

**"If we can make it we can print it
and if we can print it we can give it away":
experimental independent music publishing in the United States**

or

Beyond Imprimatur

imprimatur 1. Official approval or licence to print or publish, especially under conditions of censorship. 2. Official sanction; authorization. [New Latin, let it be printed, from Latin, *imprimere*, to print.] (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*)

Jody Diamond and Larry Polansky
Frog Peak Music/American Gamelan Institute
Box 5036, Hanover NH 03755-5036
tel/fax(603) 448-8837
email: Larry.Polansky@mac.dartmouth.edu

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Selected quotes by and about American experimental independent music publishers

Altho' this composition hath cost me much time and pains; yet I little thought of exposing it to public view: But being repeatedly importuned by my friends, I was at last prevailed upon to commit it to the press... Perhaps there may appear in the eyes of the accurate much incorrectness that I was not able to discern; therefore I would beg the critic to be tender, and rectify those errors which through inexperience may happen to have escaped the notice of a youth, in the course of so large a volume.

—William Billings

from Billings's "preface" to the *New England Psalm Singer*

Oh! how did my foolish heart throb and beat with tumultuous joy! With what impatience did I wait on the Book-Binder, while stitching the sheets and putting on the covers, with what extacy, did I snatch the yet unfinished Book out of his hands, and pressing it to my bosom, with rapturous delight, how lavish was I, in encomiums on this infant production of my own Numb-Skull? Welcome; thrice welcome; thou legitimate offspring of my brain, go forth my little Book, go forth and immortalize the name of your Author; may your sale be rapid and may you speedily run through ten thousand editions, may you be a weclome guest in all companies and what will add tenfold to thy dignity, may you find your way into the Libraries of the Learned.

—William Billings

from the introduction to *The Singing Master's Assistant*, referring to the publication of the *New England Psalm Singer* eight years earlier

It would be difficult to find another single publication in the history of American music—in the history of western music, for that matter—whose priority in its tradition is more conspicuous than that of Billings' collection [*New England Psalm Singer*]. . . . [It] was the first published compilation of entirely American music; moreover, it was the first tunebook produced by a single American composer.

—Richard Crawford and David McKay

from *William Billings of Boston*, Princeton University Press, 1975

The Wa-Wan Press never paid us anything except as we could draw upon it a little. I called it my 'wife,' as I had mostly to support it which I did by my lectures.

[Concerning the impossibility of getting his own works, often based on Native American materials, published:]

. . . such a state of affairs made it intolerable for a composer in this country. . . . I was just plain mad, and I vowed I would change the United States in this respect. I was just not willing to live in a country that would not accept my calling.

— Arthur Farwell

from Evelyn Davis Culbertson, "Arthur Farwell's Early Efforts on Behalf of American Music, 1889–1921." *American Music*, Vol. 5, Number 2, Summer 1987

Some have written a book for money: I have not. Some for fame; I have not. Some for love; I have not. Some for kindlings; I have not. I have not written a book for any of these reasons or for all of them together. In fact, gentle borrower, I have not written a book at all—I have merely cleaned house. All that is left is out on the clothes line,—but it's good for a man's vanity to have the neighbors see him—on the clothes line.

The printing of this collection was undertaken primarily in order to have a few clear copies that could be sent to friends who, from time to time, have been interested enough to ask for copies of some of the songs; but the job has grown into something different—it contains plenty of songs which have not been and will not be asked for. It stands now, if it stands for anything, as a kind of 'buffer state,' —an opportunity for evading a question, somewhat embarrassing to answer,—“Why do you write so much—, which no one ever sees?” There are several good reasons, none of which are worth recording.

— Charles Ives
from *114 Songs*, AMP/Peer/Presser Edition, 1975

[Cowell's *New Music Editions* is] a circulating music magazine via a library of unsaleable scores.

— Charles Ives
from Rita Mead, “The Amazing Mr. Cowell,” *American Music*, Vol. 1 #4, Winter 1983

All I have to say, finally, is that I think it is time for a new revolution in American music. And I wait for those, younger than me, who will carry it out. Who can predict the nature of this revolution which has yet to come?

— Peter Garland
from *In Search of Silvestre Revueltas*, Soundings Press 1991

Lingua [Press] is part of a growing movement to restore and to further the values we speak of. Certainly there are those, such as yourself, who know they need to participate more fully, and actively.

There's so much urgency and so much to do. Lingua's absence of customary editorial and rigid deadline policies, . . . policies which I consider to be serious acts of censorship against the creative act. . . , sometimes drive people nuts.

[On publishing as eco-system:]

The creative act consists not only in the stipulation and formation of concrete structures, but in responsible maintenance of them. Furthermore, such structures demand of us the necessity to create and maintain environmental systems within which they can function properly.

— Kenneth Gaburo
from *Collaboration Two: David Dunn and Kenneth Gaburo, Publishing as Eco-System*,
Lingua Press 1983

"If you want to see, learn how to act"

— Heinz Von Foerster

Abstract

This talk presents some of the philosophies, politics, histories and motivations for experimental independent music publishing in the United States, especially in the present. Specifically, we will discuss the motivations, mechanisms and technologies used in our own publishing collective, Frog Peak Music, and discuss some of the ways that organization has evolved the concepts of publishing and distribution of experimental music.

Opening Statement

some goals of this talk

Frog Peak Music

the advocacy of pluralism: anyone can and should do it

the main rule: no rules

the avoidance of distinctions between different media and between different publishing technologies

principle of the collective

the economics of a small, artist-based collective

Towards a definition of American experimental independent publishing

why do it?

the importance of pluralism in approaches to publication and distribution

the organization is itself a creative and experimental act

parallel activities in other arts

the prevalence of independent publishing

Historical examples of American experimental independent music publishing

William Billings' *New England Psalm Singer*

Arthur Farwell's Wa-Wan Press

Henry Cowell's *New Music Editions*

Charles Ives' *114 Songs*

Peter Garland's Soundings Press

Kenneth Gaburo's Lingua Press

Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective)

Philosophies and aesthetics of experimental independent publishing

"imprimatur"

important and honorable to do it yourself!

hands-off editorial policy

artist as publisher/publisher as artist

establishing a "home" for important work

Technologies of experimental independent publishing

what makes it possible?

the relationship of experimental publishing to new technologies: control over "look and feel"

appropriate technologies and the revolution in technological availability

the high technologies of yesterday become the consumer technologies of today

Politics of experimental independent publishing

avoidance of hierarchical models
independence from institutions
beyond "imprimatur"
pro-active artist work
avoiding capitalism
intellectual property and experimental publishing ideas

Problems of independent publishing

economics
distribution
pace of work
advertising
artists working with and for artists
the growth problem: how to stay small and survive
the "burnout factor"

Experimental independent publishing and you: the music librarian's dilemma

how to evaluate experimental, unconventional work and formats
avoiding stylistic biases in the acquisition of holdings
who's in charge?: pro-active librarianship

Appendix:

An informal list of selected experimental independent music publishing resources

This annotated list presents some suggestions for including smaller, important independent experimental publications in Music Library collections. Admittedly, it is primarily drawn from our own bookshelf, and makes no pretense of being complete. This kind of publication sometimes has a relatively short lifespan and it would be impossible to document all that have existed. We list only U.S. publications—with an exception or two from Canada—not out of any chauvinism, but as a way of limiting the list and in correspondence with the talk itself.

We hope librarians can use these publications as examples of ways to begin increasing their collections, and as “pointers” to many other worthwhile items. This list, and our talk, were motivated by Stephen Moore’s excellent and poignant question on electronic mail: “Where do we get some of this stuff?”

For reasons of conciseness, and not stylistic distinctions or aesthetic judgements, this list does *not* include:

- independent recording enterprises—like *What’s Next/Ariel*, *Artifact*, *Tellus*, and many others (which should be the subject of another talk).
- publications more closely associated with experimental rock forms, like the brilliant publication *Forced Exposure*, and others (or the list would be overwhelming).
- more established or institutionally sponsored publications (like *Perspectives of New Music*, *OPTion*, *Leonardo*, *Leonardo Music Journal*, and so on), because they are more generally well-known and available.

1/1: The Journal of the Just Intonation Network. Edited by David Doty and published by Henry Rosenthal. 535 Stevenson St., San Francisco, CA 94103. Devoted to just intonation in all its forms, and includes the work of a great many important composers and theorists. Published since the early 1980’s.

American Gamelan Institute. Directed by Jody Diamond. Box 5036, Hanover, NH 03755. Distributes a wide variety of materials (print, recordings, audio-visual), including materials in Indonesian from STSI Surakarta, a national arts college in Central Java. Publishes the journal *Balungan*, covering all forms of gamelan, Indonesian performing arts and their international counterparts.

Burning Books Press. Directed by Melody Sumner and Michael Sumner. An important experimental literary and musical organization that concentrates on sound and text, specifically in the works of important west coast artists. Available through *Small Press Distribution*.

dreamtime talkingmail. Edited and produced by Xexoxial Endarchy (Miekal And & Elizabeth Was). Rt 1, Box 131, LaFarge, WI 54369. This incredibly interesting publication by XE, founders of the Dreamtime Village, should be required reading for the next millenium. And & Was integrate permaculture, gourds, electronic music, agrimedia and utopian arts community into an art/life form which spans publication, cassette networking, mail art, and other visionary technologies into a single philosophy which is both radical and inspiring.

Ear Magazine. With its publication recently halted, a complete set of this “main organ” of the New York underground music scene is an important resource for any music library. Less well known is the preceding journal *Ear West*, begun by Charles Shere, of which only a few copies are still extant.

Electronic Cottage. Published and edited by Hal McGee. Box 3637, Apollo Beach, FL 33572. One of the more reliable and interesting chronicles of underground cassette culture, especially experimental electronic music.

- Experimental Musical Instruments.** Published and edited by Bart Hopkin. Box 784. Nicasio, CA 94946. *EMI* has become a central and vital publication for experimental instrumental builders of all types. It is, along with *1/1*, an absolutely essential reference for the activities of what might be called the "post-Partch" generation.
- FactSheet Five.** Published by Mike Gunderloy. It has halted publication, but there are rumours of its revival under a new editor. *FF* could be called the "mother of all fanzines," and, along with *OP*, it perhaps represents the pinnacle of publishing about experimental art in an experimental way. There were not many issues, but each was encyclopedic and jam-packed with the joy of the odd. A complete set should be in every library.
- Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective).** Directed by Larry Polansky. Box 5036. Hanover, NH 03755. Publishes books on speculative music theory, new scores and recordings, and innovative music software. Distributes artist-produced works in several media.
- furnitures.** Published and edited by Mark Andrew Nowak. 227 Montrose Place, Apt. C. St. Paul, MN 55104. A diminutive and elegant publication about sound and text-sound, with its own distinctive voice.
- Interval: Journal of Music Research and Development.** Edited and published by Jonathan Glasier. Published in the 1970's through the late 1980's, this eclectic journal represented the experimental intonation and instrument building efforts of a great many visionary and highly experimental American artists.
- Lingua Press.** Kenneth Gaburo's nearly lifelong publishing project, which will have an important place in the history of 20th century experimental music. With Gaburo's recent sad passing, the future of *Lingua* is undetermined, but its many beautiful scores and books (of which the collection of writings *ALLOS* is probably the best representative) should be in all music libraries.
- Musicworks.** Edited by Gayle Young and Lauren Pratt. Published by the Music Gallery, 1087 Queen St West, Toronto, Ontario. Canada M6J 1H3. One of the most important journals of experimental music and arts in the world, *Musicworks* fills an especially important gap now that *Ear* is defunct. *Musicworks* is a venerable publication almost twenty years old, and it has never lost its fundamentally experimental character or high quality. Includes a CD or cassette with each issue.
- News of Music.** Currently edited by Penelope Hyde, and published by Music Program Zero, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Not just a student publication, *NOM* has established itself by its longevity and list of contributors as one of the more interesting journals of experimental music and ideas. (This may be available free of charge).
- OP.** Edited and published by John Foster's *Lost Music Network* (hence LMN:OP), *OP* is the legendary progenitor of the magazines *Option* and *Soundchoice*. Dedicated to alternative and experimental music of all kinds, Foster decided to publish only 26 alphabetically-themed issues (A-Z), and then stop. No one really thought he was serious, considering the publication's tremendous importance in the experimental music community, but he was. *OP* set the style and integrity standard for many other experimental publications, and offered an unusual and artistically hospitable forum for many interesting writers. *OP*'s catholic reviewing policy engendered a major revolution in publications about experimental music, and facilitated the democratization of the cassette culture. Complete sets are something of a rarity, but many back issues can still be obtained (see ads in *Option*). In our opinion, *OP* will have a crucial place in the history of documentation of experimental music in the 1970's and 1980's.
- Pieces.** Edited and published by Michael Byron. Only three volumes published, begun as a kind of companion to *Soundings*. Contains some of the most important scores of American experimental music. We don't know any way to obtain them other than by luck.
- RollMag.** Written and published by Kenneth Maue. Box 5001, Mill Valley, CA. 94942. Perhaps the smallest publication on this list, a good example of an interesting and visionary artist "doing it

himself." Maue's insights are always extraordinary, and *Rollmag* is one of our favorite publications. As an example of Maue's writing, see his wonderful obituary for John Cage in the *Rollmag* published in Fall, 1992 ("What John Cage Did", there are no dates or volume numbers for *RM*). It seems to be free, and distributed by a kind of artist-to-artist mail system.

The Soundscape Newsletter. Edited by Hildegard Westerkamp. World Soundscape Project, Department of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada V5A 1S6. This publication is an outgrowth of R. Murray Schafer's pioneering ideas in the co-evolution of technology and the sonic environment.

Soundings Press. Peter Garland's effort of more than twenty years: over twenty volumes of scores, writings, and other materials. *Soundings* is certainly one of the most important publications of 20th century experimental music. Peter has recently suspended publication to concentrate more on his own composing. Several *Soundings* issues are out of print, but most are available through *Frog Peak Music* (until they run out).

Source. Edited by Larry Austin. One of the major publications documenting the activity of the musical avant-garde of the 1960's and early 1970's. Long out of print, but a few complete sets are still available through Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening Catalog*.

Xenharmonikon. Published and edited by John Chalmers (with a few issues published by Daniel J. Wolfe). *XH* has existed for over twenty years, and has been an important example of a non-institutionally-based publication of speculative theory. Chalmers is a research geneticist and tuning guru who publishes *XH* as a labor of love. It has been a consistent and sympathetic home for the writings of important but non-academic theorists like Ervin Wilson, Ivor Darreg, David Feldman and others, and has also included scores by many of the more interesting composers dealing with experimental intonations. It is now distributed by *Frog Peak Music*.