

In Uptown's Face

By Kyle Gann

Tom Buckner

Lois Svard

Joseph Kubera

After two decades of composer-performed music, Downtown has discovered the mixed recital. Actually, a handful of fearless virtuosi have discovered Downtown: vocalist Tom Buckner, pianists Lois Svard and Joseph Kubera, and the piano duo Double Edge. Buckner, who will sing at Merkin Hall May 13, is not only a powerful baritone, but an improviser, entrepreneur, record producer, and sometime composer. His concert will consist entirely of pieces he commissioned from Henry Threadgill, Peter Gena, William Duckworth, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, David First, and Jacques Bekaert. He's already commissioned many other composers, including Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, Leroy Jenkins, Jon Gibson, Roscoe Mitchell, Annea Lockwood, and Brian Smith. Uptown takes this kind of performer-impresario for granted, but, arguably, no one else has had such a quick, quiet, beneficent impact on the Downtown scene as Buckner.

From an East Coast perspective, Buckner was first important as the director of 1750 Arch Records, a daring San Francisco label that opened with a historic disc of electronic music by innovative women, and released what were then the complete Player Piano

Studies of Conlon Nancarrow. (Arch went out of business in 1983.) He was also a Renaissance specialist, and for six years wrote music for the California Shakespeare Festival, whose alumni included Robin Williams and David Ogdon Stiers.

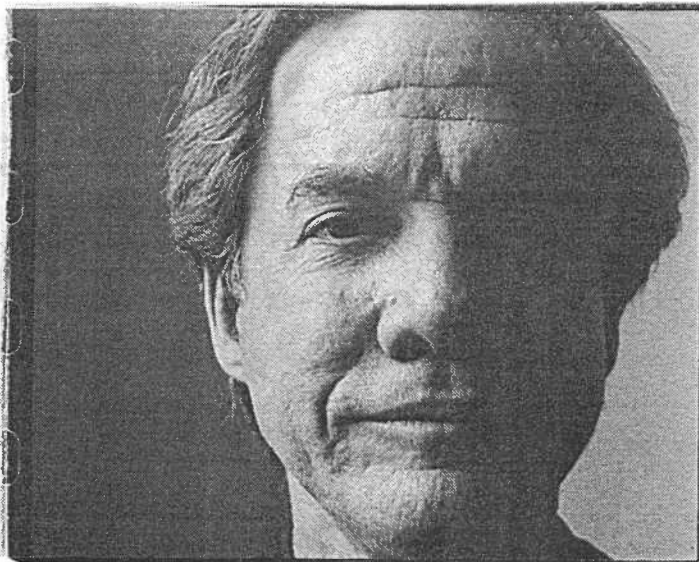
His first New York role came in 1983 as the improviser who created the vocal idiom for Ashley's recent operas, beginning with *Atlantia*. "When we got to Rome for the premiere," Buckner recalls, "Ashley said, 'I want you to listen to "Blue" and make up a melody.' I didn't know what he wanted. The first performance, I was still asking him questions. The second performance, everything took off and that's the one we released as the record." Aside from singing, Buckner runs a series called Interpretations via the World Music Institute, which has offered major gigs to many of our best mid-career composers in a money-strapped season. By itself, Interpretations has almost compensated for the 30 per cent drop in Downtown concerts I reported several months ago due to NEA and NYSCA budget cuts.

"I'm not self-consciously devoting myself to Downtown music for some political reason, or because I was a Downtown person by nature," Buckner says. "I'm devoting myself to new music, and most of the interesting new music I find happens to be Downtown. One of my motivations for the Interpretations series, and for calling it *Interpretations*—I want

to say this kindly—was to up the ante in Downtown performance standards. I'm against that old attitude of not rehearsing. It started a fashion in which the performer was not important. I wanted the Interpretations series to be about getting the relationship between the composer and performer alive again. And I put it up in Merkin Hall because I wanted to have beautiful performances of Downtown music right in the Uptown peoples' faces."

Highlights of Buckner's Merkin Hall concert will include *Joe Hill Fantasy* by Chicago composer Peter Gena, in which computer-constructed textures gradually reveal themselves as algorithmic transformations of folk songs. William Duckworth's *Their Song* subjects texts by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, and Gertrude Stein to chance operations. Bekaert is a Belgian journalist, and his *A Distant Harmony* evokes memories of Phnom Penh. Among others, J. D. Parran, Douglas Ewart, and Leroy Jenkins will accompany Buckner's Downtown panorama.

Two of Buckner's colleagues performed last week. Lois Svard's second New York solo gig, April 24 at Roulette, climaxed in a piano work she commissioned from Ashley. Ashley had seen a photo in the November 1989 *National Geographic* of Van Cao, the composer of the Vietnamese national anthem, a lonely old man seated at one of the country's two grand pianos. Fascinated, Ashley tried



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Buckner, a powerful baritone and impresario

without success to arrange a Vietnam trip to meet Van Cao, and instead wrote his best nonvocal work, *Van Cao's Meditation*: a stream of single notes that Ashley imagined the old guy playing. Using only five pitches, the line could have been monochromatic, but Svard swept the flowing octaves into passionate phrases with a meditative effect more Kabuki than Zen. She also played *Romances From the Front Line*, a series of vignettes by David Soldier that flowed between impressionism, blues, and cocktail piano, and *Scene for Piano and Tape* by Tom Johnson. Johnson's voice, on tape, coaxed Svard into an argument by criticizing her playing and offering to do it better, until she finally clipped the speaker cord. The piece is still a hoot after 24 years.

Joseph Kubera's astonishing feat April 22 at Greenwich House was his precision endurance as a

human metronome: in La Monte Young's *1201* from 1960 (the title can be any number) he played a double-forearm cluster 1201 times over 26 minutes, keeping a beat that started at 47 booms per minute and had dropped by the end to only 46.5. (I didn't want to count to 1201, so I timed every seventh minute.) The concert's thread was that the pieces all articulated a steady pulse. Jon Gibson's *Full Circle* beat that pulse in common triads and seventh chords, in a Gorecki-like attempt to find profundity in the most banal materials. More scintillating was *Reime* (Rhymes) by Gerhard Rühm, a slowly evolving string of soft patterns whose tonality was exotically tinged with shifting dissonances. Kubera's forearm clusters in Henry Cowell's *Exultation* were melodic in their accuracy, reminding us again why Downtown needs people who devote their lives to practicing. ■



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