

# Interviews



Tod Dockstader in the studio mixing Omniphony





Tod Dockstader and James Reichert in the studio mixing Omniphony

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## Interview with Chris Cutler [January 20th, 1994]

This interview first appeared in ReR Quarterly 0402.

Chris Cutler Why and how did you start doing organized sound?

Tod Dockstader Is that what we're going to call what I did? I don't know if anyone knows that term, now.

CC But you adopted it -

TD - from Varèse. He used it because of all the problems with the word "Music" - with a capital M: "But, is it Music" And there were all these labels, musique concrète, tape music, electronic music and whatnot, at that time. I was working in all those techniques, yes, but I was working in the sound, first, in the *sound*, and I thought Varèse's term covered what I was doing, best.

CC But not now?

TD Well, now I suspect it was a kind of cop-out. Why I started was because I really wanted to make a kind of music, and I was worried about being an unlettered primitive and so I shouldn't call it any kind of "music," what I was doing. I wanted to make music out of sound, instead of sound out of music - which is what people who write Music intend to do. And, with tape, for the first time, I could do that. Of course, most of the world's people make music without writing it out first; they always have.

CC "Primitive" cultures

TD Right. And I was a charter primitive. I was included, at the end, in a long programme on New York FM - this was early 'Sixties. They played Cage and Stockhausen and Schaeffer, Henry, Kagel and all, and at the end, after my little contribution, the host said something like, Well, any form that allows an unschooled primitive to make music can't be all bad.

CC You were "unschooled"?

TD No. I hadn't gone to their school, a Music school. I'd gone to my own school: I learned cooking in the kitchen. I apprenticed as a sound engineer in a big New York studio, in the 'Fifties. I went pretty fast through that school because I'd already done film editing in Hollywood, and a film editor in a little studio has to cut a lot of sound. It was all optical sound in those days, but the principals were the same.

CC What kind of films were they?

TD Animated cartoons. The studio was UPA, a little place across the street from the big Warner lot. I got the apprentice editing job because I could draw; I guess they needed an editor who could understand the artists. The studio's gone now, and the New York sound studio; so much is gone. I always felt comfortable in studios, at home right away.

CC Were you ever involved on the other side of the camera, with the visual side of film?

TD I did a few original storyboards, on my own time, that were made into films. One was about an ice-cream salesman, drove a Good Humor type of truck around and got so he couldn't stand that same lame tune looping all day. So, he installed a pipe-organ in his truck instead of the jingle-machine. I wanted the organ to play the Bach *Tocatta and Fugue in d*, but the staff composer said, no way, he wanted the credit. So he wrote a tune which wasn't much better than the first one. That was my first exposure to the business of music: they wouldn't let me play what I wanted.

CC What models did you have when you did begin to play what you wanted?

TD I'd heard some early work in Hollywood, done by film-makers working with optical tracks, drawing on them. There were the Whitney brothers and a Canadian, Norman McLaren, working in the 'Forties and early 'Fifties. They drew these little soundtracks for their films, before tape. They sounded quite "electronic," whatever that was. And I'd seen and heard a film by the Barrons, *Jazz of Lights*, which *was* electronic, this was mid-'Fifties. It was all new to me, and at the same time it sounded somehow familiar: I knew how they did it. So, as soon as I got the chance, in New York, I started in.

CC Had you heard any musique concrète?

TD I think I must have, at least on the radio in New York. Probably Schaeffer's '48 *Etudes* - the train thing and the saucepan thing - and the first Luening and Ussachevsky tapes of the 'Fifties. I still have the first LP of musique concrète; I think that was '60 or '61. But I'd already done my first *Eight Pieces* by then. I don't think I modeled my first work after anyone in particular, not consciously anyway. I just knew how to do it. In working on a Moviola, you could run tracks backward and speed them up and slow them down, and edit sounds. Before tape came in, and that's about all they were doing, technically. What was important to me was they were doing this as music, what Schaeffer called "a new art of sound." That idea was my model.

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## Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to NOMEX for directing me towards Dockstader's music and to Howard Slater for his support, encouragement and contribution. This site has been constructed to disseminate information about Tod Dockstader - if you have any contributions, please email them to the [webmaster](#).