

SoundScape

Recent experimental CD releases reviewed by

Robert H. King

A Small, Good Thing: Block

Leaf, Bay2CD



The genre hopping ASGT release that has to be their finest and most accomplished work to date. Block sees them leaving behind their 'Ry Cooder on skunkweed' excursions for some serious funk up drifting Dictaphone laden groove narrative, sort of John Barry and A Certain Ratio meeting head on in a soundtrack for a low budget (but bags of style) detective movie, Harry Palmer meets Raymond

Chandler. The cool flowing breezy keyboard intro suffused with a lone trumpet on 'Cooling System' sets the mood and pace for nine chapters in the life of someone you'll never meet but whose diary you've read. The distant thunderstorm on 'Moving Heat Source' soon makes way for some clean brisk drum loops and weather system percussion blowing its way to 'The Horn' and a voice snatched from the ether, providing the backdrop for some wonderfully bright basslines. But don't despair its not all clean livin', Block has its fair share of dirty treats and there are moments of raw genius here. On first listening it appears straightforward enough, but press the endless repeat function on your CD player and it gradually seeps into your psyche and like the stunning artwork that wraps this release up there are hidden storylines inside just waiting to be discovered. Block is like nothing else you'll hear this year. Fresh and up but with a sting in its tail.

Beat System: 2297

Time Recordings, em:t 2297, CD

"Invade areas where nothing's definite". The phrase (spoken by John Cage) that starts this latest emission from the impeccable Nottingham based label is an apt description of their output to date. Never being quite sure what to expect from the em:t series is part of the attraction. Never repeating themselves in terms of musical output is an admirable stance, many would be tempted to 'milk the winning formula dry', but Time Recordings continue to release innovative debut work. Beat System is an oddly deceptive name as the sounds on this disc don't adhere to any ideas of techno or ballistic junglism, instead it weaves its way majestically through voice experiments, binaural and electronic recordings of fireworks, soaring guitar treatments in the vein of Sylvian/Czukay/Brook/Eno, musique concrete re-appraisals and seductive weightless minimalism that pays homage to Glass, Reich, Riley and La Monte Young. Acknowledging and exploiting such diverse influences could so easily fall flat on its digital face but Beat Systems Derek Pierce pulls it off big time easily producing one of the most impressive releases in this em:t series to date.

Benge: I, Computer

Expanding Records, ECD497, CD



A shift in geographical location and a shift in dynamics sees the digital Benge hitting the road with a frenetic display of rhythmic acrobatics. This, his fourth release, takes a hyper-stylised route to greater things, as previous releases, impressive though they were, merely threw us glimpses of what Benge is capable of and with I, Computer he seems to have found the right path. A rattle and drum machine

trip departure from his more soothing style (see Variant 3) takes him on the road to a more 'Detroit' approach, but still maintaining an appealing mix of gentle pulses and high end scrapes and scratches interspersed with haunting synth lines. This adventurous departure will no doubt see comparisons being made to the acclaimed Richie Hawtin (Plastikman, and that's no bad thing). Given better distribution

Benge will be destined for bigger things, but at present his self produced material is developing at a welcome pace.

Adam Bohman: Last Orders

Mycophile, Spor03, CD

As a member of Morphogenesis Adam provided prepared violin and strings but what he presents us with here is an intriguing array of sound sources: wine glasses, balalaika, wire brush on tiles, toy telephone, muted trumpet and self built string instruments, to name but a few. Gradually unfolding gentle and soothing textures at first delicate and intricate, steadily build into moments of intense abrasiveness only to slip back into the depths of meditative calm. Last Orders has been skilfully crafted with the attention to detail of a watchmaker, making for a work of true electronic experimentation.

Nocturnal Emissions: Sunspot Activity (Soleilmoon, Sol52, CD)

For almost two decades Nigel Ayers as Nocturnal Emissions has maintained a singular iconoclastic vision, to produce music that is innovative and challenging. He has survived the 'Industrial era' that produced a spate of visceral recordings (no doubt leaving many listeners with hearing impairments), been sampled by Afrika Bambatta and The Soul Sonic Force, moved to the solitude of the Derbyshire countryside and composed moments of sheer beauty and reflection and has been embraced by performance dance troupes. Each album has broken new ground and Sunspot Activity is no exception. Ayers makes no attempts to disguise the unashamedly lo-tech conception of the sound sources used: the crackle and distorted drift of a vinyl run-out groove, bursts of reverse loop bells and chimes, fractured electronic layers of the analogue kind and snatches of cosmic radio frequencies all merge seamlessly to create a hypnotic and tangibly coherent night-time soundtrack.

Michael Prime: Cellular Radar

Mycophile, Spor01, CD

Michael Prime is an ecologist/conservationist and like Adam Bohman (see above) was a member of Morphogenesis providing electronics and sound projections. Since the age of 12 he has developed an interest in electronics that has more recently grown into a fascination with the hidden sounds that are all around us but for which we don't have the sensory organs to perceive. Using a bio-activity translator he records the electrical activity of living things (plants and fungi etc.) turning them into an audible signal, weaving them into acoustic environmental sounds and incorporating electronics to produce stunning sonic landscapes that ebb and flow with an at once graceful and violent fluidity. Listening to these recordings on headphones leaves one reeling with their spatial dynamics, phase shifts and snatches of the human voice speeding from the back of your head out to either ear before spinning round to be enveloped in a wall of processed sound.

Paul Schütze: Second Site 27° 37' 35" N 77° 13' 05" E

Virgin, AMBT23, CD

For me Schütze is a true innovator, constantly shifting his axis but never losing sight of his ultimate musical goals, his skill lies in envisioning the end work and absorbing the mastery of his chosen musical partners. This is possibly one of the few genuine 'ambient' releases available in that it aurally describes the sound of a space, an environment, in this instance a sound documentation of an 18th Century astronomical garden located in the city of Jaipur, India. Over its 100 minutes (102 sections) a calming female voice narrates descriptions of the sites pillars, spheres and stairs and their interaction with the sun and how an individual

can affect them, "To move through these structures is to set them in motion...". One is ineluctably drawn into this immense work and that it was produced with a minimum of instrumentation: flute, percussion and sound processing combined with the voice it could almost be said that it is approaching a state of musical geomancy.

Spoke: Spoke

Noise Museum, NM009, CD

This wins the award for packaging of the year. The disc has a miniature bicycle tyre around the rim and is sealed between two sheets of card screen printed to look like wheels and held together with a miniature wing nut, just brilliant. The material (recorded live at the 'Musiques Ultimes' Festival in France last year) is 41 minutes of seamless percussive brilliance. The bastard offspring of the mighty 23 Skidoo play searing basslines over dirt track drums and mountain bikes all interspersed with some unique samples, "...becoming cyclonic..." from the shipping forecast is a stroke of genius. The live sound is cavernous, natural reverb adding to the echoing drum loops and deployed wheel rattles create a mesmeric, heady mix of percussive improvisation and meditative funk.

David Toop: Spirit World

Virgin, AMBT22, CD

For Spirit World Toop assumes the role of virtual traveller, lucid dreamer and shamanic storyteller. The opening moments of 'Ceremony viewed through iron slit' with bursts of aether static and fragmented narrative



open up the minds' eye to an inner world of shifting images of exotica and roads yet untravelled. Snapshots of electric trumpet gracefully drift over charged soundscapes (courtesy of Scanner) whilst guitar and cymbal drones (supplied by Robert Hampson of Main), shakers, tablas, flute and e-bow blend effortlessly with Max Eastley's inflatable percussion. Toops' list of collaborators which extends to include the Hip Hop/ Junglist Witchman, Michael Prime (bat recordings) and Toshinori Kondo perfectly exemplifies the current state of experimental music in that it embraces the notion of an embarkation point where many disciplines converge continually providing new and exciting paths to tread. Toops' (highly recommended) book 'Ocean of Sound' revived my interest in experimental music, Spirit World re-affirms that interest.

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Em:t / Time Recordings distributed by Pinnacle.

Expanding Records:

P.O. Box 130, Loughton, Essex IG10 1AY, UK.

Leaf distributed by Vital.

Mycophile:

30 Petten Grove, Orpington, Kent BR5 4PU UK

Soleilmoon

distributed by Vital or contact: P.O. Box 83296

Portland, OR 97283 USA.

Virgin releases should be available from any good record store.