

One-Man Opera Machine

BY KYLE GANN

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Three steps ahead of the game

photo: Hiroyuki Ito

Mikel Rouse is the poster boy for composer self-sufficiency. Not that he's the first to achieve it. Charles Ives and Conlon Nancarrow led careers independent of other musicians and music organizations, but paid dearly for it: Ives heard little of his music performed until he was in his fifties. Nancarrow waited until age 65 for any recognition at all. But the computer has added vast new vistas to the composer's landscape of self-driven opportunities, and while many are taking advantage of them, Rouse seems to stay three steps ahead of the game.

Consider: In 1995 he produced, on his computer, an opera he could perform by himself with a microphone, a harmonica, and a CD player, *Failing Kansas*. This gave him the experience to write a more ambitious opera with a larger cast, the popular *Dennis Cleveland*. He's been touring that work while completing another opera, which will eventually be presented at BAM, probably in fall of 2001, *The End of Cinematics*. But booking operas in big spaces is a slow process, and Rouse hasn't twiddled his thumbs. To kill time he's made a computer film-with-music called *Funding* (named for something he's gotten very little of, and thus the drive to self-sufficiency), which can exist either as a full-performance production with cast, simply as a DVD, or as anything in between. And in recent weeks, he's officially launched his own record label, Exit Music, with three CDs of his latest music appearing at once.

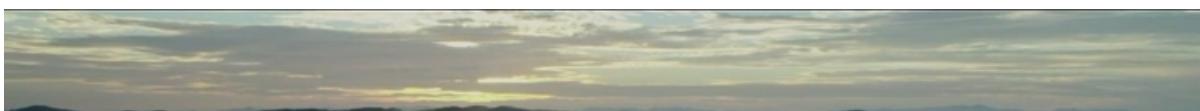
Whew. The last composer who churned out operas at this pace worked for the Archbishop of Salzburg.

The new CDs continue what I like to call Rouse's simulation of normalcy, his suave rock surface, which, when you listen into it, is highly structured via unusual rhythmic devices: slow seven-beat background patterns, phrases passing each other at different lengths and tempos. Of the three, *The American Dream* contains the music from *The End of Cinematics*. The song "Men Are Women" opens with Rouse repeating the words "Stay, whadaya say, on the way-hay" in a five-beat pattern. He then overlays a more pop-sounding four-beat version over this, and adds the words "I didn't think, I didn't dream" in a three-beat pattern, so that we finally have three-, four-, and five-beat patterns all going at once. If you made an analytical diagram for this music, and another for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, they would look identical at some points, but the feeling could hardly be more different. The sampling is inventive, too, uniting the songs globally; in a song "G.O.D.O.O.C." (standing for "God out of control"), the words "I can't" sung over and over in the background turn out to be the stuttered beginning of the next song, subliminally etched in your brain.

Surprisingly enough, the second CD, *Return*, was made by recomposing a set of nine string quartets that Rouse had written back in the '80s. In some songs you can hear those quartets running through the background, sometimes reorchestrated for winds or brass. In "You Know Why I'm Here," for instance, the original odd-rhythmed cadences, in crazy parallel fifths, run over and over beneath a rock beat they don't fit with. Stockhausen himself would envy the number of lines and textures Rouse can seduce you into listening to all at once, and the success of that depends on Rouse's amazing ability as a recording producer to locate all these levels in a virtual audio space deep and transparent enough that they don't get in each other's way.

Cameraworld, the third CD, is perhaps Rouse's most stripped-down, *almost*-conventional rock disc yet, though it is still filled with opaque lyrics running in counterpoint. Computer lingo abounds; the first words are "Visit my page," and the song "Bounce to Disc" goes, "Light break down to number/Digitize your slumber/Life becomes a fresco out of movies/Dumb and dumber." I wish I could recommend which disc to get first, but my favorite cuts are scattered on all three. I find that I sometimes can't sell hardcore rock fans on Rouse; he sounds superficially like stuff they've heard before, and they're not used to listening on the deeper structural level on which his most original effects take place. Call it avant-rock for classical fans if you want, but it's the most complex *tonal* music around. And your best bet for finding it, for now, is through his Web page, www.mikelrouse.com.

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