

# Hobo Saint

By Kyle Gann

Harry Partch

**The Dreamer That Remains** is Stephen Pouliot's 1973 film portrait of a mugging, wonderfully uninhibited, self-consciously irascible Harry Partch in the year before his death. Born in 1901, Partch composed at 14, and from the first moment, he growls, "I was not going to be straitjacketed by anyone. I was going to be completely free." And he was: he invented his own instruments, his own 43-pitch scale, his own style of performing, his own musico-theatrical genre, and his own philology of music. The Bang on a Can festival offered the film as an inspiring preface to a performance of three of Partch's works by Dean Drummond's Newband ensemble, May 4, 5, and 6 at R.A.P.P. Arts Center.

Drummond had played with Partch in his last New York gig 20 years ago, and, with brief exceptions, the May 5 performances were masterful. Most gripping was the 1952 dance piece *Castor and Pollux* with its gently unbalancing 4 + 5 meter. Roxan Jurkevich leapt from one side of the Kithara (72-string harplike instrument) to the other to plink her expressive strums and glissandos, William Trigg pounded the bass marimba with bare hands, Frank Cassara stepped lively to beat patterns on the beautiful cloud-chamber bowls (made from sawed-off 12-gallon Pyrex bottles). *Daphne of*

*the Dunes*, originally a film score, was less moving in concert. Theodore Mook played soulful microtones on his retuned cello, but the performance lost momentum when the marimbas' scintillating, quintally subdivided rhythm dropped out. To those of us who've worn the old Columbia recording down to a slick vinyl wafer, these were familiar works: the pleasure was in hearing Partch's instruments played energetically and unamplified, imbuing the rhythms with a delicacy the record wouldn't lead you to expect. Since you asked for the audience's opinion, Dean, don't mike 'em.

More than a tuning purist and innovator, though, Partch was the voice of the highway in American art music, an operatic Kerouac. Those instruments aren't just revisionist, they're *subversive*, a call for independence from commercial culture by an ex-hobo who could write an opera complaining about the proliferation of "No Loitering" signs. That aspect came into focus in Newband's *U.S. Highball—a Musical Account of a Transcontinental Hobo Trip*. This 1943 cantata, heavily revised in '55, detailed Partch's hitchhiking and dishwashing years in the Depression, and its old Gate 5 recording has long been unavailable. Dominic Donato's "Bloboy" evoked the wail of distant train whistles while Wilbur Pauley in conductor's cap (as the "objective voice"; Paul Rowe sang the "subjective") rhythmically spoke phrases drawn from America's

homeless past:

"Hey Mac, you'll get killed on that oil tank. There's a empty back here."

"Ridin' freights'll make an old man out of ya, Mac."

And, quoting an ancient codger living near the train yards in a piano crate: "It's pretty tough to be ridin' the drags on a night like this. I know, I was a bum once myself." The "dishwashing" adagio was dreamy, and Pauley was great, ending on an exhausted "Chicago!"

Robert Ashley captured mid-western bar talk in *Perfect Lives*, Laurie Anderson once sent up glib New York art-world talk with a sharp ear. But most of our music puts reality through an aestheticizing filter (the stultifying conventions of most rock and jazz not excluded), and Partch was against *anything* that stood between a person's perception of the world around him and its portrayal in art. *U.S. Highball* he called "the most creative piece of work I have ever done... in the sense that it is less influenced by the forms and attitudes I grew up with as a child." Unlike *EAR* magazine's theorizers, however, Partch did *not* believe that ignorance was the answer: for proof, read his incisive exegeses of Plato, Gregorian chant, the Florentine opera-inventors, Berlioz, Mahler, Schoenberg, and so on in his *Genesis of a Music*. The man's vision was thoroughly informed by history, but when he wrote music he put the history aside as no other composer ever has.

Hearing *U.S. Highball* in a riveting new performance gives a chance to revise the legend. You rarely notice Partch's celebrated tuning, it seems a side issue. He



Cloud-chamber bowls

NANCY SIESEL

didn't sustain his consonances like La Monte Young, he liked foggy train-whistle sounds, quick marimba patterns, glissandos, and speech. More important was the visual element, the holistic, ancient-Greek/Chinese theatrical aesthetic—staging was the one element Newband didn't recreate, but you could see it in the athleticism demanded by the instruments. Even more important was the story, the vision of a decreasingly individualistic America seen by a modern Dionysus/Jeremiah, a hobo saint with a gift for rhythm. And most important of all was that he didn't want to be straitjacketed by *anyone*, not even the people who made flutes and pianos. The audience, energized by that impulse, stood for a long ovation.

**Speaking of subversives;** I wish I had mentioned, in my article about John Oswald's *Plunderphonics*, that the motivation behind putting Michael Jackson's face on a woman's body seems to have been no comment on Jackson, but rather a reference to the electronic ability to turn a man's voice into a woman's (and vice versa) by changing the speed. Oswald stopped short of saying that to me, but he implied it, and the nuance didn't sink in until too late. It puts a spin on it.

And my editor must have no idea that there is a famous composer named Olivier Messiaen, otherwise why would the reference to him in my David Rosenboom review turn up as *Messiah*? Comparing Rosenboom to Handel was not my intention. ■

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