

Sonic Youth Covers Hits From the '60s

## ROOTS IN OUTER SPACE

BY KYLE GANN

### SONIC YOUTH

*Goodbye 20th Century*

The conceptualist avant-garde from the 1960s was the outer space of music, a music as far removed from inhabited regions of sonic thought as its creators could manage. It's hard to imagine that music as anybody's "roots," as though John Cage and his cohorts were involved in some quaint ethnic tradition. And yet Sonic Youth seems to be returning to their roots in their newest two-CD set, *Goodbye 20th Century* (YR 4), and those roots happen to be the anything-goes conceptualism of Cage, Christian Wolff, Pauline Oliveros, James Tenney, and assorted Fluxus figures including Yoko Ono, Takehisa Kosugi, and George Maciunas. Anything goes in this music except a rock beat, that is, whose absence SY's fans will undoubtedly notice. Instead of Thurston Moore's and Lee Ranaldo's virtuoso noise breaks that my son Bernard spends hours a day trying to duplicate, here are 105 minutes of the grunts, grinds, bleeps, booms, and bumps that were the '60s avant-garde.

improvising omnimusician Jim O'Rourke are among the other avant-garde cats who join SY for the ensemble pieces. Of the 13 works, seven range from 1961 to 1971, and one (the tuneful *Pièce Enfantine* by conductor-musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky) goes back to 1951. The other five, more recent, include two of Cage's so-called "number pieces" and a brand-new work written for SY by Pauline Oliveros.

Minimalism (which was conceptualism's kid brother, after all) makes several appearances, though never in a pretty way. Steve Reich's seminal *Pendulum Music* is here (an otherwise almost impossible piece to find on disc), in which microphones suspended above loudspeakers swing back and forth to create out-of-phase feedback; also Tenney's equally rare *Having Never Written a Note for Percussion* of 1971, whose delicate note-repetitions morph into a deafening white-noise continuum. Ono's *Voice Piece for Soprano* comprises merely two of her trademark screams, creditably squealed by one Coco Haley Gordon Moore—presumably a close relative of SY's Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore. *Piano Piece #13* (Carpen-



SONIC YOUTH GIVES A GRITTY SHEEN TO THE AVANT-GARDE REPERTOIRE.

Yet avant-garde aficionados will find their own surprises, mainly a gritty electronic sheen that this repertoire never had before in the classic recordings, plus the inevitable introduction of sampling technology. Those expecting the usual guitar songs will be thrown for a loop by *Edges of 1969*, one of the works in which Christian Wolff pioneered the game piece, a genre in which the relations between sounds were somewhat determined while the sounds themselves were left to the performers. Safe to say that *Edges* has never sounded like this before: whirling electronic noises, sampled ostinatos, a story breathily told by Kim Gordon. Likewise, we've never before been treated to a Cage performance like this half-hour rendition of *Four*, full of driving guitar riffs and looped voice samples.

Is this a betrayal of Wolff's austere aesthetic? If so, blame the composer, because Wolff himself is one of the performers. More likely it's the beginning of a revisionist interpretive style for '60s music, freed from the abstract musical atomism that made it seem like a spin-off from serialism in the first place. Aside from Wolff, West Coast percussionist William Winant, Fluxus violinist Takehisa Kosugi, and Chicago

*ter's Piece*) for *Nam June Paik* by Fluxus's guiding spirit Maciunas is allegedly "enhanced" by a video clip, though my computer couldn't play it and gave me an ominous warning about a "bad movie atom" instead. The piece sounds like four people hammering nails into a piano, and I'm afraid to ask.

Is this disc, which is giving Tower Records employees headaches about whether to stock it in classical or rock (just kidding, they really didn't give a damn), a legitimate addition to the discography of post-Cage conceptualism? I'll go further than that: This is the most imaginatively performed compendium of that repertoire since the Ensemble Musica Negativa's great old *Music Before Revolution* set (EMI) of 1972. It's easy for these open-ended game pieces to end up all sounding alike, but SY has meticulously sculpted and contrasted each performance so that no two embody the same atmosphere or sound world. For a century that has overstayed its welcome, this is a touchingly affectionate good-bye, and SY honors the good guys. I don't imagine there will be a Volume II: *Sonic Youth Plays the Elliott Carter Double Concerto*. But at this point, who knows? ▮

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