

THE KITCHEN

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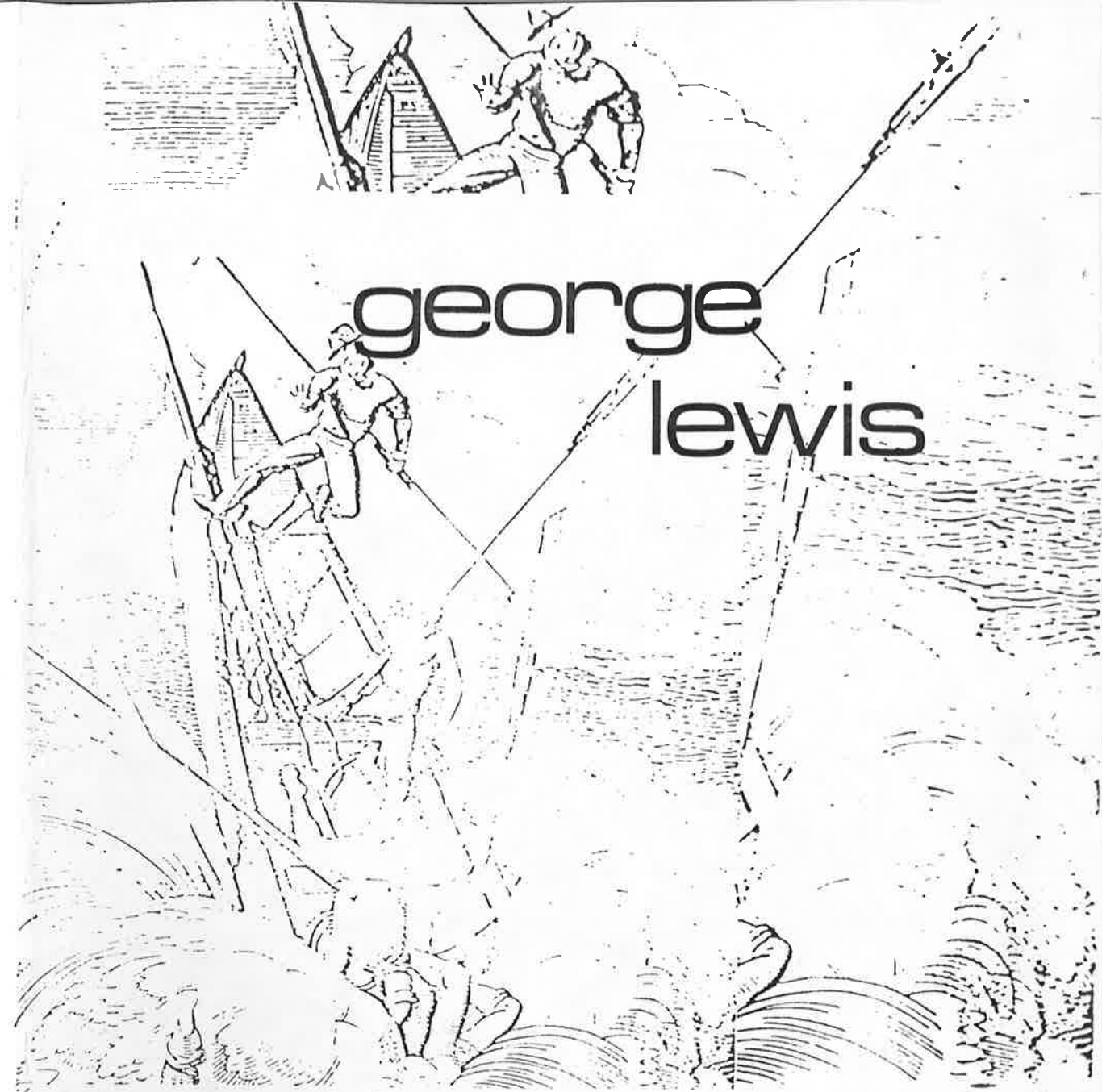
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george
lewis

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR VIDEO · MUSIC · DANCE · PERFORMANCE and FILM

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Reservations: 255-5793

MUSIC... IT'S THE OCEAN

Friday May 1, 1987

Music of George Lewis

Rainbow Family (1984)
J.D. Parran, clarinet

Kalimbascope (1986)
by David Behrman and George Lewis
Fast Forward, kalimba

Rainbow Family (1984)
George Lewis, trombone

Quick Study (1987)
David Behrman, Fast Forward,
George Lewis, J.D. Parran,
performers

A dominant theme in my work is my desire to make palpable during a performance the structural thinking of the improvising performer, and to allow for this kind of thinking at every level of the process of making a work, from the initial conception of a work to its eventual performance. I take the view that music involves, fundamentally and crucially, the recognition and transmission of complexes of symbols: social, cultural, and perhaps even the convenient fiction of the "purely musical"; the use of computers is for me an indispensable means of making this process, which is central to our activity as human beings, a structurally meaningful component of the musical work.

Rainbow Family is a computer program of a kind I like to call a "real-time composing and listening machine." It is a kind of tiny composer, making up themes and varying them, playing with quickly varying textures and timbres, often using silences quite judiciously. Though I am the author of this program, I learned more from performing with it than by programming it, because it is also a tiny listener, taking many of its cues from the performer.

One can't predict exactly what the piece is going to do, but in time a kind of personality emerges from its performance that can be grasped and worked with by an improvising musician. Because of this, I hesitate to use the word "control" to describe the process of interaction with the program, because the only control you have over the machine is its on/off switch. (I don't miss the instrumentally oriented approach to electronic music; I was never very good at it.) Rather the idea here is that the performer has control over his performance and his listening, and the computer should have the same; both are playing by a similar set of rules. In this case, then, a better word might be "influence."

The work's style of play is more suited to some kinds of playing than to others; J.D. Parran is the kind of clarinetist that the piece was made for, and indeed, this is by no means his first performance with it.

The following represents some of my personal notions about a work that David Behrman and I created together:

The kalimba, the African thumb piano that is at the heart of the composition I call "Kalimbascope" (in Paris it's called "Algorithme et Kalimba"; I suppose my rather weak jeu de mot wasn't appreciated in that sober, Boulezian atmosphere) is read by the computer by means of an electronic circuit of my own design which has given both myself and the work's co-author, David Behrman, incredible headaches; it only seems to work in two places: the Musee de la Villette and David Behrman's house. Therefore, I've brought talismans from both places for the performance, if that doesn't work, I may have to call Elegba in to help out with a bit of Yoruba trickery. As some of you are aware, that could get a bit expensive.

The work is in three main parts: first, David's music composition, which is kind of fanfare with an occasional edge of melancholy; what the performer plays on the kalimba is recorded and played back with a short delay, which David calls canonic response.

Second, my music composition, which is another of my RCLMs, and has no theme at all, though it can follow tempi and provides a kind of accompaniment to the kalimba player. Its style of play is somewhat different from the Rainbow series, and is rhythmically more sophisticated, though Rainbow hears better.

Third, the game-like graphics, which I like to think of as real-time Peter Struycken. They are controlled (here the word is appropriate) by the kalimba; the screen colors, movement direction, and movement speed are directly mapped to kalimba actions, and stopping for a moment can "freeze" the graphics in a certain movement complex. They are a bit faster in my music section than in David's; we don't know why.

Fast Forward has plenty of digital dexterity, as I recalled from a wonderful performance he gave in downtown New York some years ago with cricket clickers, an instrument I have a special fondness for. I understand that the kalimba has given him trouble too, so I've brought some clickers as talismans as well.

"Quick Study" is a work in progress, a combination of a composition and (new for me) a performing instrument. The program incorporates one of my more recent RCLMs, and is a kind of slow-motion duo improvisation program; basic, high-level guiding parameters for the machine's performance are typed in by the performers at the keyboard, while the program itself decides upon the lower-level, moment-to-moment details.

Using the set of available commands, the performer can rather quickly specify the kind of sonic complexes desired, constructing music step by step. Tonality, rhythmic flow, tempo, tessitura, transposition, articulation and timbre are all easily and individually specified for each of the eight voices available to the performer. A multi-tasking implementation of the programming language Forth has been used to create the work; multiple windows allow the performer both to play a part and to receive various messages from the other performers about ideas that they might have for directions in the music that is to come. It's brand new, and I hope it works.

About George Lewis:

George Lewis, composer and performer, studied trombone in Chicago with Dean Hey, and theory and composition with Muhal Richard Abrams at the school of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), an organization of which he has been a member since 1971. Mr. Lewis served from 1980 to 1982 as director of the music program at The Kitchen.

Since 1979 Mr. Lewis has been active as a composer working on the construction of "real-time composing and listening machines" (computer programs) that interact with performing musicians in concert. Rainbow Family (1984), one of the most recent pieces, was commissioned by the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM), receiving its first performance there in 1984. The creation of this work is the subject of a video film by Michel Davaud, which has been shown on the French TFl television network.

More recently, Mr. Lewis has been involved in adapting the ideas developed in the construction of these music-making machines to the composition of interactive pieces that can function as public installations. The composition Kalimbascope (1986), created in collaboration with the composer and performer David Behrman, runs every day of the year at the Musee de la Villette in Paris.

In addition to his activities as a composer, Mr. Lewis is active as a performer, most notably as a trombonist in improvised music. He has taken part in performances of the Steve Lacy - Robert Creeley - Douglas Dunn - Elsa Wolliaston ballet, Futurities; he collaborates frequently with guitarist Derek Bailey, saxophonist Evan Parker, composer-performer John Zorn, artist Douglas Ewart, and composer Anthony Braxton among many others, and has performed in the jazz orchestras of Count Basie and Gil Evans.

David Behrman is a composer of music and a designer of sound installations whose works make use of personal computers, video graphic displays, computer music hardware and sensors for linking people to electronic music systems. Among his installations are "Cloud Music" (a collaboration with Robert Watts and Bob Diamond), "Sound Fountain" (with Paul DeMarinis), and "Mbirascope" (with George Lewis, commissioned in 1986 by La Villette Museum). His compositions for instrumental performers and computer music systems, including "Leapday Night" and "On the Other Ocean", have been recorded by Lovely Music Records.

Fast Forward has for the last few years worked almost exclusively with metal objects as performance instruments, both as a solo performer and with his performing ensemble, with whom he recently presented his latest work, "The Caffeine Effect." Other major works include "Obsolete Paul" (1983) and "Rotorblade" (1984) (both created in collaboration with French choreographer Yves Musard) and "Dead Thunderbirds" (1984), for alarm sirens, steel drums and hundreds of glass liquor bottles. Mr. Forward has worked with, among many others, the composers Rhys Chatham, David Moss and Pauline Oliveros, and choreographers Isabelle Marteau and Stephanie Skura.

J.D. Parran is a composer and multi-instrumentalist, specializing in the woodwind family, who has collaborated with many composers of widely varying compositional directions. Mr. Parran has performed as a member of the well-known Black Artist Group (BAG) of St. Louis; along with the St. Louis-based composers Tom Hamilton and Rich O'Donnell, he recently recorded the trio album "Formal and Informal Music." A member of Anthony Davis' ensemble, Episteme, Mr. Parran was a featured soloist in the New York City Opera performance of Mr. Davis' recent opera, "X," and has performed with the Me, We and Them Orchestra, conducted by James "Jabbo" Ware. "Chicago Slow Dance," an album of music by George Lewis, features his performance on the Indian double reed instrument, the nagaswaram.