

Bop a Dop Bop

By Kyle Gann

Mikel Rouse

Machine for Making Sense

Meredith Monk

When Mikel Mikel Rouse took the micro Rouse took the microphone phone by himself December himself December cember 7 at the at the Knitting Factory, a whole crowd Knitting Fac Factory, a whole crowd of voices emerged voices voices emerged. Straining emerged straining to hear through the mum through the mumble mumble of redup reduplic reduplicated words, one heard words, one heard something words about "counter" something about "counterpoetry," a new something "poetry," "counterpoetry," a new new technique of overlaying "counterpoetry," technique of over overlaying words analogous words to analogous to counter counterpoint in music in point in music. He then sang in music sang several several songs then several songs to to illustrate songs illus to illustrate.

That's what it was like following Rouse's counterpoetry. The songs, which stem from the operatic version of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* he's working on, sound a little like he's singing with a digital delay echo, but even a cursory listen reveals that it's not that simple. Sometimes the voices on tape would anticipate him, sometimes they'd lag way behind, sometimes he was a unison

chorus. Delay's been ubiquitous for 20 years (years, years, years . . .), but Rouse painstakingly sets up word displacements on tape in an ornate rhythmic structure to give the impression that he's invented a device for spontaneously translating anything into Gertrude Steinese. A tape is a tape is a tape.

Crooning over a backbeat with the studied casualness of an avant-garde Frank Sinatra, Rouse was in his pop mode, closer to his work with Tirez Tirez (the rock group he hasn't played with in four years) than with his totalist band Broken Consort. The banality of the lyrics—for example, "I've got the invoice/It's not my department," over and over—went beyond pop, but if you knew the context of *In Cold Blood*, his seamless nonchalance became chilling: "I'm on the planet/And I take it for granted/Kiss him goodbye/Kiss him goodbye." And when he chorused on "Hey, na, naaa" in a cool isorhythm of 4 plus 3 plus 7, pop transcended itself.

Babble is in. Three nights later, an Australian group called Machine for Making Sense performed at Experimental Intermedia, and I couldn't understand what they were saying either. After a sharp electronic crack!, Amanda Stewart started spewing orgasmic/panic-stricken vocal sounds while Chris Mann whispered an extremely fast lecture about something or other, Stevie Wishart glided through cheerful

harmonics and trills on her violin, and flutist Jim Denley popped staccato key clicks. Running electronics, Rik Rue and Julian Knowles screwed everything around: suddenly Stewart's voice would jump out from the speaker right behind me, or Denley's flute would be on the other side of the room, or some metallic clangs would start up, and you'd look from player to player to see who was producing them—and no one was. Your eyes made you doubt your ears, and vice versa.

OK, so it was a collage with vocal noises and electronics. A grizzled new-music veteran who wandered in late might have been forgiven for thinking he'd just time-warped back to 1977. But there was nothing retro about MFMS's energy. Stewart's interjections and explosive high notes had a Cathy Berberian-like intensity, and Mann's professorial lunatic persona never cracked. The combination of a fanatically committed stage presence with an air of tense uncertainty about where and when noises were going to dart out raised this to the level of theater. European improv (Australians qualify) isn't about showing off virtuosity, but usually about the politics of group communication. MFMS had the sonic purity of England's AMM, but with a scary, on-the-edge fierceness. Any sense their machine makes is psychic, not linguistic.

As if all that weren't hard enough to follow, Meredith Monk sang new and old works December 5 at Merkin Hall. Along with vocalists Allison Easter, Dina Emerson, Katie Geissinger, and Thomas Bogdan, and pianists Nurit Tilles and Harry Huff, she performed selections from *Vessel*:



LINDA ROSIER

Mikel Rouse: A tape is a tape is a tape.

An Opera Epic from 1971, and the spanking new *Custom Made*, a work in progress. Monk likes the sound of voices frozen on spine-chilling intervals of the major second—that much hasn't changed in 22 years. Nor has her interest in unobtrusively odd rhythms, as a song in 19/8 meter proved. The concert's finale was an ambitious, multimovement composition on a brief poem by Tennessee Reed (Ishmael Reed's daughter) written at the age of 11. "There are three heavens and hells," the poem announced. "People heaven and hell/Animal heaven and hell/Things heaven and hell." In Monk's universe, *things* is a long, fun word.

Monk's secret agenda is a timbral heterophony, a simultaneous mixture of incongruous vocal styles. In "New York Requiem"

from *Custom Made*, a lament for AIDS victims, Bogdan kept up a fast, arrhythmic whisper of nonsense syllables as Huff played sedate piano chords perfectly in tempo, a Nancarrowian effect of clashing paces. While Monk and her cohorts riffed on "Things heaven and hell" in mellifluous ostinatos, Emerson matter-of-factly repeated "bop a dop bop, bop a dop," sticking out like a bemused fish caught in a bowl of banana pudding. Monk is a master at these timbral incongruities, these squashed-together heterogeneous characterizations as perception-stretching as any Elliott Carter string quartet. And yet, the audience, in their ignorance, thought she was merely entertaining them. You could tell by the way they whistled and cheered. ■

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