

Ches Smith  
Laugh Ash

As a grad student in music at Mills College in Oakland, California, I was introduced to the music of Steve Reich, working up several pieces with my percussion mentor, William Winant. I was drawn to the harmony, the repetition, the simultaneity of stasis and motion, and the innovative devices in the music, especially the process of “phasing” (where one musician slowly speeds up to land on an interlocking pattern a note ahead of the others). Two of my bands at that time, the new-jazz oriented Good for Cows and the loud, heavy, sludged-out Theory of Ruin were also given to repetition, although as a weapon—staying on a passage *ad infinitum* to lull the listener into a trance, only to clobber them over the head with a particularly jarring change. I also began a decades-long journey into Haitian Vodou music, in which repeated rhythmic cells generate grooves that are interrupted by seismic breaks (“kase” in Haitian Creole) according to the moment-to-moment requirements of the ritual.

My concurrent study of Beethoven string quartets also revealed a generative economy. In each work something as small as an interval stated in the piece’s opening gives rise to an entire movement; the macro-structure is present in the motif. I adopted this method as part my composing practice, but from the opposite direction: starting with a basic cell and spinning out a wealth of material, mining for implications and staying true to the system until forced by my ear to break the rules. It is a way of cohering material.

Also around that time, I got into the work of hip-hop artists Kool Keith, Motion Man, and E-40, three MCs with surprising and divergent approaches to rhyme. Their wild cadences are bookended by blunt tracks, the result often being maximalist, rhyming storytelling tucked into minimalist containers. Under these osmotic influences, the beats on this album give structure to the polyphony, dissonance, unison, polytonality, polyrhythm, spoken verses, and straight noise of the compositions, which in turn border the improvisations (not always tidily). Initially, I used drum machines in this ensemble as a foil to the “chamber” sound world of the compositions, exploiting the tension between two radically incongruous elements. The machines also served a practical purpose—at times I was too busy playing vibes to get to the drum set, yet I needed a beat. I spent the year preparing for this album by revamping my electronics palette, looking for different kinds of swing in the grooves and layering sounds to find the right motion for each piece.

This music is organized in groups or families of instruments—strings, horns, bass sounds (bass guitar, Roland 808s, Moog), and drums (machines and kit), which work to heighten the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic development, and allow perspicuously layered textures. The presentation of the tight and often dissonant lines by family establishes their thing-ness, which emphasizes juxtaposition: the more clearly each part is defined, the greater the tension in their collision. In this context, the human voice at times adds warmth to the blend of horns or strings; at other times, it provides a lyrical presentation of a literal or poetic idea.

Lucky for me and the music, this ensemble is loaded with formidable improvisers. I wanted their sounds to bleed between sections and across compositional arcs, a reminder of the improbability of these idiosyncratic spirits working in service to a group plan. Yet they were in fact trying to be a part of the plan, as demonstrated in the lead-up to the recording. When I sent out the string parts for “Minimalism,” Jennifer Choi expressed concern that the leaps across registers (based on an automated, rapidly arpeggiating synth pattern I’d created) were basically unplayable on the violin at the given tempo. Although I’ve studied string writing extensively, I do not play the violin, so often lack an accurate picture of what is possible. When I suggested rearranging the piece, she countered that we should first check it out at rehearsal. When she, Kyle and Michael arrived early to work on the part, her two old friends good-naturedly cajoled her, “Come on... we got this.” After just a few attempts it was close. Then, after a few more, they were nailing it. Before long they were playing it above tempo. There were similar instances with other players: James Brandon Lewis querying me about how I was feeling the compound-meter ostinato on “Remote Convivial”; Shahzad asking to shed with me the various loping grooves; Nate, Oscar, James and I meeting up to sort out our interlocking parts; Anna showing me extended flute techniques; Shara shipping me demos of vocal ideas. To my delight, everyone was deep into the music before we recorded a note.

When I start writing, I am not pursuing a “vibe” nor am I thinking in terms of some hodgepodge of references (e.g., “Bachman Turner Overdrive meets Last Exit-era Sonny Sharrock”). I am in a quasi-rational mode: working with a kernel and its permutations, transpositions and implications. When I finally let my ear take over, it subtly changes the shape of the melodies, the orchestration of the horns, strings, percussion, bass, and allows the drum machines their full range of signifiers (no matter how layered or processed). Thus, vibe and reference eventually seep in, according to my taste and experience. Add to this lyrics—and the interpretations and improvisations of the performers—and a mashup of atmosphere emerges: polychromatic, austere, convivial, unapproachable, urgent, preposterous.

Given the months I've put into this record, I suppose I would call it serious; it is undoubtedly sincere. Yet listeners might find parts of it at least a little bit funny. As a form of catharsis, laughter is fine by me. Genuine laughter arrives unannounced, causing a fissure where time stops. If the bout of laughter is severe, you may find yourself at the point of disintegration. Afterward, if not too worn out, you can dust away the ash, put yourself back together and continue your life afresh, newly curious about what is possible.

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