

Mercer Arts Center

Pinch of Moog, a dash of light

by Richard Nusser

For more than a century Greenwich Village enjoyed an international reputation as a cultural incubator aswarm with avant-garde ideas and a host of resident geniuses capable of transforming them into great art. From Poe to Pollock, gifted people lived, loved, dreamed, and drank here. Old and new forms of expression merged in an atmosphere of learning and experimentation.

For a time, though, it has looked as if that tradition was about to fade away forever, given the present-day Village most notable for high-rise apartment houses, gaudy boutiques, souvlaki

stands, and Mafia discotheques. Rent and crime rates have soared. Theatres have closed and the club scene is just now struggling back to life after being swamped in a wake of rock 'n' roll festivals. The walking wounded of the welfare state and the drug culture threaten to drive patrons of the arts off the streets, back uptown, or to the suburbs to feed on straw-hat theatre and an occasional visit from the Boston Pops.

But thanks to a combination of circumstances, and a handful of individuals, it now appears possible that the tide may be turning. Economic conditions and an overabundance of talented artists in every field are contributing to improved conditions, but these factors alone won't insure a cultural renaissance here, or anywhere else, unless artists have places to meet, perform, experiment, and — last but by no means least — earn a living.

On the bright side we have Westbeth, for all the troubles it's gone through, producing artistic returns with dance concerts, art shows, theatre, and an in-house video hook-up that could be the forerunner of a much larger cultural communications system. Not to mention the sense of community that's being established there.

SoHo has survived and brought the art scene back downtown, where it once belonged. Several recording studios have sprung up here in the past year or so, attracting some of the biggest names in the music business. Even John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who call the Village their "spiritual home," want to settle here permanently.

Most of those endeavors have a state subsidy or an audience they can depend on for their economic survival. But the latest addition to the Village's avant-garde community, the media artist, faces a more daunting plight. These cultural pioneers hope to humanize technology. But synthesizing one's emotions on an acoustic guitar, or through the sound of one's own voice, is a few thousand bucks less expensive than pushing them through an electronic synthesizer. And there seem to be more capable media artists, representing everything from video to electronic music, at large in New York today than in any other place on the globe.

Credit for this is due the New York State Council on the Arts, among very few others. That agency has funded many of the projects involving people who are building a sound base for a technological arts movement. Seymour Kaback and Irving Koven are two names that might be added to the list of supporters.

Kaback, a prosperous air conditioning contractor, and Koven,

whose construction firm is responsible for several posh uptown salons (Gucci, Valentino, and St. Laurent's, among others), are co-owners of the Mercer Arts Center, a complex of five theatres, two cabarets, and three workshops that was initiated by the D'Lugoff brothers, Art and Burt.

Kaback and Koven took the place over by default, after the D'Lugoffs ran out of money, leaving the two contractors stuck with thousands of dollars worth of work completed and a theatrical complex the New York Times has dubbed "Lincoln Center downtown." After a shaky start, the place seems to be on its way to becoming a stimulating addition to Village life. Kaback hopes the theatres and cabarets will support the over-all cost of developing the center as a breeding ground for new talent.

It could happen. Rip Torn wants to start a resident acting company, and there is talk of staging a multi-media version of

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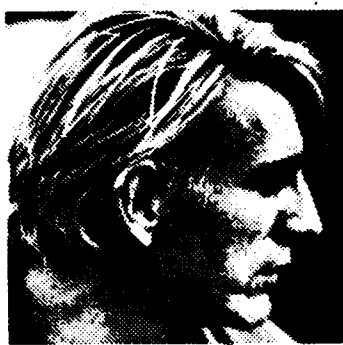
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Mercer Arts

Continued from preceding page

"Richard III." Rip is on the center's board of directors, along with Kaback, Koven, Viveca Lindfors, Gene Frankel, video wizards Woody and Steina Vasulka, producer-director Roger Englander, and director Allen ("The Proposition"). Albert. Anything could happen. The center is located in the first two floors of the old Broadway Central Hotel, now the Hotel University which, before hard times fell, was a watering spot for the likes of Diamond Jim Brady, Artemus Ward, and Leon Trotsky. The last time "Richard III" was offered on the site, Edwin Booth played the lead. That was in 1857, when the Broadway Central was known as the Winter Garden.

Much of the center's present activity flows through the Vasulkas' Kitchen, a large room on the second floor that has been bubbling over lately with the work of electronic alchemists and experimental musicians drawn almost entirely from the surrounding community. One wonders where they would be performing if the State Council hadn't paid the rent on the Kitchen. In a few months

the Vasulkas will know if the state can afford to pay the rent for another year.

There's more to creating a conducive environment for a flourishing of the arts than merely paying rent, however. Video equipment, light works, and electronic gadgets that produce sweet and/or stirring sounds must be paid for. Fortunately, it appears that the public is beginning to catch on to the skillful craftsmen and quite often brilliant artists who have been appearing at the Kitchen, and it looks as if some of them will soon be venturing into more profitable arenas.

One group, Stardrive, has managed to merge a conventional trio (saxophone, electric guitar, and drums) with a synthesizer, producing the first successful marriage I've heard between acoustical and electronic musicians. Stardrive's synthesizer, designed by 25-year-old composer/pianist Robert Mason, is played through a keyboard. Mason expresses himself very well through the machine, touching the other musicians' minds as well as the mind of the audience. He has an impressive musical background. He received most of his training here and was born in the Village, in fact.

Rhys Chatham, another of Moog maestro Morton Subotnik's students, is also working in the Kitchen, cooking up new combinations of sound and space. A recent performance featured Chatham, violinist Tony Conrad, a "pulsing bass," and a video tape loop designed by the Vasulkas that was taken from a film of Conrad's. It was an exhilarating experience. The Vasulkas have been involved in most every phase of electronic media and they have a knack for attracting the most skilled practitioners of the technological arts. Films, light works, music, and video en-

vironments have been offered and will continue to be presented on a regular basis. The quality of the work has been high, considering that much of the new art is still at a very loose stage, just developing a vocabulary and idiom of its own.

Another product of the Kitchen, 27-year-old musician composer Michael Tschudin, recently took over the musical direction of the Blue Room, the cabaret/night club that bears a chilling resemblance to the milk bar in the film version of "A Clockwork Orange." Tschudin apprenticed with Pablo Casals and Leonard Bernstein, has played piano for "The Fantasticks," and recently took over the musical direction of one of the center's plays, "Love Me, Love My Children." He is working on a model for a 12 tone piano in his spare time.

The musical direction of the Blue Room is eclectic and Tschudin has been stocking it with everything from belly dancers and rock and jazz combos to stand-up comics and underground superstars. An adjoining room, now under construction, will soon provide additional dancing space. The ambience is torn between New York chic and a funky Village atmosphere that is most prevalent on weeknights. The entertainment, on Friday and Saturday nights, is continuous from 6 p. m. to closing. Things get mellower as the evening progresses and there is less hustle and formality.

Dinner is available and on the past few weekends the post-theatre crowd has joined with tourists and locals to pack the place. During the week Michael encourages jam sessions and visits from old and new performers. Last week Caroline Plummer, who plays guitar, sings, and writes songs for Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin, dropped by with drummer Warren Benbow and legendary master Charlie Byrd in tow. Eric Emerson and the Magic Tramps are on hand nightly. So are two of Michael's aggregations, the Rhythm Section and the Midnight Opera Company, which rock 'n' roll for your dancing pleasure and then offer snatches of the sort of music Michael is writing for a jazz-rock opera. It all sounds very good. Incidentally, the musicians are working for nothing, except the opportunity to play together and develop their skills among an audience. Plans are afoot to pump the entertainment into the adjoining "Obie" Alley lounge and bar with a video hook-up.

The activity in the Mercer Arts Center is spreading to St. Adrian's, a dimly lit hang-out for artists, anarchists, and loft dwellers that is situated in the same building, but with a separate entrance around the corner on Broadway. Owner Jerry Houk will be offering live music very soon, as well as food and drink.

The Mercer Arts Center is an important step in the Village's return to eminence. Right now it is also playing a crucial part in the development of the technological arts and the rebirth of a relevant cabaret theatre. Hopefully, the demand for these outlets will grow to the point where additional facilities will be needed. And maybe — who knows? — the next cultural center in the Village might even be publicly owned and operated by the artistic community. Stranger things have happened.

Slide Show Offered

"The Automated Air War," a slide show with a written script, is available to local groups from the Fund for Peace Education and Fellowship of Reconciliation, 163 Nassau Street, New York. The slide show was prepared by National Action/Research on the Military-Industrial Complex, a project of the American Friends Service Committee.

'Stop Smoking' Plan

A "Five-Day Play to Stop Smoking" will be put into practice April 3-7 at the New York Center, 227 West 46th Street. Sessions beginning at 7.30 p. m. will include lectures, films, displays, and discussion. Registration fee is \$5. For further information call 586-2336.

Boal at Benefit


Augusto Boal will talk about "Repression and Theatre in Brazil" at a benefit-reception for the U. S. Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners on Sunday, April 9, from 4 to 6 p. m. at David Dalton's loft, 39 Bond Street. A contribution of \$5 will be asked.

Jazz History

A short history of jazz, played and told by some of the musicians who made that history, will be presented in April at the New School for Social Research, 66 West 12th Street. Sessions will be held on Monday nights at 8.10 p. m., beginning April 3. Opening night guests will include Eddie Condon, Ken Davern, Wild Bill Davison, Gene Krupa and Dick Wellstood. For further information call the Registrar, OR 5-2700.

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