

Video Data Bank
Birth of an artform



Tony Conrad's *Cycles Of 3s And 7s* (1967)



Charlemagne Palestine's *Island Song* (1976)



Gary Hill's *Soundings* (1979)

“Gotta get outta here... gotta get outta here... gotta get outta here,” clangs composer and cantor Charlemagne Palestine’s incessant chant, as he zooms around an island on a motorcycle, a video camera strapped to his body filming the potholed road beneath his wheels. The resulting piece, *Island Song* (1976), builds into an intense personal psychodrama, portraying man and machine united against the world, as his maniacal incantation harmonises with the motor’s vibration. *“Times seven divided by eight, times seven divided by eight, times seven divided by eight,”* chants a different voice while carrying out the commands on a simple calculator. The voice is Tony Conrad’s, and the piece, *Cycles Of 3s And 7s*, also dates from 1976. The numbers count out harmonic intervals – here represented through their frequency ratios. The Pythagoras-obsessed minimalist is in full flow, boiling down the mathematical essence of music to a simple, repetitive act of punching a calculator.

Both these works are included on the formidable eight DVD box set *Surveying The First Decade: Video Art And Alternative Media in The US 1968–1980*, originally released on VHS in 1995 by Video Data Bank, a Chicago based institution set up in 1974 to distribute, preserve and archive the burgeoning field of video art. Divided into two volumes, the set comprises 68 historic video works collected onto eight themed discs such as *Explorations Of Presence*, *Performance And Audience*, *Gendered Confrontations*, and *Investigations Of The Phenomenal World*.

When the Sony Portapak, the first portable video recorder, became commercially available in 1967, musicians and artists embraced the format as an exciting new medium allowing them to foreground idea and process rather than solid objects. Some works convey a childlike enthusiasm for the technology itself. Gary Hill’s 1979 *Soundings*, for example, explores the phenomenology of sound by filming the artist’s hands nailing, stroking, burying,

burning and drowning a speaker cone – whose taut covering he dubs ‘skin’ – while his monotonous voice repeats phrases through the same speaker: “Bury the sound imaging the skin space underground... Drive the image of a spike with a spike through the imaging sounds... Watering the sound, imaging the skin space.” The voice distorts as he subjects the speaker cone to the actions described, transforming this compelling work into an oddly mesmerising piece of concrete poetry.

Surveying The First Decade is invaluable for anyone interested in milestones in American video art. The only drawback? The \$1500 price tag, which evidently targets the set at institutions rather than the general public. Thankfully, clips can be viewed at Video Data Bank’s website. □ *Surveying The First Decade: Video Art And Alternative Media in The US 1968–1980* is available from Video Data Bank, vdb.org
Anne Hilde Neset



Kind of significant: Miles Davis

Richard Williams Tangled up in blue

“No colour has so saturated music over the last hundred years, while permitting so many shadings”, runs the central premise of Richard Williams’s book *The Blue Moment: Miles Davis’s Kind Of Blue And The Remaking Of Modern Music*. Returning to the 1959 album that signalled Miles’s move into modality cannot have been easy. As well as the trumpeter’s own salty autobiography, there are strong lives by Ian Carr and John Szwed – not to mention Williams’s own *The Man In The Green Shirt* – plus two recent forensic studies of this long-lasting album. “I started thinking about this book more than ten years ago,” says Williams, “and began actually writing it in 2002. But then came the books by Ashley Kahn [*Kind Of Blue*] and Eric Nisenson [*The Making Of Kind Of Blue*] – both excellent in their different ways – and I set my project aside. A couple of years ago, however, I realised that neither had written the book I meant to write all along, one which began with a study of *Kind Of Blue* but then developed into an exploration of its broader impact on contemporary music, something I felt very strongly about. So I re-examined the few thousand words of the original work and started again.”

The result is a book in which *Kind Of Blue* is portrayed as the root-ball of a vast, tangled system of musical tendrils stretching forwards and backwards through history, its fronds curling around various musics united by varying degrees of introspection, conceptual innovation and an instinctive sense of ‘blueness’. Beginning with a memoir of how, as a youthful pop fan doing the Twist in 1963, *Kind Of Blue*’s doleful indigo moods provided the author’s first musical epiphany, Williams charts a personal map through the sound environments of the past 50 years, from cool school jazz to John Coltrane’s *Ascension*; existentialist literature to the artworks of Yves Klein; Terry Riley and La Monte Young to The Velvet Underground; Soft Machine and Jon Hassell to The Necks and Supersilent; Rudy van Gelder’s spacey production values to the crystalline

cadences of ECM Records. Although *The Blue Moment* will inevitably end up racked on the jazz shelves of your local book emporium, at times Williams’s WG Sebald-like drift diverges so far from its nominal subject that you can find yourself in the middle of Picasso’s Blue Period, or hearing about the medicinal practices of medieval lapidarists. He also spares time for neglected jazz backbenchers such as George Russell, Don Ellis, André Hodeir and David Mack, who fused modality with serialist and classical complexity.

Williams has a strong claim on such a bird’s eye view. As deputy editor of *Melody Maker* at the beginning of the 1970s, he was an early British champion of the The Velvet Underground; he also presented the earliest episodes of the BBC’s live music TV show, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. He started contributing pop and jazz reviews to *The Times* when ‘quality’ newspapers still looked down their noses at the stuff. Following an interlude as an A&R man for Island Records in the mid-70s, he edited *Time Out* and during the 1980s held key editorial positions at *The Sunday Times* and *Independent On Sunday*. In 1992 he wound down his music journalism – “For a long time I haven’t wanted to write about bad music, or even good music of a kind that doesn’t interest me” – and became Chief Sports Writer for *The Guardian*. “For some reason I’m quite happy writing about a bad football match,” he explains, adding, “The similarity between the music I’m interested in and sport as a whole is spontaneity and unpredictability.”

As the author points out, *Kind Of Blue* is the one jazz album even non-jazz fans tend to own. “That’s the really staggering thing about *Kind Of Blue* – and, I’m convinced, the single quality that has given it such a remarkable life. Some things, a very few, are like that – the more you listen to or read or watch or look at them, the more they reveal.” □ *The Blue Moment* is published this month by Faber & Faber
Rob Young

Unofficial Channels:

Free Music Archive

“We want to support the artists we play so that they can continue to make great art, even the ones who send hand-painted cassettes with no name or contact info,” says Jason Sigel of the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. “But SoundExchange [the US royalties collection agency] don’t even try to track down the vast majority of the artists we play, so our ‘royalties’ just get pocketed by the organisation... I personally expect more out of the internet.” With revenue streams fast drying up, the response of many music publishing bodies in the US, the UK and beyond has been to slap a charge on any kind of music usage they can keep tabs on. Radio stations and webcasters now pay to play each track; fees are levied for ‘public broadcast’ in shops and even offices. As Sigel points out, smaller artists are often left behind in this commercial shake-up, and are out of the loop for royalties in any case.

The Free Music Archive is in part a response to this climate. For broadcasters, it’s a free-to-use archive of innovative material; for artists and listeners, it’s a discerning outlet for music run by quality curators. There’s no money involved – the music on the FMA is royalty-free, licensed directly from the musicians. The archive is still a little rough around the edges, but nevertheless has around 10,000 tracks free for streaming, download and usage by artists from Deerhoof to Dengue Fever, plus live sets at WFMU and All Tomorrow’s Parties, and unclassifiable audio ephemera such as the Conet Project broadcasts of numbers stations. “We have public domain recordings from pop stars of the early 1900s like Billy Murray,” Sigel enthuses. “And an extremely well-curated batch of early international recordings courtesy of Excavated Shellac, which might otherwise go unheard.”

Curators run the gamut of broadcasters and webcasters, and come from as far afield as Israel and Moscow. Notable among them is New Jersey based, listener-supported ‘freeform’ radio station WFMU, whose DJs include *The Wire* contributors Dave Mandl and Kurt Gottschalk. “The curated approach has always been a part of what we do here at WFMU,” Sigel explains. “We’ve extended this to the Free Music Archive. There remains this looming possibility that unreasonable royalty rates will once again put webcasters in jeopardy.” It’s not just pirates that thrive on the uncertainties of internet copyright – publishers, after all, can use these grey areas to throw their weight around. “If that day ever came,” concludes Sigel, “the Free Music Archive would be an even more important resource.”
Derek Walmsley