes sensuous love to his peculiar sounds



Photograph by Julieta Cervantes

DISORIENT EXPRESS

BY KYLE GANN

Eric Richards is the same age as La Monte Young and Steve Reich, but until his January 21 retrospective at Lotus Music & Dance, he was no more than a name to me. His underground reputation now turns out to be such that I am chagrined, connoisseur of the unsung that I claim to be, not to have known more about him. His music is published by Frog Peak Music (frogpeak.org), which champions only subversives of the most attractively disreputable kidney, and my hip friends salivated over his impending gig as if it were the second coming of Tristan Tzara. Kick me for thinking I was au courant on my American originals.

As it appears, Richards is one of a paradoxical breed, a conceptualist motivated by the sensuousness of sound. Accordingly, his music is both luscious and arcane. One of his formative experiences was, in college, assisting Buckminster Fuller in building an icosahedral dome, which started him thinking of music as spatial, determined by “geometrical patterns of energy.” He quit school (though he later taught at Mannes for years) and experimented with tape loops. Unlike Reich and Terry Riley, though, he grew interested not in repetition, but in what happens to sound when you stretch it out and compress it by changing speed. This led to a fascination with time-stretched echoes, couched in experiments like overdubbing a music box played at different tempos.

Judging from the Lotus concert, the concepts are a little difficult to tease out of Richards’s music, while the sonic surfaces are sometimes scrumptious, sometimes cold. The first piece thoroughly disoriented me. Percussionist Alan Zimmerman played *Time’s Racing (but measured by what we do)* on vibraphone, antique cymbals, and an African metal xylophone called the gyl. He tapped out seemingly random sparse gestures, going back and forth between the same

One of a paradoxical breed

itches on different instruments, a really strange effect because the gyl wasn’t tuned in the Western manner, and the pitches kept bending. I couldn’t match up all his movements with the sounds I was hearing, and when the lights came up afterward I was able to confirm that he was backed by a pre-recorded tape that shadowed his playing closely. The piece sounded completely improvised, but examination of the score showed that it was notated in great detail; Zimmerman had reinforced the illusion by memorizing his complex part.

More truly improvisatory, and far more sensuous, was *final bells*. This was a dense recording of cowbells rubbed by rubber balls, played while Zimmerman, live, also scraped 14 cowbells with rubber balls. There was no logical progression to speak of: For some 10 minutes, the music simply made ecstatic love to a succulent timbre. These pieces were recent, but two earlier ones from the 1990s were more transparent. Pianist Joseph Kubera played *The Unravelling of the Field*, which outlined a simple tonality in groups of three or four repeated notes dotted all over the range of the piano, lovely and unpretentious. Quite similarly, baritone David Keck sang *My Great-Aunt Julia*, in which, without accompaniment and leaping among several registers including his falsetto, he sang the alleged story of Richards’s great-aunt, who was kidnapped by gypsies one summer 100 years ago in Ohio, and later returned. As Keck recounted in elegantly precise octave leaps, the family never spoke of it again.

Hipsters salivated over his gig like the second coming of Tristan Tzara.

Richards ended with a work he clearly considers one of his most important, *the bells themselves—and my memory of the bells*, a tape of original and altered pings he had played on Tibetan bells called tingsha, precisely arranged in overlapping sequences by recording engineer Conor Dowling. Music so meticulously calculated, yet so insouciant in its effect, is a puzzle, and I felt like I needed more time to develop an ear for the speed effects involved. But any composer who can nonplus me at 70 is one I should have heard earlier.

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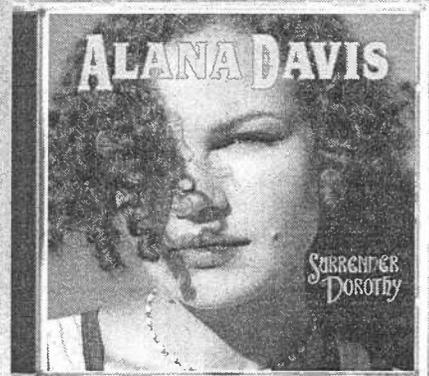
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