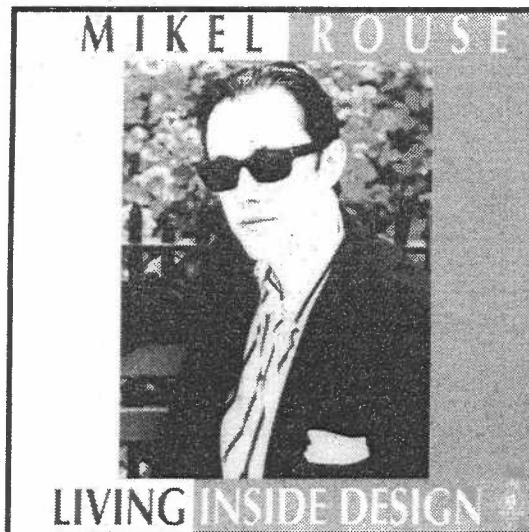


## CONSUMER GUIDE Kyle Gann

So many older-generation greats made resounding comeback discs this season that distinguishing grades entailed splitting hairs. May I point out, this once, that the *Voice's* grading system was developed for rock albums, and that when applied to music that is by definition chance-taking, non-commercial, and innovative, it becomes a little bizarre? That's not a protest, but a caveat lector. I sort of enjoy the discipline. Note, in the recordings by Andriessen, Borden, Budd, Martland, Rouse, Twining, and Volans, the use of repetition to drive home memorable images. Imagism—especially in its postminimalist dress—is the lingua franca of the 1990s. Is anyone noticing?

**Louis Andriessen: *De Stijl/M Is for Man, Music, Mozart (Nonesuch)*** I would have been happy to champion Andriessen as an underrated, peripheral Dutch figure, but his recent celebrity elevates him beyond his merits. While his music is always vivid, its relentless textural consistency seems designed to compensate for the objectivity he lost in renouncing the 12-tone system. I can enjoy any 16 measures of *De Stijl*, but after 25 minutes of this trombone-laden, punchy perpetual motion, I gasp for breathing space. And *M Is for Man* pulls off the dubious achievement of rendering Mozart quotations bombastic. There are some great Andriessen works, but the bottom of his barrel, which this borders on, isn't far from the top. **B MINUS**

**David Borden: *Places, Times & People (Cuneiform)*** An unreconstructed minimalist, Borden has a touch of Andriessen's relentlessness, but his images are more

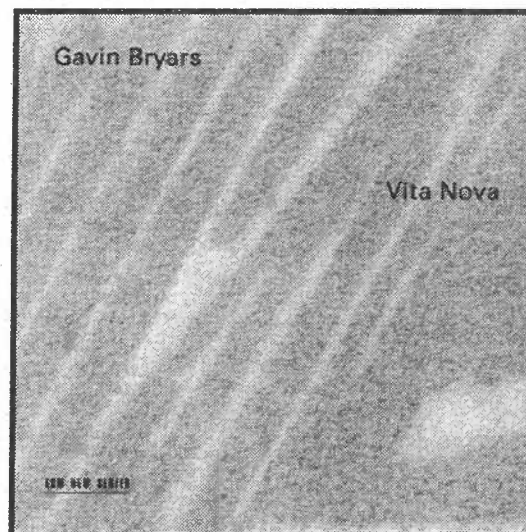


PICK HIT: Mikel Rouse

to ECM's sumptuous production. **A PLUS**

**Harold Budd: *She Is a Phantom (New Albion)*** This commission by the Midwestern Zeitgeist ensemble ought to get Budd out of the New Age bins Tower locks him in. Not that it isn't statically pretty with occasional Glassy arpeggios, but the brief movements are dotted by percussion and text, and working with this fine old avant-garde group has forced Budd to come out a little and use structures and noises beyond his usual range. "And I alone am alone," he urges over a soft snare-drum beat, while vibraphone and clarinet add a nice touch in a theme that NPR is already using as a signature. Budd's music isn't New Age because it still assumes a narrative listening mode. Following his quiet moments is like staring into an empty background, a Mojave desert in sound. **A MINUS**

**Alvin Curran: *Crystal Psalms (New Albion)*** To commemorate



PICK HIT: Gavin Bryars

so damned cute. "Look, I'm a rocker—NOT!" **B PLUS**

**Terry Riley: *Chanting the Light of Foresight (New Albion)*** Like Stravinsky and Cage, Riley keeps changing his music's ground rules, and I've given up expecting his new discs to sound like him. This curiously restrained score for the ROVA sax quartet, a program piece based on an Irish legend about Connacht's invasion of Ulster, is a virtuoso showpiece of pure tunings. ROVA spends the first 17 minutes just tuning intervals. Riley's often at his best getting into his Irish roots, but his Hindu aesthetic shows up in the austerity and rhythmic repetition of Queen Medb's minimalist pre-war blues and warrior Ferdia's death chant. ROVA gets to improvise the battle scene, and they're such fine composers they sound more like Riley than Riley does. **A MINUS**

**Michael Robinson: *Fire Monks (Arco)*** Although live

you finally arrive/Cross all your fingers and dot all your i's/And if you wonder, and wonder you might/Nothing's forever, forever goodnight." Listen carefully: the last time that verse comes around, the second line's "Cross off what lingers and dry all your eyes." A crossover disc, it's converting even my rock friends who find Rouse's instrumental music too calculated. **A PLUS**

**Arthur Russell: *Another Thought (Point)*** When Arthur Russell died of AIDS in 1992, he left behind 800 tapes of his music in rampant disorder. Devoted friends and colleagues have sifted through that material to put together a beautifully produced tribute. Russell's bow bounces lightly on his cello, while he murmurs like a pop star rehearsing to himself, yet strangely like an Indian raga singer. As Russell's friend Allen Ginsberg put it, he transmits dharma via Buddhist bubblegum pop: "'Cause I'm so busy, so busy/Thinking about kissing

cept all the humming, scat singing, whistling, note-bouncing, pure tunings, and Asian overtone tricks these four singers do so delightfully. Twining's compositions are seductively humorous, with no intellectual pretensions, and while his ostinato textures may remind you of Meredith Monk, his forms evolve more complexly, and he's equally indebted to medieval music and jazz. "Dee, doo, hee-hee-oo-ha-ha," the quartet yodels in imitation of African pygmies, and you can't keep still. **A**

**"Blue" Gene Tyranny: *Country Boy Country Dog: How To Discover Music in the Sounds of Your Daily Life (Lovely Music)*** Tyranny's luxurious pianism makes only a cameo appearance in this electronic disc, which is devoted not so much to his musicianship as to his philosophy. The title work is diffracted into five disparate variations: a calm continuum of sine wave sweeps and tones, a feel-good synthesizer chorale, a natural-sound collage, an eerie electronic transformation, and a densely aleatoric yet tonal performance by the Arch Ensemble. All, especially the last, evince the tranquility within chaos that Tyranny shares with Charles Ives. Dogs bark, planes fly overhead, radio transmissions bleep, and Tyranny's personality colors them all not just musical, but holy. **B PLUS**

**Kevin Volans: *String Quartets 2 and 3 (Argo)*** Armed with the peculiar perspectives of South African birth and Irish residence, Volans blasts through our musical hang-ups with bracing common sense. At times the postminimalist pitch language of these quartets approaches the simplicity of 12th-century motets, and both works bear faint traces of the African

quibous achievement of rendering Mozart quotations bombastic. There are some great Andriessen works, but the bottom of his barrel, which this borders on, isn't far from the top. **B MINUS**

**David Borden: Places, Times & People (Cuneiform)** An unreconstructed minimalist, Borden has a touch of Andriessen's relentlessness, but his images are more varied and arresting. These shorter works achieve more originality and flair than his self-consciously monumental *The Continuing Story of Counterpoint*. Some are landscape portraits, others homages titled after anagrams. Julius Eastman becomes, aptly, *Unjust Malaise*, and his homelessness in his last years is portrayed in atonal patterns. The textures are more elaborate and pop-influenced than Reich's or Glass's; the growling electric bass recommends itself to rock fans, and the urgently bittersweet atmospheres might appeal to New Agers. But in *Esty Point* and *Malaise* Borden explores some of the most convoluted harmonic changes post-minimalism has approached. **B PLUS**

**Gavin Bryars: Vita Nova (ECM)** For a long time after the success of his *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, Bryars seemed hard-pressed to find a niche that would differentiate him from other minimalists. He's found it. The first two works, earnest and quietly vibrant, are medieval-inspired and written for the expert Hilliard Ensemble. The real stunner is *Four Elements*, a gorgeous half hour for tenor and large ensemble, slowly swelling and ebbing through seductive harmonies over sad ostinatos like postminimal Sibelius. It'd be fun to watch this knock Henryk Górecki and Arvo Pärt off the charts—Bryars has neither the first's sentimentality nor the second's mystic pretensions. And the disc's radiant listenability owes more than a little

alone, he rides over a soft snare-drum beat, while vibraphone and clarinet add a nice touch in a theme that NPR is already using as a signature. Budd's music isn't New Age because it still assumes a narrative listening mode. Following his quiet moments is like staring into an empty background, a Mojave desert in sound. **A MINUS**

**Alvin Curran: Crystal Psalms (New Albion)** To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of the Nazis' widespread destruction of Jewish businesses, Curran brought together seven European radio stations, seven choruses, 36 instrumentalists, and a host of prerecorded noises. It's a mess of stuff, and Curran's omnivorous aesthetic doesn't project much sense of underlying scheme. What saves it from being a mishmash are the natural musicianship and taste with which Curran's gradual stream of consciousness always evolves, filmic and Stockhausen-like, only subjective and personal. You hear Hebrew chant, lots of glass breaking, mournful trombone chords, accordion waltzes, bangs of indeterminate origin, choirs providing commentary. It's big-impact music, not for background listening. **B PLUS**

**Steve Martland: Patrol (Catalyst)** Martland's new half-hour string quartet (the title cut) is lovely in a sincere, transcendent way that belies his bad-boy-from-Liverpool image. He borrowed medieval techniques, but the resulting modal counterpoint over ostinatos, all sans vibrato, sounds surprisingly American, like Roy Harris influenced by Cage and Glass. *Danceworks*, for Martland's ensemble, grows tiresome with its tic of the same rhythm over and over, but I neglected to try to dance to it. And brief *Principia* subverts pop clichés with an interruptive, stop-'n'-start momentum. I'm getting sick of pieces like that, and everybody thinks they're

ing into his Irish roots, but his Hindu aesthetic shows up in the austerity and rhythmic repetition of Queen Medb's minimalist pre-war blues and warrior Ferdia's death chant. ROVA gets to improvise the battle scene, and they're such fine composers they sound more like Riley than Riley does. **A MINUS**

**Michael Robinson: Fire Monkey (Azure Miles)** Although live computer performance is the focus of this new 'guy from L.A., his timbres can be a little cheesy. If you don't mind that, his music does generate tremendous energy by spewing out Nancarrowian reams of notes. No one-track mind, he'll play a dippy little melody and in the next moment rip through atonal arpeggios or exotic drumbeats at breakneck speed. He writes tonally and atonally at once with refreshing naïveté, and is much taken with Asian timbres. *Jade Streams* and *Ghosts* are drone meditations, *March Wind* and *Fire Monkey* are whirlwinds, and the magna opera, *Year of the Rooster* and *Mountain Temple*, are his schizo counterpoint pieces that, on repeated listening, I like best of all. No telling where he's going to spin off to, but he's an original. **B**

**Mikel Rouse: Living Inside Design (New Tone)** Rouse hasn't produced a true pop album since he gave up his group Tirez Tirez, but this sounds like one. His "counterpoetry" songs, spoken in overdubbed layers of rhythm, float pop conventions on the surface, but underneath, his rhythms are complex and his microtiming perfect. Listen to the smoothing way "This Is All We Are" alternates between two tempos, one two-thirds as fast as the other, or the 5/8 cymbal pattern running behind the 4/4 of "I Might Never Give Up." He's a superb lyricist of delicately opaque wordplay with oblique references to archetypal themes. And when you finally

in rampant disorder. Devoted friends and colleagues have sifted through that material to put together a beautifully produced tribute. Russell's bow bounces lightly on his cello, while he murmurs like a pop star rehearsing to himself, yet strangely like an Indian raga singer. As Russell's friend Allen Ginsberg put it, he transmits dharma via Buddhist bubblegum pop: "'Cause I'm so busy, so busy/Thinking about kissing you," he croons, and later, "The birth of the moment is never ending." For the first time, thanks to the liner notes, I can follow the lyrics hidden by Russell's lazy diction. Gone too soon, the Arthur Russell I remember lives on in this intimate, faithful recording. **A**

**William Russell: Made in America (Mode)** A John Cage associate and a percussion music pioneer in the 1930s, William Russell had been virtually forgotten before the Essential Music ensemble devoted a concert to him in 1990. He wrote only eight works before quitting to become a New Orleans jazz archivist (yep, that Bill Russell). They're all here and about as demure as a fire alarm, far more physical, jaunty, and attuned to the vernacular than the pieces by Varèse and Cage they were originally premiered with. The largest work, *Ogou Badagri*, is a piano cluster-filled ballet based on Haitian voodoo rites, and firecrackers explode in the title work. Discs can't do justice to Essential Music's hall-shaking performances, but everyone interested in American avant-garde history needs this. **A MINUS**

**Toby Twining Music: Shaman (Catalyst)** You might call Twining's group the Hilliard Ensemble of experimental music; they execute weird vocal techniques so suavely that the raw edge is smoothed away. As soon as you hear the lipped filter-sweep that underlies the gentle chords of "Hymn," your ear is tuned to ac-

musical, but holy. **B PLUS**

**Kevin Volans: String Quartets 2 and 3 (Argo)** Armed with the peculiar perspectives of South African birth and Irish residence, Volans blasts through our musical hang-ups with bracing common sense. At times the postminimal pitch language of these quartets approaches the simplicity of 12th-century motets, and both works bear faint traces of the African mbira music that inspired much of Volans's earlier output. Otherwise, every vestige of minimalism has been jettisoned for a straightforward narrative momentum that demands and greatly repays repeated hearings. Though charming, the virtually nonpolyphonic Second Quartet (*Hunting: Gathering*) is considerably surpassed by the Third (*The Songlines*), whose string writing is rousing effective without any of the string quartet's conventional continuity devices. I bet a lot of future string quartets'll sound like this. **A**

**ADDITIONAL CONSUMER NEWS:** ● New Tone has rereleased the old Shanti recording of Riley's modal organ-and-tape-delay improv *Persian Surgery Derivishes*, a glowing document of minimalism's hippie halcyon days that was nigh impossible to get the first time around. Also on CD is Budd's *Pavilion of Dreams* (Editions EG), though I haven't heard the reissue. Wergo has released Kurt Schwitters's own long-presumed-lost recording, with tape hiss intact, of his incredible *Ursonate* of 1922-32, a solo-voice symphony of nonsense syllables that has served as icon for generations of avant-gardists... ● Addresses: Cuneiform, P.O. Box 8427, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907-8427; Azure Miles, 209 North Swall Drive, Beverly Hills, California 90211; New Tone, c/o Robi Droli, Strada Roncaglia, 16, 15040 San Germano (Al), Italy; Mode, P.O. Box 375, Kew Gardens, New York 11415. ■