

# The McLean Mix Camping Out

BY KYLE GANN

**M**usic in the '60s wanted to shock people. Insult the audience, jar 'em out of their complacency. But—God!—that took a lot of energy. It petered out, and '70s music downshifted to an aesthetic of irritation. Bug 'em just enough to keep 'em uncomfortable; besides, if you're too direct, they'll walk out. Then a man named Steve Reich wrote some pretty *Music for Mallet Instruments*, and audiences wanted more. In the '80s, everybody began writing pretty music. Cajole 'em, and get that record contract.

Barton and Priscilla McLean, who cutely bill themselves as the McLean Mix, lived until recently in Austin, where the former directed the University of Texas electronic music center. That explains a lot. Texas lags ten years behind the rest of the country. (Being from Dallas I can say this with impunity.) Whenever I talk to a Texan, or visit there, I get this time warp feeling, a realization that I'm dealing with someone still stunned by the revelations of Watergate. The aesthetic of irritation is still big in Texas.

That's OK. I have no quarrel with those who march to a slower drummer. There's also something to be said for the idea that in the heaven that is Austin, people can afford to add a little noise and confusion to their lives through their art, whereas in New York we get enough of it on the subway. Geography is everything, and should leave its mark on art. And the

McLeans have a better than usual rationale for their '70s strategy, summed up in the Thoreauvian title of their March 4 Alternative Museum concert: "In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World." It's hard to fault a program with a moniker like that no matter what the music sounds like.

In this case, it sounded rough, gritty, a little naïve, and occasionally compelling. Composers both, Priscilla sings while husband Barton runs the electronics, and both play a variety of homemade instruments. Their favorite was an amplified bicycle wheel, which Barton struck, bowed, and fed through a digital delay to give a chimelike background texture. Priscilla's singing, replete with "extended vocal techniques," was more lyrical than Joan LaBarbara's, less hysterical than Cathy Berberian's, though potentially as unsettling as both. Throughout much of the concert, tapes played animal sounds and Eskimo music.

It was not a repertoire of devices intended to be pretty, nor was there anything elegant about the ways in which they were put together. Slickness is inimical to the aesthetic of irritation. The evening was filled with nagging unpleasantnesses, predictable disappointments, gasps of insight, and rare moments of frightening, uncontrolled beauty. A better metaphor for wilderness could hardly be

## MUSIC

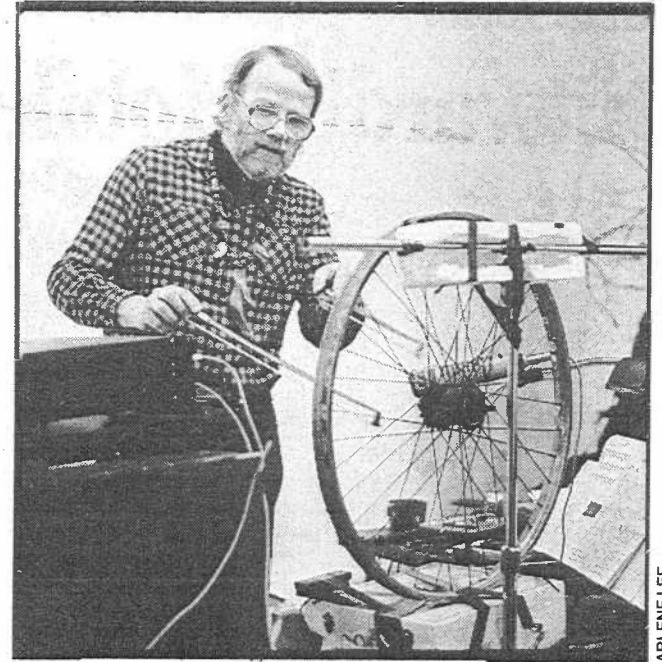
imagined. It was, in short, the urban dweller's art substitute for the average camping trip. The message came from Mother Nature herself: if you want beauty, you gotta pay your dues.

Such stunts could set your teeth on edge, and in *On Wings of Song*, a celebration of the mosquito, the McLeans captured the essence of that pest with eerie acuity. While Barton played his bicycle wheel, Priscilla shuddered in wide vibration, bounced her finger across her lips, and

shrieked a playful coloratura; as she overdramatically whispered, "Eet is not hees bite... eet is hees sing." The piece used mosquito buzzes as well, while *Invocation* had Eskimo songs behind its recorder squeals, pots-and-pans percussion, and communal singing. Eliciting audience participation is always chancy, especially from New Yorkers, and Priscilla's efforts met with little enthusiasm. But the primitive momentum of these sound layers had its own cumulative power, and one eventually got swept up.

*Voices of the Water*, combining slide projections of back-packing on snowcapped mountains with amplified running water, was less interesting, but its grating ambience had a reassuring constancy. Only in *Passages of the Night* did the McLeans take the step from irritating to obnoxious. Its tape of loud crickets, frogs, birds, and other nocturnal noises, many unidentifiable, was calculated to give an honest account of nature's terrifying side, but it would have been far more potent without the accompanying "Save Our Wilderness" sermon. In this Barton violated the first law of both theater and poetry: don't describe, evoke.

*Oh Beautiful Suburbia!* held the concert's central message and most direct statement. Priscilla led the audience in halfhearted choruses of "America the Beautiful" while the sounds of bug zappers, barking dogs, chain saws, sirens, AM radios, and TV commercials grew in threateningly unlimited crescendo. One got the joke right away, of course, but like suburban sprawl the piece kept going and



Barton McLean

ARLENE LEE

going, until you were ready for surrender at any price. Abruptly we were switched to a recording of wind blowing through a barn in Petersburg, New York (where the McLeans now live), as a voice quietly read a passage from Thoreau. Is this the kind of behavior modification we need in order to wake up? And to replay the Brechtian question, is behavior modification a proper aim for art? And if so, is a group of New York aesthetes this music's optimal audience?

Those are questions of musical politics, and I can't answer them. But for most of the concert, I felt that the ends ultimately excused the means. After all, the McLeans may be right. Musically, I mean, as well as ecologically. Reich may have unwittingly initiated the era of neo-complacency, the aesthetic of anesthesia. Maybe we need these voices from the wilderness. Maybe we let go of Watergate too easily, not to mention Lake Powell. ■

## CONCERTS

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