

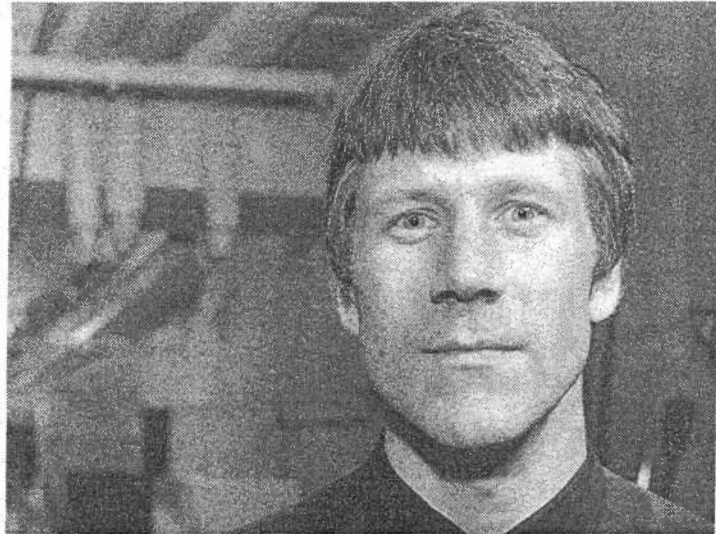
No Generic Substitutions

By Kyle Gann

Doctor Nerve

Nick Didkovsky is the best of the musicians who are fusing classical, jazz, and rock techniques, and he succeeds because it's not what he's trying to do. I have a list of questions for people claiming to "combine classical music, jazz, and rock": *Whose* classical music are you talking about? Mahler? Varèse? Cage? What technique do the three have in common to justify the term? *Whose* jazz: Ellington? Sun Ra? *Whose* rock: the Beach Boys? Captain Beefheart? You gonna have players trading eights over a backbeat in a sonata-allegro movement? You gonna have a 32-bar song form (with bridge) filled with arpeggiated sheets of sound on aleatoric pitches? Or is the drummer going to drum while the sax improvises and the violin plays a theme and variations? You can hear this kind of stuff in New York.

The truth is, there's no such animal as "classical music." Or "jazz," or "rock." There are only vast and diverse repertoires of works that exhibit, with rampant inconsistency, some family resemblances. Every single piece in each of those repertoires that is worth a minute of future attention was made in a burst of inspiration that fused the genre's conventions into a unified expression marked by a powerful personality. What makes a *specific* Bartók string quartet, or a *specific* Monk solo, great has nothing to do with "classical music" or



Nick Didkovsky doesn't settle for commonplaces.

"jazz." To attempt great art by combining what is *typical* from different genres is to begin with a fatal contradiction in terms. If you consider classical, jazz, and rock as labels on grab bags of techniques to be rummaged through while you're assembling a piece of music from spare parts, as so many Downtowners have, then you're settling for the dregs, the generic commonplaces and conventions, and leaving the stuff of genius behind.

Not so Nick Didkovsky. His band Doctor Nerve began their September 20 gig at the Knitting Factory with a series of controlled improvisations on materials lifted from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. I'll come back to that in a moment, but I needed to mention it first. The best Doctor Nerve

pieces, such as *Little Johnny Shitty Pants*, *Dark Observation*, and *Take Your Ears as the Bones of Their Queen* are grounded in bass lines that repeat motives, not in a mechanical or minimalist fashion, but Stravinsky-like, in unpredictably recurring fragments. As in Stravinsky's works (more neoclassic ones like the *Symphony in Three Movements* than the *Rite*), that technique allows Doctor Nerve to create tremendous tension within an illusion of forward motion, a shifting stasis that builds a kind of atonal tonality.

Now, you could say this is the "classical element" in Doctor Nerve's music. But more accurately, this spark of genius that Didkovsky learned from isn't one Stravinsky came up with to write "classical music," but rather a

personal innovation Stravinsky developed in a desperate attempt to escape from what was considered classical at the time.

Likewise, Doctor Nerve's sound includes a tendency toward dissonant but stable tone complexes, hovering, disappearing, and recurring as in the music of Varèse, a nicely heterogenous counterpart to those Stravinskian bass lines. Nothing could be less "classical" than that aspect of Varèse. And while that may be who Didkovsky learned it from, those tone complexes—growled out by sax and trumpet merging in a throbbing web of sound—had a jazz energy. They had nothing to do, however, with the 12-bar blues or tritone substitution chords. If they came from jazz, it was probably from Ornette Coleman's big band work, or maybe from some of the AACM reed players, in imitation of the moments in which they were most desperately trying to get away from jazz's over-reliance on solos, and as far as possible from anything that had been called "jazz" before.

Similarly with Doctor Nerve's rock drumming. The group sustained a propulsive forward momentum, but the rhythms and meters had nothing to do with a conventional backbeat. Some pieces spun off fast patterns such as 5+5+3+3, others were too complex to figure. Were I conversant in avant-garde rock I might pinpoint whence these rhythmic techniques seeped into Doctor Nerve, but I suspect it was from a band that had most rock fans

thinking, "That's not rock."

With all these tremendously sophisticated and effective devices at his disposal, I'm amazed Didkovsky hasn't shaken off the Downtown virus that makes him improvise. He conducted the *Rite of Spring* pieces via hand signals, in the style Earle Brown pioneered over 30 years ago and John Zorn revived for the '80s. Sitting in, the Sirius String Quartet played repeated motives from the *Rite*, generally forming a background for the other players. While cute, these movements went a little limp, pointing to where Stravinsky's climaxes should have been without reaching them, and letting his buildups sag. In the more fully composed works, on the other hand, improvs (such as Marc Wagon's dynamite vibe solo in *Don't Call Too Late, My Husband's a Baker*) were carefully set within the structure, so that the player knew what the energy would be like at the beginning and end of his solo, and could calculate it perfectly. And the composed pieces allowed for a fiery rhythmic intricacy that the improvs couldn't touch.

So Doctor Nerve doesn't really combine classical, jazz, and rock elements. Instead, Didkovsky has learned a lot of useful tricks from great musicians who happened to start out in different genres. Consequently, there are no generic elements in the music, simply a bunch of powerful, distinctive ideas that fuse to form the Doctor Nerve sound. That makes writing press releases difficult, because what hip PR people want to say about your music these days is that it's "breaking down barriers between classical music, jazz, and rock"—which, if you believe that's not just a marketing ploy but a valid way to look at it, is a perfect recipe for crap. ■