ARTICLE BY KENNETH GOLDSMITH

Stairway To 8-Track <u>Heaven</u>

MID THE WASH of avant-garde reissues, there's been scant recognition of what was known in the 80s as the cassette underground. Sandwiched between Mail Art and the MP3 revolution, cassettes were a quick and cheap way to get homemade music into the hands of a sympathetic worldwide audience. More DIY than cutting an LP (and with none of the industry bullshit that goes along with it), the movement evinced a 60s counterculture utopianism during the Reagan years. In the introduction to his anthology of writings about the cassette underground, Cassette Mythos (Autonomedia, 1992), Robin James talks about the thrill of picking up your mail every day: "Every time you go to your mailbox you could be picking up little packages that contain impossible sounds... It could be something that will pop in and totally blow you away... Lots of possibilities: garage sessions of your kid sister's rock band, or someone in a fancy home lab mixing incredible feats of science, or a pioneer of popular rock, soothing meditation, or difficult industrial noise... [Cassettes] are tickets to many sonic environments. It's probably not going to sound like anything you might hear on the radio." (Unless you're WFMU where, back in the day, the cassette underground releases got a lot of play. Today at the station, however, we have an enormous wall of cassettes gathering dust. Once in a while, when preparing a show, I'll glance at that wall and see scads of coollooking music, but when it comes down to it I never play 'em: they're impossible to scan and even harder to cue.)

So I was thrilled when I recently

received a brochure announcing the reemergence of Generator Sound Art offering both vintage and new releases of cassette network veterans-on CD. The first batch of discs—30 in all—are, by and large, familiar names from the world of experimental music: Nicolas Collins, Arcane Device, Pierre-André Arcand, Conrad Schnitzler, Gregory Whitehead, Chop Shop and the Haters. And then there is a series of discs that are simply whacked shit, representative of the kinds of oddball stuff on cassettes you might get in the mail: a recording of a refrigerator that makes no noise (think about it: have you ever heard of a totally silent refrigerator?); an hour of Brooklyn second-graders screaming; the sound of a Led Zeppelin 8-track tape being eaten; and an unauthorized U.S. bootleg of an unauthorized Italian bootleg of an unauthorized Dutch bootleg of Exotica music.

The project grew out of a tiny East Village record store called Generator that was around for a year from 1989-1990. It was run by Ken Montgomery and displayed cassette-only releases from around the world in a gallery-like atmosphere. Montgomery had been juiced by visiting Euro DIY music shops like Staalplaat in Amsterdam and Gelbe Musik in Berlin, and wondered why there wasn't anything like them in New York. So he got himself a 600-square-foot ground floor on 3rd St. and Ave. B and began displaying his collection of tapes, 'organizing weekly free con-



SAM HENDERSON

Rebirth of the glorious cassette underground.



certs, producing exhibitions of visual art by audio artists and setting up audio art installations in the basement of the shop. Montgomery gave the first stateside concerts of Berlin-based Conrad Schnitzler, whose electronic music he came to through Tangerine Dream, of which Schnitzler was an early member. Although Schnitzler was renowned in Europe for, among other things, being one of the first students of Joseph Beuys, he was little known here. Montgomery befriended him and won permission to "conduct" his cassette concerts in the basement of Generator, using four cassettes and eight speakers of droney electronics in complete darkness. The idea was that each concert would be unique due to the different starting times of the cassettes. Schnitzler's concerts became a weekly event at Generator, running every Saturday night

While the store created a small buzz, in the end it proved to be too much work with little financial return. (That much of the stock wasn't for sale didn't help; Montgomery says with glee, "WFMU DJs would come in and salivate over the displays, frustrated as hell that they couldn't buy anything.") He closed up shop only to reopen for another year in West Chelsea.

By the time it was all over, the enterprise known as Generator Unlimited had produced six LPs and dozens of exhibitions, and had held numerous concerts. Montgomery was burnt out and left the city in 1994. He kicked around Europe for while and finally landed in rural Pennsylvania, where he stopped listening to and producing music entirely. He went cold turkey for some time, but soon began to miss being around music. One day, while at a yard sale, he stumbled across a box of 8-track tapes and an old player. He bought the whole batch and began listening with an open mind. Although everything was 70s pop, he found it a relief not to have a vested interest in the stuff. Or so he thought: for in the box was a mud-caked 8track of Led Zeppelin IV. Upon popping it into the player, his avant ears reveled in the sound of the machine devouring the tape, pushing and pulling Robert Plant's voice to sound more like sound poetry than classic rock. He grabbed an old cassette player and

proceeded to tape the entire run of the 8-track.

The result was the first step toward reviving the Generator label and is now available as a CD called 8-Track Magic—60 glorious minutes of mangling; "Black Dog" lasts an unbearable 28 minutes, heaving and warping, kicking and screaming into the 8-track abyss. When we play the track "She's Buying" (a wobbly "Stairway to Heaven") on WFMU, the phones always light up with listeners begging us to take it off. It's become a station classic.

Returning to New York a few years ago, Montgomery formed a partnership with Scott Konzelman, aka Chop Shop, and together they run Generator's activities. A few years ago in New York Press, I reviewed a 3-inch Chop Shop disc of industrial noise that came wrapped in lead. I wrote: "[This disc] achieves an expressive stasis that manages to deaden the emotional plane like the lead it's wrapped in." Chop Shop's new disc on Generator, Kaput, tops the previous one. This time, the 3-inch is tightly crammed between two pieces of roughly cut glass. The entire package is ominously swaddled in medical gauze. Once you finally manage to extract the disc, it's impossible to get it back into the package. The whole operation reeks of danger, as does the music inside, which is pretty much the same as the last disc: rumbling tones that sound like the subway and scratchy whirrs that quietly shift like your neighbor's air conditioner on a hot summer night

Chop Shop's Kaput is typical of the sort of care, smarts and provocation that goes into the production of the new Generator line. Everything is handmade: CDs are burned to order and each package is assembled by Konzelman and Montgomery in their Brooklyn place. I ordered a couple discs from them; within a few days they arrived in the mail, each uniquely packaged and freshly laminated in (Montgomery has made a name for himself as a laminator: he literally travels the world to museums and art events laminating objects as a sort of performance art. Various laminated items around his apartment included a piece of matzoh, pancakes, panties and dirt.)

These guys are doing something that no one else is doing. "Generator supports those artists who fall through the cracks," says Montgomery. "They don't fit in the art world but they have no place in the academic musical world either." There's a charitable side to Generator as well: a percentage of each sale goes into a fund that directly supports the activities of these sound artists, be it funding for future releases or sound installations.

It's impossible to imagine just how much cassette underground material is floating around out there, waiting to find its way to CD. Generator represents just the tip of the iceberg. Due to the handmade nature of the project, this stuff won't be appearing in record stores any time soon. The only way to get it is to order from them directly, and they deserve your support: www.generatorsoundart.org.

Trust yourself, Aries... Calm down, Gemini... You're luckier than you think, Sag...

"Sign Language," p. 86