

# Yokology

## Two Critics Discuss the Ono Aesthetic

BY KYLE GANN  
AND ANN POWERS

so on—could have been a concept piece from her *Grapefruit* book of 1971.

**AP:** And it's interesting how those strengths connect with today's pop

**H**eat rose in the big room at the Knitting Factory last Wednesday night, pouring upward from the bodies crammed in front of the stage, in wait for Yoko Ono. Art-world cognoscenti, Beatle-maniacs, Lower East Side coolsters, feminist punkettes cheered Yoko's latest return to performing and the debut of her son, Sean Ono Lennon, who led her band. Performing mostly music from her latest album, *Rising* (Capitol), Ono presented herself as the survivor she is, as vigorous at 63 as most rockers are at 25. But as she moved through her songs about death, hope, and sensual awareness, she also emerged as something more—an icon encompassing avant-garde and popular traditions in music, at a moment when those traditions have never been so wed. Critics Kyle Gann and Ann Powers discuss Ono, that night, and the possibilities of raw-power art.

**Ann Powers:** I'd never seen Yoko Ono before, and her albums only hint at the visceral quality of her stage presence. But it's strange—when she began, she seemed controlled, almost distanced from the material she was singing. Her openers, "Turned the Corner" and "I'm Dying," express the terror of mortality. But she was still acting cool at that point.

**Kyle Gann:** I hadn't seen her perform live either. I admit I think of her as having a rather cool persona, despite the anguished ferocity of her vocal techniques. But then I still think of her

avant-garde. The spoken word "movement" has spawned several bands whose singers are really poets floating rhythmic language over a backing band. Then there's riot grrrl, which opened up the possibility of "ugly" women's voices—nonmelodic, animalistic, loud voices—in rock. English punks in the 1970s also explored this

some things, because while I know why I'm interested in Ono, I never quite grasped why she had a serious rock following. Fluxus, the movement Ono got reluctantly sucked into, epitomized a moment in the '60s that rebelled against, ahhh . . . competence, or at least polish. You didn't have to be a poet to write poetry, you didn't have

to be a singer to sing, you didn't have to have theater training to do theater. If refreshing then, the aesthetic seems dated now, and that's what I thought of at that moment when she did those anguished convulsive motions during one of the songs: she's no more a dancer than a composer. Also, her lyrics (all that mortality and love and concern for the universe) have a little-girl naïveté and repetitive flatness to them. And it intrigues me that rock absorbs that deliberate amateurism.

To get to your question, the weird-vocal-sound phenomenon was almost as much an academic, serialist thing as '60s protest. Bethany Beardslee, Cathy Berberian, and Joan La Barbara developed a much wider and wilder range of techniques than Ono did, not always with lasting artistic results. Diamanda can sing circles around Ono—wide ones.

**AP:** In underground rock, there's an inverse relationship between amateurism and artistry. It's not that the loudest performers are considered the best—no such bald paradoxes—but

mood in a room. It was the musical equivalent to the political tradition of direct action. Iggy's raw power grounded its wire in his willingness to speak (or sing) before he thought.

Only exceptional people, though, achieve that state of intuitive, graceless grace. You have to at least fool the world that your wild gift was with you from birth; if you seem too studied, you'll come off stodgy, fake. Maybe the very limitations of Ono's craft have made her a more likely candidate for elevation by the rock world, because she's more about charisma, the ineffable, than about skills. Diamanda's also had success in rock, but she would be considered more pretentious than Ono. More a highbrow trying to be street. I think that judgment's bullshit, by the way. But when Diamanda made a rock record, she worked with John Paul Jones, the Led Zeppelin bassist, and so invoked an arcane monsters-of-rock feel, whereas nudged along by Sean, Ono delves into hardcore and Japanese art punk.

**KG:** The original avant-garde interest in amateurism, I think, was related to chance techniques. Did you ever hear the Portsmouth Sinfonia, that British orchestra of people who'd never played instruments before? They got textures slopping through Tchaikovsky that no composer could have dreamed up. For us, amateurism offered a new look at materials. Certainly the classical world has vastly overvalued technical virtuosity, and has no plans to reform. But Ono doesn't strike me as very spontaneous or very close to the id. On the contrary, her encores, and her reading over a tape of her old song "Hard Times Are Over," seemed pretty calculated. I liked her song concepts more than her vocal per-



Ono: channeling rage through a well-oiled machine

EBET ROBERTS

# MUSIC SIC ROCKBEAT

## Stayin' Alive

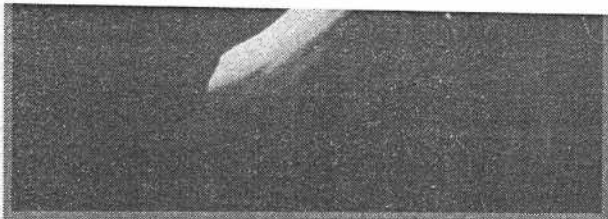
**I**want to bend each one over and fuck the misogyny out of them," pronounced spoken-word artist Bobby Miller. "Keep your mouth off my sisters." Miller did double duty last weekend as performer and host for the benefit held at the Westbeth Theatre for nonprofit, all-women Seattle-based collective Home Alive. Home Alive is celebrating the release of the double CD *Home Alive: The Art of Self Defense* (Epic), featuring tracks by Pearl Jam, Nirvana, the Gits, Ann & Nancy Wilson, 7 Year Bitch, and others. The six-and-one-half-hour concert, which raised money for local New York self-defense organizations, was followed the next day by five free hours of self-defense workshops. Miller grabbed attention in day-glo parachute pants and a crucifixion T-shirt. But the weekend's vibe was epitomized by Home Alive collective

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**Kyle Gann:** I hadn't seen her perform live either. I admit I think of her as having a rather cool persona, despite the anguished ferocity of her vocal technique. But then, I still think of her in the context of the '60s avant-garde, in which that kind of vocal is more an exploration of sound than an expression of passion. And I found her relation to her background rather a cool one: Sean & Co. played background beats that she soared in front of, not really relating to.

**AP:** That musical background varied wildly, while the vocals remained consistent. This was an odd counterpoint, or tension: her consistent but guttural voice over this shifting, yet musically conventional, rock and roll.

**KC:** Actually, the fact that she allows that tension is the reason the music from *Rising* is her most successful ever. She's not really a musician, as John was and Sean is; she came from the Downtown visual art scene. "Writing a song" in any conventional, linear sense has never been her strong point. There's hardly a musical idea on *Rising* that would take 30 seconds to explain to the musicians. But she has good performance concepts that involve sonic backgrounds. And now, she's playing more from her strengths, no longer trying to be a female Lennon. She reads her poetry, or wails her vocal shtick, and they give it a musical identity. I thought "Will I" (very different and prettier live than on the disc) was an especially strong example. The vocals—"Will I miss the clouds? Will I miss you?" and



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avant-garde. The spoken word "movement" has spawned several bands whose singers are really poets floating rhythmic language over a backing band. Then there's riot grrrl, which opened up the possibility of "ugly" women's voices—nonmelodic, animalistic, *loud* voices—in rock. English punks in the 1970s also explored this territory, but never before has it caught on in America. To many young women rockers today, Yoko is emerging as a progenitor. How did that avant-garde tradition originally connect with rock? What other women worked this territory on the new-music end?

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trigues me that rock absolutists that deliberate amateurism.

To get to your question, the weird-vocal-sound phenomenon was almost as much an academic, serialist thing as '60s protest. Bethany Beardslee, Cathy Berberian, and Joan La Barbara developed a much wider and wilder range of techniques than Ono did, not always with lasting artistic results. Diamanda can sing circles around Ono—wide ones.

**AP:** In underground rock, there's an inverse relationship between amateurism and artistry. It's not that the loudest performers are considered the best—no such bald paradoxes—but that emotional, not technical, precision is the goal. In punk, reacting against the overblown quasivirtuosity of arena rock (i.e., the 10-minute Bach-based guitar solo), artists tried to strip away music's craft and attain a state of direct contact with what some brains might call the id, or the zeitgeist, or just the

harsh and jagged

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**AP:** I think there's a real attraction in her athlete's stance, which makes it seem like she's channeling rage through  
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women Seattle-based collective Home Alive. Home Alive is celebrating the release of the double CD *Home Alive: The Art of Self Defense* (Epic), featuring tracks by Pearl Jam, Nirvana, the Gits, Ann & Nancy Wilson, 7 Year Bitch, and others. The six-and-one-half-hour concert, which raised money for local New York self-defense organizations, was followed the next day by five free hours of self-defense workshops. Miller grabbed attention in day-glo parachute pants and a crucifixion T-shirt. But the weekend's vibe was epitomized by Home Alive collective member and self-defense instructor Cristien Storm, as she ranted in her work, *This Is a Mantra*. "You took my life, I took it back. Remember that."

Storm knew Gits lead singer Mia Zapata, who was raped and murdered on her way home from the Comet Tavern in Seattle in 1993. "There was a lot of collective fear and rage," Storm explained. "We wanted to do something positive." That something started to take shape within only three weeks of Zapata's death, and its current form is Home Alive.

The night itself was multi-layered, with simultaneous musical and spoken-word performances in separate spaces. Down front on the coffee house-ish side were Tabitha Soren and diary demigod Jim Carroll, who is also featured on the CD and whose ex-wife, music-biz power lawyer Rosemary Carroll, oversees legal work for Home >>

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LOU REED

THE OPERATIC RENT

# Boys and Girls

*k.d. lang Crosses the Dancefloor Divide*

**BY LARRY FLICK**

that were driven by the male-to-male mating dance.

Ironically, the underlying soundtrack of these bars and clubs combined the throb of dance beats brewed by gay men with the swaggering wail of a powerful woman—and more times than not, it was a heterosexual woman, allowing us worshipful boys to vicariously act out our fantasies of conquering straight men. With each belted command for more testosterone worship, I could feel the chasm between myself and dykes growing tangibly wider.

**A**s a young lad preparing for my first foray into the minefield known as the New York queer community, my early impressions of my lesbian sisters were confused at best. Intuitively, I knew that they weren't the high-heeled plastic toys portrayed in my dad's secret stash of porn tapes and magazines, caked with harlot-red rouge and hairspray and cooing over an artificial phallus. But my then-feeble and thoroughly dick-obsessed 22-year-old brain couldn't even begin to grasp their psychology, much less the heat of their sexual interaction. Despite an obvious common bond, lesbians were alien creatures to a mind increasingly immersed in scenes



► themselves. "It's a paradigm shift," stated Prepare self-defense instructor Joanne Celler, "led a two-hour class with former Adam Kaplan, and operated on the mental adjuvants that can be made to reconstruct the "victim" mind—so pervasive in society, particularly among women. Her said that 85 to 90 percent of aggravated assaults against women are by single, armed attackers. "The world shows women a mode of failure," Kaplan added, after removing the layers of padding that had allowed him to be used repeatedly in the head groin all afternoon. As the workshop's participants discovered, amazing feats can be accomplished in an "adrenalized" state. This is a state that Agnew herself seems to permanently inhabit in these days. Initially, she cried that Zapata would become a sort of Home Alive poster child. "Agnew can now proudly report that the project is now outgrown the Emerald, with the CD available nationally. But scale is still the focus. "If two people are away from this with a deeper understanding," Agnew said, "that's a success."

—DENISE KIERNAN

## Flick

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all along—leading us as she discovered new land herself. She hit pay dirt with *Ingenué*, on which she wrenched her hands with the tragic beauty of Camille, simultaneously shining an unflinchingly honest and gutturally passionate light on unrequited lesbian love. Could we be more psychically connected than I ever imagined? Still, despite touching an inspired and endearing chord, she represented a world that was largely impenetrable to a man shaped by hip-thrusting grooves.

I was clearly not alone in my growing fascination with this enigmatic and compassionate artist. My fellow divahounds and I happily dined on the seemingly incongruous but tasty dance remixes that accompanied her accordion-laced *Ingenué*-era single "Miss Chatelaine." As she gleefully warbled against a sheet of shuffle beats, I noshed but was hungry for more—something a dash saucier, as it were. Lang's own fascination with rhythm increased, as evident in the progression of singles directly geared toward children of the night. With each effort, she got closer to hitting the mark. "Sexuality" nails it.

With a basic foundation of a languid, faux-funk bassline, "Sexuality" is mighty seductive in its original incarnation. But it's when the song is placed in the hands of several clubland

citizens still carrying their production chops and empowered with the freedom to experiment and explore that it comes to vivid life. Every possible street-level groove is employed, from the lazy jeep/soul samples that fuel Tony Maserati's mix, to the hallucinatory trip hop of DJ Krush's brilliantly indulgent and subversively smutty interpretation. The song takes full flight under the guidance of Angel Moraes, whose tribal percussion elongates lang's "come on" and "shed your skin" refrains and transforms them into lip-wetting mantras. Spread out over 10-plus minutes, the song is deconstructed into a primal anthem with a bassline that crawls up the inner thighs and vocals that hypnotize.

Fatefully, it is Chicago house maestro Teri Bristol who manages to perfectly merge groin and mind. Tapping into her own lesbian sensibilities and her experience as a DJ with a predominantly queer-male audience, Bristol reverently casts lang's original performance into music embossed with fluttering disco texture that carefully layers percussion and horns as if they were sweat and perfume.

Although such reconstructions of "Sexuality" would seem to impair the flow of lang's compositional intentions, it is arguable that by opening up her material so radically, she is allowing more people to benefit from the fruits of her discovery—starting with the realization that it really isn't that different on the other side. ❖

## Gann & Powers

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a well-oiled machine. In that respect, she reminded me of Henry Rollins, hardcore demigod, who's made himself into a cartoon of athleticism with his big muscles and stern attitude. Watching a woman cop such a macho attitude—especially a Japanese widow in her sixties, who stereotypically should be quite frail—is a thrill.

You'd mentioned her naive lyrics; I think that's one of the things that made her anathema in rock for a long time. Also her singing, which verges on vaudeville. I have a strange weakness for her ballads (especially the Weimar-meets-Roger Rabbit "I'm Your Angel," from *Double Fantasy*), but they're not for the punks. They're more for the Lennon generation, I guess. This evening she stayed away from that sound, although it surfaces on *Rising*. Maybe it's Sean's influence. I also think it's brilliant that she's connected with Cibo Matto. Yuko Honda's keyboards especially fleshed out IMA's basic rock sound and gave it a more experimental pop edge. And props to Russell Simins, the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion drummer, who gave the night a kick. By the way, what do you think about Sean's contribution?

KG: I'm no rock guitar aficionado. He seemed tasteful and low-key, and if,

as I suspect, he supplied the grindingly chromatic bass line for the last song, I'm impressed. It is amazing that you're watching a woman wail and growl like a 25-year-old without a single visual or aural cue that she's 63. I wonder what percentage of rock interest in Ono boils down to sentimentality about Lennon, but I don't really find myself capable of thinking about her art without thinking about her life, too, as esoteric artist-turned-tragic celebrity. Fate made her the real work of art. ❖

## Weisbard

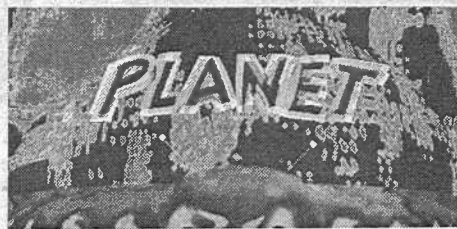
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only temptresses or conventional gals who need seducing—they're players at rebellion, too.

Pop sociology, sure, but in concert at a sold-out Academy some weeks back (Roseland is next month), Alexakis seemed equally bemused, beaming from onstage and anxiously asking if everyone was having a good time. The kids offered no clear clue, raptly chanting Alexakis's lyrics one second, then bodysurfing the next, boys and girls alike, as if at an amusement park. Bassist Craig Montoya and drummer Greg Eklund, both 25, had the casual style and ride-the-wave intensity of players for whom success is coming faster than they'd ever expected; but Alexakis understands how strange a mantle he's grabbed, at least briefly. The alt-rock funhouse has made him an overnight patriarch. ❖

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## DOG GONE DUB



THE VOICE

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Virgin

Megastore