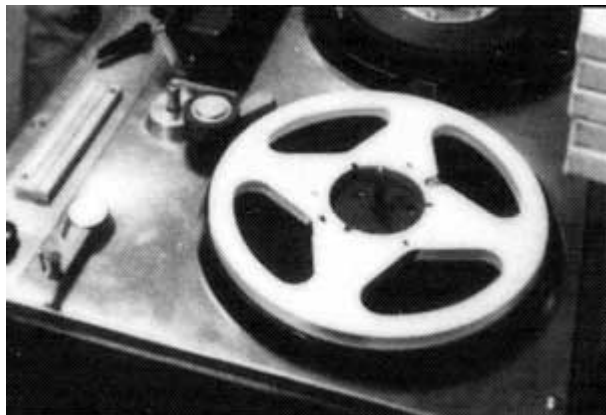


# Interviews



Tod Dockstader's studio, circa. 1966



Tod Dockstader and James Reichert in the studio mixing Omniphony



Tod Dockstader's studio, circa. 1966

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## Tod Dockstader by Ken Hollings [June, 2005]

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Tod Dockstader wanders down the fluorescent aisles of his local supermarket like a polite ghost. Self-contained and quiet of manner, you may not notice him at first amid the busy shelves and stacked freezer cabinets, but then some detail will catch your eye: his neatly pressed khakis, the knitted white sweater or the crisp Reebok touchline jacket he's wearing. At 73, he displays a casual elegance that allows him to both blend in and stand apart from the suburban sprawl that surrounds him in Westport, Connecticut, a quiet stop on the Metro-North Railroad about 50 miles out from New York's Grand Central Station.

A couple of fire trucks race by outside, their sirens and horns blaring. He consults a handwritten list, peering closely at the items on it. "Soda, bag of ice, spring water, KEN," run a few of the entries. "I write a lot of lists," he explains. He sometimes finds he's lost track of which pair of glasses he should be wearing at any given time. He's also responsible for some of the most exciting electronic music you're likely to hear these days.

"To me it's just a continuation of what I've been doing all this time, with long periods of nothing," he remarks casually of the two most recent releases to bear his name, then pauses to light up another cigarette from one of the two packs placed carefully on a side table close to where he's sitting on the back porch of his home. The sights and sounds of a fresh spring day in rural Connecticut filter easily in through the fine mesh screens. Out of those long periods of nothing to which he has just referred, however, has come *Pond*, a collaboration with David Lee Myers and the first new Dockstader work to be published in nearly 40 years, plus *Aerial #1*, part of a three-volume series of compositions derived from shortwave radio transmissions being made available as a part-work by Belgium's Sub Rosa label. Its scale and complexity, not to mention the painstaking technical skill with which each piece has been assembled, reveal a composer of unique talents and singular perception.

"Or a worker," Dockstader adds, recalling the resistance displayed in more traditionally minded musical circles during the 1960s towards his early compositions on magnetic tape. "'Composer' has always meant notation, instrumentation. But yes, I compose what is and has always been, to me, music. Back then there was a great deal of conflict about the word 'music'. Everybody went through this at the time. You know: 'What's this? Sounds like sound effects.' But I was very clear on what I was doing. See, I came from a different background entirely than most of those people because they were all, you know, capital M musicians. I came from a background of film sound effects and studio engineering, so I thought of myself as a worker more than a musician with a capital M. I was just working in sound."

It's a technical grounding, accumulated over the years, that still allows Dockstader to "go directly into the sound and work with it" in an age where quarter-inch magnetic tape has been replaced by the hard drive, and music, with or without its protective capital M, is being transmuted into a malleable onscreen presence, a stream of visible data. In fact, he seems right at home in such a period of transition. To create *Aerial*, for example, Dockstader used sound editing software to build up a selection of lo-fi recordings of shortwave signals made directly onto cheap audiocassettes into a vast, expansive work in both depth and scale. The source material for this project had lain around for some time as a series of two-track mixes until Dockstader's daughter finally persuaded him to buy a computer so that they could email each other. Prior to that, its potential as a compositional tool had left him fairly cold.

"I got some LPs of early computer music and it sounded so sterile," he recalls. "To me the ideas were lacking. So you did it on a computer. You can't play the harmonica? Come on, let's make some mistakes here, let's make it live rather than this *ticking*." Dockstader's deep brown eyes flash and roll dismissively. He has always shown a preference for what he calls "acoustic sounds" - that is to say, ones that move through and inhabit auditory space. "I like the way they breathe," he once remarked in an interview. Whether dealing with radio waves or frogs, his approach remains fundamentally the same. To create *Pond*, Dockstader swapped sound files with fellow composer David Lee Myers (Arcane Device), gradually transforming field recordings of local aquatic lifeforms into a teeming selection of exotically hybrid digital mutations.

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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](#).