

America the Callous

By Kyle Gann

Brenda Hutchinson
Charles Wood

"O beautiful, for spacious skies," sings the voice on the tape, and, in excruciating disharmony, another voice joins in: "for amber waves of grain." Two mock-patriotic inebriates fade in and out, while a mental patient named Norris describes the experiences that drove him to a breakdown. A dark-skinned physicist of African, Asian, and French descent, Norris enjoyed a rewarding career until he began to date a lighter, mulatto woman. Suddenly his work was considered unsatisfactory, and of five papers he published on nuclear reactive theory, his name appeared on only two. When he blew the whistle on a nuclear accident cover-up, the jig was up and his career over. Norris rambles, but Brenda Hutchinson, who taped his interview and premiered it at her December 8 concert at Experimental Intermedia, says, "I believe him." "America, America, God shed his grace on thee..."

After I called Hutchinson a "conceptualist" in my *Voice Choice*, she told me she looked up the word to see what it meant, but her pocket dictionary only listed "concept." OK, so it isn't the best term to describe her often moving and surreal performances. But it does convey her *type* of imagination, a type common among an earlier generation (Alvin Lucier,



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Annea Lockwood, La Monte Young) but uncommon among hers. Rather than develop a musical style from one piece to the next, Hutchinson darts in invisible leaps. No clear theme connects the Thai pig call of her *Eeh-yah!* (which I've reviewed here) with the giant music box of *Norris and America the Beautiful*. Her output is a series of inspired concepts, unified only by the open-earred originality that allows them to occur. Consequently, she's one of the few composers around who always surprises me.

Take *Norris*: the ill-tuned "America the Beautiful" came from *Apple Etudes*, a series of street-people recordings she made in the early '80s. Norris's sad story was added later. Meanwhile, as a poignant yet distancing overlay,

Hutchinson stuck pins in a three-foot-diameter cylinder that, as she turned it, struck bell-like notes on a row of metal bars tuned in quarter-tones. Standing opposite the cylinder from the bars, Hutchinson had only partial control over what pitches the pins elicited, and as she stuck in new pins the music increased with each revolution. We've heard lots of randomly derived music, and lots of music that repeated additive patterns, but this was the first music I'd heard that drove home random patterns through repetition, the first "Cagean minimalism."

And what did that music box, or Norris's problems, have to do with Hutchinson's Duet for Flute and Long Tube? Hutchinson blew overtones on a nine-and-a-half-foot tube, Barbara Held circled

the same pitches on flute. The tube, however, had inherent nodal points at which pitches sung into it were canceled out—a tone at such a point is physically impossible to sing into the tube. As Hutchinson's voice rose, sounding alternately like a flute, a muted trumpet, and a voice, it would suddenly warble violently at certain pitches and then disappear until she passed the nodal point. The higher she went, the more frequently her singing became impossible.

Other pieces on this concert I've written about before. In *Sentences*, Hutchinson read a surreal Robert Gregory poem through a megaphone while rolling on the floor in the changing glare of a TV screen we couldn't see. *Voices of Reason* consisted of recordings made at a psychiatric hospital: some geezer singing, "I'm in the mood to be kissed," a woman kvetching unintelligibly. Brief and impermeable, these felt less like works-in-themselves than seeds for future Hutchinson inspirations. Flutist Held also repeated her own *Desert Wrap* (formerly known by the dance it was written for, *Inscriptions for a Cylinder Seal*), in which she drew arabesques around taped desert sounds such as gravel-shoveling and the Moroccan flute of Paul Bowles. Run through Phill Niblock's classy sound system, the piece sounded more vibrant than ever.

But even from this mixed offering, one could piece together a Hutchinson sensibility, and I think it's this: she tends to place something deeply personal and emotionally charged—disturbed voices, painful reminiscences—against a seductive demonstration

of some physical principle—the random music box, the TV light, the voice-canceling tube. Faced with that contradiction, you're allowed to pretend you're just hearing a neutral acoustic-demonstration piece, while in the background she slips you a harsh reality you'd rather not think about. Physics, in her music, is a defense mechanism. On the surface her work is filled with extremely clever, avant-gardisms; underneath it weeps for the callousness and cruelty of our civilized life.

The previous evening at Roulette, as I'm always saying, Charles Wood played pieces for home-built noise instruments. *Two Minutes Fifty*, shorter and much louder than Cage's 4'33", cycled through humorous permutations of mechanical bells, like a miniature symphony of telephones, burglar alarms, and sirens. Next, in *A Fiber in the Mind Does Tear*, Wood, John Kennedy, and Eric Kivnick bowed and plucked wires attached to various resonating devices: trash cans, buckets, gourds, tambourines. This was austerity incarnate: nuances were ear-stretchingly subtle, and no surface attraction seduced the ear. But if you dug in, the noises were so elaborately structured that you could imagine this being a reconstruction of Webern's String Trio slowed down to eight rpm, or perhaps Debussy's *Peleas* sung by the Gyuto monks of Tibet.

For austerity, though, I didn't hear nothin'. I couldn't stay for Wood's *Time Is Change*, a reportedly 45-minute work for four pairs of stones. But then, I'm not qualified to write about rock music.