

Brainwashed - Musica Elettronica Viva, "MEV 40"

Written by Justin Patrick

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Mev 40 is an essential listening experience. The four discs of this set bring together eight tracks from seven performances spanning 40 years of Musica Elettronica Viva's activity, from 1967 through 2007. In 1966 musical ideas were flowering in America and Europe. As American expatriates living in Rome they were steeped in the classical New Music scenes happening on each side of the Atlantic, as well the heavy spell cast by Free Jazz. Musica Elettronica Viva was a new hybrid that blossomed out of that fecund sound pool. Within their songs can be heard a zeitgeist that not only spans the decades, but an inclusive and intuitive impulse whose periphery extends far beyond the group and deep into audio culture at large.

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By continuously extending their musical vocabulary, the sound world of Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV) has remained on the cutting edge of improvisational praxis. The prospect of remaining in a comfortable niche is not something I imagine these musicians would relish. Instead they have made a habit of pushing on the boundaries, of going into domains of practice that test the limits of their abilities, allowing them to expand on their already formidable technical proficiencies. Each member of MEV functions as a tributary bringing in a diverse range of skill sets to their collaborative river of song. The core group consists of Alvin Curran, who has seemingly embraced the entire spectrum of contemporary non-commercial music; Frederic Rzewski, composer and virtuoso pianist; Richard Teitelbaum, electronic aficionado and pioneer of brainwave generated music; and Garret List, trombonist extraordinaire. As a collective they have amplified their power by bringing in an extremely talented cast of characters that included, among others, saxophonist Steve Lacy, whose presence and influence is heard on a number of these tracks.

The first disc opens with "Spacecraft," an exemplary noise piece. Highly atonal and

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asymmetrical, much of the sounds consist of non-traditional instruments like amplified glass plate with attached springs and contact microphones, a move that in 1967 set a precedent for what groups like Matmos and many others do today: amplifying the minutiae of sound. Mixed with a synthesizer self built by Alan Bryant from electronic organ parts and the tenor sax of Ivan Vandor this music has much of the same shrill cacophony that can be heard at any given contemporary noise show, with a notable difference: the players seem more in touch with the ability to be silent and make room for each other than much of what I hear on nights out. As such this track is my least favorite of the set, though it does have some brilliant moments. Finding those moments within its 30 minutes is what makes it problematic for me.

More nuanced than the power chords of punk rock in their strategies of opposition to the state, the socio-political concerns of MEV are a constant thread of connectivity running through their work. Collective musical improvisation is by its very nature a form that embraces egalitarianism. A traditional band set up on the other hand tends towards the hierarchical—with lead singers and lead guitars—which is possibly one of the reasons why many of them never have an active lifespan anywhere close to 40 years. Improv is open-source, free from the dogma of playing songs by rote, making intuitive leaps of the imagination the norm; and when expert players are involved their responses to each other don't sound sloppy. Their revolt against the military industrial complex is evidenced by more than just their collective structure and approach, and can be heard on songs like "Stop the War" (a live broadcast from WBAI in New York on New Years Eve, 1972). Speaking out against Nixon and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, Vietnam, this number contains snippets and phrases from traditional war time standards like "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" and "Taps," and carries an emotional resonance that is made all the more powerful by the gorgeous interplay between delicate piano lines and electronic squelch burst from the moog. "Mass.Pike," from 2007, sends the anti-war message out once more, quoting the above mentioned songs again, but in a different sonic context, along with a conversation of sampled voices saying, "bashing the federal government/I'm not bashing the federal government I'm bashing Slick Willie because he deserves bashing. This is a democracy is it not? We do have a first amendment do we not? Do we not have a first amendment?"

Listening to the entire set is a substantial investment of time, and though it certainly can be enjoyed as background music, attentive listening offers deeper rewards and a more lasting impression. The songs themselves are, for the most part, presented in chronological order; most likely they all would have been if half of them were not over 40 minutes long. "Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam Pt. 1" and "Pt.2" are thus separated onto discs two and three. It is in the two parts of this performance that some of their most wild playing occurs, as they range out into nearly interplanetary, diverse musical territories. Rzewski plays electronically processed prepared piano on this outing, giving his instrument a nearly alien timbre, well matched with the wheezing soprano sax of Steve Lacy. The group moves easily from slowly churning quiet moments, full of groans and creaks, to insane time signatures that make my mathematically incompetent mind spin with delirium. Throughout the entire set the electronic elements are

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expertly mixed with the acoustic, each accentuating the other without domination. In each performance there is something new and surprising. Frequently, when I think I have pinned a song down to its constituent elements, to its overall mood and feel, it shifts gears, and spins off on a new trajectory. This is a labyrinth, a musical version of Jorge Luis Borges *Garden of Forking Paths*, a place where each choice is met with further endless choices and where infinite possibilities hide behind every corner.

samples:

- [Stop The War](#)
- [Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Pt.1](#)
- [New Music America Festival](#)