

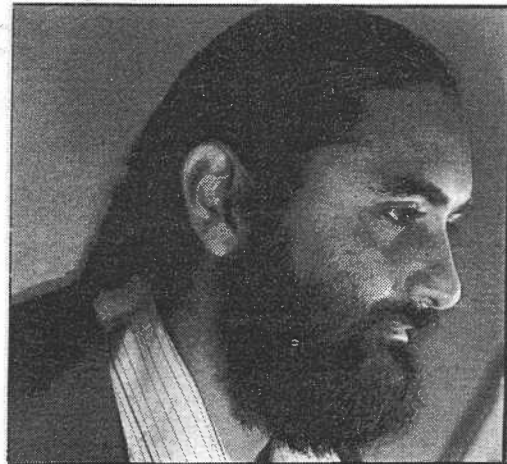
Shelley Hirsch/Bill Horvitz/Glen Velez

# The Third World

BY KYLE GANN

**M**usic is an analogy for social structure. Serial music harnesses communism's drive for integration, its subjugation of the individual (note) for the glory of the whole (even if the partless whole usually fails to materialize, either musically or politically). That communist countries condemn serialism is a telling paradox: they prefer to offer the masses an illusion of individuality. Minimalism and its offshoots extract from capitalism the idea of the interchangeability of individuals, with its attendant tolerance for repetition and meaningless variation: the comfort of almost-predictability. That universities condemn minimalism is another paradox: academic musicians foster the illusion of their integration into a larger scientific community, which actually couldn't care less about them.

In this post-World War II schema, improvisation survives as the Third World of music. Improvisation's antiquity, its oblique relation to technology, its resistance to standardization, its refusal to be stamped out, its ethnic roots—they're all relevant. Accordingly, serialism and minimalism look askance at improvisation, as any technological society does at a country that seems satisfied to get along with less. Critics like myself, with too much training and just enough conscience, often feel as embarrassed at an improv concert as an overdressed tourist. With notated music's slick packaging in our memories, it seems condescending to low-



Glen Velez

MICHEL DEISOL

er our expectations for a performer who renounces the reified splendor of the finished product. While waiting for an improviser to find his evening's inspiration, it is difficult to remember that the promise improvisation reneges on is one it never made.

Of three recent improv concerts by New York artists, two caused this critic no embarrassment, and provoked thought instead. Shelley Hirsch doesn't fit neatly into this category, but she did call her live work improvisation, and even her two taped pieces had a similarly loose, wandering form. At Phill Niblock's Chinatown loft December 3, in her first one-woman show in New York, Hirsch presented four frenetic urban collages, created with her voice and a few simple gestures. Real-life snippets—bag lady harangues, Muzak, vacuous busytalk—jos-

ted each other in a succession that seemed more cinematography than stream-of-consciousness. Hirsch's most impressive demonstration came in the persona switches she made in split-second responses to an abruptly changing tape by David Weinstein.

What kept Hirsch's work on the perceptual level of improv was a feeling of content spread thin. For all the hectic saturation of her musico-theatrical surface, the pieces resisted close listening. Each persona's objectivity could only be maintained for a few seconds; when she went past that, the specter of vacuity Hirsch raised began to lose its irony and seem uncomfortably sincere. Listen to an old woman whine "They didn't give me nothing, *nothing!*" too many times and the urban mind quickly shuts off. Still, Hirsch's technique was dazzling enough to carry one over the slow spots and raise hopes that this might develop into something.

To Hirsch's credit, she made an asset out of technology. More often, this is where improv meets its downfall, as Bill Horvitz's band showed at Roulette December 5. Horvitz used the potentially subtle tape medium to create a blank layer of noise beneath his group's chaos, with the result that all colors merged to brown. Serialism is grounded in the splic-

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ing block, minimalism in the tape loop; but like all Third World technologies, that of improvisation is ancient and rooted in the design of the musical instrument itself (as Horvitz realized when he played an enchanting little guitar solo).

Glen Velez, percussionist with Steve Reich and others, gave a beautiful reminder of improvisation's roots in his almost-solo Roulette concert November 21. His music sought out the form's ethnic origins, using drums from Egypt, Morocco, and Eastern Europe, and a couple of

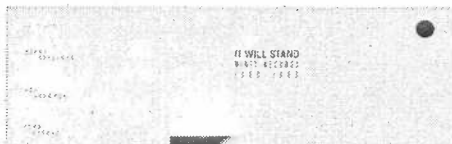
mbras. With such simple means, Velez and his sometimes partner Layne Redmond created piece after piece of astonishing sophistication. Each had a talalike rhythmic unit for its basis, and just as Velez made the most uncountable of 7- to 27-beat patterns sound clear, he drew complexity from the simpler patterns. In these circular forms, no finger motion was left to chance, and every musical element was effortlessly resolved. Complicated timbres fell back into their component parts, and every melody that rose to the subdominant (for Velez not only sang gently but whistled harmonics over his drone) eased its way back down. The final gesture of each piece was exquisitely calculated, even to the soft turning of a tambourine's jingle-wheel.

It's troublesome to describe such utterly polished music as improvised, and Velez and Redmond may have practiced every note. Then again, composition originated as the flipside to this conception of improv. Vladimir Horowitz can make Scarlatti sound improvised; Velez, in his gentle meanderings that sound engraved in stone, reverses the process with a similar artistry. Is that an illusion created by Velez's calm self-assurance? Or do product and process become one when a natural musician unmakes that distinction? Velez's music led to the essence of improvisation and composition, and made one happy to hear it.

But as much as I prefer the musical results of Velez's traditionalism, I feel uncomfortably like the vacationer who exhorts the Navajo auto mechanic to go back to weaving rugs. As Bill Horvitz's group demonstrated with frequent forays into quasiminimalism and -serialism, improvisation has much to borrow from the more technically advanced isms. Yet in these borrowings lies the danger of subtly undermining improvisation's own agenda. Like the Third World, improvisation will eventually have to carve out its own place in this era of technological superfluity. ■

Continued from preceding page  
Kinks (Arista), all ye need know and then some of Ray Davies's Clive Davis years... *Rap's Greatest Hits* (Priority) sure ain't "the biggest sellers of all time!"

earlier Standells, and added "Riot on Sunset Strip" to boot), plus brighter audio on the Turtles, the Spencer Davis Group, Love (major improvement), the Everly Brothers (best domestic single



Put on Your Dancing Shoes: *13 Vintage Dance Singles* is a wildly inconsistent mess of worthy weirdness. *Dream Babies: Girls and Girl Groups of the Sixties* is remarkably ungeneric for arcana (that's a