

ON  
**RUMINATIONS, MYTHOLOGY,  
PLURALISM, AND A NON-LINEAR  
PRECURSOR**

by Jim Pomeroy

Lindley Armstrong Jones (1911-1965) is yet another of those 'lost' composers, buried in the sands of time, who are occasionally uncovered to stand as monuments to the reworkings of history. Like Atlantis, Troy, the Sphinx, the Piltdown Man, and the Cardiff Giant, these revelations perform dramatic inversions upon the authority of historic determinism. These rosetta stones embody the power to fuse missing-links or to shatter the bonds of spurious integrity, however encrusted with antiquity. These finds are discovered not so much with 'new' evidence as through the re-reading of 'classical' texts in new context. The case of L.A. Jones is consistent with this familiar process. Perhaps this analysis can reveal something about the contemporary context in turn.

"Rediscoveries" place the extraordinary congruencies of the present as template upon the shifting profile of the past. (Granted, profiles alter with point of view, but that quality of 'perspective' is one of the foci of this investigation.) In the light of New Music in 1981, Jones' oeuvre exhibits an amazing string of alignments. As a performing composer he was skilled in classical traditions and fluent in popular and ethnic vernacular, including the jazz idiom (as were his approximate contemporaries Stravinsky, Gershwin, and Brecht/Weill). An innovative percussionist (like Steve Reich and Harry Partch), he aggressively experimented with a wide variety of extended techniques on traditional instruments (like John Cage, Joseph

Celli, Stuart Dempster, Henry Kaiser, George Lewis, and others) and extended vocal technique, including text-sound (as does Joan LaBarbara, Meredith Monk, Julia Heyward, or Charles Amirkhanian). A major aspect of his work is the adaptation or invention of new, handmade instruments (like Laurie Andersen, Yoshi Wada, Ivor Darreg, Dan Schmidt, Jim Hobart, Bob Bates, Dick Dunlap, Susan Rawcliffe, Tom Jenkins, Bob Wilhite, and again Partch) to provide his unique music with an appropriate and expanded vocabulary unfettered by the limitations of standard equipment. His performances successfully sought to fuse the musical with strong visual and narrative impact (in a manner prophetic of today's Kipper Kids, Robert Ashley, Bob Wilhite/Guy De Cointet, Tom Johnson, Pat Olesko, Robert Hughes/Margaret Fisher, Meredith Monk, Julia Heyward, Laurie Anderson). His favorite form, the song (not unlike Terry Allen, Peter Gordon, Jill Kroeson, Olesko and Anderson) was frequently a grandly tempered transcription (Ashley, the Kippers, Tomita, Wendy Carlos, The Residents, Olesko) warped with ironic intent. He recruited from a rich and competitive pool of professional musicians and trained them in the particular rigors of his demanding personal requirements (reminiscent of Partch, Frank Zappa, and Captain Beefheart) drawing upon their highly developed extemporaneous (if not improvisational) skills.

Jones' primary task as an artist appears to have been in the role of critical mediator. He was obsessed with the processes of translating, compressing, and inverting linguistic and social codes. Most of his work involved transcribing well-known pieces, themes, genres into

eccentric workings of the popular idiom. His purely original compositions are rarely as universally appealing as these transcriptions. The fact that some of the most powerful works of Ives, Liszt, Bach, and Dvorak contain partial or incomplete quotations substantiates this practice as a creditable strategy.

Although an accomplished, commercial musician, Jones was bored with the material. Constrained by regulations of the musical profession in the early 1940's, he began his experiments in instrument design and improvisational ensemble work. Early recordings sold unremarkably but a July 1942 issue moved 1 1/2 million copies in 10 weeks. For the next 20 years his career was a non-stop tour (at ultimately, a killing pace.) A typical roadshow: 139 shows in 165 days, a 40 person troupe (including 13 musicians), two private pullmans and a baggage car stuffed with enough paraphernalia to dwarf the massive stock of the Chicago Art Ensemble. A familiar figure on radio and film, Jones' experience in television, beginning in 1948, and concluding with a six year network series, ranks him with Ernie Kovacs as a major progenitor of video-performance art. In 1962, his command of the vernacular was eclipsed by a linguistic/demographic development he was unable to comprehend or subsume.

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Rock'n'roll swept him off the air. He died in 1965 of emphysema in Los Angeles; a weary veteran in the city of one night stands. The hundreds of recordings made in his lifetime, stack as an un-mute memorial to the genius of Lindley Armstrong "Spike" Jones.

Few contemporary artists cite Spike Jones as a formative influence. It is clear that his work is not part of the lineage of new music, its roots lie elsewhere. Yet the similarities between his work and so much of today's call for consideration. What is it about today's art/music that allows this comparison; and what was going on then that somehow led to today if it was so different from Spike Jones in the first place?

Serious experimental music in the 1940's, 50's and early 60's shared an important hangup, it was too serious, bagged with centuries of Western (meaning European) intellectual development (meaning investment) which, however experimental, was still confined to rigorous acknowledgement of tautological systems of discourse, decorum, discipline and tradition. It was old, white, masculine, tired, and structurally conservative. Part of this baggage was instrumentation form, and ensemble (implying years of complicated socialization for composer, performer, and audience), venue (institutional modes of presentation — the concert hall, conservatory, the academy, the museum, and the court) and the concomitant social support (institutionalized forms of patronage consistent with the previous conditions). Most of these institutions still exist, still presenting string quartets and symphonies long after the corpses of their German composers have turned to dust. And there are academics still composing mannered chamber music in

the illusion that they're experimenting creatively.

Recently, there seem to be some significant departures from these constructs (otherwise we wouldn't be here dealing with this). Today's realms are harder to determine. The notion of New Music itself is difficult to define. Part of the problem has to do with the expanding boundaries of all art-forms in the last twenty years. It is often no longer possible to discern whether a given work is theatre, music of 'performance art', whether something is an instrument, a sound sculpture, or an environmental installation, whether a particular narrative or formalist idea resides most comfortably as art, theatre, music, or literature. And, most emphatically, it's not important to categorize as such. Another important point is the wholesale relegation of European tradition to the back-seat in favor of world music, jazz and popular musical influence. The presence of these ideas in the spectrum of "avant-garde" music is due more to the *literal* presence of a significant third-world population, real gains in racial and sexual redress, and autonomous youthful achievement, than to the condescending humanity of "innovators" of the previous decades.

Radical expansions have also occurred in the areas of venue and support. The development of artists spaces, communication and distribution networks, loft jazz, improvisation workshops, festivals, retreats, public radio and television have exponentially increased the means for composer/performers to reach new audiences with provocative expositions (previously inconceivable). Vigorous, direct and indirect, grant subsidy from federal, state, local, and private agencies has exer-

cised unfathomable leverage on contemporary aesthetics, especially upon the risky, unmarketable, the ephemeral, the experimental, the critical, and the minority. Certainly there are kinks and omissions but the climate is currently as favorable as it ever has been (and possibly better than it will be, unfortunately).

In addition, developments in accessible technologies (electronics, compact high-quality audio, xerox and cheap offset reproduction, video, polaroid, public media centers) have greatly contributed to the information exchange, promotion, distribution of work, and dialogue. Networks exist for the distribution of artists books, audio and video tapes, journals, and films. In a perverse sense, vaudeville is reborn in the alternative space.

It is pivotal to recognize that all the above mentioned phenomena developed to a large degree as peer-oriented expressions. They are neither the class-oriented, tradition-bound structures of the ivory tower, nor do they reflect the massive populist leveling of the 'entertainment industry' (and its corporate determinants.) The diffuse richness of the offerings available in contemporary art/music confuses many critics who long for the good old days of elegant "excellence" (and all its stratified reinforcements). Events like New Music America serve to emphasize the breadth of this situation. There is an ungainly, chaotic, hungry, shocking, playful, obscene, profound and joyful quality to this music which disturbs the funereal decorum of 'high art'. What good is art after all if it's got no room for a good Bronx cheer, right in "Der Fuehrer's Face."