

8 Introduction

by
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Public figures often hate the media because they are being used as material for a writer's work, and they've already used themselves as material for their own work. So the writer's work may be at odds with that. I've been trying to play both sides of the fence by establishing an identity both as a writer and a musician, someone who conducts interviews and is an interviewee, someone who could potentially either play music with someone or interview them.

—Alan Licht, “A Lecture on Transcription”

Scanning the table of contents for this book—twenty-five years of penetrating and generous explorations of artists' lives—it becomes apparent that one of the many *tones* resonating among a number of Alan Licht's interlocutors is New York City. Here, emergence, infamy, and progress interlace with topography: its venues, its conditions of living and working, social configurations and artistic scenes, allure and myths, and the brutality of its unforgiving forgetfulness and churning development. Whether interviewing ANOHNI or Suicide, in New York or far beyond, Alan is attuned to the hustle of radically self-motivated artists and methodically cross-references their social and cultural environs in service of their fullest reverberation. This unearthing of both personal and intellectual histories—how things happened and how those episodes, overlays, and synchronicities can now be understood more holistically—is a hallmark of each of the conversations here; more than one interviewee demands, “Ooh, ooh, how do you know that?” (Lou Reed in this case).

As I reflect on these important conversations and the theme of “common tones,” I realize my own two-decade intimacy with the multiplicity of Alan's work. From the outset, his dual efforts in rock and

experimental music as a highly active band member and improviser and, at the same time, as an excavator of their most potent buried histories proposed to me an implicit way of being—of course one should make adventurous work, participate in the scene on its ground level, and fervently articulate its emerging and marginalized histories. As his own first solo guitar albums were being released (*Sink the Aging Process*, 1994; *The Evan Dando of Noise?*, 1997), Alan was indoctrinating the underground with his revelatory minimal “top ten” lists and related profiles in *Forced Exposure*, *Halana*, *Option*, and other pointedly nonmainstream music magazines. His timing was propitious, as the often impossibly obscure albums he championed by a then-lost generation of vanguard composer-performers gained quick CD release via an emerging generation of reissue labels, run by people like Alan’s eminent counterpart in Chicago at the time, Jim O’Rourke. These resurrected musicians saw themselves ushered into a newly emerging context of festivals and fandom that reoriented historical antecedents across minimalism, krautrock, and free improv.¹ As Derek Walmsley recounts in a piece about watershed lists in experimental music, Alan’s top-ten series “was crucial because it posited minimalism as the hidden wiring of whole swathes of underground music.”²

That sense of looking forward via the rearview mirror that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s manifests in the intriguing termite tunnels that Alan and others revealed through their own passion, fascination, and occasional disdain. In 1999, Alan began

1 These musicians include Charlemagne Palestine, Terry Riley, Phill Niblock, Henry Flynt, Tony Conrad, Jon Gibson, Alvin Lucier, Folke Rabe, Yoshi Wada, Éliane Radigue, Michael Snow, Anthony Moore, Arnold Dreyblatt, and Elodie Lauten.

2 Derek Walmsley, “Feeling Listless,” *The Mire* (blog), *Wire*, April 26, 2011, <https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/themire/20804/feeling-listless/>.

contributing to the British experimental music magazine the *Wire* with an extended profile on composer Maryanne Amacher on the occasion of her first-ever CD; a flood of important recuperative articles, often on severely marginalized practitioners with barely any recorded output, soon followed, culminating with this book’s not-to-be-missed closing interview with Milford Graves, conducted in January 2018. Some culture writers emerge squarely from the center of a zeitgeist, and their chronicles of a period or scene read like live transcriptions of a fever dream. Alan sparked a different kind of catalysis, counteracting the errant conditions of the music industry by brushing the dust of obscurity from mavericks who had been systematically buried beneath the celebrity avant-garde, and disregarding the arbitrary genre distinctions and high/low art demarcations upheld by both academia and commercial culture. While working on this introduction, I texted Alan about the extreme lack of marketing and promotion for a few of these artists’ releases at the time. His reply was: “The impetus for some of these interviews was certainly the thought, ‘If I don’t do it, nobody else will, and that would be a shame,’ or ‘If I don’t do it, they’ll get some hack who will totally fuck it up.’” While it’s implicit that many of these interviews were assigned, Alan was clearly pursuing his own larger project as a cultural historian with each conversation, and these full transcripts restore the shape of that directive.

“A continual suggestion of the *possibility* of music,” says theater-maker Richard Foreman about actively frustrating the escapism of musical, narrative, and rhythmic resolution in his plays.” In this book, the term *tones* does refer to music, but there’s a fervent intertwining of artistic modes throughout, as Alan consistently champions artists who’ve actively transposed their work across many forms of media. Echoing this is an early statement

of purpose about his work: “The point of all this is that it’s these far reaching aesthetic ideas I’m interested in more than music or film or whatever as mediums per se. I’ve been drawn to all this stuff for the last decade plus without really realizing why, and I’m beginning to see that it’s all connected in a way I hadn’t been aware of before.”³ So, in sweeping interviews, visual and performance artists Vito Acconci, Cory Arcangel, Matthew Barney, Jutta Koether, and Tony Oursler reveal to Alan the enduring tenets of sound, music, composition, and collaboration in their disparate work (I’ll let you find out who says, “When I was doing performance I thought I was doing the same kind of stuff that Neil Young was doing, that Van Morrison was doing, a single voice, long songs.”). Further, Alan’s dizzyingly multitudinous discussions on filmmaking and soundtracking with practitioners as varied as Ken Jacobs, Phill Niblock, Kelly Reichardt, and Rudy Wurlitzer open myriad pathways unlikely to be found anywhere else.

The epigraph above implies a specific equilibrium where consumer, producer, and participant are superimposed—and in Alan’s own case, avidly cross-circuited. He’s collaborated and performed with a number of the artists here—Christian Marclay, Michael Snow, Tom Verlaine, and Yo La Tengo, to name a few—and additional commonalities in life and work continually appear throughout. Give your full attention to Alan’s recent conversation with Greg Tate (whose articulation of “lived criticism” certainly resonates), a formidable writer and musician instructive to Alan’s own musical efforts and discursive project. And Rhys Chatham’s storied tenure as the Kitchen’s first music director finds its equal in

Alan’s time as a booker at Tonic three decades later. All to say: Alan’s integrity plays solidly throughout.

An obvious lesson I’ve learned is that turning up, night after night, is the means of invoking a mobile and biomorphic institution, an evident social body (what Wurlitzer here calls the “spontaneity and intercourse of floating relations”) that collectively enacts the complexities of cultural history from inside the metropolis (“urban density is the key to cultural progress,” says Tony Conrad). In the relatively money-proof and institution-immune worlds of poetry, experimental film and music, dance, and performance, it is the attendees that most often constitute its practitioners, organizers, and historians—often exchanging roles on different nights. And when one of these participants compiles their recollections—here I’m thinking about Jonas Mekas’s *Movie Journal*, George E. Lewis’s *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, and Tom Johnson’s *The Voice of New Music*—all of us who may or may not have been there gain access to some of these extraordinary lived moments as well. In these interviews, I hear Alan’s tough-minded on-the-ground enthusiasm and generosity of detail opening what might otherwise be private conversations among practitioners—revealing real contexts, motivations, and affinities directly to his readers.

3 Alan Licht, *Evan Dando of Noise?*, Corpus Hermeticum, Hermes022, 1997, CD. Liner notes.