

Nurock (and Dewey) take music across the species barrier



Photograph by Joshua Farley

KIRK NUROCK
Natural Sound Workshop
October 27

Dewey and friends

around rapidly in a circle, shaking our voices and squealing falsetto, scat-singing over smooth harmonies. The 1982 documentary *Animalsong*, by Burrill Crohn, shows that Nurock likes to get animals' attention by singing relatively conventional chorales before launching into careful imitations of their own sounds. Here, however, the animals had been auditioned, and he knew in advance what would trigger their cadenzas.

Dewey, for example, would respond to nearly any sustained tone. Noises that were too weird, in dog terms, simply made him look dubious, and the didgeridoo played by no less than Art Baron elicited only startled attention. L2, on the other hand, a miniature pinscher belonging to Barry McQuad, responded primarily to being ignored. Sung to solo, he would merely snort and then look to McQuad for approval. To keep him singing, or rather emitting elongated barks, we all had to avoid looking at him while singing. Unlike Dewey, however, L2 would squeal along with the didgeridoo. I thought Dewey had real artistic potential, and might consider a career in the Downtown improv scene. L2, though, seemed like one of those people—excuse me, dogs—who just perform for attention, and who wouldn't sustain a musical career past the first flush of success. I wouldn't sign him for a contract longer than one recording.

Birdie, on the other hand, was a self-

His best-known early piano piece was called *Gorilla*.

conscious show-off. Bertilla Baker's Indonesian red lory could meow when asked, "What does the kitty cat say?" and cough when prompted, "Does Birdie have a little cold?" He exercised his vocabulary while people were singing, responded positively to vocal shakes, and let out a series of shrieks when the crowd crooned into his cage through cardboard tubes—a reaction I think I would have duplicated under the same circumstances. Eventually he fell victim to stimulus overload, and when 14 people started singing "Take the A Train" to him through those tubes, I reflected that I've been in this job for 17 years, and it's been a continual parade of unpredictable musical creativity and innovation. But now, I think maybe I've seen everything.

MEET CARL ARFF

BY KYLE GANN

Dewey was the best singer we found during the October 27 workshop. His long, plaintive ooooooos were quite various in contour, and he seemed to particularly enjoy performing in duets, improvising in overlapping phrases.

Slapping sounds distracted him from performing, though, and weird vocal techniques simply made his ears perk up. Dewey is a Chinese crested dog belonging to Marilyn Briskin, who graciously volunteered him for Kirk Nurock's latest Natural Sound Workshop, in which Nurock and 13 singers, professional and amateur, sang in a number of cross-species encounters.

I should mention that Nurock is not a nut, but a superb musician (not mutually exclusive categories, I'll grant you), a versatile jazz/new-music pianist and composer with an innovative sense of texture. He seems to have a lifelong fascination with other species. His best-known early piano piece was an exhausting forearm-cluster extravaganza titled *Gorilla*, and I first became aware of him via performances he gave at zoos in the 1980s, walking around with a chorus and eliciting sounds from the wolves, sea lions, and Siberian tigers. He likes to quote Darwin on the connotative aspects of certain animal sounds, but he's convinced that some species occasionally make sounds simply for pleasure—and that there's no reason not to call it music. Nor to refrain from joining in.

I missed Nurock's early zoo gigs (we brought him to New Music America '82 for one, but I was too busy administrating to attend), and when I learned he was resuming them after a long hiatus, I jumped at the chance. Nurock brought an evolving group of singers, performance artists, friends, and strangers together for six workshops (my schedule allowed me to make half of them), the first five preparatory. We practiced various vocal improv techniques, passing sounds

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