

Music Reviews

Kenneth Goldsmith

The Disintegration Loops

William Basinski

(2062 Records)

x10R.1/x10R.2

David Schafer

(Transparency Records)

Chart Sweep

(MP3)

About a year ago on a plunderphonic music listserve I'm on, a message was desperately sent out asking what everyone was going to do for source material in the post-Napster landscape. For a moment, it really seemed like it was the end of some golden era. A year later, things couldn't be more different. With files flying back and forth on numerous decentralized peer-to-peer systems, the future of plunderphonic and appropriated work seems richer than ever. A few releases—two of which reached me through traditional postal means and one that was downloaded—seem intelligently to sum up the potential for this apparently inexhaustible form. All three pieces manage to take cold source material—Muzak and chart-topping hits—and transform it into historically based works of art that make broad cultural comments yet remain incredibly personal.

We're just beginning to see artworks emerging that respond to events of 9/11. The first CD to pass my way that deals directly with the tragedy is William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*, a piece created as an hour-long soundtrack to the events of that day. It's based on a repeated Muzak loop recorded back in the early 80s when Basinski was experimenting with altering tapes he made off radio samples (remember when Muzak was a constant FM radio presence?). Many years later in 2001, Basinski was archiving and digitizing some of his old pieces when he stumbled upon the loop that this work is based on. He popped the tape into the recorder, but to his surprise the tape unexpectedly began disintegrating. As the tape loop played, the tape began to deteriorate more and more unexpectedly, leaving eerie echoes and silences in places he couldn't have foreseen. The result is *The Disintegration Loops*.

After the collapse of the WTC buildings, Basinski broke out his recording and looped it on his Brooklyn rooftop for the rest of the day as an elegy to those who perished. With its sweeping strings and droning echoes it's a pretty compelling elegy. There's a poetic parallel to the way the piece was constructed (or deconstructed) that perfectly fits the mood of 9/11. It brings to mind the work of Gavin Bryars, particularly his *The Sinking of the Titanic*, another wistful memorial to a major tragedy.

David Schafer is a Los Angeles-based artist who has also put Muzak samples to good use in his new two-CD set *x10R.1/ x10R.2*. He got his hands on the entire Muzak library and simply superimposed 10 CDs' worth of the stuff on top of one another, all playing at the same time. It's nerve-grating: what starts out as "easy listening" is instantly transformed into "uneasy listening." Dozens of different string-based tempos swirl around one another, with an occasional pop melody making itself known before sinking back into the sonic mess. I heard bits of "Volare," "Raindrops Keeps Fallin' on My Head" and "Theme from *A Man and A Woman*" among dozens of others. Choruses of whistles, the clatter of snare drums, whining accordions and tinkling piano all weave in and out of this insanely dense texture, continuing on for two full CDs (the first is a straight superimposition; the second one is slightly manipulated, so that the melodies are more audible).

In the early part of the 20th century, Charles Ives wrote a piece called the *Universe Symphony* that called for multiple orchestras to be playing different pieces simultaneously outdoors in a valley. Depending on the way the wind was blowing or how the sound was bouncing off the mountains, you would have an entirely different listening experience, replete with unexpected juxtapositions in tone and tempo. Although Ives is thought of as the quintessential American composer, I think that Schafer's one-upped him here. Judging from the few recordings I've heard of Ives' *Universe Symphony*, Schafer's achieved the same disorienting effect using the contemporary American material: whereas Ives drew from American folk tunes, Schafer's plundered the vast archive of American commercial Muzak and turned it on its ear in ways that Ives could only have dreamed of.

Finally, on that plunderphonic listserve, a post was recently sent from the Evolution Control Committee's DJ Pantshead informing everyone that he had digitized a legendary, obscure piece of patched-together music of dubious origins called *Chart Sweep*. It's a chronological collage featuring a tiny fragment of every number-one U.S. chart hit from 1956 to 1990, evidently spanning the complete age of the 45 rpm single. It starts with Elvis' "Heartbreak Hotel" and ends with Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" and sounds like one of those commercials on tv where

they're selling a Time-Life collection of music, with only samples of the "good" or "recognizable" parts of the song. It's a stunning monument to pop culture, once thought to be disposable, but after listening to all 45 minutes' worth and blushing at how you know *every single song*, it's obvious that your head is so crammed with this stuff that you never need listen to the radio again—it's all in stored there in your head.

Chart Sweep is available at the Evolution Control Committee's website: www.evolution-control.com/sounds.html.