



FOUND IN SPACE

If NASA numbs you, if you prefer your space stimuli to be, well, *orchestrated*, check out the Kitchen at the Mercer Arts Center on Friday nights—and for one week, starting May 2, Folk City (huh, what?). There you will find Stardrive, synthesizer band, picking up where Stockhausen and Cage, Miles and Mahavishnu, and Dead and Floyd leave off on the starry trail through advanced musical consciousness.

When you're sitting there in Mercer's Le Drugstore-cum-SoHo studio decor, listening to Star-

drive, the technicalities of it all are irrelevant, but they are important to the future progress of music. Bob Mason's synthesizer is a truly revolutionary instrument.

The synthesizer is a keyboard instrument which produces purely electronic sound; i. e., there is no acoustic source, as there is with an electric guitar or organ, and therefore there are no acoustic limits. The Moog, ARP, and Buchla synthesizers have been in commercial production for some five years now, and have become an integral part of recording studio equipment, for the simple reasons that their sound range is almost infinite; they can emulate any other instrument and a good deal else besides. Their chief limitation as performance instruments is that only one note at a time can be played on one keyboard—with incredible nuances of volume and distortion, but still only one note. This does not matter in a studio, where over-dubbing is common practice, but onstage, forget it. To duplicate the live musical potential of a simple piano keyboard, you would need a dozen synthesizer keyboards. And that's where Bob Mason, who leads Stardrive, comes in.

Mason has designed and built a synthesizer which can be played like a piano: that is, as many notes as there are available fingers can be played at a time, chords and all, and the keyboard is dynamic—the instrument reacts directly to the force with which keys are hit. Combine that with the range of the synthesizer, and you have what must be the most potent musical instrument ever.

Mason can produce literally any sound he wants by direct touch control; the only limits are within himself—what he can do with his brain, nerves, muscles, and hands. His synthesizer brings the marriage of musician and instrument to a new peak of perfection, and it is incredibly sensitive. When the NASA boys shoot off their rockets, the tiniest variation in aim produces huge geometrically proportionate variations of direction and distance in space. Similarly, Mason can produce amazingly different sounds by minute alterations of finger movement and pressure on his keyboard. In a split second, he can do what Stockhausen and Cage spent hours, days even, splicing tapes to achieve.

As you would expect, Mason has the class to go with his monster machine (which, incidentally, is remarkably compact: it's as big as it is only because he needs to work on its innards with his hands). He has a degree in composition from Oberlin, he has worked with the masters of elec-

tronic music—Paul Bley, Milton Subotnik, and Steve Reich—he has worked on mixed media shows in the heyday of the Electric Circus, arranged music for a multitude of rock bands, and so on. Over the 10 years he has been directly involved with the avant garde of jazz/rock/electronic music, he has soaked up a worldful of styles, techniques, and sounds, and he has more than enough technical skill and musical intuition to work everything from classical European to Mahavishnu into a stunning new music.

Stardrive is a band of four (Mason and his baby accompanied brilliantly by electric guitar, horns, and drums). Together they play music which would normally require the combined services of a full symphony orchestra, a rock band, several Moogs, and Miles or Ornette with their mates. Simply astounding, it is, a total treat for the senses, not a trace of confusion as it swoops and glides and roars and crashes around your brains in a delicious, sensational, cosmic flow.

I don't usually rave on so, as readers of these pages will know, but this is *something else*. Like it says in Stardrive's promo stuff, "Stardrive . . . is named for the power that propels a moving body to the speed of light—the velocity at which matter ceases to be matter and becomes pure energy." Think about that, Werner. Catch it in the ears, space freaks.

—Patrick Carr

THE PAUCITY OF PLACES with enough room for "name" bands and for dancing has made dancing in the aisles a not uncommon sight at such places as Carnegie, Philharmonic, and the Academy. In clubs, however, dancing is usually limited to squirming around in the few square inches allotted each person, taking care that the long blond hair in front of you doesn't get a special helping of whipped cream or coffee. For those who came to see Billy Preston at the Bitter End last week, though, there were no space limitations. The audience Thursday night was not simply bopping up and down in place—it was *dancing*. In the aisles. On the seats. The waitresses took to the doorway to the kitchen. Dancing:

Preston put on a 40-minute show that should put James Brown on guard. Each number represented a climax that couldn't possibly be topped—but was. The gospel tradition, with its emphasis on two-way communication, was abundant. "Talk to me," he insisted, but that was the least of it. One woman near me was filling in some beautiful riffs on the breaks. People around the stage consistently reached out to slap and shake hands. And there was just a

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