

Well-Tuned Blues

By Kyle Gann

Forever Bad Blues Band

If you've never been in La Monte Young's Tribeca loft, it smells the way the Kitchen smelled January 9 at the American premiere of Young's Forever Bad Blues Band. Young's incense served two functions: to create the right vibes and to track the time. An assistant showed Young each new stick, lighting it as a signal of how far along the performance was. Good thing, for Young can play forever, and his musicians were pushed to their limits. The Forever Bad Band—what a title for an old Idaho hillbilly who became a world-famous music guru—toured Germany, Austria, and Holland in 1992, and this was their first American appearance. Young, earthily humorous beneath his mystic facade, developed an Idaho-tinged persona for his quartet, wearing a purple bandanna tied behind his head, a denim jacket with the sleeves ripped off, and leather gloves. He could have completed the effect by roaring in on a Harley.

Now known for his mathematical sine-tone installations, his fanatically pure tuning, his knotted beard, and his five-hour improvisation *The Well-Tuned Piano*, Young started out in jazz and blues. In 1953 he beat Eric Dolphy for a sax chair in the Los Angeles City College Dance Band. ("Best dance band in the U.S.," Young recalls; "I was lucky, because Eric played beautifully at

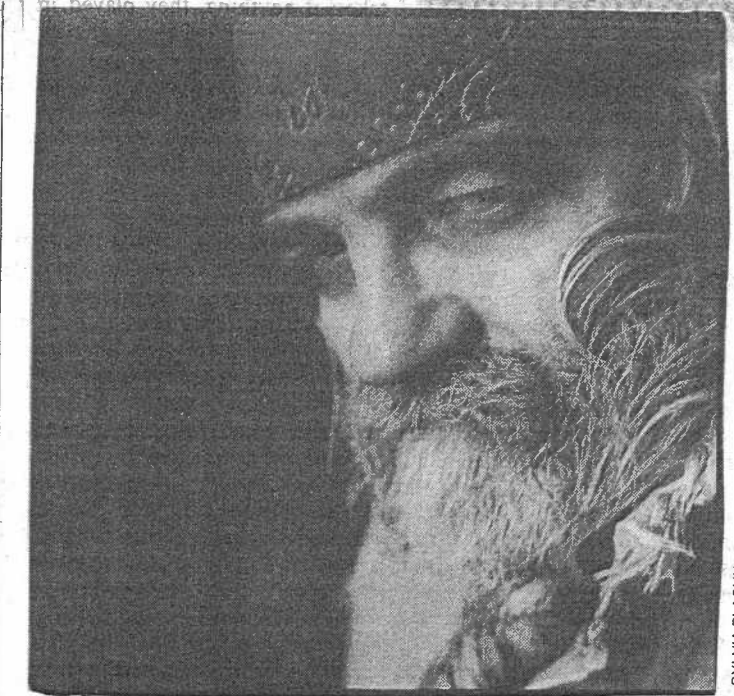
the audition.") The tapes that survive of Young playing sax in the early '60s reveal incredible stamina, an ability to reel off thousands of notes for half-hours at a time with no lapses of technique or inspiration. (Those tapes, if they make it to disc someday, will rewrite our history of early minimalism.) But while his improv style in the *W.T.P.* owes much to sax figurations, today Young plays only the keyboard.

I heard the FBBB twice, on the 9th and 15th. Each performance began at 8:54 and ended promptly at 10:54. (Young carefully records his every note, and his tapes run two hours.) His leisurely time-sense a legend, Young opened with a few "clouds," the harmonic flurries that constitute much of the *W.T.P.* It took 15 minutes to ease into 12/8 meter, and the group didn't stray from the opening chord until around 9:25. Young's Korg synthesizer is tunable to within one cent (1/100th of a half-step), and his quiet, opening four notes gave away his septimal scale, for the B-flat in *Young's Dorian Blues in G* made a 7/6 interval, a third of a half-step flatter than on the conventional piano. (Tuning aficionados might note that the E in the IV chord was a 5/4 major third above the C, despite Young's famous avoidance of 5-based intervals in his other works.) Like many tuning theorists, Young believes that blues singers instinctively aim for flat, seven-related intervals, and this narrow tuning had a bite no other piano blues could have

provided.

Once the swing began, Young kept a remarkably low profile, playing mainly a 3-against-2 pattern with occasional breaks into quick, high-register fingerwork. The stars, guitarists Jon and Brad Catler (on bass) and drummer Jonathan Kane, were tirelessly entertaining and inventive. The Catlers, who also play in the Microtones, had been tuning freaks long before they worked with Young. Jon switched between fretless and just-intonation fingerboards for his guitar, dropped the melody to strum his higher strings harp-like, and, in both gigs, snuck in a justly-tuned version of "Summertime." Kane made Young grin by throwing the beat into duple and 3-against-2 rhythms, and his relentless energy matched that of Young's early tapes. He took to wearing gloves in the final performances, and one concern about repeat gigs was whether his hands could take the abuse.

There were few landmarks, but the variety was unending. By 50 minutes in, the band fell into a more traditional 12-bar pattern, with chord progression I-IV-I-V-IV-I (misprinted in my *Voice* choice). Young, fond of parallels between blues and Indian music, compares the effect to raga performance, in which the second composition is more regularly rhythmic. The 12-bar period dominated on January 9, but by the 15th the group had slowed the chord changes into a more static, meditative continuum. At both gigs, dynamics ebbed and swelled



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with extreme gradualness into slow Wagnerian climaxes. Volume hovered between 100 and 110 db on my decibel meter (which I bought especially for Kitchen concerts), reaching 114 at the end (I leave at 120), but instead of being pounded by racket, we were massaged by pure harmonies. It made a difference.

"The problem with equal temperament," Young told me, "is that nothing reinforces anything else. You go for a big sound and you get a big noise." More are beginning to agree. Microtonal pioneer Ben Johnston claims that one cause of society's problems is that people grow up bathed in loud rock in the usual equal-

tempered tuning, and that the irrational intervals of that tuning create an unconsciously disturbing disharmony in the ear. If that's true, the SRO crowds that flocked to the six Kitchen FBBB performances went home blessed by a blasting dose of in-tuneness. The Kitchen had to turn so many people away from the door that they held the show over one night, but the remaining, tentatively planned performances have been canceled due to scheduling problems. The Kitchen's looking to cosponsor the FBBB at a larger venue, and, for those who want their Idaho frequency-bath at home, a CD should be out within months. ■

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