

SIGNAL TO NOISE

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WORD MUSIC

Fred Cisterna reviews recent spoken word recordings.

In 1951, John Cage composed *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, a radical work that embraced chance but utilized precise instructions. The work is scored for musicians who manipulate 12 radio receivers, and the basic material—whatever radio stations are broadcasting at the time of the performance—is unpredictable and varies with every performance. Almost 30 years later, the Canadian filmmaker, musician, and artist Michael Snow created two audio pieces by turning a short-wave radio's dials, but these works were improvised. The result, *2 Radio Solos*, was eventually released on cassette tape in 1988 and is now available on a CD from Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto in Mississauga, Ontario.

Snow's subtle performances—"tuning in and out and between stations, changing bands, bass, treble, and volume"—result here in exquisite audio collages. Of course, all kinds of sounds come into play, and a variety of spoken languages make up a significant part of the rich panoply. In the first piece, "Short Wavelength," much of the material is sped-up, not because of post-production tinkering—there was none—but because the batteries lost power in the course of the recording. The effect abstracts the source material, pushing it further into the realm of pure sound. The second track, the 43-minute "The Papaya Plantations," starts off with what sounds like a broadcast of Moroccan music. Later, bad reception, slivers of music, and overlapping signals create sonic magic. At another point, a Spanish-language broadcast is enriched with various types of looping interference. Sometimes voices are buried so deep in the mesh of radio waves that they become just another texture in the mix.

Light years away from Snow's approach

are the brash recitations of the musician and performance poet Copernicus. Born Joseph Smalkowski, he's been releasing albums since the 1980s. His philosophical, rant-like performances focus on a handful of themes, particularly the idea of nothingness. On 2009's *disappearance* (Nevermore, Inc/Moonjune), his backing musicians include two longtime associates, guitarist Larry Kirwin and musical director and keyboardist Pierce Turner.

On "12 Subatomic Particles," the deep-voiced Copernicus intones, "After 2,000 years of scientific discovery, all of creation can be explained by 12 subatomic particles." As the band whips up a psychedelic stew, Copernicus commands, "Bow your head to the top quark! ... Bow your head to the electron!" It's impossible to know how much of his act is a put-on and how much is a sincere expression of a wiggly perspective. But worrying about such distinctions is probably missing the point. Copernicus's world is a place where bravado, philosophical rumination, and rock jams are all equally at home.

Ha'Orot (Tzadik) by Greg Wall's **Later Prophets** involves three rabbis—not too many jazz albums can claim that. First there's saxophonist and clarinetist Rabbi Greg Wall, who was ordained in 2006. Then there's Rabbi Itzchak Marmorstein, who intones the album's texts, which are by Rabbi Avraham Itzchak HaCohen Kook (1865_1935), a poet and mystic also known as Rav Kook. At times, Marmorstein sticks to the poems' original Hebrew, while at others, he recites his English translations. Wall (a former student of Archie Shepp) and his band—pianist Shai Bachar, bassist Dave Richards, and drummer Aaron Alexander—provide fine backing: modal grooves, free jazz, impres-

sionistic pianism, Jewish melodies, and other elements come together nicely. "Nigun Ha'ra'v #1" and "Nigun Ha'ra'v #2" show another side of Rav Kook's creativity. For these two instrumentals, the band has created excellent arrangements for melodies composed by the revered rabbi. The first track displays a lovely lyricism, while the latter is a jaunty piece with elements of 1960s soul-jazz.

The legendary ESP-Disk' recently put out a CD of the late Timothy Leary's *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*, which the label originally released as an LP in 1966. It's a key spoken-word document of the psychologist and psychedelic researcher's ideas. A lot of us walk around with reductive, cartoon-like notions about Leary, and it's good to hear the doctor make his own case. Leary discusses, in measured tones, a number of ideas surrounding what he sees as a new step in the development of man. Assisted by the use of certain drugs—LSD and marijuana—people, especially young people, will have the opportunity to live fuller, more sensual, and more sensitive lives. (Leary's speech rhythms are hypnotic, but it must be noted that engineer David Hancock edited out what the liner notes describe as "the long intervals between words.")

Leary's cultural critique is nuanced at times, and it's fascinating to hear him talk about the generation gap in neurological terms, complete with references to an "imprinted symbol system" that traps older adults. Leary's ideas have been superficially absorbed by American society, but they are still radical. The last track, "One Final Word," touchingly asks the young to be kind to their parents and to turn them on—not to drugs—but to sensory awareness.*

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