

## Ben Neill

# Bar Art

BY KYLE GANN

It may be timely to assert that, as one exasperated composer recently wrote to me, "everything is not everything else." The cognoscenti were shocked when, in the mid-'70s, Rhys Chatham began booking jazz and rock groups at that avant-garde sanctuary the Kitchen, inaugurating an exciting period of genre confusion. That the inherent ontological unity of a musical tradition can be flouted with impunity is now such a trendy commonplace (the *Times* hates to go a week without repeating it) that musicians no longer dare speak against the idea. It serves a purpose: traditional musicians get extra gigs, and fans become aware that their favorite genre holds no monopoly on invention and enjoyment. But the coexistence of classical and pop, performed in different venues and enjoyed by different audiences, has been a feature of every major culture and can be traced back at least to the second millennium B.C. in Egypt; predictions that such distinctions will melt within the next decade seem premature.

Commercial musicians, with no ideology to defend, usually grasp the absurdity of genre confusion immediately, as when Terrance Simien and the Mallet Playboys, a zydeco group, ordered its Alice Tully Hall audience to stand and clap along at "Serious Fun" this summer. A few weeks ago at Telluride, Brian Eno stated (I quote from memory), "We like to pretend that there's a continuum of musics, but in reality there is a series of hillocks of interest that are not terribly well connected." There's a fallacy involved in asking a staid audience, seated in rows, to subject a rock group to the



Neill: good, sturdy music

same objective, microscopic scrutiny they regularly bring to a performance of a Mahler symphony. On September 24, that same absurdity attended Ben Neill's tranquil trumpet-and-computer works, performed over the chatter and glass-clinking of the bar Tin Pan Alley, and several Hell's Kitchen regulars visibly derived humor from the discrepancy. Such programming helps alleviate New York's present space crisis, but in 10 years this type of venue mixture will seem as naive as most beat poetry does now.

Not that Neill's music doesn't deserve the exposure. He made a dignified official good-bye for Tin Pan Alley in its present location (the landlord gave the 17-year-

old club until September 30 to move out). Neill's performed frequently in the last year, and, perhaps fearing overexposure, neglected to play what might have been his most entertaining works in this context. For example, in one piece he plays harmonic series improvisations over a taped auctioneer's spiel; if the effect is hilarious, the rattle of words gradually merges into a complex but perfectly viable drone. In other works, Neill talks to a computer via a *mutantrumpet*, his own invention, a three-belled horn hooked to software that makes him sound like an independent-minded brass trio.

Neill's Tin Pan Alley concert, coinciding with his new release, *Mainspring*

## MUSIC

(Dossier, German import), was more meditative, and pointed up his debts to two composers with whom he's been associated, Chatham and La Monte Young. The solo works took the harmonic series as starting point, beginning with overtone motives and wandering toward gestures less related to the key. The additive process involved was identifiably Stravinskyan, and it led the ear into complex sonorities built by accretion. The computer's additions lent a Boulezian sensuousness to the sound; in *Schizetude 1* (a world premiere) it provided certain notes with an echoing slow decay, and in *Speed Freaks* it formed drones from Neill's low tonic and dominant notes. *Speed Freaks*'s immobile calm (imagine this in Tin Pan Alley) belied its title until a taped text by Paul Virilio zipped through repetitions of the phrase "acceleration exceeds accumulation"; finally, a program written for Neill by David Behrman (heard a year ago at Experimental Intermedia in one of Behrman's own works) wove vibrant arpeggios around each of Neill's staccato notes.

The ensemble pieces that followed, dating from 1985, were sort of a brass ver-

sion of Chatham's pounding atrock. Both made structure from the simplest of materials, perfect fifths a half step apart, whose Neapolitan flavor recalled Debussy's Spanish-influenced moments in a much harder-edged context. In *Mainspring*, trombonists Rob Bethea and Don Hayward repeated motives of medieval sparseness, as guitarist Evans Wohlforth made an unstable ostinato by glissing between half steps; over the whole, Neill's dissonant little fanfare melody sounded both parodic and comforting. The title and form of *Two Dances* recalled Philip Glass's *Dance* series of nine years ago, but Neill's works were more rhythmically interesting. Percussion tapped out a recurring intro leading to a 15-beat pattern, around which the ensemble alternated chords in an oddly impressionistic rock chorale that seemed better suited to the space.

It was good, sturdy music, though the solo pieces in particular would have been more flattered by the stillness of a cathedral than by this hectic environment. The strength of Neill's music is (my favorite virtue, rare in these times) its clarity, for each piece establishes a firm context before bringing up new material. Its weakness, at least in this veiled presentation, is its momentum, for Neill's fighting the same problem that Stravinsky and most Stravinsky-influenced composers have had: how to actually move through a work rather than merely create the illusion of motion. That style's inability to either run or stay put must partially account for the Schoenberg idiom's phenomenal ascendancy in recent decades, including Stravinsky's own 12-tone conversion. Neill, though, has a different escape hatch via the droning aesthetic of La Monte Young, and the patent intelligence in the way each piece makes a different attack on the same problems marks him as a composer worth listening to. Disciplined, unostentatious, Neill has a reach that just barely exceeds his grasp, and that's how artists grow. ■

*i Giullari di Piazza*

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