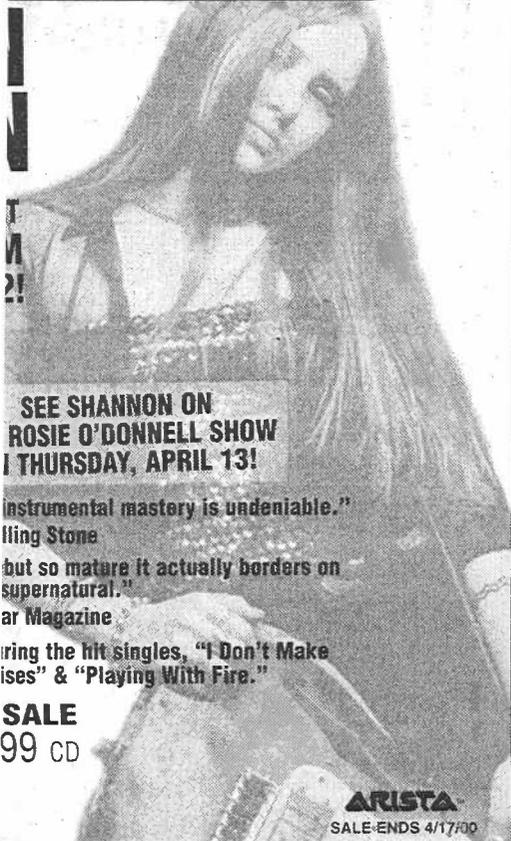


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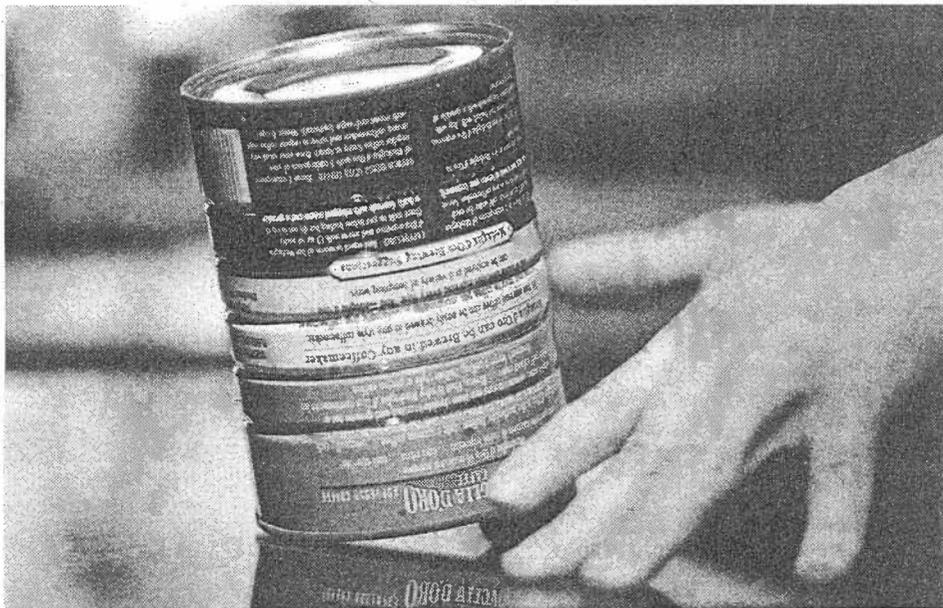
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MUSIC



CARLA GARR

WHAT TURNED THIS DISCRIMINATING MELODIST INTO A LATTER-DAY STOCKHAUSEN? THE INTERNET.

Ambient Goes Postminimal in William Duckworth's New Music

STREAMLINING CHAOS

BY KYLE GANN

WILLIAM DUCKWORTH'S CATHEDRAL BAND
Roulette
April 1

What the hell is William Duckworth doing? For 20 years he was a pioneer of the widespread (and woefully unacknowledged) postminimalist movement, weaving elegantly precise scores like *The Time Curve Preludes* and *Southern Harmony* from folk-music patterns with a logic as cool and convincing as Mozart's. Now, at Roulette, he's surrounded by noisy improvisers, his face framed by headphones and illuminated by a glow from the screen of a Macintosh G3 computer, as a DJ spins dance records a few feet away. What turned this discriminating melodist into a latter-day Stockhausen, omnivorously devouring whole chunks of other people's musics and fusing them into his own megalomaniacal vision?

The simple answer is the Internet. For the last few years Duckworth has channeled his energies into a mammoth Internet piece called *Cathedral*, which you can tap into at www.monroestreet.com/Cathedral/home.html. This ambient concert was part of *Cathedral*, and Web-cast as such. (I thought of tele-reviewing it from home, but server traffic is unreliable, so to avoid potential disaster I dragged my virtual ass to the physical hall.) Now, if you're a true artist, you realize that in a change as drastic as going from concert hall to Internet, you can't just keep writing the same piano tunes you used to: You need a complete concept makeover to fit the new medium.

And so Duckworth—although he still composes entire pieces that are part of *Cathedral*—went interactive. Download a slew of software, and you can perform along with *Cathedral* over the Internet, your own melodies ultimately ending up as part of the mix. However, we've had some examples in the past of such interactive, multicollaborative Internet music, notably Tod Machover's *Brain Opera*, and they tend to be disappointingly diffuse, mishmashes of disparate elements in which individual contributions get lost in the ocean of sound. Being a postminimalist, and thus aesthetically inclined toward highly identifiable and carefully delineated structures, Duckworth was not the type to be satisfied with random sound collages.

So he refined a technology to do the impossible: create filters to unify the blend of other

people's contributions, to make sure that everything Mr. D. eats turns into Mr. D. It's a quixotic attempt to synthesize the great philosophical divide in current music. On one hand we have the Cage-Stockhausen-Zorn side of music, with its amorphous multiplicity, on the other side the La Monte Young-Steve Reich side with its narrow focus on unity. Bringing the two together seems impossible, but so did reconciling Wagner and Brahms, until Schoenberg did it.

So for this ambient concert, Duckworth chose his collaborators carefully: John Kennedy and Charles Wood on percussion, the inimitable "Blue" Gene Tyranny on piano, and, most of all, DJ Tamara, a Seattle-based DJ who's been making the rounds in New York lately. Tamara supplied the rhythm for the entire 90-minute work with looped record tracks, at first gentle and quiet, later more rock-oriented, and climaxing in a high-energy jungle section. (My students tell me what jungle is: I'll assume you know better than I do.) Wood and Kennedy made percussive sounds either to blend in or stand out—during one mellow section Wood squeaked and popped balloons—while Tyranny suavely phased motives and harmonies from Tamara's records in and out of his playing. Duckworth, meanwhile, spread his own poignant tonalities over the whole with something called the Pitch Web, an electronic instrument programmed into *Cathedral* that plays prerecorded samples.

The result, usually beautiful in its additive melodies and prolonged frictions, was a living contradiction. Drumbeats, voices, and recognizable snippets of music (including Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and *Come Out*) oozed from the turntables, noises from the percussionists, arpeggios from the piano; yet we heard these disparate elements all through the same lens. I've long felt that free improvisation need not be chaotic, that a new improv technique could grow from minimalist roots; here it was. A certain noble melancholy held everything together, and the Pitch Web's ostinatos fused with the drum loops as though showing us there was no real difference in significance. Roulette, with its rows of chairs, didn't seem like the right space, for the drifting music and video ("motion paintings" by Daniel Wiesenfeld) made us want to drift around as well. But the music referred us to points all over the globe, without ever leaving home. ▮