

Music That Others Would Call Noise

Gen Ken Montgomery

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BESIDES THE WONDERFUL *ICEBREAKER* RECORD, NEW YORK-BASED SOUND ARTIST AND NOISEICIAN GEN KEN HAS A HISTORY OF MAKING RECORDS USING UNUSUAL OBJECTS - SUCH AS THE LAMINATOR. HE'S ALSO A LONG-TIME ASSOCIATE OF THE GERMAN ELECTRONICA HERO, CONRAD SCHNITZLER.

EP You've worked with a range of objects to produce sound art events. Is the process of sound-generation more important than the object used? The objects in your list are positively Surrealist - what do think Andre Breton would have made of you?!

GKM The experience of listening is far more important than the source of the sound. Musical instruments, appliances, objects - all can be used to create listening experiences. I've never made a distinction between a synthesizer, a violin or a refrigerator. They all have a sonic element that can be used to create a good listen. I don't know what Andre Breton would have made of me. I think he would like the Ice-O-Matic though. Maybe he would find the sound marvellous.

EP Does the Ice-O-Matic have some - erm - talismanic property which attracted you? It sure looks like a nifty item. Do you look for these things in junk shops, or do they just turn up?

GKM I didn't know how talismanic the Ice-O-Matic was when I first brought it home. I like junk shops, thrift store, yard sales, stoop sales, stacks of garbage in the street etc. You never know what you'll find. Its an attraction to chance, haphazardness and luck. I enter these arenas like I enter an art museum. My eyes wander until something pulls me in. Sometimes I get surprised about what I'm attracted to. I try not to inhibit the impulse to move towards it. Sometimes I suddenly pick something up that's horrible. But I had to pick it up to find out. The Ice-O-Matic was love at first sight in Cleveland Ohio. I had no idea of using it as a sound making device. I just thought it looked good and it was cheap enough. It sat on a shelf until one day...

Whether they come from an instrument of mine, a toy, an appliance, a malfunctioning 8-Track player or something happening out my window, the sounds I use in my work are a part of my life in one way or another.

EP Did you need to add much tape processing or studio work to make its sounds into music? What did you do to the recordings? Is that the 'real' sound of the Ice-O-Matic at the very end of the record?



GKM I'm attracted to sounds from the first instant because I find them musical. I don't need to add any processing or effects to hear them as musical.

When I recorded *Icebreaker* in 1991 I was still using a lot of electronic instruments. Mostly cheap toys and analog synthesizers. But then I had the opportunity to work in a professional studio with lots of synthesizers, samplers and electronic processing gear. I got something like writers block, I guess you could call it noisician's block. I had one year to use the studio but after 11 months I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do. No inspiration. I knew my little instruments but these other high tech ones were so unknown to me I got lost in the technology. After a wasted time in the studio fiddling around with this expensive gear, I decided to bring in some things from home to record and process. The Ice-O-Matic was the star. It was a turning

point in music making for me. I'd always used concrete sounds in my music a motor, a fan, glass, metal, etc. But after *Icebreaker* I used the sounds objects made or other everyday sonic events as my main sound sources. When I performed *Icebreaker* live I ended by shoving handfuls of ice cubes into the Ice-O-Matic so the audience could hear the pure sound of the Ice-O-Matic. Since then I have used less and less electronic processing, but with *Icebreaker* I did a lot of electronic manipulation.

EP In performance, you play the piece as a surround-sound work through large speakers, through many channels. By magnifying the sound to this degree, are you disrupting SCALE - changing the Ice-O-Matic from a small object, into something huge enough to live inside?

GKM Certainly. I'm putting you inside of something big. But the space is as big as you make it since I perform it in total darkness. The 8 speakers have 4 pairs of stereo information criss-crossing the room so the experience of *Icebreaker* is also very much about the sounds moving through space and the immersive experience of being inside a world of sound which is very musical.





acquired from the Salvation Army the day before. That's heightened haphazardness for me! Underlying my love of haphazardness is the suspicion that haphazardness doesn't exist!

EP What's the appeal of household objects? I can think of quite a few great musical records I've heard using them...including a great washing machine mini-LP from last year. Was La Monte Young the 'first' to rhapsodise about his fridge motor? What's the attraction for you personally? Do you see it stemming from the ideas of John Cage?

GKM I pay attention to sounds, and get very attracted by the world of sound we live in. Everyone has a story about the sounds they hear. I listen and eventually record the ones I like the best. Then I try to bring them into consciousness for others. I get excited about the sound of things that have a purpose other than making sound. When I see objects I sometimes imagine what it would sound like. Certainly the refrigerator is a big everyday source of many sounds that everyone knows and usually try to ignore. I once searched for a silent refrigerator. I would be interested to know La Monte Young's fridge motor work. I wasn't aware of it but it may explain why I spent so many hours in the Dreamhouse. John Cage's ideas and ears had a big influence on my life. As a teen, before I knew anything about his work as a composer I stumbled by chance upon his book *Silence*. I checked it out from my school library and still haven't returned it! With his ideas I took myself out of every boring moment by shutting my eyes and listening. So in a way I thank him every time I hear music that others would call noise.

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I imagine my concerts as a public way of closing your eyes and putting on headphones. That's why it is very dramatic at the end when you suddenly hear the pure little sound of the Ice-O-Matic coming from a stationary position.

EP How do you generate and promote the 'haphazardness' that you seem to value in your work?

GKM Haphazardness finds me wherever I go and of course it's best when unexpected. With *Lamination Rituals* I laminate ephemeral objects while listening to the sound of their lamination. Unexpected changes takes place during the process of lamination. Try laminating a concert ticket, bubblewrap or pancakes for starters. The transformation of the mundane into officialdom is continually amazing!

There is a regular dose of haphazardness built into my octophonic sound work. I began performing 8 channel Cassette Concerts in total darkness at the Generator Sound Theater in the 80s. Cassette Concerts was Conrad Schnitzler's way of presenting electronic music, the individual tracks of a piece are recorded on separate cassettes (or today burned on CDs). The elements in the music become free to change in every performance: volume, placement, timing, timbre etc. It's like making a live mix every time. Since it's nearly impossible to start them all at the same moment (we never even tried to!) the relationships between the sounds morph and change into new and unrepeatable patterns, every time.

In live performances I get excited about the uncertainty of what will come out of the speakers. I work with filmmaker Zoe Beloff making a live sound track to her live 3D film projection performance *Mechanical Medium*. Besides amplifying her projectors and putting them in the mix, I have a table full of unstable equipment and objects whose sounds are impossible to control or predict. During the performance, I make fast decisions while watching the screen, juggling the sounds and staying in sync with the moment.

When travelling, I am fond of making concerts using objects that I just

