

JENKS MILLER: MAKING THE INACCESSIBLE ACCESSIBLE

Staff writer Benn Wineka was assigned the task of encapsulating the meaning and relevance of an increasingly visible avant-garde music community in the Triangle.

This seemingly Herculean task was made easier when the following e-mail exchange with area musician Jenks Miller did the work for him.

Diversions: How would you describe experimental music as a genre?

Jenks Miller: I don't think experimental music can be considered a genre; the term more accurately describes an approach to the creation of music than it does a classifiable genre or sound.

I realize this answer dodges the question, but the sheer diversity of discrete experimental musics makes the term fairly weak as a classification in itself (unlike, say, "Brit-Pop" or "Delta Blues"; terms that give us an idea of what the actual music sounds like).

Often, artists identify themselves as "experimental" in order to differentiate their own creative process from the process of "perfecting an existing form," which is what most pop music strives to do. Even then, the designation is problematic.

Dive: Once something has been done, can it still be called experimental if someone else does it?

JM: Once a method of sound-manipulation becomes codified in a recognizable shape that other artists can reference, I guess it's somewhat inaccurate to call those subsequent references "experimental."

Lots of popular rock bands — from My Bloody Valentine to Akron/Family and Isis — have referenced Terry Riley's or Brian Eno's tape experiments, Steve Reich's phase manipulations and La Monte Young's suspended-tone techniques.

I'm uncomfortable calling those rock bands "experimental," and I think that there are often more accurate labels available (in the example above, those labels would be "psychedelic rock" and "progressive rock").

In cases like these, the term "experimental" either functions as a shorthand for a more complicated description or it indicates that one just hasn't discovered the appropriate antecedents yet. If we accept that all new art forms (including those of modern composers like Riley, Reich, and Young) have been informed by existing art forms, things get even tougher.

This is one reason that I dislike the term "experimental" as a classification. Ultimately, if we must engage in this ugly classification business, it's more useful to trace similarities among artists in historically — and/or geographically — related music scenes.

Dive: What shapes the music?

JM: I cannot begin to account for the variety of forces that shape any artist's creative process, of course. Personally, I like music that appears to be a product of an artist's intensely personal — or spiritual — understanding of the world.

I enjoy pursuing music that is beyond my immediate grasp, music that is at first unfathomable, music that directly challenges me and may therefore expand my consciousness.

I like having to work backwards from a final product, through the creative process and into the contextual elements that may have shaped it. In this way, I find value in not knowing what has shaped a single musical composition.

Dive: How would you defend experimental music to a critic?

JM: Critics who continually expand their own knowledge and understanding of music as an art form are the only critics worth reading, in my opinion. I'm not interested in critics who are opposed to new sounds or ideas, so I certainly wouldn't bother defending experimental music to them.

I believe that an individual who adopts a critical voice in art (or politics, for that matter) must educate him/herself in order to be taken

seriously. I do not listen to ignorant political commentators; similarly, I have no stock in music critics who would deny the art form's ability to expand upon itself.

Dive: Can experimental music make an impact on popular music?

JM: Absolutely! But it often takes a while for this to happen.

A very broad example: Karlheinz Stockhausen's work on controlled chance and serialism has been extremely influential in electronic music and electro-acoustic composition, two sub-genres which have, in turn, influenced many styles of music you'll hear today.

One could even argue that the cut-and-paste approach involved in the production of today's slick-sounding radio rock is just a (rather extreme) permutation of early tape-sampling experiments.

Dive: Are there any bands who have penetrated the mainstream that would be classified experimental?

JM: There are many mainstream bands that reference 20th century experimental music; but again, I don't think that's really what experimental music is.

Some hugely popular bands used more esoteric compositional techniques in a stage of their careers, but often those bands shed the more "difficult" sounds in their search for wider audiences.

Some examples: The Grateful Dead, though eventually one of the most ostensibly "mainstream" and middle-of-the-road rock bands in the world, was vocal about the influence of Iannis Xenakis on their early album, *Anthem of the Sun*. John Coltrane's masterpiece, *A Love Supreme*, has enjoyed popular acceptance even though it is (still) a very avant-garde jazz record.

Dive: What's the biggest reason for most people not listening to experimental music?

JM: They haven't heard of it yet.

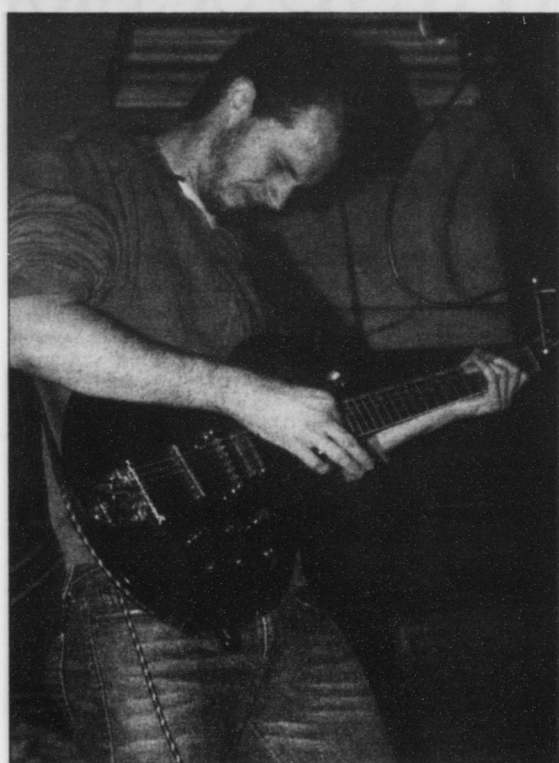
Dive: If these same people were exposed to experimental music could they be converted?

JM: Music means different things to different people; I believe there are great rewards to be found in music that challenges my preconceptions, but the process of appreciating difficult music, learning its vocabulary, and finding a way "in" can be very involved and time-consuming. Some people would rather not spend their energy in this way, and I understand that.

Dive: What drives people to experiment with "conventional music?"

JM: I believe that we all have a creative drive, and that part of that creative drive involves the destruction of an established form, be it musical, political, etc. Tearing down established forms is hard, because a nauseous sort of existential dread or fear inevitably follows that process. It takes a leap of faith to rebuild after the smoke has cleared.

There's a quote from Aleister Crowley's "The Book of Lies" that I like. It goes like this: "That which causes us to create is our true father and mother; we create in our own image, which is theirs. Let us create therefore without fear, for we can create nothing that is not God."



Jenks Miller's role in many progressive music acts, including his solo project, Horseback, makes him a staple in the local avant-garde music scene.

Contact the Diversions Editor at dive@unc.edu.

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