

The California Ear Unit presents minimalist compositions

by Doug Jablin

New music is, among other things: tripped-out, downtown Manhattan (moving to Seattle by way of Santa Fe and San Francisco) collage work by Nagativland; the neoclassical work of Milton Babbitt, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Terry Riley.

The California Ear Unit performed at the Judy Bayley Theatre Feb. 6 to an audience of a little over a hundred people. The Ear Unit has a CD on the San Francisco new music label New Albion. They are descendents of the neoclassical tradition, that is they play recent work of modern composers, and do not rely on improvisation.

I attended the performance without any expectations, and was completely

blown away. I'm not often impressed by a show, sometimes titillated, rarely excited, but impressed? Naaa. The members of the band played everything from prepared piano and toy saxophone to slide guitar, violin, and marimbas. Minimalist founding father Terry Riley was on hand to read at the beginning of his composition, and was accompanied by a bull whip.

The music was particularly fascinating because of the way the pieces would change from one style of music to another; modern classical shifting to something rock-based, all in a cohesive collage.

The group was formed in the late '70s by students at the California Institute of the Arts. Originally they played classical works like Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*,

and Donald Marino's *Nocturno*, but the group evolved with the times. The musicians are able to play the fresh music of composers of this age, such as Captain Beefheart, Elliot Carter, Frank Zappa, as well as Karlheinz Stockhausen.

"There is much more freedom to draw on your worn musical experiences and the kind of things that you ought to use in your own sounds, whether it's rock, or jazz, or some ethnic music that you grew up with," Arthur Jarvinsen said.

"Right now it's a good and healthy environment for the composer to draw on all of those experiences and so that

is a fresh direction that contemporary music has taken," he said. "We're hearing a lot of, I wouldn't call it crossover, because it's not like the third string music of the '50s where somebody decided: 'wouldn't it be neat if we could somehow put jazz and classical music together,' this is something that is just happening. Composers are just doing it and saying 'what did I just write?'"

Robin Loretz commented on the effect of world music, saying the approach wasn't in a "traditional way at all, but to play an Elvis Presley tune. The possibilities are endless."

"Many new composers have background experiences

in rock and pop playing in bands," Jarvinsen said. "Then you progress to Stravinsky, and maybe you play in country bands or the Ear Unit."

There may be better places to start listening to new music, but you can't lose with the music of the California Ear Unit.

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