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 Group Britain—ahead of such hits as "Smiley Smiles" by the Beach Boys and "Here's Nose" by the Nose, was "You're Supposed To Try" 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, abstract sound recording of 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 an array of conventional instruments; this strange, spacey, modi dop sounds like nothing one hears from the innovations of the avant-garde beyond any human control. Altogether, The Crypt (Matchless Records MEC 951-S) was not the 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 people.

AMM is an improvisation group, but not improvisation in the dictionary sense of "to fabricate out of what is conventional on hand," but rather in the jazz sense of playing around within a preexistent structure of melody and harmony. The group was started by AMM, and the style of its music, have changed from time to time, and its members sometimes have had to describe their working methods, but it is clear that, for each one, the music is an embodiment of a personal, not a technique. Each AMM improvisation is a search for something beyond the limits of past experience, something that did not exist until its realization. The members of AMM are not interested in flaunting their virtuosity or expertise, and indifferent to their peers' recognition. They have no concept of success or failure. Yet, despite this Zen-like uninvolvability with their peers' recognition, AMM has garnered an enormous amount of critical praise and, with the advent of the European following, and several of their albums have been best-sellers in Europe and Japan. AMM has evolved closely associated with the uncompromising European avant-garde of the 70's, and is influenced by such rock groups as Pink Floyd and Henry Cow, and more recently new wave groups such as The逝 to and Dose.

That AMM's recordings are difficult to obtain in America makes the recent broadcast on WNYC's Day at the Top of the Morning, sponsored by the Interarts Ministry (the same people who brought you Diamanda Galas's "The Chariot Will Be Waiting" and "Fugue") very exciting. The group's next release, the culmination of this great record, will be a hit—and the configuration will be a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The original members of AMM—guitarist Keith Rowe, saxophonist Louis Moholo, and percussionist Roscoe Mitchell, and slightly later, bassist Lawrence Sheaff—who all had been jazz players. They were moving in the direction of the avant-garde. In 1966 they were joined by Cornelius Cardew, a composer who had already made a name for himself in the cluttered world of the avant-garde by writing and performing John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Although a former jazz musician, he 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 the London School of Economics, and recording infrequently because of their view that fixed recording could not capture the essence of the performing situation. From time to time, their well-known musically, temporarily became part of the group—American composer and John Cage disciple Christian Wolff, English composer Christopher Dobbs, 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 see what the limits of the inherited musical practice. Besides their usual instruments, they played on alarm clocks, radios, stoves, wheels, battery-operated cocktail mixers. They made instruments out of found objects, filings, steel sheets, and plastic yogurt cups. On their album It's Had an Ordinary Enough Day in Pueblo, Colorado (JOFA 00031), a ruler, hooked to a simple microphone, can be heard sawing endlessly back and forth over the strings of an electric guitar in the distance. For this, which was inspired by Keith Rowe's work in a mental hospital, they performed without music sheets, and made their own sound into an integrated a result that it was often difficult to tell what was being played, and Friedwald 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 him by himself who had been responsible."

Yet unlike so many other groups that followed externally similar procedures, there was never any self-consciousness about AMM's pursuits, and this has been the secret of the longevity of this aesthetic. Their experimentation is informed by a wide range of influences, and they quote Zen and Rosicrucian for their "uselessness" of their work. Keith Rowe's early passion for the art of Pauline Boty was reflected in his painting that gave him a sympathy for Cardew's geometrically graphic notation.

Ed die 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 musicology and aesthetics from the London University. Tilbury, whose virtuosity has gained him a reputation as one of the leading avant-garde pianists, David Tudor, has been influential on the music scene throughout Europe, and formed the Warsaw Music Workshop Group with Polish composer Wojciech Kilar.

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 political statements. The problems overwhelmed us; they were crippling and they broke AMM."

Within months, however, Eddie Prevost and John Gage came back together as AMM II. After another period of problems caused by geographic dislocation, Keith Rowe and Eddie Prevost took up the group again as AMM III, and in 1980, John Tilbury rejoined the group, which is now once again known simply as AMM. Throughout these vicissitudes, the group's aesthetic has remained constant. "Ultimately, AMM will fail," says Prevost. "There might be only a few vital moments when we, or others, sense a kind of success, but there can never be any full return. Nevertheless, with the kind of pervasiveness that belongs only to the mind's continuing to play. AMM continues to want to play, and in playing fails, appears to blame the audience for not being receptive, and then fails and fails."

The paradox is that continual failure on one plane is the root of success on another... We seriously must not look for failure any more than for success. Since 1966, AMM's music has mellowed somewhat, and their recent albums, though no less unusual, have begun to appeal to the ear than their violent work of the 60's. Part of this change is due to political reasons, such as a refusal to limit their audience to an elite crowd, concerns that were close to the hearts of Mark Chagall and 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 rock. Since the group's improvisation, the group will perform parts of Cardew's monumental Improvisation graphic work Treasures. AMM plays at the Arts Club, 106 E. Ontario, Friday night, May 28, 8 PM. (Student admission is $7, and seniors $5, and tickets will be available only at the door: no reservations. For further information, call the Interarts Ministry at 764-0329."

—Kylie Gann

Photo/Kenneth Ade