

Un-Oriented

By Kyle Gann

Gamelan Son of Lion

Jody Diamond spent a year in Indonesia, studying music and interviewing composers. Upon her return, she wrote an article, "There Is No They There," for the Summer 1990 issue of *Musicworks*. It's the most intelligent thing I've read on that academic-study-turned-pop-craze world music. "World music is a dangerous idea," she began. "If 'world music' means all music except Western music, it perpetuates a hierarchy of knowledge. It separates Western Culture, 'reality,' from Other Culture, 'an exotic variation to be observed.' 'We' know who 'they' are but they don't know who we are. . . . We can participate in their world but should not have too much influence. We study 'them' and don't share the results; they don't need the information.

"All of these propositions must be abandoned. *There is no they there.*"

November 20 at the Greenwich House Music School, Diamond's thought-provoking thesis walked onstage and became a mallet-wielding reality. Gamelan Son of Lion, downtown's gamelan orchestra that usually plays pieces by Americans like Barbara Benary and Daniel Goode, gave a program with I Wayan Sadra and Rahayu Supanggah, faculty members from Java's leading arts conservatory at Surakarta. Only two pieces used the gamelan, and if the re-

sults resembled no New York concert I've heard, they resembled traditional Balinese/Javanese playing even less. Nothing here paralleled new Japanese music, which has been Westernized, serialized, and Stockhausenized for decades, distinguishable from European music only by being softer (Takemitsu) or peppering its pointillism with glissandi. Sadra and Supanggah are interested in John Cage's ideas, but their response (if even that is the right word) to Cage takes a different form than it has among Americans.

Sound is the post-Cagean focus, but these pieces centered on sound-in-the-context-of-daily-activity. Thus in Supanggah's *By Accident*, two gamelan players stomped across stage wearing metal plates on their feet, two others swept with brooms, two more played an aggressive game of patty-cake. It was a visual madhouse, but their motions coalesced into a pulse not only infectious but elegantly organized. Likewise, Supanggah's *Subway*, less naive than it first looked, mimicked the New York pedestrian's least favorite transportation experience with repetitious banging noises, shouting, and badly played pop tunes.

Sadra was familiar to me from the 1990 Telluride festival, where his performers threw eggs at a heated metal incline; the eggs fried as they slid to the floor in a truly sizzling finale. Here I hoped eggs were on the menu again, and he didn't disappoint me. His *Daily* began with a 16-beat (3 + 3 + 6 + 4) ostinato that accel-



JODY DIAMOND

Rahayu Supanggah: part of a "we," not a "they"

erated gradually (unison accelerations without conductor are Balinese music's most virtuosic effect). Karen Gilbert improvised on violin, Barbara Benary sang, and Diamond declaimed a text of rhetorical Big Questions, while the performers, with almost sinister expectancy, rubbed eggs hidden in their palms. Finally there was silence, and in pairs and trios they smashed their eggs in unison on a plastic sheet protecting the stage, making a noise that defies my powers of description. Let's just say we don't hear it in music often enough.

Lots of American musical tourists come home playing exotic instruments, but Sadra's *Mimpinya Salju* (Snow's Own Dream) showed us the reverse image: an Indonesian's first tape piece produced on a Synclavier (as part of his current residency with Dia-

mond and Larry Polansky at Dartmouth). If not technologically impressive, the piece was highly original in its lonely atmosphere drawn with refreshing matter-of-factness. Sadra had sampled a *suling*, or bamboo flute, which undulated in gentle curves over low whirring and whistling sounds, with only the whirring left by the end.

One reversal of expectation was that the Indonesian avant-garde didn't seem to extend traditional practices (as Europe's generally has), but instead includes traditional music as a theatrical element, as if in quotes. Sadra's *Terus dan Terus* (On and On), taking a mandalalike scrawl as its graphic score, had the Indonesians passing wild tabla patterns back and forth as the Americans droned, tremoloed, and tossed motives around with abandon.

Supanggah's *Paragraph* began when Philip Corner beat a melody on his gamelan instrument, growing into a 14-beat ostinato that was then interrupted by nonrhythmic improvisation, starting with the composer on a xylophone.

These pieces seemed sloppy, and my first impulse was that a great and beautiful tradition was being debased. Then I recalled Diamond's article, and realized the hypocrisy of my reaction. For many of us, Balinese *old* music still titillates the ear enough to serve as a quasi-new music. That isn't the case for Supanggah and Sadra, who are expert enough gamelan musicians to feel secure that no damage can be done to their own tradition by departing from it. I was in the position of the Japanese businessman who goes to the N.Y. Phil to hear Mozart and is angry when they take apart their instruments to play Cage (were they to do that). Recognizing that Indonesians are not a "they" but part of our "we" means giving up the right to feel proprietary about what direction they take their music in.

And, as Diamond points out, Eastern musicians relinquishing values that we feel we don't possess may be good for us, making it possible, even necessary, for us to rediscover them ourselves. As long as we continue to project "spirituality, community, and timelessness" on the "mysterious East," demanding that its musicians live up to the caricature, we will fail to recognize those qualities in ourselves. Until that happens, Sadra and Supanggah may have to continue showing us that making our new world omelet involves breaking some eggs. ■

BUDDY GUY

A HOT NIGHT IN WINTER