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AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM NEW YORK

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The Complete Songs of Innocence and Experience
Allen Ginsberg (Omnivore-Ginsberg Recordings)
by John Pietaro

“An illumination of eternal Consciousness,” wrote poet Allen Ginsberg in December 1969 in describing his inspiration to compose songs for radical Romantic Age English poet William Blake’s most profound work. Ginsberg was back in the East Village after appearing as a defense witness for the Chicago 8, who were on trial for conspiring to incite a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago (ultimately found not guilty). Ginsberg, with fellow radicals and gay rights activists William Burroughs and Jean Genet, were central to the mass peace and justice demonstration at the convention, which was violently descended upon by Chicago police. So inspired by the event and subsequent trial, Ginsberg wrote that the first half of *Songs of Innocence And Experience* was “now finished to music; the rest will be completely tuned in another year.” Ginsberg chose “tuned” to describe his compositional approach; the songs began as improvisations at his “haven for comrades in distress” in Cherry Valley, NY.

However, his visceral connection to Blake began more than a generation prior when he reported hearing Blake’s voice in his “mind’s outer ear.” He wrote: “It’s taken 2 decades of vision, fame, friends’ deaths & Apocalyptic history for me to realize the spiritual illumination...I imagined this music after 20 summers musings over the rhythms.” The resultant album, recorded in the East Village at Apostolic Studios, was released in 1970, boasting tracks with Don Cherry (trumpet, flutes, harpsichord), Elvin Jones (drums), Julius Watkins (French horn), Bob Dorough (keyboards, arrangements), Herman Wright (bass), Jon Scholle (guitars), Woodstock Sound-Outs producer Cyril Caster (guitar, trumpet, French horn) and Janet Zeitz (flute). Ginsberg provided vocals, finger cymbals, harmonium and piano, and his partner Peter Orlovsky added vocals, along with a chorus. Morris Eaves of *Blake Review* wrote: “I can hear the spiritual Cockney voice of Blake himself, though, in the New York voice of Ginsberg. The poet and amateur musician has made better music for Blake than the professional composer so far. I look forward to the spring and the second stage of Ginsberg’s tuning.” That second collection, recorded in San Francisco a year later, remained in Fantasy Records’ vault, unreleased for far too long.

Striking the necessary chord of resilience, Ginsberg’s complete album became available posthumously in 2017. *The Complete Songs of Innocence and Experience* became available as a two-CD set on Omnivore (and now available under Ginsberg Recordings), mastered and with rarities and new additions to the extensive notes. Listening with contemporary ears in Trump’s America, the statements, at once child-like and tragic, are especially poignant. Much of the music approximates renaissance sounds, some enlivened by free jazz. Starting with “Laughing Song” and “Holy Thursday”, trumpeter Cherry—a perennial fighter for humanity—is present. “The Grey Monk”, originally the album’s closer, includes Jones’ artful drumming explosions. An alternate take, sans drum track, is present, making the value of Jones’ fire immediately obvious. The second disc is arguably of greatest interest for the presence of cellist Arthur Russell who’d relocate to NYC’s downtown and serve as director of The Kitchen a few years after these sessions. His expansive concepts, like those of Cherry and Jones,

complement Ginsberg’s visions of Blake as succinctly as the unrest of the ’70s.

For more info visit allenginsberg.bandcamp.com



FATHM
Laura Cocks (Out Of Your Head/Relative Pitch)
Music for Two Flutes
Weston Olencki/Laura Cocks (Hideous Replica)
by Kurt Gottschalk

Extended technique is often dated to John Cage’s introduction of the prepared piano in 1940, but even before him, Henry Cowell, Heitor Villa-Lobos and Maurice Ravel had called for alterations to the instrument in their scores; yet musicians have been futzing with instruments as long as they’ve been playing them, “extended technique” predating codified technique no matter what the instrument. An infatuation with it persists, though, which often eclipses aesthetic judgment. Is “I never heard a sound like that before” a mark of artistic expression? For Cage, it certainly was. And for anyone who enjoys a good litany of dissociated outbursts, relish away. Others (this writer included) might find that good music is built from the same set of sticks—a sense of connectivity with the performer, a feeling of genuine expression, an understanding of structural intent (spontaneous or otherwise)—no matter what the technique.

Laura Cocks, Executive Director of TAK, not only helms of one of the city’s most vital new music ensembles but is a flutist possessed of remarkable technique. That aptitude was well displayed on 2022’s *field anatomies*, a set of five pieces for flute and piccolo (some with electronics and objects). *FATHM*, their second unaccompanied album, is a more introspective, more directly personal statement. The nine tracks are built around a mournful text by singer and poet Shara Lunon that opens with getting both physically and emotionally lost during a walk along a lake. Cocks’ responses seem to be structured improvisations and the force of playing is, at times, remarkable. The flute is treated as a resonant chamber, pushed into realms more commonly heard coming from saxophonists. But beyond technique, *FATHM* is a discourse of strength, delicacy and cohesion.

The 20-minute “SLUB”—Cocks’ contribution to *Music for Two Flutes*, a duo recording with Weston Olencki—seems to follow *FATHM* with the protagonist having fallen into the lake. The playing is even more visceral, the thoughts layered and colliding, the cold water met with both anxiety and resignation. It, too, posits an unorthodox dexterity, even virtuosity, something quite remote from the placid afternoon of Debussy’s faun. The other piece on *Music for Two Flutes*, Olencki’s “ceòl meadhonach”, is fascinatingly grating through much of its 30 minutes. Olencki transcribed and arranged the piece from a book of bagpipe music, and at times his and Cocks’ flutes do suggest the droning complexities of pipe music, with melody lines emerging from and sinking back into a wavering din. The two also coax and choke sounds from their instruments that I’ve not heard come from a flute. My guesses were either electronic processing or alternate mouthpieces (Olencki’s primary instrument is the trombone) but a performance video on Olencki’s YouTube channel put such theories to rest. Like Cocks, Olencki pushes the instrument beyond its natural inclinations to the point that it barely seems to matter what instrument is being played. Unless, I guess, you’re one of the flutes in question.

For more info visit outofyourheadrecords.com, relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com and hideousreplica.co.uk. Cocks is at Roulette Jun. 24 (part of “Terry Riley 90th Birthday”). See Calendar.