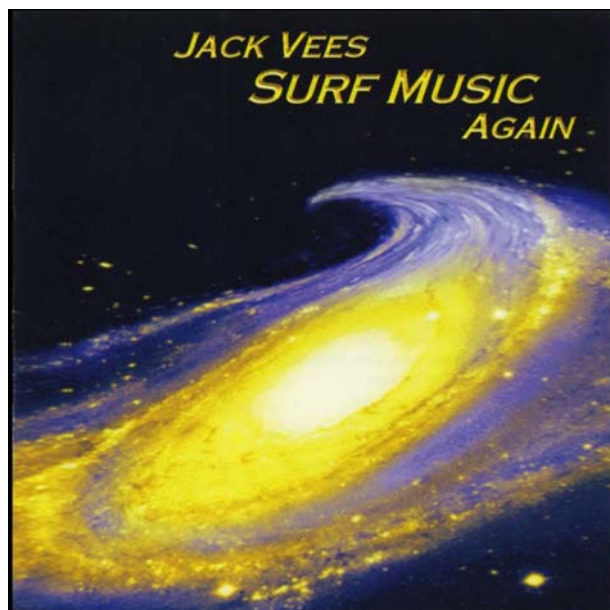


NWCR730

Jack Veas

Surf Music Again



1. *Piano Trio* (“Hulk Smash!!”) (1994) (12:45)
Jack Veas, pianos
2. *Surf Music Again* (1996) (8:30)
Jack Veas, electric bass
3. *Rocket Baby* (1994) (14:15)
Jeff Krieger, electric cello and sequencer; Tony Forkush, narrator
4. *Stigmata non Grata* (1991) (4:50)
Dorian Ringers, Cammi Carteng, Jan Dudiet, JoAn Kerns, Monica McGowan, handbells; Bill Matthis, conductor
5. *SPNFL* (1995) (8:42)
Jack Veas, electric bass, electronic tape
6. *Tattooed Barbie* (1992) (16:00)
Libby Van Cleve, oboe electrified; Jack Veas, twelve-string electric guitar, drum machine

Total playing time: 64:62

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Notes

Jack once amusedly pointed out to me a publicity blurb in which he was described as a “rock based composer.” I suggested that if it had said “New Haven rock based,” one would have to conjecture which Rock—East or West.

Now those unfamiliar with the topography of New Haven, Connecticut, should know that the city is bounded on two sides by prominent escarpments called East Rock and West Rock. East Rock is the more famous and has a prominent War Memorial crowning it; West Rock, however, does have Judges Cave, where three famous seventeenth century regicides, Whalley, Goffe, and Dixwell, hid out from the authorities. From East Rock one can see the whole of New Haven, across the sound to Long Island itself, and, maybe, on a very clear day, even to New York City.

As a composer, Jack is an East Rock guy; he has a far-reaching view. Sure, he’s rock-based in a way—after all, he has had a career as a bass guitarist and, like many composers of his generation, is comfortable in the vernacular idioms. His use of electric bass and guitar, synthesizers, and drum machines all point to this. But Jack’s vision stretches way beyond genre and style, a view from his compositional perch, which is pretty far reaching. There are influences and allusions from all over (Stravinsky, Varèse, Andriessen, Bach, Hendrix, Zappa, to name a few), but this is not to say that he is eclectic or derivative; he has sharply etched his own style.

As a member of a slightly older generation of American composers, I view with a somewhat jaundiced eye the current rush amongst younger serious composers to “be relevant” and employ the tricks and tools of popular music. It too often is done as a desperate move to find “new territory.” Jack’s uses

of this material seems natural enough, as he grew up in it. (It should be said that he had a thorough “classical” training as well.) But enough of panegyrics and/or jeremiads. Jack, by now, would have riddled this text with a dozen scathing puns; and if double entendre and irony punctuate his conversation, listen to this music!

Ironically, his *Piano Trio* (“Hulk Smash!!”) is written for only two pianos (actually three players on two pianos or, in this case, one MIDI file playing two Yamaha Disklaviers). But there are deeper ironies than that. The piece begins with some smashing chords, out of which seem to evolve both rhythmic drive and melodic materials. It’s like pulling apart fabric, a piece so long that it would appear to have no end. But in the end, it seems to turn back on itself as if looking in a mirror. It has a machine-like quality if only for the motoric rhythms, but a self-conscious one, not unlike the mechanistic drives from the Stravinsky of *Les Noces*.

Jack’s *Surf Music Again* is not so much an homage to the Beach Boys (nor Dick Dale) as it is to Jimi Hendrix. It is one of the most gorgeous “live-electronic” essays I’ve heard lately. It’s uncanny to see him playing (barely—his movements are minimal) the bass guitar and hearing such ether...(more irony?). This music reminds me that Jack, despite his roots in southern New Jersey, did “time” in California (at CalArts). *Surf Music Again* may be “pretty” music, but it’s not a pretty picture. The handbell piece, *Stigmata non Grata*, on the other hand, is sort of a pretty picture, although not what you’d expect from the standard handbell repertoire; those expecting “churchy” angelic sonorities might be a bit surprised. As he often does, Jack

subverts the tradition somewhat by having the players strike the bells with mallets as well as ring them.

Like *Hulk Smash!!*, *Rocket Baby* is a trio—in this case two parts of it are MIDI sequencer produced, and the third played by Jeff Krieger on his electric cello, which looks as radically different from a “real” cello as it sounds. It would appear that the story of *Rocket Baby*, as told by the wonderfully characteristic thirties radio announcer (shades of Orson Welles) is an introduction to the music proper, but be on the lookout for early sightings (or soundings).

Jack, always the literalist, says that the tape part of *SPNFL* is “constructed from piano resonances,” and indeed it is, but don’t expect to hear any sounds derived from hammers against strings. What vibrates the strings in this case are pre-recorded sounds blown into the interior of the grand piano at high levels of volume. As to deciphering the title, I would refer the curious to the famous live electronic piece of Cage and Hiller of the mid Sixties, *HPSCHD*.

Tattooed Barbie is, again, a trio. This time two live performers and a MIDI drum machine part. Jack thinks of the oboe as a “well behaved, pretty” instrument in its usual context (say, an orchestra) and, similarly, finds the twelve-string guitar in a rock context (e.g. the Byrds) also to be on the “pretty” side. By gradually retuning the twelve strings so he finally arrives at a harmonic series, and by a gradual increase in “weird effects” via electronic processing applied to the oboe, the two instruments are re-characterized or “tattooed.” (While he is doing this in performance, the drum machine has its “solos,” which are progressively more “tattooed.”) There are other meanings of tattoo besides the engraving of designs into human epidermis—the military musical ones I am thinking of—and there are other allusions with the words Barbie (as in a French connection?). They all bear hermeneutically on the piece. That’s as far as I get on the title, but it gives one much to contemplate. That’s the thing about this kind of music; it’s not a pretty picture at all, but hard to look away from. It must be the form.

I have shied away from discussing form, but there is much richness in this music on a formal level, some of it not so easily discerned but much of it strongly in control, pulling the listener along. Jack is a formalist in spite of himself, for he is a subversive; we find him “tattooing” many things in his music, whether it is the strange use of the piano’s resonance in *SPNFL*, or the unorthodox use of handbells. Come to think of it, perhaps Jack’s subversiveness does in the end make him a cohort of the Regicides and more of a West Rock kind of guy.

—Ingram Marshall

Technical Notes:

I’ve included some general descriptions of how we put this music together, because as technology permeates more and more levels of our lives, the audience, composer, and performer will probably have a better time of it if they all know what tools have shaped the process.

I played *Piano Trio* into a standard sequencing program. This allowed me to overdub myself track-by-track, sometimes measure-by-measure. I made full use of all the editing possibilities (quantizing, etc.) before recording the final playback on two Yamaha MIDI grand pianos.

Surf Music Again balances the way in which a sound is produced on an instrument (in this case the electric bass) with how that sound is altered electronically. The only “effects” utilized are an analog delay, and on one track, a wah-wah pedal. There are four tracks of bass, but usually two or three are heard at a time. On each track the bass is played in a particular way. On the first it is bowed on the neck, up near the nut. On the second track, a rubber ball mallet is slowly dragged along each string. The third has a glass ashtray (and the aforementioned wah-wah pedal) combining to create washes of high sounds. The last track features at first, clusters, and then later on, single natural harmonics. I wrote *Rocket Baby* for Jeff Krieger, with his electric cello and traveling MIDI road show in mind. It is a trio, with one live and two sequenced parts all the way through. Most of the things that don’t sound like cello (i.e. Frippian guitar) are, in fact, cello. And most of what does sound like cello isn’t. Those parts are various MIDI instruments in his road rack. The narration, performed by Tony Forkush, is backed by a montage of 1950s and 1960s radio debris. The story itself must be based on some real event.

Stigmata non Grata has no electronic processing. But sometimes it may seem that it does. At first the handbells are played in the standard way, but then the sounds of some of them begin to decay oddly. This is due to the bells being muted into some foam padding after being rung. Later on, the players use percussion mallets to strike the bells, which allows for more active rhythmic interplay.

SPNFL is inspired by a Willie Dixon tune, and in particular, the Cream’s live version of it. To create the tape part, I took short excerpts of Cream, usually less than a second long, sampled them, then played them very loudly into a piano. I then recorded the resonances, and using the usual array of digital manipulations, made new samples. Some of these were played through the piano again. Because these reprocessings happen partly in the physical, not digital, world, a certain amount of residual noise built up. I decided to clean up these sound files using a prototype of a de-noising program developed by Jonathan Berger. The program looks at the combined noise/sound as if they were layers of an onion, and one can peel away as many layers as desired. The program saves these “peelings” because it’s possible to peel away too many layers and discover that after the fact. At some point, rather than listening to the “cleaned up” sound, I reviewed some of the peels. Of course, I decided to use them at various points in the piece, inadvertently turning my colleague’s application into a re-noising program, my apologies.

Tattooed Barbie was a commission to compose a piece for people and computer to play together in a “live” situation. In each section of the piece the twelve-string guitar is heard in a different open tuning. It starts out as normal, but string-by-string, section-by-section, moves to a “D” harmonic series. The oboe is processed through a standard multi effects box and also changes from one section to the next. The drum part was composed using some features of both MAX and Performer. One of the technical challenges was to write a drum part that was dependable without being machine-like, and variable without using a generic random function (which, by itself, usually sounds like sloppy drumming).

—J.V.

Production Notes

Produced by Jack Vees

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