

# the Kitchen

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## Meditating and on the run

Charlemagne Palestine has given three stimulating one-man concerts here this season, the most recent being his "Spectral Continuum for Piano," presented at the Kitchen Sunday night as part of the Walter series. After hearing these programs, and spending a couple of afternoons talking with him, my view of what he is doing is greatly expanded, and I can see much in his work that is unique and important.

To begin with, Palestine is not really a composer, but a composer-performer, as he always presents his own music, rather than entrusting it to other musicians. This practice allows him unusual flexibility. Instead of writing set pieces, he simply works out materials which he then selects and adapts to specific concert situations. He is vitally concerned with room acoustics, lighting possibilities, and the inclinations of various types of audiences, so the same materials are likely to be presented quite differently from



situation to situation. An electronic tape which ran for 20 minutes at the Sonnabend Gallery concert, for example, went on for about an hour at the more intimate concert at Phill Niblock's loft, and it might go on for two weeks if Palestine decided to use it in one of his gallery installations. Similar variations occur in his vocal solos and his piano pieces.

Palestine's electronic music is the easiest to explain, as it is basically a marriage of aesthetic principles borrowed from La Monte Young, and technological finesse learned from Morton Subotnick. All of his tapes deal with sustained tones which fluctuate ever so

slightly. Sometimes they fade in and out over long spans of time. Sometimes they meddle with overtones. Sometimes they create aural illusions, enabling the listener to hear melodies that aren't actually there.

Palestine's tapes are perhaps the most extreme form of musical minimalism I have yet encountered. Sometimes it is difficult to hear whether the sounds are changing at all. But after a few minutes it is usually possible to tune in on that microscopic level where the music is, and begin to pick out all sorts of details.

This music has a meditative quality, simply because the surface is so placid, and I used to think the best way to approach it was just to drift into the sounds, almost with a blank mind. But I have changed my mind. If the ears are sharp, and the mind is quick, there can be a great deal to listen to on this microscopic level. I would even go so far as to say that one of Palestine's sustained electronic

chords can be as interesting as a complex symphonic texture. After all, the ear and brain can deal with only so much information at one time anyway, and we can occupy ourselves with an abundance of subtle information just as easily as with a super-abundance of gross information.

The most unusual category of Palestine's work is his vocal solos, which fuse sound with movement. In his concert at Niblock's loft, Palestine knelt quietly on the floor for a while, just rocking and breathing, and then gradually picking up steam both physically and vocally. When the performance climaxed, about 20 minutes later, he was reiterating loud tones and throwing himself vigorously onto his hands. The hypnotic repetition of sound and movement became quite involving, partly because there were so many ways to interpret what he was doing, partly because it looked like he was hurting his knees, and partly just because the performer's concentration was so intense. He finally stopped and exited in one of the heaviest silences I have ever experienced.

In another vocal solo, Palestine simply walked and ran around the three rooms of the Sonnabend Gal-

lery while singing a steady pitch. This was largely an exploration of acoustics, enabling the audience to experience sound moving in a variety of directions at a variety of speeds. But the performer was so intent that it seemed like much more than just a study or an experiment.

These vocal solos are easier to remember than other Palestine pieces, but they are harder to explain. There's nothing to compare them with, and I don't know what they might mean dramatically, I'm not even sure if they are good pieces in purely musical terms. I am sure, however, that they represent a distinctive approach toward linking the human voice

with the human body, and I suspect they could lead to some extraordinary form of full-blown music theatre, especially if Palestine ever figures out how to present such things with a group of people instead of as solos.

Palestine's piano music deals with overtones and subtle changes in sound, similar to his electronic works, in combination with the performing energy of his vocal solos. The piano pieces he played at the Sonnabend and the Kitchen all involve very fast left-right-left alternation, usually with simple combinations of only four or five keys. Hammering away steadily like this for 20 to 30 minutes at a time, as he sometimes does, must require a

great deal of energy, but Palestine has plenty of that.

Within its severe limitations, the music changes a lot, and it is difficult to predict what will happen. Every once in a while a note is added or subtracted. The pedal is occasionally depressed or lifted, sometimes so gradually that it takes five or 10 minutes to make the change, and it is a crucial change in this context. Little accents and variations in emphasis add continual interest.

Most of the time Palestine sits eyes closed, his head turned to one side, listening intently to the overtones. And the strange activity of these overtones is essential to the music. Like all overtones, they are elusive, hard to pick out, and pure

as gold when you can bring them into focus. But unlike most overtones, they seem to fluctuate in rational ways. They are, after all, being controlled by a man whose ear is perhaps even more remarkable than his performance personality and his aesthetics.

—Tom Johnson