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JAMES TENNEY INTERVIEW

So Woody, tell me why you want to interview Jim?

Why? I think we have some ontological origins in common but I would rather step out of the total personal interviews to begin with. I would like to ask overall questions and then go into more specifics. I would like to ask what is so frustrating about working with purely electronic material? We talked about it before and you said that to glick with pure electronics wasn't something that you'd be interested in.

Not in the beginning.

What actually motivated you from going acoustical?

Well, actually those are two different questions or there are two answers. In relation to the first one, that kind of purely electronic sound was too poor for me in the beginning. The earliest motivations to go into electronic music had to do with this great new world, all the new treasures, the richness of it and yet some of the early things that were being done that I heard from Europe for example, that used pure tones and where they seemed to want that, the Cologne work for instance, just sounded too slick and simple to me. So it was as though there was some aspect of richness that I was spoiled by from the acoustical world that I missed there. In the work I did with the computer I dirtied it up again deliberately which is probably one of the reasons that that computer music that I did has not caught on. It's hardly recognized in the computer music world. I think that in 10 or 20 years from now more people will get interested in that dirty thing again.

It's very (?) what we get in (?) imaging because we may say the first register of the music is trivial to the point of not being useful or usable. That refers to a phone conversation you had with Holly Scranton (?) who's been working now with the computer and graphic display and she asked me directly could you do anything with it which would be related to your work. I said not yet. It's too trivial to be useful. On the other hand, what I found for myself was even with that structure I got from primitive electronic image, let's say just the feedback which is very much what she worked with in the beginning, audio system feedback, even the oscillator itself was (?), was that once it starts moving suddenly you get into a different class of the problem, or perception involvement, once it develops from one stage to the other the simplicity or emptiness of the image actually becomes secondary. The change or the control becomes primary because there's nothing else to watch. I wonder if what maybe that's what discouraged you as well, that the modes of controlling your sounds were so small in the register, so small in its scale that you wouldn't find that worthwhile.

Well, my experience with electronic music was very curious because I began with the most primitive beginnings of the medium and after working in that for a couple of years I jumped to the most sophisticated and I skipped over the middle ground that employs the instruments that most current electronic music is being made with. Synthesizers, for example. I just skipped right over that. So I went from this situation where I was working with old Lafayette oscillators and old tape recorders and a homemade noise generator and things like that and jumped right into that computer thing at Bell Laboratories where the process was suddenly extremely and, for me, wonderfully abstract. Abstracted from the wires and the plugs and things that you and Steina enjoy but I was never too comfortable with that. What I am comfortable with in the working process is just thinking and putting the idea down on paper and then somehow getting it translated. I went from a form of the medium where the only thing that could be done was pretty funky to another form where I had to really work to get some funk back into it. Another thing that occurs to me is that I seem to be kind of perverse in a way because with the computer music I felt the necessity to mess it up a little bit, to get away from the pure, simple, clean, slick kind of thing. In the early 70s though, I did a series

of pieces that involved players with acoustic instruments in which I'm asking them to do something very mechanical and to do it as perfectly as possible. Now, I know that they can't and I don't expect them to do it perfectly and yet the effort to make it perfect brings the result into an interesting area, an interface between electronic and the usual acoustic experience. Somewhere where the imperfections are reduced to very small fluctuations in some or several parameters and they become very interesting, they become like the melodies in an otherwise nonshaped thing because it's so mechanical. I keep calling it mechanical. Perhaps it's a strange word to use but . . . so I'm perverse. Which manifests itself in another thing. It seems to me as soon as I've done something and explored an area to my satisfaction I find it very hard to go back to it.

What you described was like a stepping into an area in which you needed the texture, you needed some imperfection, certain space. It would not be even acoustical space but it would be certain space that you need for your work to actually exist within some environment. Maybe if you would have a different class of tools, that is if you would go through different time or would start in a different time do you think you would find this completeness in the same medium but in a different time or is it something that is . . . how would you define this frustration of the incomplete material, of primitive material? What I'm trying to say is this: it happened to us in video but we follow the line of the tool and eventually through the evolution of the tool we gained some satisfaction.

Well, partly my leaving the medium was the result of other factors that were not . . . I might very well not have left it if my life situation had not taken me away from the medium. In a very real sense, I moved to a new place and a new job and there was no computer. So, I looked around me and said, "What is there?" And I started using that. Another thing I have referred to when people ask me about it is that there was a kind of fatigue that had set in. It was not the medium itself but just the disproportionate amount of time I was having to spend at development as distinct from composition. Now it's very different but in the 60s if you wanted to work with a computer music system you had to set it up. I do expect that if my life situation ever put me in close contact again with that kind of medium, I'd probably use it because I've got a backlog now of ideas and pieces that would best be done with a computer. One more thing, you used the word frustration and in a way it was not so much a frustration. It was the kind of frustration which becomes a motivation to do something and I remember during that period doing an awful lot of listening to natural and environmental sounds and I said to myself, "Look, you've got a medium that theoretically can do anything." So it doesn't seem to make sense to use that medium to do things that you only conceive of through your training, through your past experience. If that medium can do everything then what is everything. The nearest thing to it is that incredible range and world of sounds that you encounter when you go out in the street or out into the forest or wherever. The computer programs that I designed at that time were deliberately designed in order to try to achieve this similar range of variability in the sound. That included aspects that I heard in most of those sounds which was a level of . . . a kind of noise, a kind of random modulation of one thing or another. So, I considered that to a necessary component of this rich world of sound and one setting of the noise generator is zero. Right? That's one possibility. Occasionally, you hear a bird and it's an absolutely pure, unvarying tone. Occasionally. Or you hear a what? I don't know, some kind of electrical or mechanical sound among all these. So that's one possibility in that range. I also was very interested in the variations in speech sounds because the human voice is one of the most incredible modulators, synthesizers, of sound in the whole world. So this was obviously an area to extend the idea of timbral variation. Even though it was an extremely abstract medium my involvement at the time included a great deal of listening.

So let me get myself oriented in this. Basically, what you're saying is that you were drawn toward sound but what about a composition? Did you foresee a possibility in developing whole compositional systems to this class of machines?

Yes.

What would be the barrier? What would be the most difficult, in fact, in this. Is it getting there? Is it getting closer to that possibility or is it getting . . . what is it?

Well, I did it actually. I did it within a certain class of compositional systems but they were invariably stocastic but stocastic in Zinockus (?) sense. With an additional component which Zinockus' theoretical writings do not incorporate and that had to do with ideas that I had developed a few years earlier having to do with Gestalt perception. You know, that whole Gestalt perceptual school, Wertheimer, Kafka and Curler (?) dealt mostly with visual perception and I don't know if you had come into some of that but I found it fascinating in its own right but also nobody had made any attempt to draw analogies, or generalize the principles or observations that they had made, to carry those across to auditory perception, musical perception and I made an effort to do that and came up with some things that were not all that original except that they were applying it to musical perception for the first time and these were incorporated into those programs too so that they were a combination of stocastic process but modified or shaped in a certain by these notions about Gestalt, hierarchical Gestalt perception. Okay? Significantly, when I left the medium I also left that kind of compositional process. I did a few things that were based on that process for instruments but mostly the things that I've done since then are not stocastic anymore.

You see there is an illusion in work with successful units that you may eventually accumulate out of these unit systems. That's what happened to us.

Universal systems?

Yes. Eventually, you see, I even got the illusion that image could be notated which is something that is probably very farfetched as long as you speak about photographic production because every piece of photography is very ambiguous. In a way, I got into this same dilemma. It would be one's life time or many life times to learn the disciplines or achievements of composition as accumulative. It is beyond one now to control the tools, control the tonal systems and still even perform them. That seemed to be very remote because if you look at computer music or performance of computer music as Berman does it still very elementary and it's based on the hope that eventually this is an accumulative discipline and through a group of people it will be possible to develop notational systems that will serve as (?)

I don't think that's true, do you?

You see I'm in the same situation now. I would like to escape that because it's a very precise program which you know what to do the next day and you know exactly what to do a week from now and a year from now. It is a discipline which I think is a scientific or other humanistic interest. Yet to devote your life to it and divorce yourself from what you described as a total environment of sounds, of culture, all these influences I think is beyond one's endurance unless one is a monk or a mad person.

An egomaniac.

Or has no other way.

I think it comes from a hangover of an old concept, from the European culture of the great masterpiece. Somewhere in us we all still want to be Beethoven or Rembrandt.

Or Descartes. If you start working with the computer it just gets very (?). It's a whole system, it's

a linguistic system as well as the (?) system as well as a compositional system. All kinds of systems. Yet I haven't assured myself that is I have the capacity and I've tried and I will stay with it for a while but I don't think it's possible. I don't think we can really grasp the world as it was held before.

Three of four of the compositional programs that I did at Bell Labs were designed to be totally general so that a large of number of pieces could be done with the same program with just slightly different input variables. In some cases, not even a different input variable except a starting number for the random number generator and that a whole class of pieces could be done from each of these programs. That's the way I conceived them. Once I had done one piece with a program I never went back and did a second piece. To me, that's related to this thing that you're talking about. How much of what we do is creation in the old sense and how much is just plain discovery? I think it's really important that we acknowledge the degree to which it is search and discovery and the notion of creating a masterpiece is kind of irrelevant.

How much was the discovery, say of Beethoven? How much was the masterpiece (?)

I don't know.

Steina: Or in any period.

Woody: It seemed to me that at once a notational system is established suddenly what we call divine talents comes to the system which is somehow readily available and can exercise it. What we're talking about as you described your program, once you write your program or establish it, you can exercise it through A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H but that's what we, you know, you cannot pursue that direction because then you would be fulfilling the possibilities which first of all is endless and then it's uninteresting. But once there is a complex system that can be exercised intuitively or above the system then it could probably be exercised in the sense of new myth or new narrative or even subjects or something that is utility. I wouldn't recognize my work to be a utility because I think it is a discovery. At least for me. When it becomes a utility you have to step away from that process and take other processes and build on them and you speak about Wagnerian drama-building, something which is related to the processes. Let's move in a different direction now. What's interesting to me about this interview you had with Susan on the radio was that you kind of defined certain lifestyles or life in composition as very distant from the mainstream of music, of mainstream contemporary music and from the mainstream of anything. You actually described certain mode compartments which fascinated me. How would you characterize it? What is it that makes people isolated in not only the culture but with each other?

Oh boy. I wish I knew. I question the reality of the concept of mainstream. It used to be very meaningful and now I think there are a lot of people that still believe in it and work in relation to it and maybe in some sense, for them at least, there is a mainstream. But it's not a useful concept for me, perhaps because I find myself obviously not in the mainstream. When I look back at the history of, at least, American music and to a lesser extent European music in the 20th century, the most important composers were never part of any stream at all except their own individual trip. For me, they become a kind of composite heritage, a composite root system. I'm choosing that very personally and sort of peculiarly or idiosyncratically. I choose certain ones that other contemporary composers might not. I don't know if this a rationalization. It may be but it might also be true that the reality is, more a kind of pluralism. There are individuals working in various places, more or less in touch with some community, in some cases, not in touch at all and that 20 or 30 years from now when inventory is taken it will be found that it was again a bunch of isolated individuals doing the things that remain of interest to people later. We no longer have that kind of consistent sense of

the musical culture is. If there's any way to describe what it is now, it would be in terms of what it's possibilities are, which are virtually infinite. The world is just blown apart, in a certain sense. That homogeneity that we associate with the last few hundred years of European culture does not apply here and I don't know if applies in Europe now. Maybe it does because my sense is that composers there still have their sense of mainstream and what they do is done partly with a consciousness of their relationship to that mainstream. They can come out with manifestos . . . I won't name any names . . . saying that everything except which one thing, which they do is irrelevant which in relation to what's going on this country is a meaningless statement.

Let me pursue this. Again, certainly the illusion of the modernists especially, now it's kind of transcended into the political level was and maybe still is, that this group of people should be supported, not only spiritually but directly, financially. Even after the Russian revolution all the unusual creative talents were kind of taken into account. Of course, they were eventually purged but is this a part of the utopia that you could involve yourself with? Would you think that this is fine as it is, somehow heroic or romantic or somehow painful or is there a social alternative? As in the 60s, there was some glimpse that there is a unity of alternate thinking, there is a support of people living in that social and spiritual milieu and that in fact there was even some sort of direct support with the arrangement of the shows, of the performances. Does that at all interest you?

Until I moved to Canada five years ago and even now, if a politician came and asked me, "Should we legislate more money for the arts?" I would say, "Yes, of course. You guys are a bunch of bastards that you haven't given more money to the arts." I would always take that public stand and yet the situation in Canada has made me think differently about it and have a kind of private view which is different, which is that governmental support is dangerous. That's there really is a kind of co-opting that takes place at a very subtle level. In Canada it's nothing like, I assume it was in Russia where they were really expected to write revolutionary symphonies. Nobody would ever say that a Canadian composer is expected to do any particular thing. Yet I really have a sense that because of the system in Canada music and the arts are supported on the European model. In certain respects, it's very good. It's been awfully good for me. In the past five years I've gotten three commissions since I've been there whereas here I received one. I sense that my students are aware at some level that when they graduate they will have to move into that mainstream and when I think about the American composers whose work I value from the last 80 years that didn't have that, I think that they only had one essential thing that is the other side of coin of being completely ignored and that is they had freedom. I don't like the romantic aspect of that. I don't want to ascribe to a kind of romantic vision of the artist, that it has to be painful and lonely and all that. Personally, I don't want it to be that way but I would expect the quality of the music to diminish if there were a different system suddenly instituted. That's just private between you and me and of course, the camera. You know, it's not something you can tell a politician because they wouldn't understand.

By the time they're thirteen or fifteen they're aware that if they write a certain kind of music that they can get a grant, that they can make their living from grants and commissions from the government. They want to know how to write that kind of music because they want to make a living writing music or making movies or whatever and not washing dishes. It's a natural process.

I think that given the nature of the dominant profile of this culture, this society the way it is, the arts are not really integrated with it, the arts here have nothing to do with supermarkets or should not. And yet supermarkets are a good deal of what this culture's about and there's something appropriate in the arts not being supported by the supermarkets, so to speak.

There has been something defined in this society or this cultural environment which is called

experimentation. It may be not a very exact term in the mind of the people that support either directly or voluntarily or involuntarily. Yet, even that notion of experimentation seems to be diminishing. As far as video is concerned we have been long hidden in this category of experimental videos. It is a new religious pursuit probably but in that way the control of the government was not direct because there was no meaningful examination. Even if the government would get back a tape or a report they would have no way of evaluating it. In a way, this period of funding that we got into was the most free I've ever experienced.

That's the paradox of it because it's great when some money comes down it doesn't matter where comes from.

There's no pressure because there's no inquiry. In some conscious or unconscious way it's coming to the funding process that there should be some usefulness of that public money. It's very little to do with the government. I think it's a common consensus. Something develops and people think they should return some value to the people. My two thoughts would be: I would pursue one and corrupt the art completely and see if you can destroy art by corruption, by money and the other would be that you would look for imperfections. Whenever there is an imperfection you would use it. When there's a perfection that we know, it would be a dead end. So there's a certain modality that I have no answer to that either. I also think that when people lose the purpose of experimentation or I would say, play, and go straight to certain social utilities that's where the art loses its interest to me and I guess to our kind.

It's a paradox. You have argue both sides because you have to survive some way. Most of the American composers survived by doing something else.

Teaching.

Not so many by teaching until more recently. That's a more recent phenomena. In fact, Peter Garland is terribly suspicious of anybody, including me, in the academy. But I don't think teaching is nearly the problem for a musician that living on Pulitzer prizes and grants would be. Perhaps it doesn't generalize to another medium. There's a wonderful story about Ives in 1947. Fifty years after he'd written the piece, he received a Pulitzer prize for his third symphony. He scrawled this letter to Carl Ruggles that said, "Dear Carl. You're the greatest composer in the world but if you ever win a Pulitzer prize you ain't." But he deserved the Pulitzer prize and the fact that it was 50 years late, what is he going to do, turn it down? Or what can we say now about it, he shouldn't have been given it? Of course, he should have been but it's a paradox.

(?)

Tenney: One last word about money. I like to win the lottery or something and win a hundred thousand dollars, two hundred thousand dollars and come here and buy a place in New Mexico.

(Real estate talk)

Why are we here in New Mexico? For you, it's easy because you have the homing instinct of a pigeon.

It's partly some searching for roots again. I have a lot of them. I have a lot of connections here besides being born in Silver City. They're not factual but psychological. I feel some connection with the Indians. I feel some connection with the history of the place including crazy things like the Atomic bomb. That whole Los Alamos, White Sands aspect of the history, I feel a direct connection to because of the way I first came upon it in my youth. On this last trip we went to Chaco Canyon

and over to Grand Canyon down and then down into central Arizona and then along one highway which includes 3 little towns in Arizona that my family lived in and then continued on back into New Mexico and went to Silver City where I was born. For some reason these towns were along the highway, as though every time the family it moved it just got up and drove to the next town but it wasn't that. All those towns were along one river including Silver City and that has a mysterious attraction for me.

You find out that there is fact some metaphysical basis of the past.

Yes and of the place.

Indeed, there's no escape because my environment was the second war and I can never get out of that. It's like art of the 19th century, you can never overcome that. This region is the only historical region that I've experienced in America.

That's right. You really have a sense of a history here that you don't get in a lot of places.

If you walk in the desert you know that there's someone that walked there before and you look for the artifacts. It's an interesting feeling and I think it grabs everybody.

It's not just the search for roots because Ann loves the area as much as I do. She's as fascinated and drawn to it as I am.

It's interesting that you mentioned Chaco because a friend of ours just came from Buffalo. He's a scholar, a medievalist but when he saw the Pueblo Bonito he just felt so betrayed. In fact, first he was mad and then he was frustrated and then he was totally nostalgic. He said, "This experience humbled as nothing in my life," because he was a medievalist and he was never taught about Chaco. When he saw these buildings, when he probed through them he was moved to tears.

Because he was taught that there was no history here.

He was surprised. He had been taught that history was about Boston and the Mayflower, the good Anglo-Saxon tradition and they had eliminated a magnificent people here. I guess that effects everybody.

There's another level that goes way farther back. The earliest projectile points, like arrowheads and things, there are three different styles of those from three different early periods, like ten, twenty thousand years ago, they all have names of New Mexico towns because that's where they were found. Sandia, is one, the mountain down here by Albuquerque. Folsom and Clovis, those are two New Mexico towns. So there's something about the aridity which has preserved artifacts that probably would be found all over the continent if it weren't for different climates.

Yes, the vegetation eats everything.

Yes and then it's easy to forget that Spanish history here is earlier than the Anglo-Saxon. It goes back 450 years. All these place names are Spanish.

Woody: That's something for the Anglo-Saxons to think about. How it came to be that a certain part of north American was settled by the Spanish. It must be kind of strange.

Ann: A continuing Spanish culture in New Mexico I find really appealing.

Tenney: Yes, that unique.

Ann: Even being in Arizona, all of a sudden you don't see anybody that's under six feet tall or white and I was anxious to get back to New Mexico.

Woody: Americans have never been hung up on this territorial patriotism. In Europe every region has such a deep rooted instinct about their own history and they recall events in 1620 which are decisive in the local politics. So it's crazy. I think it's a continuous lesson to American that there was something like the Southwest. It's a continuing resource and lesson to the rest of the country aside from the cowboy and those mythologies. Would you believe that this may become a resource again or a new subject to work with as the west was or as the Indians are? Do you think there's a creativeness here also?

Tenney: Well, for me there is. I have ideas for a new piece that has a lot to do with the experience of being here. Some of these place names, they are so evocative for me. Like Sangre de Cristo mountains or Jornada del Muerto desert. These are heavy, heavy, resonant with all kinds of history and poetry and I hope sound but that's very personal. I don't know whether it would attract other people. In fact, I hope not.

Are you afraid that you'll be laughed at?

Oh, that's always been a problem.

Because the music was a whole new culture, such an urban stress.

Yes, but I can't help that. Most of what I do I have the feeling that I'm liable to be laughed at and I just hope I'll have the last laugh.

There is something in the urban culture that it is the most protected in its extreme. Everything in the rural area is so vulnerable because your neighbor can come to you and kill you because of your belief. While in an urban area they'll kill you because of money but they may not develop ideological antagonisms. In some way this seems to be a paradox. I see it this way, the west does not have it's (?) the landscape is unlike supermarkets, as you mentioned it. It's unlike anything that is corrupt in this society. It's there. It's way beyond any other landscapes elsewhere. The consistency of the bizarre, the surrealistic environment is a pure resource which is beyond criticism. It should bring that purity to any form.

This landscape is like the music of Webern. Everything is so articulated. It's curious that one of the things that saved it is the fact that nobody wanted it. That's the main reason why the Indians in this region are living in their ancestral areas because Anglos didn't want it. It was too dry and to them, ugly. You couldn't farm it, you couldn't ranch on it very well. And that's an irony too. The fact that it was not wanted that has preserved it. Now they're going after it again.

It's interesting that this landscape is a continuous critique of the commerce oriented population. It could never be a good resource that's why it became the last resource. In fact, it is a resource.

They're going to fuck it up now. They're trying real hard to mess with it. I wonder how resistant it will be. It's all so interesting. It's the landscape that has been the most devastated by natural forces. Erosion, wind and water and everything has just washed away thousands and thousand of feet of soil and yet that's part of its incredible beauty.

That's the job. You could say that God did a good job here.