

CRAWLING WITH TARTS

MICHAEL GENDREAU AND SUZANNE DYCUS HAVE BEEN WORKING UNDER THE NAME CRAWLING WITH TARTS SINCE 1983. THEY HAVE RELEASED MUSICAL WORK ON CASSETTE AND VINYL AND HAVE APPEARED ON SEVERAL COMPILATIONS. IN 1991 THEY RELEASED A VIDEO COLLECTION WHICH INCLUDED THEIR WORKS MADE WITH VIDEO, 8MM FILM, AND WITH THE PXL2000 CAMERA. THEIR MUSICAL WORK RANGES FROM STRUCTURED COMPOSITION TO FREE IMPROVISATION, AND THEIR OUTPUT DOCUMENTS A VARIED APPROACH TO MUSIC AS WELL AS HIGHLIGHTING COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS WHICH HAVE SPANNED THE YEARS AND THE GLOBE.



ND: Give a basic history of how CWT all started, and being involved with cassettes and all?

Michael Gendreau: I'll start with the second part of your question, which will include information on the first. Cassettes are only one media we work in, but because of the simplicity of mass distribution of that media (and other reasons,) we are best known for releasing sound on cassette. I first became involved with Suzanne after joining a band that she played bass guitar in during 1982, partially because of the band's poster art representations that she designed. Our first work together in a material medium, other than performance, was postering. Right after that we started a magazine, *Youths Go Camping*, of which we published six issues, the fifth including a cassette entitled *Crawling With Tarts*. The first band broke up, and "Crawling With Tarts" has become a cover for any sound work we do together. Consequently, we have worked mostly on cassette, for economic and convenience reasons, but also lots more in visual art forms (especially Suzanne;) film, video, and bits of vinyl and digital formats.

In the beginning, and to some extent now, we were isolationists. Cassettes or any media (re)producible at home allows us to concentrate, to work with a particular quality. We have become less isolated, and are seeking outside sources to help distribute our work; people have been willing to help us without compromising us or themselves. Being out here - being accessible - has made us more political and I have become more interested in social theory, propaganda, etc. But there is a cost; it wastes energy that I would like to use for other things. It could be said to represent a dichotomy between two functions of art: "pure" (referring only to musical tradition—which is less interesting to us, or non-referential—where we prefer to work from,) or for social suggestion or deconstruction.

Whatever the use, the thing that keeps me from nihilism is a love of exploration, allowing manias, rational or irrational connections that develop into new forms, new ideas, unimpeded thought and action. I am not just talking about art, but of *life*. The idea that everything that has been done is short-sighted, on the level of the advertising tactic that states that if you put one image in as many places as possible, people will buy it because

their subconscious demands it (it *does* work.) That idea presupposes receptors with no thinking faculties. But you asked about cassettes. If the ads did not work, they would not be there. So it is dependent on the viewer. The fact that there are media monopolies getting rich off of base campaigns tells more about the quality of their supporters, the viewers, consumers, and corporate sponsors; they almost legitimize it. But the various "underground" cultures change faster, because of the, generally speaking, better discrimination of its viewers. Perhaps we saw this in "cassette culture" where in the late Eighties a glut of similarity appears to have caused a decline in activity. At least I have seen a decline and the lack of originality often found is one of the reasons for my own disinterest.

ND: What is the working relationship and process like when working on musical material?

Suzanne Dycus: [For example,] today we are working on a piece for the two of us to perform. Recently we have been developing "play along with music" using auto-manual 33-45-78 RPM record players to assist us. We have a collection of 78s which we began on our first trip to London when I found our first 78 player on Portobello Road in 1986. We carried it around with us for the rest of our trip; I went to Europe precisely for the reason of finding one, and a tea set. We play more than one 78 at a time, records having the same or different feeling, and add percussion and other sounds along with them to create the atmosphere. In the end, everything falls into place by the spontaneity of the event. To begin the present creation, we went to a 78 store and dug through boxes, came home and then played them for each other in various combinations. This discriminatory placement is the beginning. Next we will listen to what they say and play other instruments with them. This is how we will build our symphony. The things are there, they just need to be defined.

N D: How does the video and film work tie in?

Dycus: The videos and films were established because we had moving visual ideas that needed to be demonstrated. In 1989 we bought a PXL camera. I have some ideas I am presently working on. I am making a film about a friend called *The Mambo King*; I am now editing it and we are working on the music for it. We don't have a lot of editing equipment so it has to be well planned and conceived beforehand so we can get what we want from it in the end.

N D: What is a CWT show like?

Gendreau: There are many different kinds; our shows have the same variety of styles as our recorded musical output. We always take the performance environment—space, mood, size, other performers, time of day, plus our own ever changing manias into consideration. I will briefly describe some recent ones. There are two basic situations we get into; shows where we perform one short piece that features several performers, a situation we get into increasingly as our music becomes acceptable in contemporary classical music circles, and whole shows where we function as a "band" (and sometimes a group of composers,) usually performed at bars, galleries, or rock clubs.

We often have other persons performing with us, and there are several different reasons and situations for this. Sometimes we want to perform music that requires more musicians to realize, so we will supplement our duo. We choose to work with them because they will have similar or flexible musical sensibilities, and usually the ability to play different styles and instruments, not necessarily (but, yes, sometimes) in a virtuosic manner. They share our love of composition and assemblage with pure sound, sounds not anchored to traditional hierarchies, and especially, musical forms not based on pure music. Our formal ideas, and this is especially true of the performance pieces because of their direct transmission to the outside, are ideally based on the reality we perceive around us, not on an abstract closed tradition.

I'll give one short piece description, of a piece called *Dangling*, performed at the Mills College Concert Hall in Oakland (March 2, 1991). This was created, for one reason, as a response to the conservatism of "new music," a term I dislike anyway. In the middle of the concert, all lights are suddenly turned off. A 8' high x 2' diameter cylinder is centered on stage with a flood light inside at its bottom projecting upwards only, towards the ceiling. Suzanne is operating a motor shaft driving wire strings amplified by contact mics, and there are two similar, but self-driven units located elsewhere in the concert hall. An object begins coming down from the 25' ceiling: a chopped-up but functional electric guitar, its signal wire connected to the PA system. The guitar stops in the center of the space. An electric knife motor then lowers down to the guitar to play its strings. The guitar is then raised back up close to the ceiling, and the support wire cut, but not the signal wire so that it is amplified as it crashes into a metal plate inside the cylinder: End as the noise dies out. In the end it is an abstract piece; I don't know if

it responds to the more concrete idea it was inspired by (conservatism), but it was unexpected and unlike the other music presented at the concert, in the very least because of its dramatic and visual nature.

When we perform an entire show, it usually has one of two formats: one or several precomposed pieces, or improvised according to a preset or no preset structure. One of the precomposed pieces we performed recently was *Sarajevo Center Metal Doors*, a piece with 17 sections of full color graphic and traditional notation that takes about 40 minutes to enact. It is written for a quartet who are given only specific density, timing, and loudness cues, and formal and stylistic indications. Instrument, pitch, and rhythm are not given and are therefore chosen by the performer during the performance. An important part of this composition is the selection of the musicians who will play it. It requires musicians who are careful improvisors who can also read notation effectively, can bring a wide range of instrumental timbres to the music, and who work well as a group (i.e., listen).

We recently produced *1-8 Ideomotors* ("*Ideomotor: (1867) Not reflex, but resulting from the impingement of ideas on a system*") both in Oakland, and in Cleveland for the Sonic Disturbances Festival. *1-8 Ideomotors* is scored for 24 specific sounds divided into trios (3 performers perform 8 each) plus two sounds common to all performers and a unique finale written by Suzanne. I invented the form which is quite strict, but allows some variation of order in the second section as well as free motive (trio) length. The form specifically is: exposition of 8 trios in succession, free trio order section, sawblade trio, short free trio order section, window weight trio, exposition of 8 trios in succession, finale. The piece is about 20 minutes long and is performed with other pieces, such as *Motors*.

All sounds in *Motors*, except the shortwave radio, are generated using small 120 volt AC electric motors. Shafts fixed to the motors are turned against various metals and strings. The form of *Motors* is ruled spontaneously in performance using a game board and deck of cards that specify certain musical parameters and activities; it usually takes 10 to 30 minutes to perform.

In a singularly different performance-collaboration situation, we have been working at various intervals since about 1986 with Cliff Neighbors. Our performance work with him has always been as a trio in all respects. We usually tend to work out the music to perform or record with him improvisationally. We work out many pieces ahead of time, which we recreate live. At times, the style subtly refers to "rock" music, as in our recent *Lug Music* show. So we will have entire concerts of songs worked out from sample sets with guitar, bass, drum set, home made instruments, reeds, other percussion, and electronic processing; and songs worked out from noisy G-B-D trios which we then add samples and tapes over and between in the place of vocals. Despite what may be considered classicist tendencies, we have always been fans and perpetrators of base noise.



ND: *Could you talk some about the instruments you use and also about any that the group has built for itself?*

Gendreau: Both of us consider ourselves to be able to use any instrument with some functionality. That idea is consistent with our usual working method that puts tonal combination over virtuosity – if we need a certain sound we get it, and we can usually get what we want in a finite number of attempts. Also, we consider anything to be an instrument. We have favorite pieces of metal, for example, that we treasure and can be heard on recordings spanning our entire history. We have hundreds of this type of “found” instrument, which range from the very versatile, producing many different sounds and agreeable to or even suggesting extended playing techniques, to the things that only make one good sound. We use both AC and DC electric motors quite a lot, as tools for extracting sound from other objects and as sound producers in themselves. We have mostly homemade electronic instruments and a general distaste for commercial quality pre-programmed and inflexible electronics, although we have a few of those too. We’ve used computers in the last few years, sometimes running software I have written and sometimes not. And we have a lot of normal instruments, percussion, winds, strings, record players, and the like.

We have built or found most of the instruments we have. This includes both combining the different types of instruments listed above to make new ones, and building them from scratch in all flavors: acoustic, electric, and electronic. I can’t say why I (or we) started working this way, because it goes back all the way to my earliest memories of music-making. I wasn’t given “real” instruments until I was 11. Now it is more a matter of necessity (primarily aesthetic).

Dycus: My most recent instrument is a *Bonko*. I saw it in a film in Lisbon and then came home and made one right away. In our most recent performance I sang through it while I plucked at the sawblades. I also like the sound of broken china: spilling it out, stepping on it with my shoes. My favorite instrument would be a cello, and if I ever get a chance to have one I would treasure it immensely and make many pieces with it.

ND: *What are your present and future recording projects?*

Gendreau: We are working on an LP of operas made mostly with turntables and 78 rpm records which I expect to be out by the time this published. I am also remixing and mastering a set of songs for an upcoming CD release. We have two other CD projects that are finished, and will be out as soon as we or someone else can get them out. One of them is a mixture of different styles of music and the other contains 3 performance pieces (*Motors*, *1-8 Ideomotors*, and *Sarajevo Center Metal Doors*, described above). We will eventually put out a second video tape with several new abstract films and films of CWT performance pieces. Most of them are finished; it is just a matter of collecting them. I have been saving up instrumental and electronic pieces that I have written in a different style than what we usually call CWT music (they are based more concretely on physical, psychophysical, and social concepts), that will be released some day, when there are enough good ones.

ND: *You both have been involved with music and working as *Crawling With Tarts* for several years now. What has kept you both interested in it all?*

Gendreau: It is a project that we retain complete flexibility with, in ideological and material terms.

ND: *Looking back at your history of work, how do you feel about it now, and what directions do you see it going in the future?*

Gendreau: I like the music we made in the past quite a lot, but I have to prepare myself before listening to it because, for me, there are images, environments, feelings, and ideas that still arise with it, so I can’t listen casually. I only regret poor recording quality – sometimes. But when I think about it, the past and future feel like a set of points in statistical variation around the present, so the distinction is elusive. Naturally, I can’t tell when I started to feel like this.

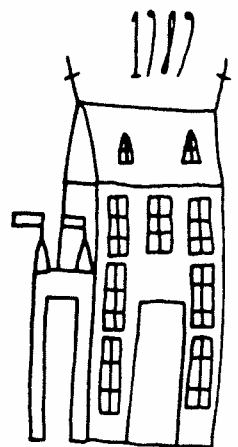
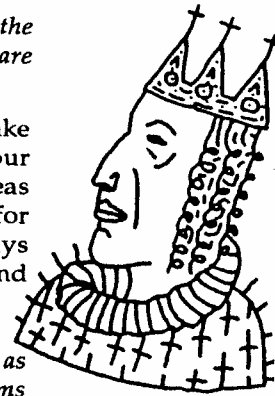
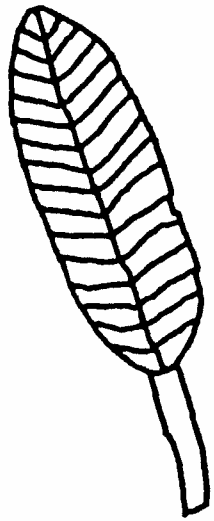
Dycus: I see us continuing to make all different types of music and mixing it all up, and combining it; continuing experiments with machines. I think we will travel to do more performances. I am fascinated by the idea of putting my broken china, palm fronds, odd tart molds, and bean shakers in a suitcase and travelling far away to perform.

ND: *Could you also talk briefly about some of the other projects and work which you both are involved with now?*

Dycus: We have many other projects. I make paper collage pieces; they are a lot like our music in the way things are combined; ideas are presented for the viewer to decide for themselves the meaning. Michael plays drums with lots of people and groups, and has scientific projects.

ND: *With the music you are both composing as *Crawling With Tarts*, which at times seems formal and other times more underground, do you feel you fit in two camps; such as the more academic side of music or the more experimental side? How do you feel about this in general?*

Gendreau: Yes, I do think we make music that might be said to belong in both camps, and out of them, and all camps. Speaking in general about the two styles you mention, there are things I like and dislike about both, so I have always preferred combinations of the two. I like pure primitivism or elementalism (if I can equate “experimentalism” with that) more than I like pure formalism, but what I really like is a primitive sound with a formal structure that is invisible to logical audition. When the sounds we produce approach this state, I feel that they approach the ideal state of finished music. For me, form is everything, if it is filled out with elements containing something undecipherable, but always detectable, a preverbal spark of “beauty,” “truth,” or “reality,” whatever you want to call it. I prefer elements that push away from simple timbres, perfect pitch, and rhythms renderable in standard notation. We tend to



use many kinds of forms, from standard "song" forms to completely singular forms. My basic point is that, what is loosely defined as academicism or formalism may tend to lack an emphasis on the element; what is loosely defined as underground or experimental tends to lack enough emphasis on form.

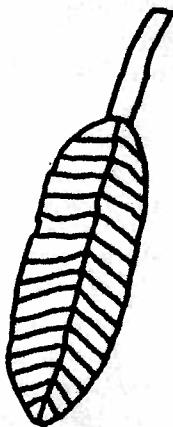
Dycus: It is odd, sometimes I think we don't fit in anywhere. We seem too young to fit into modern academic music and we are perhaps too formal for complete underground. But then again we cross over into different camps because we have flexibility. If asked, we will consider participating anywhere - this is interesting to us. Places that put on underground music shows get shut down for this or that reason, academia is often closed to outsiders or extra risky music, galleries are so overbooked; you are always applying for sometime in the future. It is unfortunate when art or music is not seen or heard in the time for which it is created.

CONTACT

ASP - Crawling With Tarts
Post Office Box 24908
Oakland CA 94623 USA

DISCOGRAPHY (partial)

- "Voccianna" (cassette, ASP)
- "Broom" (cassette, ASP)
- "Bled es Siba" (cassette, A/a)
- "The Tudor Tapes" (cassette, ASP)
- "Candy Tooth Ceylon" (cassette, ASP)
- "813" (videocassette, ASP)
- "Radio 45" (7", ASP)
- "New Caldonia" (cassette, SPH)
- "1 snak, 2 rider" (cassette, IRRE-Tapes)
- "Operas" (LP, ASP)



Summer/Fall releases

CURLEW "The Hardwood" (Cuneiform Rune 47) [Video]
The vibrancy of a live Curlew show is captured on this four camera hi-fi stereo video, recorded live at the Knitting Factory in 1991.

HELDON "Interface" (Rune 43) [CD]

RICHARD PINHAS "Iceland" (Rune 44) [CD]

"Interface" features the classic line-up; Auger, Gauthier, Pinhas. Dense & riveting, "Iceland" combines icy synthetics with melodic passages & bursts of guitar. Both include bonus tracks.

HENRY KAISER "Lemon Fish Tweezer" (Rune 45)

This compilation presents the best of Henry's brilliant solo guitar work, with material from rare tapes, & lots of unreleased music. This is the definitive Henry Kaiser solo disc!

THE MUFFINS "Chronometers" (Cuneiform 55007) [CD]

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MUSICIAN "The Journey" (Cuneiform Rune 42) [CD]

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