

The New Improvisors: 'Music of the Moment'

Clark Bustard, **RICHMOND-TIMES DISPATCH**
(July, 1979)

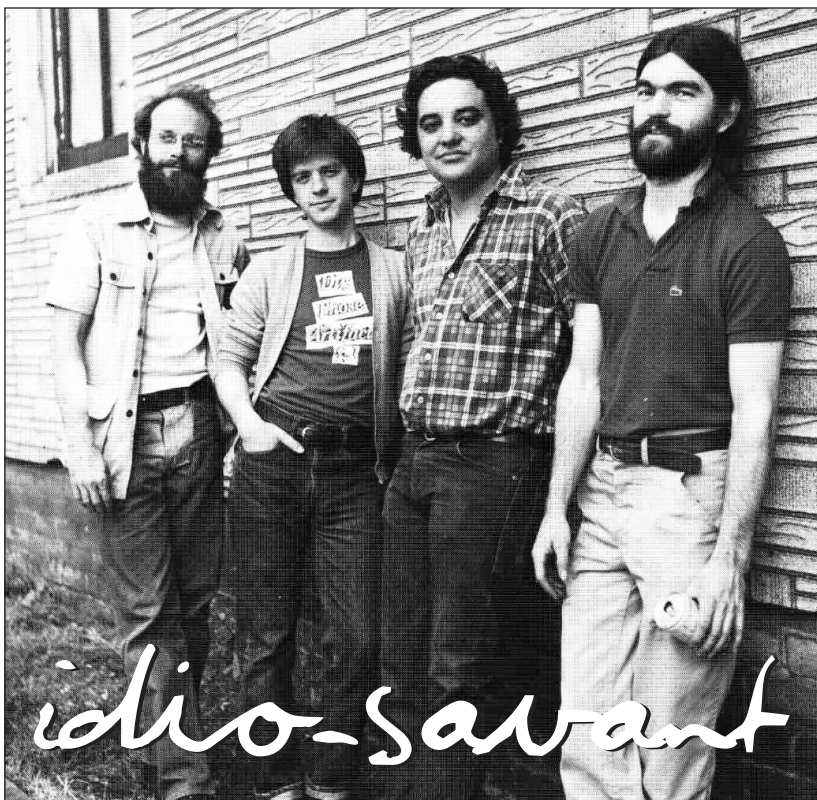
"Depending on the listener's perspective, they may be the wedges that drive music into the future, or they may be denizens of the deepest shaft in the musical underground.

They are practitioners of a music that goes by various names — improvisational music, creative music or, simply, new music. Its patron saints come from the farthest reaches of both the classics (Edgar Varese, Karlheinz Stockhausen) and jazz (Anthony Braxton, Sun Ra), though the music fits comfortably under neither label.

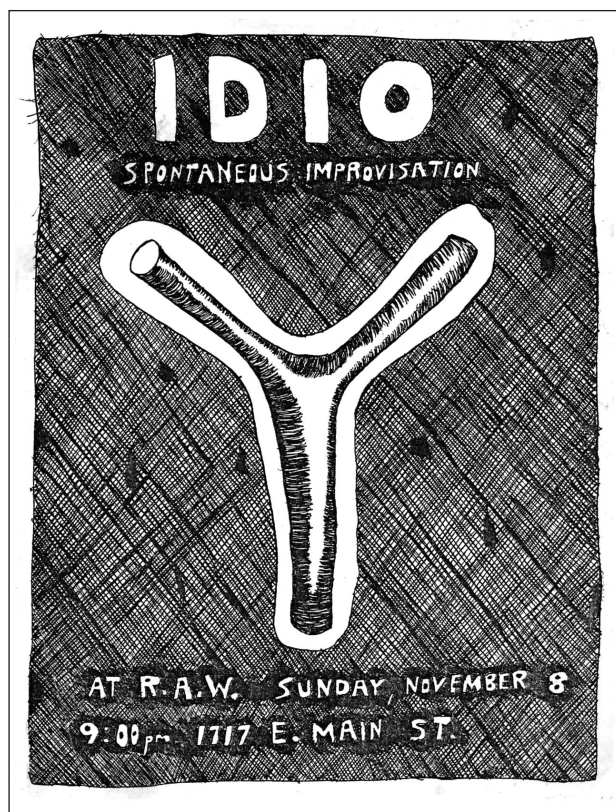
The uninitiated tend to dismiss it as a string of random noises, while its followers often lapse into the language of metaphysics when trying to describe the sound and its effects.

'It's a music of anything — rhythm, melody, texture,' says Paul Watson, who plays it. 'I wouldn't call it harmonic music, though it could be.' Hardly ever, though, is it the stuff of foot-tapping or humming along.

Watson, a trumpeter, joins keyboardist Martin McCavitt, saxophonist Danny Finney and drummer-percussionist John (Pippin) Barnett — collectively, an ensemble called **IDIO-SAVANT** — in making what Watson describes as 'music for people who are not afraid of the moment.



L-R: Pippin Barnett, Paul Watson, Martin McCavitt and Danny Finney



It is, Watson explains, a purposely perishable sound, 'never to be repeated' in the same form — a form, you might say, that defies form. 'The experience of this music lies in hearing it live.'

'Even those who hate it the first time,' McCavitt says, 'later find that certain sounds or images have stayed with them. A lot of people find it very beautiful, very moving,' once they have adjusted to the special context of the new improvisors.

Theirs is a sound of dense fabrics and tiny nuances — in the most intense performances, Watson notes. 'the smallest gesture can become part of the music' — and a language constantly drawing new words from disparate voices.

Drifting in and out of earshot in such arrangements as Idio-Savant's 'Non-Uku' are echoes of music ranging from the classical forms of Europe and the Orient to the strains of tribal Africa and native America. In the group's less structured pieces — 'Water, Only Water.' for example — form gives way to pure sound.

Throughout the group's work, primitive Third World percussion coexists with the most sophisticated Western electronics. And the products of centuries of instrument-making evolution are played alongside devices fresh from the musician's workbench.

The sound of Idio-Savant, Watson suggests, is a natural outgrowth of what has happened to both musicians and their audience in the past 20 years. Regional and national boundaries have disappeared, thanks to the wide circulation of recordings of once obscure ethnic music.

It is a new world, where Tibet and Bali are no further away from the phonograph than Nashville and New Orleans, and the result is a new school of music that skips across continents like a shortwave radio dial and jumps centuries like a time machine. If it seems to have no rules, Watson suggests, that may be because there are so many rules to choose from.

‘There has always been improvisation,’ he says., ‘though that quality in music was overshadowed in the 19th century,’ source of so many lingering norms in music.

With the 20th century’s artistic reaction to the rules of the 19th and the growth of such cross-cultural styles as Afro-American jazz, ‘the idea of improvisation in the European and American tradition is becoming a lot stronger, even in the so-called classical tradition.

‘Look at what’s happening with modern composers like Stockhausen,’ Watson says. ‘They are moving away from notated music to the point where a paragraph of description takes the place of a score and becomes the basis for an improvisational piece.’

While Stockhausen, John Cage and other inheritors of the classical tradition move toward improvisation, another group of improvisers — the likes of Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago — are kicking aside the last traces of European form in the jazz tradition.

The two orbits converge in the sound of the new improvisation. Watson and McCavitt, self-professed ‘seekers of new sounds,’ avoid the search for a toehold on shifting musical ground. Instead, they savor the ride.”

IDIO-SAVANT:

PAUL WATSON – Trumpet, alto trumpet, flugelhorn, etc.

DANNY FINNEY – Alto, tenor and baritone saxophones, duck-o-phone, fandango

MARTIN McCAVITT – Synthesizer, organ, piano, etc.

PIPPIN BARNETT – Drums and percussion

Paul Watson: Danny, Martin and I knew each other in high school in Northern Virginia in the Sixties. We met Pippin in Richmond circa 76-78 when he was playing in a group called Mandala and living on Dundee Avenue, in a house that was a sort of collective living situation. Jamming and hanging out occurred there and at the Main Street Grill — and Idio-Savant was born.

Milo Fine

CADENCE Magazine (July 1980)

From a review of **“SHAKERS IN A TANTRUM LANDSCAPE”**: “...fresh, powerful and invigorating... using notes and sounds to create shifting textures and spontaneously conceived areas for interaction.

The emphasis is on group music, but solos do occur...Throughout the textures and so-called avant garde attacks and technique, there is a subtle melodic edge. Individually, the musicians are very strong...Special mention should also be made of Barnett’s very sensitive drum and percussion work; he propels without being overpowering... One of the solidest debut albums from an American group playing free music that this reviewer has heard in some time.”



“Shakers in a Tantrum Landscape” LP (1980)

A Newer 'New Music' Group

Divina Infusino, THE MILWAUKEE JOURNAL, (December 1980)

"A stream of classical musics wandered off the old course into unexplored channels, and that post-World-War-II movement became the first stream feeding what is now the wide pool of experimental, or new, music.

Wayward sons of jazz, like Anthony Braxton, have supplied a steady tributary to the new music pool. And in recent years, rock's new wave has contributed...

The association between new wave and new music is less unusual than it appears. At the point where new wave's trancelike repetitions, dissonance, droning rhythms, unusual instrumental combinations (including traditional instruments used in non-traditional fashion are taken to their limit, new wave and new music intersect.

Add complete improvisation, and you have Idio-Savant, a trio from Richmond, Va.

'Actually, I think there's more connection between new wave and new music than between jazz and new music. The climate is ripe for it. Some new wave groups employ textures and sounds in a very improvisational manner.

'Jazz is more hierarchial. There's an established route that you have to go through in order to play jazz. I just don't feel that route in my roots. Some new wave groups embody the spirit of what we're trying to do with improvisation. The similarities have to do with energy and exploration.'

Watson, Finney and Barnett do not discuss what or how they will play before a performance.

'We don't say, 'Let's play that chord or play in this key. We just do it,' Watson said. 'It's like a trance state or automatic type of playing.'

It may be awhile before new wave groups embrace improvisation. But the inherently rebellious rock avant-garde may change face again once today's new forms have embedded themselves into the mainstream. And the rock avant-garde of the future may well be performing what Idio-Savant does today.

Unlike some new music groups that explore sound for its own sake, Idio-Savant is concerned with emotions.

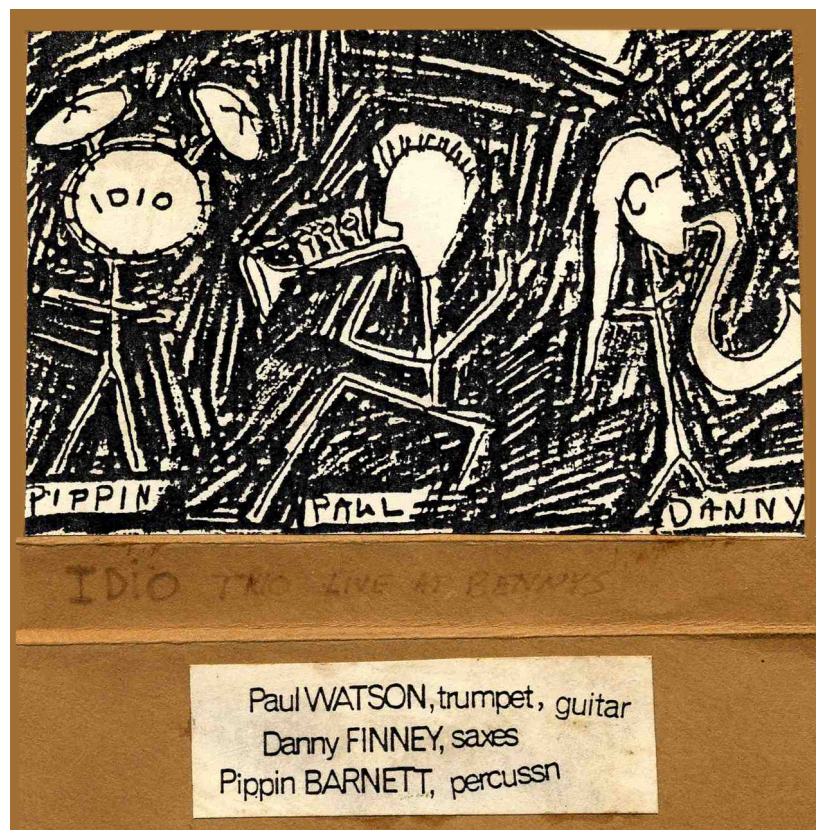
'Improvisation demands creativity, and creativity leans more on emotions,' Watson said. 'We're always working for communication, to get through to the audience.'

New wave and new music will never be alike. New wave operates in a rock environment — that means business, money, stardom — while new music traditionally has been content with its non-commercial status.

But in the future the two musical streams may intersect more often and at more point as they both feed and occasionally collaborate with each other."



Unreleased studio recordings (1979)



"Live at Benny's" cassette tape cover (1982)

In 1980, **IDIO-SAVANT** teamed up with the Alabama-based improvisational duo, **TRANS**, comprised of LaDonna Smith (viola, violin, voice) and Davey Williams (guitar) and the following year, after the departure of keyboardist McCavitt, together they recorded "**TRANS-IDIO.**"

Clark Bustard

RICHMOND-TIMES DISPATCH (November, 1980)

In a review of a live **TRANS-IDIO** performance at the Richmond Artists Workshop: "The six produced a transparent, freewheeling sound, typified by the opening 'Music Against the President-elect Who Will Not Be Mentioned by Name,' seesawing between achingly high registers and the more mellow combination of viola, trumpet and electric guitar. Finney's saxophone provided much-needed texture to the ensemble.

Connoisseurs of this art form look forward to a whimsical variety of audial aids in performance, and Williams did not disappoint. His arsenal included one of those slinky eggbeaters (slunked against guitar and banjo strings) and a plastic brontosaurus skeleton (which when wound up, did the old soft hoof along the strings). He also injected some vocal Donald Duck impersonating into the proceedings, answered in turn by some restrained coloratura screeching from Ms. Smith.

In all, an evening of improvising that proved alternately haunting, raucous and festive."

IMPROVISATIONAL MUSIC AT R.A.W.

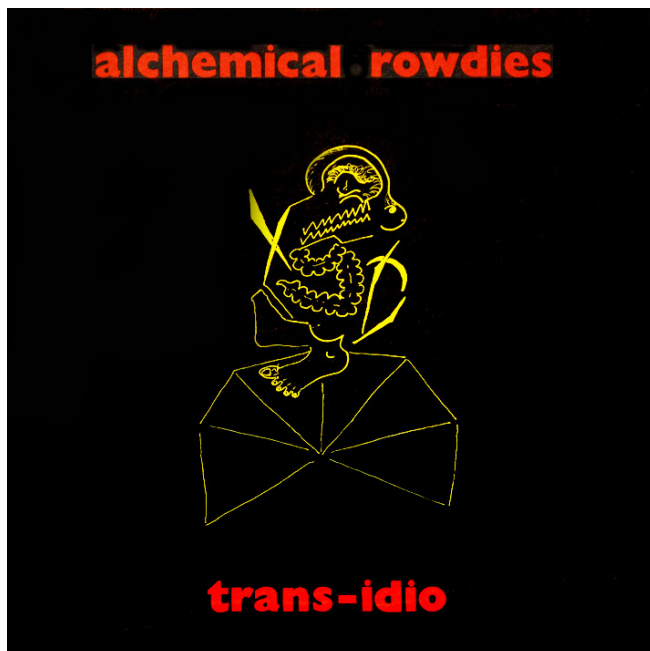


TRANS from Birmingham, Alabama
davey williams - guitar, banjo, electricity
ladonna smith - violin, viola, voice

PLUS

IDIO TRIO of Richmond
paul watson - trumpet
danny finney - saxophones
pippin barnett - percussion

Friday, July 31st 9:00 pm
1717 East Main St. \$2.00



"Alchemical Rowdies" LP (1981)



LaDonna Smith and Davey Williams in 2012

In 1980, **IDIO-SAVANT** added Rebbly Sharp (guitar, keyboards and vocals) and Phil Trumbo (bass and art) from the band **LUMINOUS BIPEDS**, calling themselves first **THE ORTHO-TONES** and eventually **THE ORTHOTONICS**.