

From Scratch: Albanian Summer Picaresque

Pykë-Presje (Editors)

Pykë-Presje/Rab-Rab Press Pbk 144 pp
In March last year, I went to hear the composer Dave Smith perform on the new piano at South London's Iklectik. His recital consisted of protest songs from struggles around the world – Ireland, Gaza, Tibet, Argentina and the Uyghurs in western China. Each song had been transcribed by Smith and then transformed into 'Dave Smith music', often forceful, dynamic and colourful, but with the original melody always clear. Afterwards Smith chatted with the audience, and advised me to listen to Lolo, the Tibetan singer who received a six year prison sentence in 2013.

In 1984 Smith wrote the 45 minute piece *Albanian Summer* for saxophonist Jan Steele and his partner, pianist Janet Sherbourne, who released it as an LP and performed it across Europe. Smith's

intention was to celebrate the urban popular music he had heard, mainly on the radio, on his dozen trips to Albania in the 1970s and 80s. Melodic and direct, the piece was well received by critics and audiences, performed with what Gavin Bryars in his sleeve notes calls Smith's "highly energetic form of pianistic muscular Christianity".

What happened next, unknown to anyone in the UK, was that a group of young Albanians copied the album and passed it around on cassette. Some of that group have now formed a publishing collective in Pristina (Kosovo) and Helsinki, and produced a book about *Albanian Summer*. Their intention is to reissue the album. Meanwhile what we have is a fascinating, if rather odd, tribute to a great piece of music.

The book kicks off with a splash, almost literally: 16 pages of bright red abstract calligraphic prints by Ott Kagovere. There's an essay tracing *Albanian*

Summer's context: Smith's connection with Cornelius Cardew and The Scratch Orchestra, and Cardew's involvement with the Marxist-Leninism of Enver Hoxha (who ruled Albania from 1944 till his death in 1985). Bill Bland was secretary of the Albanian Society in the UK, and Smith wrote essays for their journal *Albanian Life*. President of the Society was musicologist AL Lloyd, whose album of Albanian folk music had influenced Jan Steele's improvising.

There are new interviews with Smith and Steele, the original sleeve notes by Smith and Bryars, and several of Smith's *Albanian Life* essays, including a 1990 piece on Albanian contemporary composers. The title *From Scratch* refers to these postwar composers having no tradition to draw upon – as well as Smith's time in The Scratch Orchestra.

The book's final third feels disconnected, though it's clearly important to the publishing collective.

An annotated bibliography offers photos of the covers of books and pamphlets on Albania: *Chinese Warmongering Policy* (1978) and *The Krushchevites* by Hoxha are here. Finally there are 30 pages of grainy images of demonstrations around the world, originally presented as "Photography Unmasks" in a 1985 Albanian youth magazine.

Hoxha's rule in Albania produced immense achievements in literacy, women's rights and ending blood vendettas. It also featured a Stasi-like secret police, thousands of political executions and labour camps. Western music and the saxophone were banned. Interviewed by the BBC in 2005, the mayor of Tirana recalled his own teenage fascination with the saxophone, which he had never seen: "He would cower beneath the bedclothes at night and listen to foreign radio stations, an activity which was punishable by a long stretch in a labour camp." Clive Bell

The Williamsburg Avant-Garde: Experimental Music And Sound On The Brooklyn Waterfront

Cisco Bradley

Duke University Hbk/Pbk/eBook 400 pp
Cisco Bradley's *The Williamsburg Avant-Garde* is the most comprehensive study to date of one of the most important music scenes of the past 30-plus years. From being more or less a backwater relative to Manhattan through the late 1980s, Brooklyn in a few decades virtually supplanted it as the new music locus of the city, an unimaginable feat.

Bradley places the start of the Williamsburg scene at around 1988, when increased bureaucratic hostility toward Lower Manhattan's squatters, particularly in the wake of the Tompkins Square Park police riot, led to the first mini-exodus from the borough. Northern Brooklyn's Williamsburg was just one subway stop across the East River. Its rents were a fraction of those in Manhattan, and huge

abandoned industrial spaces were readily available there for staging the kinds of performances now impossible in the cramped venues of the East Village.

Bradley covers the ever-changing shape of the vast North Brooklyn scene chronologically, mostly via the series of most noteworthy venues and performers as they come, go, disband and regroup. His painstaking documentation also provides a parallel timeline of the significant cultural and aesthetic shifts within the scene. Held in warehouses and other rough spaces along the waterfront, the earliest events were heavy on noise and scrap metal.

Many of these venues were squatted, and various laws were skirted or ignored, sometimes with just a shrug from the local police. Cat's Head events included performances by drag queen Medea de Vice, and bands like Cop Shoot Cop and Reverb Motherfuckers, before a floor to ceiling installation of ropes for audience

members to climb. 1997 saw the founding of pirate radio station free103point9, which hosted performances and made its transmitters available for others to use.

In 2002, pianist Connie Crothers, having been evicted from her Lower East Side space, moved to a loft on Williamsburg's Kent Avenue where she started a jazz-oriented concert series. In 2007 the opening of the popular venue Death By Audio was a critical event in the history of the Brooklyn DIY movement, particularly the development of what has been termed brutal prog, which incorporated elements of prog, punk, no wave, free jazz, metal and Japanese noise. And somewhere around the turn of the millennium, a cohort of university trained musicians who had studied with the likes of Anthony Braxton claimed their place in the scene, Mary Halvorson, Taylor Ho Bynum, Jessica Pavone and Jackson Moore among them.

But all the while the inevitable was happening. The neighbourhood's massive

influx of wealth forced venues to become more professional. Skyrocketing rents along with devastating zoning changes made by Mayor Bloomberg's administration forced out more participants. Eventually the nexus of Brooklyn's DIY movement moved east to Bushwick, effectively ending the Williamsburg scene.

To anyone familiar with the power and influence of New York City's real estate developers, this will seem like a predictably unhappy ending. But evading those forces for 30 years was no small achievement, and it's heartening to know that something like the Williamsburg scene found ways to thrive and spread its influence for so long. As one musician told Bradley, "I was an undocumented immigrant, working illegally as a bartender and waitress, and making music in an unlicensed venue. But those are the only kinds of spaces where America's culture is innovating." Dave Mandl

dublab: Future Roots Radio

Mark 'Frosty' McNeill & Jeremiah Chiu (Editors)

Hat & Beard Press Pbk 264 pp
The story of dublab is as dramatic as you'll find in radio. Straight out of college in the late 1990s, Frosty McNeill turned to online radio as a cheap alternative to broadcast, founding one of the first internet-only stations. Two years later, an offer of millions in funding vanished during the dotcom crash. The team redoubled their efforts to bring the station back to life, organising funding drives, selling cars and McNeill sleeping in the studio for years. By the 2010s, dublab had become an integral part of the Los Angeles music scene, incubating the careers of Flying Lotus, Daedalus, Ras G and countless others.

This story can be found in *dublab: Future Roots Radio*, but only piecemeal.

Though it features interviews with six founding DJs, including McNeill, Daedalus, Hoseh and Carlos Niño, this is more of a scrapbook than an oral history per se. The passion and enthusiasm that these radio personalities bring to their topic is authentic and contagious. Anecdotes abound – a visit to Ras G's Spacebase studio, a meeting between George Clinton and Sly Stone – but a broader narrative arc is precluded by repeated musings on creativity, community and the broader significance of radio as a medium.

To be sure, dublab is not easily defined. Its "future roots" ethos purposefully sidesteps genre labels, pointing instead to a creative continuity at the margins. Transcriptions of on-air interviews give a sense of the breadth of dublab's coverage. One would be hard-pressed to list a more disparate group of artists than

Lydia Lunch, Juan Atkins, Harold Budd and Van Dyke Parks, but these innovative iconoclasts all fit comfortably into the dublab milieu, even if their interviews are more promotional than hard-hitting.

Lunch seems bored by the format, purposefully inciting controversy to shake things up. "If you're coming to me, you can't find what you need in Nick Cave. Not that you're gonna get something from that bitch," she opines. Meanwhile, Parks is unfailingly modest in response to Niño's gushing compliments. This clash of tones makes it unclear by what criteria these interviews were selected.

dublab is an arts organisation as much as a radio station, and illustrations from the artistic projects that they have undertaken play to this book's strengths. Sections on "Up Our Sleeve", a touring collection of hand-drawn 12" vinyl

sleeves, and "The Dream Scene" bedroom decorated with posters from imaginary concerts are great fun to peruse. Photographs of the studio, the staff, concert and art installations demonstrate better than words the immense energy and creativity that the station inspires.

The book ends with reflections from current staff in LA and satellite stations in Japan, Spain, Germany and Brazil, showcasing dublab's ability to foster direct participation from unexpected places and how it functions through this global network. *dublab: Future Roots Radio* presents their individual perspectives like coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, providing momentary snapshots of singular moments without adding up to a mosaic of dublab's history as a whole.

Matthew Blackwell