

drawing his influences from lately, covering Tom Waits's "The Black Rider" and squeezing Arlo Guthrie's "Coming Into Los Angeles" into the middle of his own song about the city.

The show was billed as "solo-acoustic," but that was only half true. In addition to Catholics member Dave Phillips on lead guitar, the 21-to-50-year-old crowd provided backup vocals for the entire 90-minute set. Almost everyone knew the lyrics to Pixies classics "Mr. Grieves" and "Gouge Away" (introduced as "another cover song"), but it was surprising how easily they sang along to tunes from his new album, *Dog in the Sand*, released just a few days earlier. The highlight came when the first few notes of "Where Is My Mind" pierced through the air, and the crowd erupted in response. It was a truly incredible Rock Moment, one that would remain on everyone's minds for a long time afterward. —Ken Switzer

## Horn Matter

Rhys Chatham is an odd gentleman. You don't often see cufflinks on stage at the Knitting Factory. But this was an occasion, a homecoming gig after 10 years in France. Abroad he's gotten both younger, digging electronica with his Hard Edge Trio, and older, modeling his stage persona and coiffure after the avuncular John Cage.

In 1993 Rhys switched from guitar to trumpet, and now makes his horn sound like Tommy Iommi's in Black Sabbath. He's claimed this was because trumpet fingering was so much easier. If true, it explains why he never used to change chords: His famous "Guitar Trio" has everyone strumming an E-something in just intonation (an exotic tuning beloved of minimalists); he performed the piece on Wednesday with a veteran of his 100-guitar orchestra. Just-intoned guitars build up overtones, so that what starts out as performance art—rock gesture as exercise in suspense and frustration—becomes an exhilarating, disorienting pulse of sound.

Then he's playing the old oddball again. "Give me funk riff #27, from the CB's gig in '88," he calls, getting a cheesy *Late Show* groove for his audience-participation tarot reading. He's having fun soliciting picks—"Sir? Ma'am?"—and commenting on the cards (lots of wands!), but he appears to be in earnest—he gives up on interpreting the contradictory hand, saying he's not up to it. Come to think of it, who can tell whether Letterman is joking anymore, either?

Rhys's electric trumpet doesn't sound even like fusion Miles; instead it's returned him to

Friday, and began scaling back editorial content in the *Monthly*, putting the specialty music columns "on hold."

"This is a pretty sane reaction to the market," said one editor, who asked not to be named. "We staffed up quick in the irrational exuberance of last year, and now we're paring down appropriately." The expansion included a move from CMJ's cramped Great Neck offices into posh Manhattan digs in November. Writers also received pay hikes, and the magazines gained more helping hands for their overworked, underpaid staffs.

When new-media management and Internet venture funding firm Rare Medium merged with CMJ in November 1999, its stock rested at 27.75; in March of last year it reached a high of 44. But in late December, Rare's stock plum-

Tony Conrad: One-Idea Composer or Late Bloomer?

## MISTAKEN MEMORIES

BY KYLE GANN

I ran into my old friend Al Niente at Tony Conrad's January 18 gig at Tonic. Conrad was droning away rasply on his violin, seeking out obscure overtones above thick drones emanating from a compact disc. Al mentioned that Conrad's music sounded much like it did back in the 1960s. Then he added, "I never trust these people who base their entire life's work on one idea. It seems careerist, rather than artistic." "I could never find an idea interesting enough to base my entire life on," I joked. "That's just my point," he shot back. "Neither has anyone else."

Al had me stumped. I admit to a prejudice that the composers who turn out to be truly great are those who transcend the trajectory of their early careers in their mid forties, and who take some left turn into new vistas. (Having recently turned 45, this is a matter of some urgent personal concern.) Like Robert Ashley leaving conceptualism behind at 48 and inventing the unprecedented continuity of *Perfect Lives*. Like John Cage abandoning modalism and rhythmic structure at age 40 to begin chance composition. Like a 44-year-old Morton Feldman beginning to write eccentrically notated works ranging from 90 minutes long to six hours.



ANOTHER COVER SONG: FRANK BLACK GETS BLUE.

meted to a dismal 1.9. Rare has four other "incubator" companies, but CMJ's rapid expansion and the collapse of the Internet market collided at an especially inopportune time. Last fall, the Network hosted mini-Marathons in three cities: Seattle, San Francisco, and Atlanta. Each of them flopped, and the company laid off 19 employees in the Events division just after Thanksgiving. According to Haber, the mini-Marathons might be retooled for the future, and a nation-

And it's not just American experimentalists. My hero Claudio Monteverdi jettisoned his Renaissance contrapuntal training at 40 to join the new Baroque "amateurs" with his *Orfeo* of 1607. Beethoven, at 42, stopped composing and eventually emerged with a new style so avant-garde no one's caught up with it to this day. Wagner (b. 1813) transported himself from the stolid German forests of *Lohengrin* (1848) to the chromatic quicksands of *Tristan und Isolde* (1858). Coleman Hawkins switched from swing to bebop at around 40, and Miles Davis—having spearheaded cool jazz and hard bop in his 20s—made a critic-exasperating jump to fusion in his early 40s.

Counterexamples would be cruel to enumerate, but there are plenty of older composers around still making basically the same music they did in their youth, and wondering why no one makes a big deal about them anymore. It seems like there's some psychological barrier an artist has to break through in his or her 40s in order to go beyond what is merely a product of one's time into something bizarre, supremely personal, and, ultimately, unexpectedly universal.

But it's not clear how this tenuous paradigm applies to Tony Conrad. After all, despite some early innovative conceptualist works, Conrad didn't have much of an independent early career back in the 1960s, but was known for being part of the Theatre of Eternal Music alongside (or under, depending on whom you're arguing with) La Monte Young. By 1966, the then 26-year-old Conrad had opened a separate career in underground film with his classic piece of stroboscopic minimalism, *The*

wide CMJ tour of sorts is a possibility: "We're probably going to skew them to be more consumer-oriented rather than trade-oriented."

Despite the setbacks, Haber maintains that Rare Medium "is the best thing that ever happened" to CMJ Networks. And employees still have high hopes. "Maybe this is foolish optimism on my part," said the editor, "but I have some belief that the company is going to continue on to do some cool things." —Tricia Romano

*Flicker*. When he returned in the mid 1980s with his *Early Minimalism* series, a group of raucously droning violin pieces based on a rough, fluctuating approach to pure tunings, he had pretty much been forgotten by the music world for over a decade.

And now we have this unique career based on re-creating a music remembered from 35 years ago that never really existed. At Tonic, Conrad played a lush, denser sound continuum than one hears in his single surviving solo recording from the '60s, *Four Violins*. With a rough tone constantly in flux yet hitting precise points of crystallization, he played around a seventh harmonic over the drones, eventually moving to clearly defined 11th and 13th harmonics: phenomena made memorable by their rarity. Toward the end of the first hour, he was joined onstage by an ensemble including Arnold Dreyblatt on bass, Mark Stewart on cello, Jim O'Rourke on hurdy-gurdy, and others, magnifying the density of the drone texture. At last Conrad put down his violin and plucked deep glissandos on a large, horizontal stringed instrument, a new device but hardly a radical change.

So is Conrad a one-idea composer? Did that idea take a detour through other media before it could blossom into a full conception? Or is the new idea of his late career a remembrance of tone structures that never really existed? Such questions may be impossible to decide. But while superficially Conrad did about what I expected, he also led me through obscure regions of the harmonic spectrum I had never experienced before, feeling too pleasantly lost to care whether he had been there before or not. ▮