

"Blue" Gene Tyranny

# Alien

BY KYLE GANN

**B**lue" Gene Tyranny (born Robert Sheff) begins his bio statement by noting that he has lived one decade in each of the four corners of the United States. His music sounds like it. There's an ingratiating, unpretentious, rural truck stop feel to his piano improvisations, even when he's venturing past his boogie-woogie roots into the avant-garde. In fact, though he's rarely far from a pop tradition that normally wouldn't interest me much, a subtle but ever-present core of Copland-Schuman-Harris Americana gives his music a nobility one wouldn't expect from the style. Tyranny's the only musician I know who can sound low-down honky-tonk and Grant Wood-heartland at the same time. There's also a tragic strain in his work, evinced by in memoriam pieces for JFK, Harvey Milk, and others; after all, the tragedy of lost innocence is part and parcel of the American mystique.

If any one feeling unites the varying styles and genres of Tyranny's output, it's that of the strangeness of being on planet Earth. That feeling was first made explicit in *A Letter From Home*. This was the work with which Tyranny began to reinvent the cantata, just as his associate Robert Ashley had earlier wreaked similar havoc on another hallowed form, the opera. The piece has undergone considerable development in the years since its recording on *Lovely Music*. That early version was a '60s-ish, spaced-out letter naïvely read over a mild pop/minimalist background. The latest installment in the series, performed February 19 to 22 at St. Mark's Church (following a hilariously

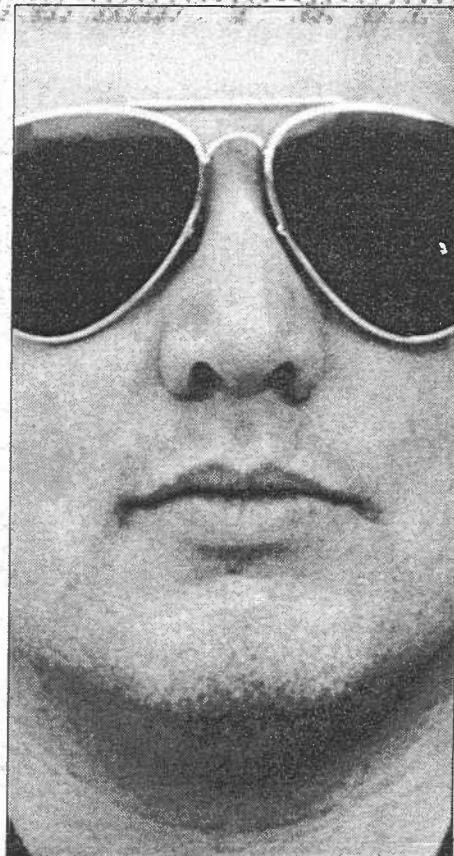
surreal dance/theater piece by Tyranny, Rocky Bornstein, and Roger Babb), is quite different: abstract, formalized, a cool postmodern collage made from snippets of down-home nostalgia.

Tom Buckner and Tyranny sang the text in alternating phrases, while Louise Smith, Lenard Petit, and Roger Babb danced the minimal theatrics. Like Robert Ashley's video operas (which get their Midwest musical realism from Tyranny's creamy jazz), *A Letter From Home* stringed shreds of disconnected narrative, but where Ashley makes a verbal jigsaw puzzle that can eventually be pieced together, Tyranny's images seem hermetic. They are sensual, half-recognizable, but not approachable. One gathers that "Dear Dorothy Jean" has been abandoned by some man in her life, and there are ominous hints of hidden scandal: "Terror lives in the family circle." The two boys, equally abandoned by waning adolescence, look for meaning in cars and distant Western cities: "This plan shows how to build a car, but not where to drive it."

The music has changed, too. Tyranny and Buckner's lightly inflected recitative (a flat style coincidentally reminiscent of 16th century English anthems) infused the narrative with calm sadness, but offered no other insight. The taped accompaniment has moved further from Glass and Eno toward stately, electronic c&w, though even in such stylized circumstances Tyranny's phrasing remains subtle. Vestiges of romanticized ruralism

## MUSIC

survive the obliteration of context, and the narrative's fragmented poignancy makes for a kind of postmodernist's "Such are the dreams of the everyday housewife." Ashley wraps such stories in a bewildering plethora of detail, but Tyranny's stripped-down presentation amounts to the opposite: information un-



KEN BECKMAN

### A gone Grant Wood

derload. There's a feeling here that the composer/author knows more than he's telling, and no reason is offered for the reluctance to communicate. It's a beautiful, tender piece, even if some of its ideas are still struggling to reach the surface.

Alienation is easy to express with words, but in Tyranny's April 1 concert on the Whitney Museum's Philip Morris schedule, I was impressed with how well he captured that feeling through sounds alone. *Extreme Reincarnations Just Before Sunset* pushed his Coplandy, bitter-sweet improv into uneasy coexistence with tapes of birdsongs, traffic noise, people yelling. The contradiction was in-

tentional; academia has poured forth hordes of similarly heterophonic piano-and-tape works, but most of them weren't meant to come out that way. A couple of melodies echoed between speaker and keyboard were the piece's sole attempt at integration. Such unwilling accommodation seemed evocative of contemporary life: whether you're in New York or Hurricane, Utah, wealthy matrons step over the homeless and Zuni Indians collect VCRs. Forced coexistence is an ontological category of the Global Village. *Extreme Reincarnations* heightened one's awareness of that aspect of our world, and it's hard to ask more of art.

Other, briefer piano-and-tape pieces on the program were marked by similar estrangement. Tyranny's *Variations of John Coltrane's "The Red Planet"* superimposed complex 12-tone figurations over a loud rock beat with bristling fury. His realization of George Cacioppo's *Casiopeia*, a classic '60s open-form work (in memory: Cacioppo died in 1984), was typically chaotic. But there are concerns closer to Tyranny's Texan heart than alienation; the final work, "Unseen Stars Shake Us Awake," from his ongoing *Country Boy, Country Dog*, painted a familial, more comfortable way of life. Here he improvised over a synthesized-orchestra tape of simple melodic permutations, sometimes decorating it with virtuoso filigree, elsewhere adding polytonal tension. Ultimately, the piece offered reassurance by returning to the octave drone from whence it came.

In his own music, Tyranny pushes into the background the very thing that makes his contribution to Ashley's operas so delightful: his clean, eloquent improv technique, his genius for coming to the inspired note at the right time. He must find it too easy. It's obvious that, as a composer, he is challenging himself, resisting the easy path. For all that I enjoy his command of the vernacular, I have to respect that integrity as much as anything. ■