

C BILL COLVIG

I WROTE a series of articles for *Op* which were about lesser known performers, periods, or styles in traditional American music. I also wrote a series of articles on avant-garde American composers, and here I had much the same thing in mind. It occurred to me that virtually right under my nose here in Oakland worked one of the finest examples of what I had been talking about — instrument designer and builder, theorist, performer, teacher, and world traveller Bill Colvig.

Bill is a quiet musician, and because he has been so closely associated with fellow composer and instrument builder Lou Harrison for nearly 20 years, he has not gotten the individual attention he rightly deserves. Much more importantly, his work has not been adequately documented, even though it is of considerable scope, invention, and magnitude. Colvig is a versatile musician, a capable and exciting performer of Indonesian, Chinese, and western musics, and he has been involved in cross-cultural performance for some 30 years. He is principally responsible for actually building some of the first gamelans in America (perhaps only preceded by Dennis Murphy on the east coast), and is still at it. In addition, he is one of the few westerners who can actually tune Indonesian built gamelans, and is often flown halfway across the world to do so. Several universities and individuals in this country have Colvig-Harrison gamelans, most notably Gamelan Si Betty at San Jose State and the largest, Gamelan Si Darius/Si Madelaine, at Mills College. These were all designed by Harrison and Colvig, but constructed mostly by Colvig, usually with students under his instruction. Other important builders, like Dan Schmidt of Berkeley, emerged from his tutelage.

Colvig's designs, tuning systems, methods, and building techniques have not been preserved in writing until now. Several students at Mills College have compiled a detailed "book" documenting the design and dimension of the Si Darius/Si Madelaine gamelan at Mills (named after Milhaud and his wife). This gamelan, like the previous Si Betty (after Betty Freeman) at San Jose State, is principally aluminum, in a complex system of just intonation. It has some radical and interesting features, such as an extended pitch range and the use of what Colvig and Harrison term "slab gongs" — large aluminum slabs with resonators that sound as beautiful tuned low gongs. Amazingly, he and Harrison are well known in Java as well for their aluminum design and tuning systems, which allegedly have surprised and delighted Javanese musicians and gamelan builders.

It would be a useful and interesting task for a student or scholar to compile the work already done by Colvig, and this is especially important now that so much excellent scholarship and writing has been done on the long neglected works of Lou Harrison. With the advent of small, independent and specialized journals like Jody Diamond's *Balungan* (see "Reading Matters") and Bart Hopkins' new journal of experimental instrument construction (POB 423, Pt. Reyes Station, Pt. Reyes, CA 94956; first issue forthcoming), it is hoped that more and more of Colvig's work and ideas may be made available, and that his importance to the experimental music tradition will be more and more appreciated. ■

L a r r y P o l a n s k y



William Colvig

Jody Diamond

COMPOSED of members of the now-defunct This Heat, who were perhaps more innovative than any Euroband in the past few years, here is the Camberwell Now. Their music is exciting, driving, and intense. It includes powerful drumming from Charles Hayward (ex-Soft Machine), virtuosic bass playing by Traver Goronwy, and cassette tapes, brilliantly used by Stephen Rickard, with sometimes two or three tape decks playing at once. The bass, which is played more like a guitar, and Hayward's drums set up rhythmically seductive patterns that evolve into exciting, powerful grooves. Cassettes and electronics blend with patches of sound, almost like color, as the "melody". It forms an overall picture that is guaranteed to please.

In performance Hayward pounds his drums in precise metronomic bursts, while some sort of industrial sound transforms into a dying scream. The accompaniment dies away. Suddenly, they're back in a slower rhythm completely different than the last. Hayward sings with strange vocal accompaniment by Goronwy. The music is truly unpredictable. It maintains rock form with strong grooves, and thereby does not allow itself to drift into aimless noise. With each song the power of this three piece grows to the point of astonishment.

The tapes are an interesting part of the group. Unheard-of sounds, low industrial tones, birds, and several different TV shows cut up to make an entire sentence of nonsense. Watching Rickard grabbing tapes and working his many cassette players and other electronic devices is really something. The tape as the melodic line of a song works remarkably well. It can bring the dynamics up, or together with the other instruments, it can reach an unbelievable point of climax, not necessarily loud, but incredibly gripping.

In their closing song, "Ghost Trade," they metrically mix up the same melodic material by slowing down and then repeating a bit faster, then slower etc., accompanied with tape that sounds like floating angels and bells that remain in a constant meter, resulting in an astonishing interplay with the rhythmic swirl.

This is a very fine group. They have a record out, *Meridian*, which is quite relaxed and more conceptual than any performance. There are, for example, songs about travelling the sea (kind of reminds me of Joseph Conrad stories), but it really does not do justice to what they're capable of musically. Soon they will release a new record with material such as I've described. By all means keep your eyes and ears open for the Camberwell Now.

Contact: Duplicate Records, 583 Wandsworth Rd., London SW8, UK. ■