

From: "charles curtis" <c.curtis@gmx.net>

To: Gino dal Soler <rov6154@iperbole.bologna.it>

Subject: Re: questions for Blow Up magazine

Date: Tue, Aug 15, 2000, 5:53 PM



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1) Your Ultra White Violet Light/Sleep double LP is among my favourite listenings these days (is to be considered a release of this year or a 1999 release?... I ask you that because only in these months i found it here....)... I liked also the idea the four sides can be freely combined with one another... Could you tell me something about this release?... Is it your first album? and the choice of vinyl is especially due to combination listenings... or else? Will there ever be a cd release?....

i have become more and more interested, over the course of time, in the ability of the mind to apprehend multiple dissimilar experiences at the same time... there is a form of concentration in which this becomes possible... i knew someone who could follow the conversation he was having with me in a restaurant as well as two other conversations at neighboring tables all at once... as we continued conversing he would report to me on what the others had just said... i tried to do it and found it very disorienting, but spacey and exhilarating... gradually i have seen this as a key to perceiving the many layers of the universe around us... one notices that one stops regarding oneself as the controlling authority, regulating and interpreting and interpolating, and one begins to listen and participate in one's surroundings, to be a part of everything... not subjugating the environment to one's interpretation of it, but entering into it...

a very interesting example of this is the observation of non-synchronous time periods... on a very small scale, for instance, you could be taking a long trip in a car, following a baseball game on the car radio, and listening to the ticking of your wristwatch... all of these things take different amounts of time and are measured in different units, and if you manage to take notice of the different rhythms and speeds at the same time, you can feel an unusual, i think in fact a heightened, appreciation for time as an abstraction... i find this very calming and satisfying, i suppose meditation is a little like that... and on a larger scale, to reflect on the rhythms of the seasons changing, the amount of time it takes to complete a large-scale work project over months or years, the accelerated, super-intense time experience of small children, the changes in time experience as life lengthens, to sense these periodic patterns simultaneously is i think rewarding and liberating...

this is something of what i had in mind when i thought of the idea of musics that can be played simultaneously with one another... and, additionally, musics with different texts... when the records are played over multiple stereo systems it becomes very easy to get into that state of concentration, because the signals are spread out in the room over different pairs of speakers, one can move around perceptually in the space...

my goal was to create musics that harmonize with one another, but do not build upon one another... i certainly don't think that absolutely everything sounds good with absolutely everything else... so i want to form the elements, yet i don't want to make them so related to one another that it becomes just one thing... it should be different things which co-exist...

i am not an orthodox cageian by any means, but he did say something that impressed me quite a lot... he was differentiating his concept of indeterminacy from the european experiments with aleatoric procedures, and he explained that he wished to create a music whereby he had no knowledge of what might happen during the process of creating it... instead of known elements which allowed a

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degree of flexibility, he wished to be working with things that he knew nothing about... this is a very radical position, and whether or not he achieved it is beside the point, the fact that he said it is very beautiful... in this age of extreme conformity and uniformity and aesthetic control over listeners, particularly in reactionary branches like classical music and commercial pop but also in what passes for progressive music or new music, his remark is interesting... i feel that i have released a double lp which, if it is listened to on multiple stereo sets or sound reproduction devices simultaneously, will sound different every time it is played, and i as its creator will not know how it is sounding and have relinquished control over the circumstances and results of the listening experience...

the release history of ultra white violet light is a little confusing... it first came out in september 1997 as a limited edition... it was in a very beautiful hand-made cover of soft white paper with an actual original bernhard oe photograph mounted in each album... this edition sold out pretty fast... squealer records offered to co-re-release it in 1999 in this new color photo cover... in a few months they will issue the double cd version... this is my third album, the first two were cd's put out by the german label strange ways, they are straight rock albums by my trio, one is called volcanoes and the other is called lesser writings...

2) In particular way i appreciate the beauty of sine-tones along with your sustained electric guitars and cello...like a fine psychedelic experience...When did you start to play in this deep and subtle way? Could you explain some around the sine tones...?

it is hard to explain much about sine tones, because i don't know that much about them, at least scientifically... they are quite mysterious!... but i believe they represent the lowest common denominator of sound, the material out of which all sounds are derived... therefore a kind of essence of sound... there is a paradox in sine tones which i point out in the liner notes to ultra white: a sine tone is defined as a tone which contains no overtones... yet an overtone is said to be very nearly a sine tone... so, one could say, the sine tone is like the aura or secondary radiance of primary, audible sound, and at the same time the core or nucleus of any sound... additionally there is the problem that what we hear as synthesized sine tones, or as harmonics of a natural sound, is most likely not entirely free of overtones, therefore we are never hearing a totally pure sine tone, only an approximation of one... these are subtle and puzzling problems that one runs into when thinking about sine tones, and i like to think about sine tones, as i like to think about anything that is really mysterious...

but most of all, i found the sensation of listening to and playing with sine tones very satisfying and also very physical... originally i began to work with sine tones as a way of perfecting my intonation on the cello... la monte young was teaching me to play the cello in just intonation in the style of indian raga singing, with a drone, and he mentioned that the drone which is most difficult to play with is a sine tone... as it is most unforgiving, showing, by virtue of its perfection, the blemishes and imperfections of one's playing most brutally... naturally, that was all he had to say and i was out the door rushing to find a sine tone generator... after working at it for a long time i started getting better at it and found it to be an experience that was beyond comparison with any other drone-based type playing, so i began to experiment with performing live to sine tones, and this is ultimately the direction i went in...

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the combination of sine tones and sustained cello or guitar turn the acoustical space that they are in into a large instrument, and the modulation which occurs is comparable, i think, to what a ring modulator does via circuitry... only it is happening in the room... this is of course most noticeable in a live performance...

3) I know you are a former of the latest La Monte's Theatre of Eternal Music... Could you tell me something of your experience with La Monte and your impressions on this "Granddaddy of all us"....?

this is a subject i feel very strongly about, so strongly that i sometimes find it difficult to speak on it...

i would count any person fortunate who at some point in his life encounters another person whose existence and life and lifework verify the beliefs and ideals that one has harbored and fought personally to maintain up until that time... not necessarily just in the sense of meeting a kindred spirit or a similarly inclined individual whom one wants to become friends with, or whom one admires and wants to emulate... it is less narcissistic than that... the experience that i refer to is that of recognizing aspects of oneself which might not even have been obvious to one, which were definitely there but in an inchoate form or beneath the level that one has conscious access to on a day-to-day basis... this is one of the most profound forms of spiritual transfer between the generations, and is for me the truest definition of teaching, of what a teacher is...

this is the experience i have had over the last almost fifteen years working with la monte young... and the longer my relationship with him continues the more its importance becomes clear to me... i am just reaching the age (i am now forty) when there are people in my circle of friends who are younger than i and to whom i am passing something along somewhat along the lines of what i have described above, and as this begins to happen between me and persons younger than myself the significance that la monte young has had (and continues to have) for me is defined anew...

from a musical standpoint i don't think i need to elaborate on the substance of his contribution, it is well known... and while i don't want to enter a personal level which would be inappropriate to this public format, i do want to refer to his example as a human, which is inspiring in a way similar to his musicianship... in the way he leads his life, he makes no concessions to what anyone else thinks is the right way, he follows invariably his own very original approach to all aspects of life... yet he has a very strict moral code and a natural generosity and respect for others, and for the individuality of others, so that he inspires trust and reciprocal respect among those who are close to him... i have known few people who are as true to their word as he, and his word might be pretty weird by normal standards, and require some interpretation or thinking about, but he is true to it... another thing i find interesting about him is how he values his privacy and how he pursues his work very quietly and calmly, which is unusual nowadays, when artists are expected to talk a lot about themselves and be in the public eye as much as possible...

i have had my disagreements with him and there are aspects of his work that i am less partial to than others, and i consciously make a point to regard his work critically, in order to avoid being awed by the dimensions of his work and his

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personality... but there is no doubt in my mind that he is the most important living composer and that his contribution over the last forty years is one of the most significant to contemporary culture...

i would correct you on one point, i am not a former member of the theatre of eternal music, i am an active member, though the current incarnation of the theatre of eternal music is not to be compared to the original 1960's group... today it is more flexible, more like a pool of musicians who come together for specific projects...

4) In side two and four i also liked so much your particular use of speech... Especially in side two i can feel some affinity with the finest so called avant/post rock... Are you interested in that kind of music?

i am very drawn to the combination of spoken texts and rock music... it is impossible for me to write song lyrics that sound good when they are sung... and i am not a fan of melody... my music does not co-exist well with melody, the writing of melodies requires to my mind a hands-on, topical or circumstantial inventing or making or plying of material into a firm and henceforth unchanging shape... this is difficult and unnatural for me and doing it would exert a restraint on my compositional technique and make composing very tedious for me... my music is contrapuntal in nature, it has to do mostly with revoicing and recombining simple harmonic ideas, melody would distract from this... therefore the spoken word thing offers an interesting perceptual counterpoint to my music without interfering musically with the composition...

also when i was younger and hanging around new york i was a member of a band called king missile, which was one of the best of the early spoken word bands in the early eighties... i really admired the poems of john s. hall and his sensibility for musical settings... the musicians i hung out with were all steeped in the velvet underground who also practiced spoken word to perfection... also, almost all of my friends and girlfriends wrote poetry, it was just a totally natural, obvious thing to do, kind of like writing a journal, making notes on your life and all of the things that were happening, love, joy, frustration, ennui, basketball games in the park, late nights in bars, et cetera... so i was doing it too, and still am, it was never really intended to be published or we never thought of ourselves as poets per se, it was just something you did, that beautified or adorned life in a subtle way, and also punctuated it by marking the steps along the way... for me being an amateur writer is very natural, my father was one too...

post-rock is one of those terms i don't really understand, it does get applied to my music... i would say that i have had a very deep appreciation of rock music for many years, and would name three main influences... one, the vague memory i have of great sixties rock that i kind of heard peripherally as a small child... two, the velvet underground, whom i only discovered when i was about 25 years old... and three, the new york rock scene in the late eighties, like sonic youth and the feelies... i make no distinction between rock music and new music or formal music... i am interested in music that is spiritually elevating and intellectually challenging, and for me the only difference between rock music and so-called serious music is the instrumentation and a few idiomatic gestures...

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5) Your music aside, i know you are a performer for other modern and minimal composers... like La Monte of course but also Terry Jennings, Richard Maxfield, Feldman... like in the forthcoming concert in Hamburg... Could you speak about these projects?...

i have made my living since the age of eighteen as a professional cellist... i have done just about everything you can possibly do on the cello, from the sacred to the profane, from playing on the street with a hat in front of me to performing concertos with symphony orchestras and famous conductors... i was always drawn to radical new music and the seriousness and depth and courage of the great avant-gardists... after playing new music by all kinds of composers over the years like babbitt, carter, ferneyhough, xenakis, stockhausen et cetera, i found that the work of la monte young and his circle, cage and feldmann, and a few others, was the music in which my own musical nature was most at home, and in which i therefore felt most free, and most capable of realizing the composers' intentions to the highest degree of perfection... i am a perfectionist and don't wish to be an all-purpose performer switching styles at the drop of a hat and adapting to new fashions... i take interpretation very seriously, and wish to devote my life to perfecting my interpretation of the music that i consider most important... achieving perfection in the music of la monte young is certainly a life-long task, it is the most challenging and complex music that i know of... gradually i am getting to a point in my life where i can take the necessary amount of time for the things that are most important to me...

6) Wich feelings and influences (not merely musical) are so determining in your approach to composition?

growing up in a small beach town in california in the sixties and seventies formed me... the ocean, the weather, the permissive surfer/pot smoker culture that i was very aware of if not directly involved in... if you lived in california in those years you absorbed the concept of newness as an idealistic or utopian stance... minimalism in its radical california form could be seen as a mixture of idealized (artificial) beauty, gestural coolness, and newness or "being different" as a form of protest... it's no wonder so many great minimalists are from california... la monte young, robert irwin, walter de maria, chet baker, kenneth anger... i'm glad i grew up in california...

then there is new york as a counterpart to all that... where i lived from the age of eighteen on... with intervals in germany... the german language, which i have made something of a study of, and some german music, have had a forming influence on me... bach, schubert, bruckner, late brahms...

above all the discontinuity of my life, the ruptures and changes and losses, have made me intensely aware of continuity as a precarious possibility for happiness... i see continuity however not in a linear or horizontal structure but as a unity, the past and the future as a whole, and the many differences, unrelated elements, individual or differentiated aspects as defining the whole... to phrase it negatively, sameness suggests to me the fragmentary, difference suggests wholeness... the more i can be aware of at once, and the more difference there is, that i am aware of, the more sense of wholeness i have... and the freer i feel... this relates directly to the concept of simultaneous play...

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7) Could you tell me about your future projects, releases and collaborations?

i work very slowly and there are a few projects which have been pending for some time now... i did a tour last year as a trio with alan licht and dean roberts, we are sorting through some recordings to see what sounds best... i consider my work with michael j. schumacher very important, though it has been sporadic in the last few years, we go back to 1985 as friends and collaborators, and that sort of continuity is of great value to me... on the surface his music and mine sound very different, but there is an ideological core within which we are very close... donald miller of borbetomagus is another whom i have worked with and been close to for many years and whom i love and admire... i work with the new york artist and filmmaker jeff perkins, whose work is little known but of extraordinary quality...

i do a bit of guesting now and then, there is a very recent release by a young reggae star named patrice that i play on, and in april i recorded in los angeles with wayne shorter, john pattitucci and alex acuna for the forthcoming wayne shorter album... also, i have two very young daughters and for them i wrote a children's piece which is a fantasy space voyage with spacey electronic and rock music, and this will be released by deutsche grammophon in october...

six weeks ago i presented ultra white violet light as a simultaneous broadcast over two different radio frequencies, as a two-hour continuous mix of the different sides... this way people could hear it as a sound installation at home by simply setting up two small radios in one room... it was a great success, people said it sounded really wild, and i supplemented it with a live four-hour performance in a small gallery in which i played sine tones, text fragments, other unrelated elements while receiving the simulcast in the gallery... if there are any radio stations who would like to hook up with a second station and try this, i can provide the pre-mixed recordings for this simulcast... early in september i will collaborate with two light artists who call themselves dura lux on an outdoor installation with sine tones and quiet noises, and a complementary indoor performance in which they will transform a large room into a camera obscura that will project the clouds and sky into the dark room i am playing in... it is to be called "the sound of daylight", the concept being that my sounds will gently supplement the sounds that are already there, just as dura lux use only the daylight, which is already there... simultaneously there will be a small exhibition of bernhard oe's photos starting the night before when it gets dark, and "the sound of daylight" will end the next day when it gets dark, so the whole thing is called "from dusk to dusk" and is a kind of memorial to bernhard oe...

also i am continuing to record with my trio... and i am happy that i now have one really good cello student, reynard rott, who is 25 years old and he is playing the music of la monte young and feldman and jennings and so on with me, which is a pleasure, two cellos is a good formation for this kind of music...

8) Do you like play live?...I'd like sooner or later see you playing in Italy...

i love to perform, if i could i would play six concerts a week all year round... so if you want me in italy just say the word and let's see when i'm in the neighborhood...