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Cold Blue Records

Barney Childs, *Clay Music* (Cold Blue Records E1)
 Read Miller, *Mile Zero Hotel* (Cold Blue Records E2)
 Rick Cox, *These Things Stop Breathing* (Cold Blue Records E3)

Daniel Lentz, *After Images* (Cold Blue Records E4)
 Michael Jon Fink, *Vocalise* (Cold Blue Records E5)
 Peter Garland, *Matachin Dances* (Cold Blue Records E6)

Chas Smith, *Santa Fe* (Cold Blue Records E7) *Cold Blue* – Eugene Bowen, Harold Budd, Michael

Byron, Rick Cox, Michael Jon Fink, Jim Fox, Peter Garland, John Kuhlman, Daniel Lentz, Ingram Marshall, Read Miller, Chas Smith, James Tenney (Cold Blue Records L10)

The recordings may be obtained from Cold Blue Records, 1831 Orchid, Los Angeles, CA 90068, USA.

Listening in the fastnesses of Northern Ireland to these eight Cold Blue records, long-forgotten sounds of the seventies filter through the silent airwaves of the mind. Dim memories stir and vague connections are made. Wasn't Daniel Lentz part of California Time Machine and didn't they perform *You Can't See the Forest* . . . Music at the ICES festival in London in 1972? Here it is on the compilation record, *Cold Blue*. Peter Garland? Editor of the American magazine *Soundings*, of course. Here is a record of his music and tracks by several of the composers featured in the magazine: Michael Byron, Ingram Marshall, Eugene Bowen, Harold Budd. And James Tenney, teacher of Byron, Marshall and Garland at Cal Arts. He's here too. I knew something of him from the phone conversation he had with Walter Zimmermann in 1975, which is transcribed in Zimmermann's book *Desert Plants*.¹ And here is his *Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow* for player piano, which Tenney told Zimmermann he had just left with Nancarrow in Mexico for punching.

Zimmermann on his odyssey through America never got to the west coast. It was too far away. It still seems far away, even here on the nearest edge of Europe. We don't hear enough music from the younger generation of American composers, but what we do is far more likely to be from the east coast, for that's as near again as California. For us, then, the music on these Cold Blue records is interesting because it is west coast, from California, and even more specific, from southern California – around Los Angeles, rather than around San Francisco – even if some of the composers have moved away, like Byron to New York and Toronto, and Garland to South America.

Away back in *Soundings*, nos.3-4 (1972), Peter Garland said:

Several people have suggested that biographical (or other) information be given about contributors. I tried this in Issue 2, but felt very unsatisfied about my ability to give facts about other people . . . In the future, if a composer wants such information given, he should supply it himself, and as briefly as possible.²

There was never much information about composers given in *Soundings*, and there is virtually none on these records either. But even from the meagre sleeve and label notes, one gleans some idea about who they are.

Cold Blue Records is run by Jim Fox in Los Angeles and seems a private (and probably non-profit-making) set-up functioning, out of the goodness of Fox's heart, to promote the music of southern Californian composers. The seven records E1-7 are rather charmingly produced, with interesting sleeve designs, in a 10 inch, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm size rarely seen nowadays, giving a playing time of about 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ minutes per side. The record actually called *Cold Blue* (L10) is a normal LP and features one piece of music each by six of the composers who have records of their own (usually a more recent piece), together with tracks by seven others.

There looks to be a fair proportion of southern Californian composers represented here. The catalyst in the whole thing is probably Barney Childs, who teaches at the University of Redlands: Jim Fox was a student of his, he is in touch with most of the older composers and, of the younger ones, Read Miller and Rick Cox had their music recorded at Redlands, so I assume there is a connection. As a homage to Childs, perhaps, the first record, E1 is devoted to his *Clay Music* (1981). This is one of three records that do give some information. Childs was commissioned to provide music for a variety of ceramic flutes, whistles, pipes and ocarinas for an artist, Susan Rawcliffe, who has made a study of pre-Colombian clay instruments. The music on the record, as Childs says, is not an evocation of any kind of primitive music but, as one hears very clearly, allows performers first to explore the possibilities of the instruments and then to begin combining them in unisons, counterpoints and chords. It is a very lucid and charming 20 minutes of music.

Peter Garland has long been interested in the music of pre-European America (he has spent long periods in Central and South America), and his record presents music based on the matachin, a Mexican dance noted by Cortez's soldiers in 1519 and named by them after the Italian dance they thought similar. The matachin is still danced in parts of the Americas, and Garland's set of six, for two violins and gourd rattles, written in 1980-81, uses the small compass and limited scales of most folk music, oscillating tonally often around A, or the

pitches of the other open strings. Some of the dances are fast and some unexpectedly slow, such as the one called 'Dance of Death', which is the longest of the six.

The energy and artless artistry of these dances is only equalled elsewhere in the whole collection by James Tenney's track on *Cold Blue*, the manic *Spectral Canon*, in which the music erupts in harmonic series from a low A to crabbed scrabbling in the upper partials. Tenney's is the last track on the compilation record and it threw all the rest of the music into relief, electrifying me upright after the wavery, sitar-sounding, vox-humana-beset, sentimental tune of Eugene Bowen (guitar synthesizer) and Harold Budd (keyboard synthesizer). Their piece is titled *Wonder's Edge*; it seems piquant that the only other information given is that it was 'recorded at Old Rugged Cross'. There is more than a touch of the recent Terry Riley here. Even more wavery and sentimental is Ingram Marshall's *Gradual Siciliano*. Via mandolin, piano and electronics, snatches of an Italian tune filter through. I couldn't remember its name, but it's not *Just One Cornetto* . . . This would make a great atmospheric track for a spaghetti western.

Atmosphere! That's what so much of this music is about. It's there in Peter Garland's *The Three Strange Angels* (1972-3) and Michael Byron's *Marimbas in the Dorian Mode* (1976), but it's there even more – ad nauseam in fact – in the more recent music. The score of *The Three Strange Angels* is in *Soundings*, no.6 (1973),³ but it's more effective in performance than it looks: mysterious bass drum bangs, the whole sounding-board of the piano allowed to reverberate, and eventually the wailing of a bull-roarer adding its sound. The marimba piece involves soft and slowly changing chords played tremolando by four instrumentalists, and of course conjuring up thoughts of Steve Reich.

Michael Jon Fink specialises in very spare music for piano solo, two pianos, cello and piano, and celeste. It is based on slow and soft solo lines, or unisons, or maddeningly hesitant two-part writing, in pentatonic or Eastern scales, without rhythmic interest, and the sound is allowed to die away upon the air; there is probably a carefully worked out system behind it all. *Vocalise* for piano and cello suggest more structure than the other pieces and the record is named after it, which could be significant. The music can have a feeling of timeless beauty, or it can become too spare, or too sweet, as in the *Celeste Solo* on *Cold Blue*. Fink's copyright title, I notice, is 'Deathless Moon Music' which may also carry some significance. The pieces were written between 1978 and 1981.

Chas Smith plays pedal steel guitar, 12-string dobro and banjo, and it was the sound of the Hawaiian steel guitars, beloved of country-and-western players and perhaps not so familiar in Britain, that awakened in me memories of the Polynesian Hawaiian guitar music I used to encounter in New Zealand. The three pieces on the first side all use those slidy, mournful sounds amplified by echoes and slowly moving up and down compasses of about a 5th. I hardly dared turn the record over, but *Scircura* uses a six-note ostinato over which relentlessly major chords accumulate, so it does sound somewhat different. The recording is nicely engineered by Smith himself. Like Fink and others, he loves the sound to fade away before offering the next wavering.

Rick Cox's music really sounds very similar to that of Chas Smith, except that he plays electric

guitar. *These Things Stop Breathing* (recorded 1981) begins with gradually changed and filtered guitar chords, has a middle section of tinkly sounds, and ends with a mournful clarinet solo that emerges through the fuzz. *Necessity* (1983) also has events ghosting out of fuzz – it made me think it was all happening under water. *Taken from Real Life* is strong on atmosphere too, with a poem spoken in a low confidential monotone by the composer accompanied by the sort of sounds the phrases of the poem suggest – they're all taken from love lyrics. (A large portion of the poem, typing error and all, makes up the record's cover design, and it makes a rather good 'concrete' artwork.)

Cox plays guitar and Chas Smith engineers the one piece by Jim Fox on *Cold Blue* – *Appearance of Red* for piano, cello and electric guitar – and it's plainly out of the same stable as their music and that of Fink: spare piano chords and notes releasing harmonies that are echoed by cello and guitar atmospherics.

It's both the voice in Cox's piece and the use of echoes that bring me to the music of Daniel Lentz. His amusing piece *You Can't See the Forest . . . Music* (1971), for three speaker-drinkers, who alternate syllables of well-known proverbs as they strike glasses with mallets and then snatch sips of wine, is presented on the compilation record in a version that differs to some extent from the score in *Soundings*, nos.7-8,⁴ and includes his 'cascading echo systems' as a background.

On the smaller record of Lentz's more recent music the 'cascading echo systems' envelop everything. The term makes it sound like Mantovani's strings, and there is a resemblance. Lentz is the only composer other than Childs and Garland who gives some idea of his intentions in his sleeve note. He aims to build musical structures in spirals rather than from left to right, creating music that is in a constant state of becoming. In the pieces on *After Images*, for voices and keyboards, the gradual building up of lyrical poems from words like 'dawn' or 'beams' or 'sun' or 'fire', coupled with the whooshy sounds of the echo systems and the tonal harmonies, create a sound world that I can only compare with a make-believe, Disney-like land glimpsed through the ripples in a huge blue lake.

Read Miller's work is purely vocal, but no-one sings; voices intone his offerings in short phrases and without expression, though they often speak not quite in unison. *Weddings, Funerals and Children who Cannot Sleep* on *Cold Blue* talks of life 'breaking down, disintegrating' and the voices appear to do just that on the track. Clever, perhaps, but although it gave the flavour of southern Californian speech, I didn't really want to think about the message behind the monotone.

Perhaps I wasn't finding the messages behind most of this music. Is it really as innocent and gentle and static and mushy as it sounded to me? Are the composers really locked into the 'flower power' of the 1960s in their minds, and into dreamy, Eno-like repetition in their music? Does the Pacific sun drain the energy out of the young? Are these records typical, anyway? Childs and Garland and Tenney excepted, so much of the music presented here is a cop-out. The music doesn't find its logical ending, it fades away; it exists for atmosphere rather than for musical purposes; it ignores the element of rhythm. On the plus side, though, it shows genuine experimentation in the exploration of harmonics, and the records give fascinating

glimpses into unfamiliar territory, enlarging our knowledge of the range of American music today.

- 1 Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants* (Vancouver: ARC Publications, 1976), pp.221-32.
- 2 Peter Garland, 'Comment', *Soundings*, nos.3-4 (July-October 1972), p.73.
- 3 Peter Garland, 'The Three Strange Angels', *Soundings*, no.6 (Spring 1973), pp.16-20.
- 4 Daniel Lentz, 'You Can't See the Forest . . . Music', *Soundings*, nos.7-8 (July-October 1973), pp.148-53.

Stephen Kovach

1930-1980

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Stephen Kovach's music is a blend of traditional and contemporary styles. His compositions are characterized by a strong sense of rhythm and a deep understanding of the American musical tradition. His work is a testament to the power of music to transcend time and space.

His early work was heavily influenced by the jazz and blues traditions of the American South. He drew on these influences to create a unique sound that was both familiar and new. His music is a reflection of the American experience and the struggles of the people.

Over the years, Kovach's style evolved, incorporating elements of modernism and postmodernism. He continued to explore the boundaries of music, pushing it in new directions. His work is a testament to the enduring power of music to inspire and move us.

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