

Tuning Your Brain

BY KYLE GANN

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The Downtown music scene has seemed slightly sleepy since 9-11, but one of the artists most closely affected drew a new lease on life from the tragedy. David First, the distance of whose apartment from Ground Zero is measured in yards rather than miles or blocks, jumped back within weeks with a self-produced pop song aptly called "Jump Back," an "ode to the people of New York." Since then he's come out with two new CDs and initiated a couple of series of performances, making strides in both aspects of his career at once, pop and experimental. *Universary* (Analysand) is a highly charged disc of songs with a bright dance beat. *Dave's Waves* (Ants) is an austere but lovely ambient disc of undulating harmonic tones. And First's March 24 concert at Harvestworks was the second unveiling of a new phase in his career that he calls, with characteristic humor, Operation: Kracpot.

It's not only the quantity of First's work since 9-11 that makes it seem like a determined rebound, but the music's resolute upbeatness. *Universary* does some interesting things in the background with tuning and beats (First tells me I can't always hear them), but the foreground is filled with vibrant dance beats and thoughtful but never angry or self-pitying lyrics: "Was nothing too bold or obscene?/We froze as all good was withdrawn/The agencies waging their faith/Claimed they knew God alone/Was God even home?" *Dave's Waves*, by contrast, is a continuum of electro-waves geared toward die-hard Phill Niblock and La Monte Young fans, but its liner notes make a claim for the healing, or at least relaxing, power of sine tones in the frequency range of the human brain's alpha waves. Whether rocking or droning, First is clearly trying to make the world a better place.

So much was evident at the Harvestworks concert as well. As we entered, soothing, lightly pulsating electronic tones already emanated from the loudspeakers. First is on a new kick-crackpot by his own admission—of basing his music on fluctuations in the earth's electromagnetic field, as translated from raw data sent to him by a geophysicist friend in Poker Flat, Alaska. As he explains it, lightning strikes the earth at many points at any given time, causing it to ring like a gigantic bell, though at subsonic frequencies. First takes this data over the Internet and transposes it upward several octaves so we can hear it as the drones underlying Operation:

Kracpot's improv piece, *The Music of the Sphere*.

New-music old-timers will immediately think of Charles Dodge's 1970 electronic piece *Earth's Magnetic Field*, in which tones meandered up and down driven by similar data, but First had a more complex plan. He added in oscillator tones (not having taken science since high school, I promise to get this wrong) at the frequency of brain waves, on the theory that the listener's brain will tune into the frequency and shift into the brain-wave state suggested. Be that as it may, what was more immediate was that First and electronic composer Daphna Naphtali sat at laptop computers, nudging the tones this way and that and adding in ostinatos and melodic curves. On the opposite side of the small room, singer Lisa Karrer burbled softly into a microphone, while on the flanks David Simons and Jim Pugliese drummed and tapped on cymbals, gongs, and drums so subtly that they mostly blended into the mix.

It took a little wishful thinking to make the disparate elements coalesce, but it was easier when I closed my eyes. The pulsing of harmonics didn't raise the hair on my neck as has sometimes happened with First's live performances, but it did absorb me, interrupt my train of thought, loosen my sense of time. It was a relaxing feeling, especially after a day spent tracking anxiety-making news about the troops' tortuous trek toward Baghdad. The *Dave's Waves* disc is even more mesmerizing, like having your own La Monte Young sound installation but with followable, almost melodic, transformations in the beat patterns. Perhaps someone should look into the possibility of piping First's hypnotic tones into the Iraqi countryside in hopes of calming everyone down.

Or better yet, into the White House.

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