

by King Leer

I first heard about Stardrive while downing a cold Bass ale upstairs at Charlie's Music Box in swinging Rumson, New Jersey. The Music Box, referred to by habitués as "Michael and Nancy's," is an R&R center for veterans of the Hoboken-hippie scene. In Hoboken a young and attractive woman isn't even a chick, she's a *dame*, and the natives are still leering at Betty Grable's legs.

The Music Box boasts entertainment by such Hoboken luminaries as the skillful Luke Faust, whose rare New York appearances at the Folklore Center last year culminated in a spontaneous ten minute ovation, and Bob Palmer, who since his days with the Insect Trust has been intimately linked to the Hoboken scene. Another skilled reedman to serve his apprenticeship in a Hoboken club is the ubiquitous Perry Robinson. And when he is up from the South, the elusive and brilliant John Parrott III—one of America's finest songwriters—will pull into the Music Box and take a hand in the proceedings; occasionally I make it down there to jam, myself.

Recently, another Insect Trust graduate made a surprise appearance at the Music Box: Trevor Koehler. Koehler's credentials as a master musician are varied and impeccable. In addition to his stint with the Insect Trust, perhaps the finest of the unsung rock bands, Trevor has appeared with people like Pharoah Sanders, Sonny Simmons, and Gil Evans. Furthermore he has done everything from picking peas with Tennessee Ernie Ford to hanging out with Big

Carlos Hernandez, who some of you might remember from a group called the Dukes and Duchesses which, if my memory serves, distinguished themselves by appearing on Thom McAnn radio commercials five or six years ago.

"The sound we're coming to," Trevor told me, "I think, is one with a whole lot of musical power. Remember . . . I guess it was Albert Ayler who put out an album called *Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe* . . . the music on the album wasn't," he smiled the boyish smile that belies his thirty-five years, "but the thought behind it is true. There are moments when we get close to it, when it starts to feel healthy and powerful, with the electronic direction helping it."

Bob Mason added, "The electronic thing provides a new frame of reference so that the way in which the sounds come at you, the way they order themselves in your mind, is much more flexible. They sound different from anything that has occurred before, so it makes a whole other framework possible." Although many rock groups have used synthesized sound, Bob is quick to make distinctions. "There aren't many people who are really *playing* the instrument; there are a lot of people who *use* it, a lot of studios that have them around and use them for everything from serious music to filling in commercial product. But it's still pioneering to get out there and go on the road and *play* the synthesizer."

Bob has worked with Paul Bley, one of the few he will admit can *play* a synthesizer, and Trevor spent two years

"So there's that and also there's the touch-control thing. Synthesizers are normally like organs. The amount of pressure you put on the keys doesn't alter the volume. Mine does, however. But that's only part of it," he adds. "The music is what is important. All this is only a way to find the music. That is what Stardrive is about."

Mason's synthesizer is the backbone, the balls of the group, carrying much of the rhythmic as well as the melodic thrust. While most of the jazz-rock fusion ventures (Weather Report being typical) tend to use their keyboards in a very mild, impressionistic sense, Mason's synthesizer has more than enough sheer drive for a whole band.

Carlos, who is a great guitar player, is capable of walking that same thin line that McLaughlin and Coryell are on—blending the strength and bright palette of the rock guitar with the harmonic and rhythmic complexity of the traditional jazz guitar. The division between rock and jazz styles is especially evident in the use of the guitar.

Jazz guitar is predicated on chords that rock musicians (depending on whose theory of snobbery you accept) either are ignorant of or shun. The net result is that jazz guitar too often falls prey to its own development and appears colorless and tonally insipid in contrast to the strong, basic tonal and harmonic palette of the rock guitarist. The best of them, of course, in both fields walk freely through the artificial barriers of idiom and past practice. This is what Carlos Hernandez brings with such gusto to the music of Stardrive.



## Stardrive The Greening of Jazz-Rock Revisited

Mama Thornton. Last year his baritone-sax playing won him first place in the Jazz and Pop Critics Poll, and this year might be the year of his new venture, a jazz-rock group called Stardrive.

I didn't see Stardrive at the Music Box, but having attended some performances over at Buckminster Fuller's Space for Innovative Development in Manhattan, I can imagine the scene at "Michael and Nancy's" little funky down-home bar. Stardrive's thrust comes from the integration of electronic music, represented most obviously by Bob Mason's handbuilt synthesizer, with more "physical" instruments such as sax and guitar (enhanced and altered more or less subtly by both traditional and electronic manipulation). For a jazz group they are intolerably loud; for a rock group they are probably too far divorced from formula, perhaps too intellectual and alien to the strictured rock environment. But taken on its own terms Stardrive has a lot to offer. This is the tightest band I have ever run across and they are still putting their stuff together. I have seen them play, minus their rhythm section, with a drive and precision that is calculated to lay you out. What they will be like in a month is anyone's guess. Stardrive is a collective effort among three highly skilled musicians, Trevor, Bob Mason, who has heavy credentials as both keyboard performer and composer, and

gigging and cutting albums with Gil Evans, possibly the only other group to make full use of synthesizer capabilities and to allow the synthesizer a full creative role. Part of this lack of synthesizer use, despite the obvious attractions of an instrument theoretically capable of producing any combination of sounds, is that there is not, as yet, a commercially produced synthesizer set up to play like an instrument.

Mason explains it like this: "It started off a long time ago when I was studying composition at Oberlin Conservatory. They had a studio there with a Moog I was using to compose tapes on the synthesizer. When I graduated I came to New York and worked with Morton Subotnik at his studio for a couple of years composing on the Buchla synthesizer. The Buchla is a type of West Coast synthesizer, a very hip one. It doesn't have any keyboard, it is all conceptual, all intellectual, you have to manipulate the stuff with your mind rather than with your fingers."

"I was making tapes and at the same time I was thinking about the kind of instrument I'd want to perform on, because none of these seemed to be set up for playing or performance, they were all meant for composing. So over a period of a few years I put together what I have now. In the meantime I was playing piano and organ, you know, keyboards, and I had visions of bringing the two together without making any compromises."

"Finally now the thing has taken shape; my instrument combines the good feel of the piano and that kind of direct-touch control percussive instrument, with all the sound variety of a synthesizer. It's all in one place. The Moog (and others with keyboards) are all monophonic, they play just one note at a time; absolutely none of them plays chords. I think that is why there hasn't been a real synthesizer influx yet, it's still very limited. I have a system of repetitive wiring which enables me to get all those things onto one keyboard. It's pretty simple, but no one has done it yet." Mason pauses to consider, "It's kind of dirty work, too."

In the prototypical fusion group the sax, as well as the keyboards, seems determined to shun creativity and the limelight for a role of pseudo-drone or aimless wandering typified by Wayne Shorter's immense renunciation of the limelight in his roles with both Miles and Weather Report.

There seems to have developed a kind of post-Ornette and post-Coltrane revulsion to either howling it up freestyle or using the sax up-front as a lyric voice in the manner of Coltrane and, later, Pharoah Sanders. Trevor suffers from no such embarrassment, and his use of both the soprano and baritone sax looks back to the kind of chaos-into-lyricism of both Coltrane and Pharoah, and forward through his incredibly effective use of wah-wah and echo devices.

All the members of Stardrive are acutely conscious of the pressures upon them to conform to a more typically "rock" environment. But they feel the climate has improved in music to the point where a group can be accepted on its own terms.

Bob says: "I had a chance to play a lot of this material down in the Washington D.C. area and outside of the city. We performed a lot of different audiences, just the synthesizer and guitar. There was a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of people open enough to just dig the music."

Stardrive's plans don't follow the usual routine. "We have to find our audience, or maybe let them find us before we get into doing a record. We want to go out and work for a while, find out what we're capable of while playing for audiences. You know, there's a standard formula: get the agent, then the manager; then get the recording out and then get the work. Everybody runs through the thing pretty much in that order. We want to be different, we want to work."

Their plans involve touring. "It's really part of being a musician," Trevor says wistfully. "I don't think that sitting in one nightclub for twelve years is what music is about. The travelling musician is as old as human life, a real part of it."

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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.