

# Music Notes: AMM's continual quest for failure

In August of 1981, the number one hit record on the pop charts for independent labels in Great Britain — ahead of such hits as "Smiley Smile" by the Beach Boys and "You're Not Moving the Way You're Supposed To" by the Homosexuals — was not a rock and roll album, nor was it even music that had been recently recorded. Instead, it was an intense, two-record, abstruse-sounding electronic improvisation that had been recorded at the Crypt, a London nightclub, in the summer of 1968. This stringent music ostensibly utilized violin, cello, piano, saxophone, guitar, and percussion as well as electronics, but the listener is hard put to recognize any of the sounds as emanating from conventional instruments; this strange, spasmodic din sounds like some robotic music-of-the-future, beyond any human control. Altogether, **The Crypt** (Matchless Recordings MR5) was not the type of record one ordinarily finds on a top-ten list in any category. Neither were the musicians who produced this record — members of a group known only as AMM — ordinary performers.

AMM is an improvisation group, but not improvisation in the dictionary sense of "to fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand," and still less in the jazz sense of playing around within a preset structure of melody and harmony. The aims of AMM, and the style of its music, have changed from time to time, and its members are sometimes hard put to describe their working methods; but it is clear that, for each one, improvisation is the embodiment of a philosophy, not a technique. Each AMM improvisation is a search for something freed from the limits of past experience, something that did not exist until its realization. The members of AMM are uninterested in flaunting their virtuosity or expertise, and indifferent to their past achievements, and even to the concepts of success or failure. Yet despite this Zen-like uninvolvedness with conventional standards of good and bad, AMM has garnered an enormous amount of critical praise and built up a wildly enthusiastic European following, and several of their albums have been best-sellers in Germany and England. Though closely associated with the uncompromising European avant-garde of the 60s, AMM has strongly influenced such rock groups as Pink Floyd and Henry Cow, and more recently such new wave groups as This Heat and Dome.

That AMM's recordings are difficult to obtain in America makes the group's appearance here an impressive event; and this 19-year-old ensemble's Chicago debut at the Arts Club, sponsored by the Interarts Ministry (the same people who brought you Diamanda Galas last February), can without exaggeration be called a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The original members of AMM — guitarist Keith Rowe, saxophonist Lou Gare, percussionist Eddie Prevost, and slightly later, bassist Lawrence Sheaff — had all been jazz players. They quickly realized that, as much of an inspiration as they had found in jazz, black American music was ultimately an inappropriate means of expression for white Europeans, and they soon moved away from jazz toward experimentation with a rapidity that left any thought of commercial success far behind. In 1966 they were joined by Cornelius Cardew, a composer who had already made a name for himself in the cliquish world of the avant-garde by studying with and assisting John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Although he had no jazz experience, Cardew encountered no problems of musical language, so far had AMM already moved in the direction of the avant-garde. For years AMM performed in and around London, playing weekly in a small room at the London School of Economics, and recording infrequently because of their view that a fixed recording could not capture the essence of the performing situation. From time to time other well-known musicians temporarily became part of the group — American composer and John Cage disciple Christian Wolff, English composer Christopher Hobbs, and the remarkable avant-garde pianist John Tilbury.

During this time, AMM went to perhaps greater extremes than any other improvisation group had done to escape the limitations of their inherited musical culture. Besides their usual instruments, they played on alarm clocks, radios, and even battery-operated cocktail mixers. They made instruments out of found objects such as steel sheets and plastic yogurt cups. On their album **It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado** (JATO 60031), a ruler, hooked to a simple machine, can be heard sawing endlessly back and forth over the strings of an electric guitar in the piece "For A," which was inspired by Keith Rowe's work in a mental hospital. They performed without plan, yet merged their separate sounds into so integrated a result that it was often difficult to tell who was playing what, and Prevost claims that it was not uncommon for a member "to wonder who or what was producing a particular sound, stop playing, and discover that it was he himself who had been responsible."

Yet unlike so many other groups that followed externally similar procedures, there was never anything nihilistic about AMM's pursuits, and this has been the secret of the longevity of their aesthetic. Their experimentation is informed by a wide range of influences, and they quote Zen koans as justification for the "uselessness" of their work. Keith Rowe's early passion for the art of Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock (he was recently awarded money to develop improvisation techniques based on Pollock's paintings) gave him a sympathy for Cardew's geometrically graphic notation.

Eddie Prevost took a degree in history and philosophy during his work with AMM, as part of his search for a comprehensive aesthetic for improvisation, and John Tilbury has a master's degree in analysis and aesthetics from London University. Tilbury, whose virtuosity has gained him a reputation as the successor to avant-garde pianist David Tudor, has been influential on the music scene throughout Europe, and formed the Warsaw Music Workshop Group with Polish composer Zygmunt Krause.

In 1973, AMM disbanded. As Rowe explained, "The problem was one of bringing conscious political thought into the music. We wanted to work from a philosophical base through to direct political statements. The problems overwhelmed us; they were crippling and they broke AMM." Within months, however, Eddie Prevost and Lou Gare came back together as AMM II. After another breakup caused by geographic dislocations, Keith Rowe and Eddie Prevost took up the gauntlet again as AMM III, and in 1980 John Tilbury rejoined the group, which is now once again known simply as AMM. Throughout these vicissitudes, though, the aesthetic has remained constant. "Ultimately, AMM will fail," says Prevost. "There may be rare moments when we, or others, sense a kind of success, but there can never be 'ultimate' success. Nevertheless, with the kind of perversity that belongs only to nature, AMM continues to play. It continues to want to play, and in playing fails; appears at times to be succeeding, and then fails and fails. The paradox is that continual failure on one plane is the root of success on another... We certainly must not look for failure any more than for success."

Since 1965, AMM's music has mellowed somewhat, and their recent albums, though no less unusual, are calmer and more appealing to the ear than their violent work of the 60s. Part of this change is due to political concerns such as a refusal to limit their audience to an elite crowd, concerns that were close to the heart of Cornelius Cardew (who died in a politically suspicious hit-and-run accident in December of 1961). Still, due to the environmental and ephemeral nature of their work, AMM must be experienced live for anything approaching their full effect, and tonight's performance will be a truly rare opportunity to hear a part of the avant-garde that is strangely located between jazz and new wave. Besides their own improvisation, the group will perform parts of Cardew's monumental improvisation/graphic work **Treatise**.

AMM plays at the Arts Club, 109 E. Ontario, Friday night, May 25, at 8 PM. General admission is \$7, students and seniors \$5, and tickets will be available only at the door; no reservations. For further information, call the Interarts Ministry at 784-0239.

— Kyle Gann

photo/Kenneth Ansell

