

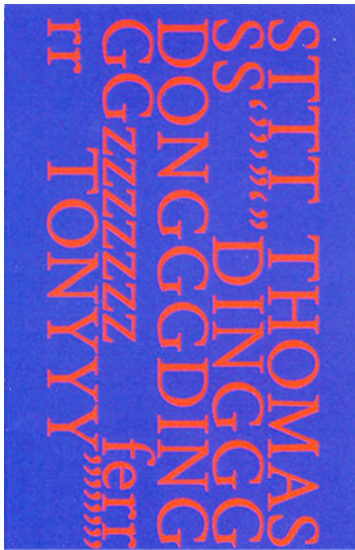


## THE HUM

On Charlemagne Palestine's STTT THOMASSS """""" DINGGGDONGGGDINGGGzzzzzzzz  
ferrrr TONYYY""""""', via Blank Forms

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By Bradford Bailey



Despite what the grand narratives might lead us to believe, when dug back to the root, histories are the product of chaos – series of random or chance encounters – collisions and response. Logic goes out the window. There is only what is and what might have been.

Between the years of 1963 and 1970, midtown Manhattan was treated to a strange, daily event – the kind of thing which only that now lost reality of New York could have allowed. Between 5:00 and 5:30pm, the bells St. Thomas Church at 53rd Street and 5th Avenue would ring out, beginning with a series of prescribed hymns, before concluding with wild improvisations which rattled through the streets. Their creator, pounding on the keys which controlling the 26-bell carillon with his fists and feet, was a then unknown Charlemagne Palestine, affectionately referred to as the Quasimodo of midtown. His creations – klanggdedanggebannggg sessions, laid the foundation for the cycling repetitions on piano for which he would later become known.

On an otherwise unremarkable day in 1968, Tony Conrad peered into the church, inquiring after who was responsible for these wild sounds – a meeting which would change the face of avant-garde music in its wake.

At the time, Conrad had already made an indelible mark on the history of music, pioneering Flux Music and Minimalism. Palestine was another story – entirely unknown. It was Tony who brought him into the fold, first drawing attention to the artist's towering worth.

The friendship between Tony Conrad and Charlemagne Palestine, quickly forming after their first meeting, stayed fast and true until Conrad's tragically early passing in 2016, with the two collaborating regularly from beginning to end. A friendship and creative partnership which stretched over the better part of a half century is subject enough for celebration and study, particularly when regarding figures as seminal as these two, but Conrad and Palestine occupy a singular, often overlooked place in the histories of music and creative practice. While emblems of the spirit and concerns of their generation, they always followed another path.

Though little has changed, it's worth remembering that for more than half a century following development of the musical avant-garde, a defining feature of this music was built around its own defense. Whether regarding the efforts of Stravinsky, Ives, Schoenberg or countless others, all the way through Cage and beyond, composers dedicated considerable effort to enforcing a standardized set of values and contexts around their work and themselves – that this was work by a serious composer, part of the high tradition of Western Classical music. Even Conrad and Palestine's peers, Minimalists like Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, despite efforts to create a music which broke with the elitism of this tradition, still framed themselves firmly within it. Conrad and Palestine were different, taking the institutional attacks at the heart of Fluxus into their own practices, dismissing the very idea of the composer and the contexts in which they sat.

Looking back over the decades, despite how serious and refined each of their respective bodies of work is, it's easy to spot the wry, irreverent humor imbued within the practices of Conrad and Palestine. With their endless playfulness, and willingness to experiment and fail, they became the guiding light for experimental musicians following in their wake – eternal outsiders, far more comfortable in the streets and tiny venues, taking the company of the generations who succeeded them, rather than in the grand concert halls occupied by those with whom they once ushered radical change. It is their position and legacy which, joined as micro-context, has had the greatest, lasting effect.

And so, with the wry, irreverent humor and playful willingness to experiment and fail which embodied their friendship and creative partnership, on what would have been Conrad's 77th birthday, Palestine returned to the site of their first encounter, just shy of fifty years since, climbing the stairs of the St. Thomas Church's bell tower for a tribute performance to his lost friend. The event, which by all accounts was beautiful, was programmed Blank Forms, the New York based curatorial platform, many of whose contributors had long and meaningful relationships with Tony. Tragically, no longer living in NY, I missed the performance by only a few days on a visit home. I was heartbroken, spending the following days stitching together my own experience from friends' cell phone videos – making it all that much more thrilling to find out that Blank Forms' first release as an imprint would take form as a cassette documenting Palestine's tribute.

STTT THOMASSS “”””” DINGGGDONGGGDINGGGzzzzzzz ferrrr TONYYY is one of those objects which transcends its basic element – the music housed within. It is a listening experience which operates as a marker – a sonic lens through which we are reminded of the profound effects of chance, friendship, and creative partnership. It is singular within Palestine's recorded output, returning our ears to where it all began, but, as with all things relating to Tony, the end result is not the point, it is how one arrives and what one is willing to risk in the process. Capturing Palestine pounding on the keys with his fists and feet for the time in decades, the cassette is a duality – the spirit which embodied our lost friend, brother, and teacher, rattling through the streets as living force. I can't thank Blank Forms enough for allowing these recordings to pass beyond the moment of their event. Totally essential. You can check it out below, and pick it up from Blank Forms, SoundOhm if you're in Europe, or a record store near you.

<https://blogthehum.com/2018/01/24/on-charlemagne-palestines-stt-thomasss-dingggdongggdingggzzzzzz-ferrrr-tony/>