

# contact

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**BOB DOWNES OPEN MUSIC: EPISODES AT 4 A.M.**  
Openian BDOM 002 (£2.90 inc. P. and P.)  
Obtainable from Openian Records, 30 Seymour Buildings,  
Seymour Place, London W1

**A TOUCH OF THE SUN: MILK TEETH**  
Bead 1 (£2.20)  
CHAMBERPOT  
Bead 2 (£2.20)  
Obtainable from Bead Records, 28 Chiswick Road, London W4 5RB

**JAN STEELE; JOHN CAGE: VOICES AND INSTRUMENTS**  
Obscure No. 5 (£1.99)  
**MICHAEL NYMAN: DECAY MUSIC**  
Obscure No. 6 (£1.99)  
Distributed by Island Records

#### DAVID ROBERTS

*Episodes at 4 a.m.* was commissioned by the Welsh Dance Theatre in 1974, and is just one in a string of works that Bob Downes has produced for dance companies. The music – characterised by clear, simple, yet strikingly atmospheric ideas – is well-suited to choreography, so much so that one has to question whether the piece stands up on its own. As a whole, I don't think it does; some spots are certainly a bit scanty. On the other hand there are a number of original and effective sections which are predominantly textural and timbral, such as 'Flute Streams' and 'String Percussion', that are quite delightful and sustain repeated hearings. *Episodes at 4 a.m.* is performed by Bob Downes and Wendy Benka on a wide variety of instruments; Downes produced and engineered the record, and it's issued on his own label.

Although it has since expanded, in 1974 at the time of recording *Milk Teeth*, the improvisation ensemble *A Touch of the Sun* was a trio comprising Peter Cusack (electric guitar), Simon Mayo (clarinets) and Shelley Lee (dancer). Since I don't hear any muffled footfalls in the background I think it's safe to say that the recorded ensemble is effectively a duo. Interestingly enough, at times it takes careful listening to convince yourself that there are just two people playing. The complexity of the textures and the rich, full sound they produce are extraordinarily deceptive. What is more, one finds a lively and invigorating interplay between the performers that encompasses plenty of wit and playfulness – it really does sound as if they are enjoying themselves. All in all it adds up to some of the best improvisation that I've come across: and it's improvisation that has something to offer the listeners as well as the performers. One slight drawback of the record is that it has rather a lot of surface noise, though this keeps within tolerable limits.

Simon Mayo also plays with Chamberpot on their eponymous album; the other three members of the group are Philipp Wachsmann (violin), Richard Beswick (oboe/english horn) and Tony Wren (double bass). The style of playing of this larger group is somewhat less frenetic, with perhaps more attention to long-term shape. The record certainly has its moments but it never takes off in the same way as *Milk Teeth*.

Obscure Records continue to do good work and I'm delighted to see that they are beginning to pay some attention to the scandalously-neglected early music of John Cage. Included on Obscure No. 5 are five of his modal pieces dating from before his discovery of the *I-Ching*. Two are instrumental: *Experiences No. 1* (1945-48) for piano duet (Richard Bernas double-tracked) and *In a Landscape* (1948) for piano (Bernas solus). The remaining three are vocal, and here two unconventional but wholly successful choices

of singer were made: Robert Wyatt (ex-Soft Machine etc.) sings *Experiences No. 2* (1945-48, words by e e cummings) and *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942, text taken from *Finnegan's Wake*); Carla Bley (*Escalator over the Hill* etc.) sings *Forever and Sunsmell* (1942, another cummings setting). In all the pieces an uncanny formal balance is coupled with a precision of detail that can only have come about through the application of the greatest care in their construction, scotching all that nonsense about Cage not being a composer. I am hungry for more Cage of this vintage, and certainly hope that Obscure will consider bringing out more in future – some of the prepared piano pieces perhaps?

Coupled with the Cage items are three pieces from Jan Steele, which all arise out of his work with the York-based improvisation group F & W Hat. This was 'directed toward playing a very quiet, repetitive form of improvised rock-based music'. Of the three, the song *All Day*, a setting of one of the Joyce *Chamber Music* lyrics, comes closest to rock. The backing falls straightforwardly into a sophisticated soft-rock category, though the vocal line, modelled on Debussy, is more problematic. I'm not quite sure what effect the composer intended but I find the result curiously disjointed, though there are a lot of good things in the song. I'm not sure how to react, either, to *Distant Saxophones* (not a saxophone to be heard) in which the bass riffs and regular pulse of the percussion seem quite opposed to the whining sustained line of the viola solo. *Rhapsody Spaniel* for piano, four hands, is simpler and more successful. For my money it could have been even simpler still, dropping the contrasting middle section and relying upon the single cunningly-devised ostinato all the way through.

Michael Nyman's album is made up of two longish pieces, *1-100* and *Bell Set No. 1*. Both rely on long-term processes resulting from the working-out of simple material – hence 'decay music'. *1-100* consists simply of four unsynchronised but superimposed performances of 100 quiet, slow-moving tonal chords played on the piano. This produces a very strange effect of suspended animation. The superimposition occasionally results in coherent tonal progressions, sometimes in incoherent ones, with just sufficient balance between the two to keep things interesting. *Bell Set No. 1* is noisier and busier. The process involved here is one of a gradually diminishing density of attacks, i.e. in the score the notes become longer. With this declining activity, more and more of one's attention is focussed upon the timbres of the steady-state sounds of the bells, triangles, gongs, cymbals and tamtams, rather than upon the attacks. Again it's one of those things that looks terribly obvious and dull on paper but must be heard in order to appreciate its subtleties.



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