

Sample Questions

By Kyle Gann

Neil Rolnick

When Neil Rolnick toured Yugoslavia a few years ago (back when the country still existed), he took with him a piece called *Balkanization*, which scrambled pre-recorded samples of Slavic folk songs. He was afraid local audiences might think he was a "horrible, colonial, un-politically correct person" for using their songs. Instead, he says, they were delighted, and the songs served as a bridge between the Yugoslavians and Rolnick's high-tech music. I suspect this is a common pattern. Liberals have become squeamish about "appropriating" any icon of another culture. But the very people afraid of transgressing are probably the ones who don't need to worry: artists who treat the materials reverently, abundantly crediting the original sources. It's hardly as though he raped Yugoslavia's heritage for monetary gain; as your average avant-garde computer composer, Rolnick'll be lucky if he ever sees \$500 net profit off of *Balkanization*. No wonder the Slavs weren't offended.

So why does Rolnick's *A Robert Johnson Sampler*, which he also played at his December 18 concert at Experimental Intermedia, seem a different story? Robert Johnson, the early blues musician, died without much recognition, and the album from which Rolnick took his samples sold its millionth copy decades after John-

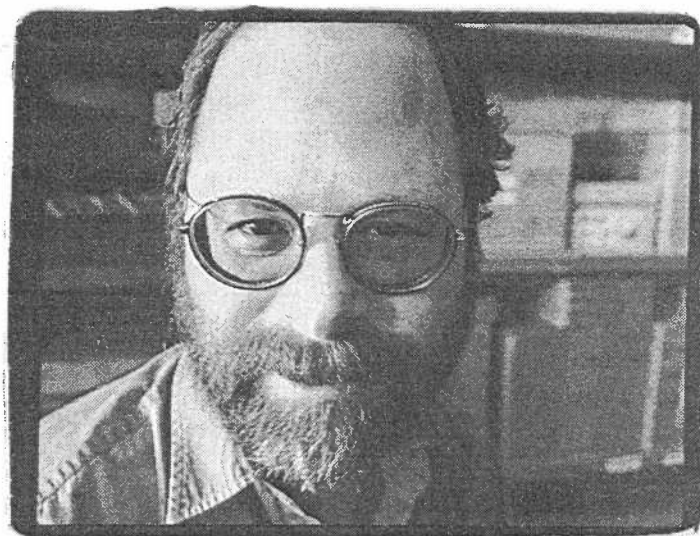
son's death. Rolnick's *Sampler* began with Johnson's recognizable guitar licks, slowed them down, then splintered them into a rhapsodic succession of impressionistic images. Then, unidentifiably abstracted, Johnson's poings bounced randomly as Rolnick harmonized them with synthesizer chords.

I felt guilty hearing Johnson's unrewarded innovations turned into Rolnick's upscale Downtown art. But I don't think I'd flinch at the borrowing if Johnson were alive today, happily basking in his celebrity. Does that make my reservation more sentimental than political? What if the samples had come from Ornette Coleman? Wouldn't they have felt more like a tribute than a rip-off? How early and hungry does a minority artist have to die before his tunes are off limits to computer aces?

These are the kinds of questions sampling raises for even the most nonprofit artist (let alone the rapper paying royalties for a James Brown riff). Rolnick answered several of them in a newer work, *Requiem Songs for the Victims of Nationalism*, for sampler, percussion, and two sopranos—his response, as a former visitor, to the Bosnian situation. In brilliantly pure voices of Slavic gutsiness, Amy Fradon and Leslie Ritter sang folk songs from the area, sometimes virtually unaltered, while Rolnick touched in with light electronics. "Do you know, sister, where I grew up?/In Bosnia's mountains," went a fetching

tune in 7/8 meter laced with sultry Balkan appoggiaturas. In "Wedding Party," the singers chanted dissonant intervals of a second on the words "ethnic cleansing" while the electronic drumming behind them crescendoed ominously. Using tambourine, Arabic-tinged melodies, sophisticated chromatics, or explosions of noise, Rolnick commented on each song, ironically, angrily, or yearningly as the occasion demanded. Such angelic voices rising over a field of gritty noise certainly evoked the soul of a war-torn land.

Requiem Songs is anomalous in Rolnick's output: a multimovement work composed of small units, each with a clear, often strophic form. His other compositions occupy a realm for which no coordinates have yet been mapped. So far, sampler pieces have fallen into two categories: either collages of heterogeneous materials, like the humorous assemblages of John Oswald or David Weinstein, or process pieces, like the repetitively gradual sound-transformations of Carl Stone or Nic Collins. Between those maximalist and minimalist extremes, Rolnick has found an odd middle path; his works float in a succession of images, revolving around a central idea but with no forward momentum. Another reference point could be the music of Ingram Marshall, but Marshall projects that dreamy, California mellowness in which floating seems the natural thing to do. Rolnick's mu-



ALEX FORMAN

Rolnick: Is anything off limits to a computer sampling ace?

sic floats even though its textures are sometimes prickly, tense, abrasive. (The fact that he lives near Woodstock, however, lends an air of authenticity to his mellow moments.)

For example, in *Balkanization* (available on both Bridge and Nonesuch CDs), the singing voices emerge from a continuum of burbling noises, their comforting regular cadences contradicting the electronic arrhythmia around them. In *Word Processor*, a new work, Harvey Sorgen banged some deep bass pitches on a drum pad, while Rolnick triggered sampled note clouds in response. Then a syrupy sermon about the Virgin Mary began seeping through the loudspeakers. What's the connection?, you thought. Sorgen answered by gradually abstracting the sermonizing voice into the same pitches he'd been playing all along, slowly sending the preacher out of focus like Alvin Lucier in *I Am Sitting in a Room*. Rather than let that pro-

cess finish off the piece, however, Sorgen and Rolnick returned to drumming and enigmatic vocalizing.

Musical quotation has been around for 800 years at least, but the sampler has made Charles Ives's scattershot-snippet-of-melody technique a '90s commonplace. Yet Rolnick's music staunchly defends a turf all its own. Besides being Rolnick's most affecting work, *Requiem Songs* stays the closest to its sources, and most directly addresses the political issues of borrowing. So successful is it on all counts, in fact, that he's been asked to perform it in Washington for members of Congress; to "put a human face" on the Bosnian conflict. His other sampling music is formally complex, thorny, meandering, arbitrary in its transformations, yet memorable in its images. The music sticks in your mind, but inaccurately, and so demands to be heard again and again. ■

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