



# Electronic tonic

Bob Lukomski and experimental music in the Hudson Valley

On a spring day in the late '80s, I took a rowboat out to Esopus Island with Mark Marinoff, Phil Farber and some other friends.

After exploring the rocky little island — a footnote in occult history — we ate some of Phil's excellent chili and listened to Philip Glass on a boom-box out on the rocks. There was no clock, and it went tick-tick. In those days, I carried a rehearsed opinion of Philip Glass with me at all times. This looked like a good time to launch it, apropos of something: "Man, if music is

going to be this repetitive, and furthermore, this repetitive, it should at least groove," I said, as the glinting surface of the south-bound Hudson appeared to ripple north. "Teenybopper," scoffed Marinoff. But re-

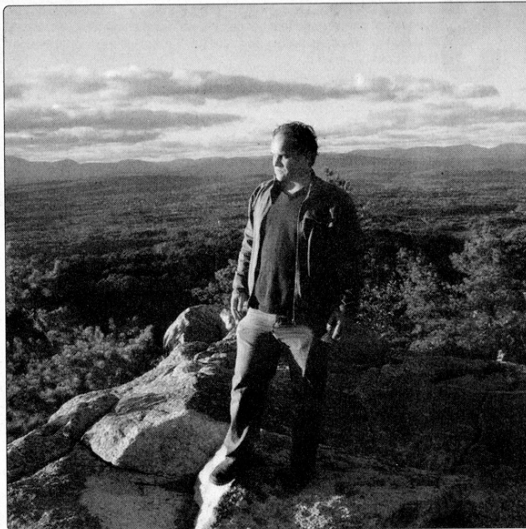
ally, I was describing something more like Brian Eno, wasn't I? As a producer, Eno had been officiating the union of naïve electronic Minimalism and Afrobeat for quite a while. Teenybopper like *Remain in Light*, for example?

Anyway, it was a great spring day. My cranky opinion was just a momentary disturbance in its flow. There was a time when Minimalist, electronic and especially New Age music just made me feel a little righteous and combative — playfully, I hope. I love having opinions and defending them, but I don't want my opinions deciding

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anything.

It's funny, though, that my inner curmudgeon should be awakened by this music in particular. All music produces "states." All *everything* does. But the "ambient"



BOB LUKOMSKI

family of music often aims and claims to produce certain heightened, meditative and cleansed states as if by pharmacy, via some concert of psychoacoustics, cultural deconditioning and spirit breath. Not in young-man me it didn't; it just pissed off young-man me.

I liked the clean, pattern-shifting Minimalism of Glass and Steve Reich and the more unsettling electronic textures of Morton Subotnick just fine; but they pissed me off, the way they begged their own justification, seeming to be more about the eloquence of the defense than the music itself sometimes. The found-sound, culture-collage, tape-splicing and knob-twiddling noise scene? It was cool, but it pissed me off: too full of its own political agency and too proud of its musical naïveté. New Age was kinda nice. I liked wood flutes, reverb and oneness as much as the next New Paltz native. But it pissed me off: flaccid music, lacking all challenge by design, pious and so assured of its own extramusical power to produce "states."

Now, 25 hard years after Esopus Island, I find plenty to like in all of these styles. And I find that I could use some states. I could stand to be cleansed of some calcified old opinions. Enter, "by a commodious vicus of recirculation," the music of New Paltz-based composer Bob Lukomski, who never offered his music to me as tonic, but I am taking it that way anyway.

An accomplished and credentialed composer of serious electronic music and a college teacher of same, Lukomski is also what you might call an advocate for this family of genres. He is a member of the Coterminous Collective, a group of Hudson Valley electronic artists that performs and packages its members' diverse work together. Lukomski has also launched Earwaker, an intimate performance venue dedicated to contemporary, mostly electronic chamber music.

One of the first things that I notice about Lukomski's initiatives is the conspicuous lack of the confrontational rhetoric that used to be *de rigueur* in his line of work. From the Coterminous Collective, one would expect an oppositional manifesto of some kind, or at least a good working definition of "coterminous" and an explanation of the missing "e" in "collectiv" (could it be that the terminal "v" describes convergence?). Instead, the banner on its blog boldly pro-

claims: "We make electronic music in the Hudson Valley."

And the most provocative verbiage that you'll find regarding the purpose of Earwaker is the name itself: its implication that our ears are asleep or heavily doped, and that they might benefit from some concerted, purgative listening in an intimate environment. Not exactly inflammatory.

So I guess that if I were looking for someone to orchestrate the violent overthrow of my tastes, I've come to the wrong place. This absence of the revolutionary ruse suits me fine, though. The *avant-garde* is not so *avant* anymore, and maybe never actually did throw culture on its ear so much as claim to, in the stock, hyperbolic terms of its era. But the calling of the *avant-garde* is evergreen — a necessary corrective in every age.

There is a quiet assurance of purpose to Lukomski's music. Apart from being quite lovely on its own terms, it is very much culturally active in the way that we expect radical art to be. Its function is to dislodge and flush the habitual from the ears of the willing listener, heightening our basic sensitivities to pure sound and pattern.

The first lesson of this electronic music is that a sound is a concrete object. Our expectations of music often preempt the direct experience of sound. We hear what we expect to hear. Many of Lukomski's pieces — especially his less pulse- and pattern-driven soundscapes, like the transportive *Tunnel/Bridge/Tunnel* (2011) or *Like a Moth to a Flame* (2008) — seem to exist in space more than in time. Lukomski is clearly an expert sound designer/programmer and shaper of the stereo field. The discrete sounds in these pieces come at you like 3-D objects; you almost feel as if you could pluck them from the air and examine them in the palm of your hand.

Lukomski is fascinated by pattern and pattern manipulation, as composers in his genres have always been. An early specimen of his pattern-oriented work, *Alles Klar* (1994), could be described as New Age funk. Fast-forward to *Boys* (2005) and Lukomski has really begun to explore pattern drift and the ways in which each added element redefines the focus and alters the context. Still, this is a composition that is always on the verge of breaking into a club beat or a pop song, which occasions the question: What is the difference between

academic, grant-hungry electronic music and the umbrella genre "electronica" that has been ruling dance floors for what seems like about 150 years now? The short answer is about 75 BPM. The long answer is: too long.

The kinds of experimental compositional moves that used to require razor blades, alternative scoring systems and Fibonacci algorithms are now so easy via sample manipulation and sequencing that they must make the old-school *avant-gardist* feel a little put out. Lukomski, who clearly has some old-school radical training, embraces the new tool, big time; for, among other things, they uniquely enable one of the holiest of the *avant-garde's* grails: indeterminacy.

Indeterminacy describes the ways in which composers attempt to shake free of their own compositional intentions and centuries of inherited expressive gesture, to reconceive music as an organic process that follows a will of its own. The composer initiates the process and may or may not choose to guide its progress; but in some way or other, indeterminacy is introduced: an element of wildness and spontaneous design. Music technology — specifically the deft use of MIDI sequencing — is what enables Lukomski to "let music happen" in some of his pieces and performances.

Isn't it funny that of all the affronts to tradition that the *avant-garde* intended, this one is perhaps the most genuinely offensive to people: that a "composer" might be something other than an all-controlling genius and commander, and that "Anyone could do it"? To which the most preposterous composer of them all, John Cage, replied, "They could, but they don't."

But if all this sounds too abstract for your tastes, Lukomski has one last surprise in store: He is a truly wonderful singer. Songs like "For Parts Unknown" evoke the art song of British songwriter Robert Wyatt; only Lukomski is more pure of voice. The musical setting remains abstract and uncompromising, offering none of the gratifying resolutions and emotive gestures that might make an average listener feel more at home. But there is an undeniable, soaring, alien beauty to the piece. And this should remind us that, in spite of its reformer's agenda, experimental music is no less likely to have a heart than any other kind of music. You just have to change yourself a little to find it.

Learn more about Bob Lukomski, Earwaker and Coterminous Collectiv at [www.boblukomski.net](http://www.boblukomski.net), <http://soundcloud.com/bob-lukomski>, [www.facebook.com/earwaker.chapel](http://www.facebook.com/earwaker.chapel) and <http://blog.ccollectiv.com>. Coterminous Collectiv will be performing at the Lounge at Backstage Studio Productions in Kingston on Thursday, May 24.

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