

# Shooting Stars

By Kyle Gann

Ron Kuivila

Chris Newman

Laurie Anderson

Ron Kuivila's ideas spin in from another galaxy. Some of them burn up on contact with Earth's atmosphere, dying in a streak of light. Others hit the ground, leaving us to speculate, from their craters and fissures, whence they came. Kuivila studied with Alvin Lucier (and teaches with him at Wesleyan), and while their performances don't at all look or sound the same, they both pull a foreground/background switch on your ear, forcing you to focus on phenomena you normally would ignore. Kuivila speaks fluent virtual reality; I love to hear him talk, but he can shoot the mildest subject way over my head in a few sentences. Sometimes his music is equally elusive, but May 6 at Roulette his ideas landed intact.

A video camera was trained on Kuivila, who sat at a keyboard. His image shone on a screen overlaid with a grid of dots that here and there flared into little crosses. Though he barely touched the keyboard, the air was filled with electronic whirs and growls. I first suspected one of his impenetrable sampler collages, but after a while I noticed that each little cross appeared to be connected to a specific noise, and that beeps coincided with the visual flare-ups.

Then I noticed that Kuivila's on-screen movements triggered the video dots, which in turn caused the sounds. He was playing, with his body, a musical instrument several feet away that existed only as a visual image. What looked like a typically opaque technoshowoff piece turned out to be a user-friendly synesthetic environment, with premises fascinatingly simple, yet foreign to everyday perception.

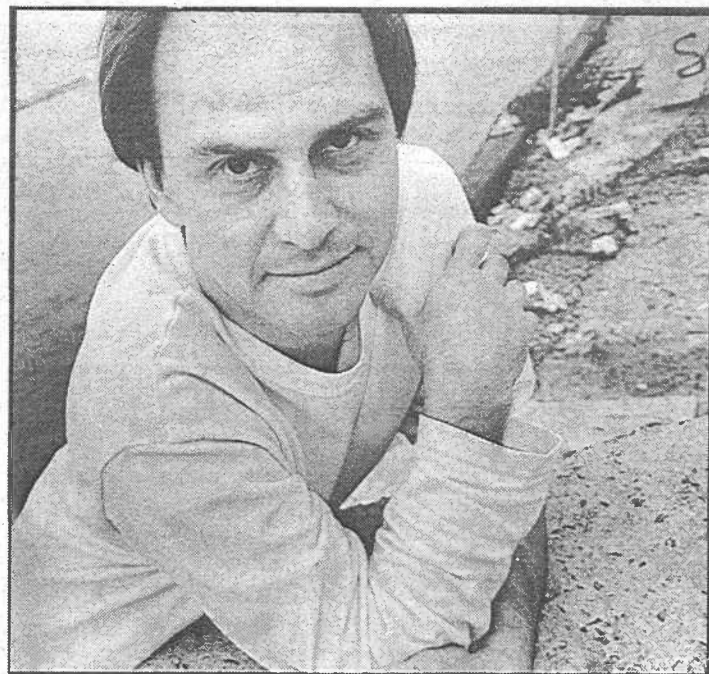
That was *Civil Defenses*; in *Jocular Static* the grid disappeared, and the little star-crosses followed Kuivila's arm and face around the screen, buzzing so like flies with tiny megaphones that I kept expecting him to brush them away. The piece, which Kuivila describes as a "celebration of aural fecality," used a tape he's been working with for some time, excerpts from Antonin Artaud's suppressed radio broadcast "To Have Done With the Judgement of God." Aside from the text's iconic status, I began losing the thread of Kuivila's process when he played Artaud's taped words and then repeated them into a microphone. The final work, *Athabasca*, mirrored in circuitry the processes of glacial scouring, setting waves of ringing tones crashing into each other. By this time the music that had so pleasantly jolted me for a half hour was blasting back toward the Milky Way, chuckling preternaturally over its shoulder.

On May 7, Thread Waxing Space sprung Chris Newman on an un-

suspecting New York. Londoner living in Germany, minimalist poet, painter, former Kagel student, and noted Morton Feldman look-alike (thick glasses, mop-haired, and chubby, though not enough to legitimize his fat jokes), Newman is the founder of the British rock group Janet Smith, well known in the new-music underground but clearly not ripe for prime time. In one electrifying solo song, beginning with the line "I love London in this light," Newman outlined the same diminished triad and rippled up the same virtuoso diatonic glissando in almost every phrase. His assistant, violinist Dennis Latzko, punctuated with triumphant repetitions of "Da-dah!" (perhaps as in Dada).

You could read Newman as an urban atavism of an ancient saga-chanting tradition, an overgrown adolescent who'd do anything for a laugh, or any number of things in between. The lied that followed featured a repetitious refrain, "How boring, boring, BORing you are," sparsely accompanied by flat lines on violin and electric bass. "All these songs are true," Newman told the audience afterward. "It's the only hope I have." Another song, delivered with a dance emphasizing the relevant anatomical parts, hammered home the portentous sentiment, "My wife is French/My wife is French/And everywhere she goes/She has a French nose/And she has French toes/And French elbows." Sheer poetry.

Newman preceded Laurie Anderson performing songs from her new show, *Stories From the Nerve Bible*; I saw the whole thing last month in its premiere at Philadelphia's Annenberg Center. In it



LINDA ROSIER

Kuivila, blasting toward the Milky Way

Anderson fuses the political commitment of her late-'80s monologues with the lyrics and, to a mild extent, technical wizardry of her *United States* period. It's a great mix. "Now that the living outnumber the dead" goes its poignant refrain, and she drew cheers in both cities asking important questions like "Who put that public hair on the can of Coke?" Music is more pervasive in *Nerve Bible* than it has been in her pieces for the past decade, but also more fluid and less song-oriented than in the "O Superman" days. The songs at Thread Waxing Space kept accordionist Guy Klucvsek in the shadows; he was the Philadelphia show's well-appreciated supporting star.

Thread Waxing Space started as a gallery, and, after its first heady

promise as a new-music venue, has veered back toward rock this season, confirming what composers always suspect about painters: that, although they want to feel flattered by the hipness of their musical entertainment, they take no interest in music as art. Whatever the space's ultimate aims, the audience who begged Anderson for encores (ungranted) didn't comprehend Newman. Downtown musicians are sufficiently inured to pointless repetition to find Newman's songs refreshingly unpretentious. But when he announced that the next song he was about to sing would be his last, the cheer that erupted from the SRO crowd suggested that, for the first time in the history of music, we'd all been out-avant-garded by an Englishman. ■

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