

05/87

Cynthia Cotts in *The Village Voice*, May 26, 1987:

I'm someone who holds cosmic ideas about as long as a substance high: after the rush anxiety falls like a net. The enlightenment I once got from Be Here Now, and white lightning dispersed when global entropy set in for good.

I say that to preface my admiration for an independently produced—and very cosmic—cassette. On *Open My Eyes*, Ron Ellis recites his poetry to an acoustic/electronic soundtrack; and the dualities abound. While Ellis's lyrics launch a vision romantic and spacey as Blake's, his meticulous formal compositions land the tape clean in the '80s. Ellis cites influences diverse as Buddhist chants on the one hand, and his former teacher Alvin Lucier on the other.

First off, "Macadamia Nut" is the perfect answer to a conceptual assignment. Several voices find themselves stuck inside the eponymous nut. To get out, they must fashion an incantation with words made up only of letters contained in the words "macadamia nut." After a Babylon of brainstorming, they unfurl a musical solution and crack the nut.

Another choice cut is "Wind Gauge," a takeoff on the card you used to be able to get from the Jefferson County agent, which tells you how to recognize different speeds of wind. As Ellis's mini-poems evoke the wind at increasing intensity, the Chamber Rock Ensemble pursues the atmosphere onomatopoeically. Thus we go from calm (thoughts like steeping tea) and 1-to-12 mph (imagine erotic breath) to 73- to-120 (shall we ponder in the cellar? or stay here until the roof lifts off?). At a windspeed of 800-to-1,160,000, entropy moves in (earth out of orbit, be alert for further bulletins...can I get you something for those hemorrhaging eyes?) This cut begs for nonprofit airplay.

Competently rendered, the soundtrack on *Open My Eyes* sometimes recalls Zappa, sometimes Glass. The fusion end of the spectrum can be gratingly derivative, but on a cut like "Golgonooza," sax, guitars, synth, and percussion provide the apt correlative mesh for a lyric that's phonetically and metaphysically complex. Affecting a self-ironic baritone, Ellis twists hip buzz-words into an iridescent helix—and lets it hang. Golgonoo-za, don't wanna loooooose-ya, goes the hypnotic mantra until it escapes meaning, exactly the way it's supposed to.

The surprise here is not that an academic who publishes in university reviews has conceptually rendered the ecstasy of electronics and Tao, but that such a seemingly retro vision can still liberate consciousness—if briefly—from its scheming to find the next rush.

11/87

Professor Ray Griffith of the University of Wisconsin reviews "Open My Eyes" on his November 2nd, 1987 "Commentary" on Wisconsin Public Radio.

Ray Griffith
Wisconsin Public Radio
Open My Eyes
(Ron Ellis performing part of poem "Hubbub" from album "Open My Eyes.")

Supposing there were an ampule of impudent song
that when shattered transforms
esters of yesterday?
I see now the tatters of spin-dried Oriental tapestry
must hang out with the laundry of Western folderol.
Who could make a whole patch
of such a set of blankets?

(Music continues at low level behind first lines of commentary, then fades out.)

That's Wisconsin poet Ron Ellis doing his poem "Hubbub" from his album entitled "Open My Eyes." All eleven poems in the album are performed with music, or at least sound accompaniment, supplied by a group called the Chamber Rock Ensemble. Nowadays there's increasing interest in poets "performing" their works in public appearance rather than only reading their poems. Universities that invite poets to campus often specify they want performances, not readings that recreate the printed page orally. And the same is true with other places that offer poetry. Two of the poems Ron Ellis does in his album "Open My Eyes" were recorded live before audiences at the Cafe Carpe in Fort Atkinson, which presents poetry as regular entertainment. Performance can range from reading poems with dramatic emphasis to presenting poetry along with other media—with music, with visual art, with dance interpretation, with what have you. The accompaniment to the Ron Ellis poems in the album varies from the classical flute played by Al Jewer and jam sessions of the Rock Chamber Ensemble to sound utilizing complicated technology—multiple tracks, synthesizers, and harmonizers. And the music has echoes of everything from Tibetan chants to the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto to the Rolling Stones to working computers. The eclectic sounds are appropriate to the eclectic poetry. Ron Ellis tries to incorporate in his poems many of the opposite poles that are part of civilization in the 1980's. There's the interaction, for instance, between Western and Eastern thought, as in these lines from "Hubbub":

I see now the tatters of spin-dried Oriental tapestry
must hang out with the laundry of Western folderol.
Who could make a whole patch
of such a set of blankets?

The sounds produced by the synthesizers and computers are appropriate to the album "Open My Eyes" because there's a lot about technology in the poems. Many poets—and non-poets too—think in terms of the conflict between the humanistic and the technological, a polarization with technology on one side and nature on the other—natural human beings and a woodsy kind of nature with trees and flowers and loons and raccoons. But Ron Ellis sees technology and nature intermingling, for technology is really part of the nature of the world we live in, and part of our nature also. After all, it is a human pursuit.

His poems do contain lyrical passages about the outdoor woodsy nature. In one he says:

This morning grackles held a vast conventicle
concatenating out of the trees like blowing
dandelion seeds. Blue- and sun- sky swells
in the tomato whose blood-juice sings
in my stomach while a cicada like a tuning-fork
thrums the sympathetic note...

And he writes about technological phenomena:

Efficient robots wearing metal fatigues
are under orders to KEEP THIS SPACE CLEAR.
It may be emptiness but it's all we have.
It may be just a surface but it's clean.

But almost all the poems combine nature in the special sense and technology, as in my favorite of the poems, "Night Out." On a summer night he stands at the screen door which has become "an immense grid" and watches a moth pace "from square to square" and sees "its thorax throb / against the rule of the

possible.” Outside he watches the insects attracted by the porch light: “... moths spiral to the filament, / splashing dusty scales / against the light-bulb/sun.”

His details about the moths—

ecstatic cabbage looper:

furious nymph underwing:

hickory tiger possessed:

are matched by the details of the light bulb— “thin membrane of glass,” “radiant electron stream” “white-hot streaming core” and the clear letters of the alphabet that spell out “General Electric.” He stands on the porch with a moth—a “white-winged dagger”—caught in his hair and he is part of nature but/ just as attracted to the incandescent bulb as the moths. To Ron Ellis the conflict is not outside human beings but within. The important thing is, he says in “Canto Five,”

...the sacred text of the finite mind.

Untranslatable, yet bound in the texture of the slightest ordinary life.

And later:

The most sacred text of the finite mind is you, staring you in the face.

The polarity is within all the possible you’s, and you facing you. In another poem, “The Arousal,” Ron Ellis says:

Too long
the Imaginative Beast
lay tethered and sedate
submissive to the designing hand
and file of the rational faculty.

So maybe that’s it. The conflict isn’t between nature and technology, or between Eastern and Western philosophy, the conflict is within the human mind either dealing with the world creatively or noncreatively.

Ron Ellis is on the side of creativity. But what is creativity? It’s empathy with other people and other forms of life. It’s an awareness of what you’re doing and an effort to determine why you’re doing it. It’s humility. This album of poems by Ron Ellis is called “Open My Eyes,” not “Open Your Eyes.” It’s an exploration, not a lecture. And a sense of humor helps to keep things in perspective, even in such a major issue in the poem “Hubbub” as to whether you’re a “hub type” or a “bub type.”

(Music of “Hubbub” and final lines performed by Ron Ellis on tape album “Open My Eyes.”)

It’s all in the left and right hubbubspheres.
You have your hub types and your bub types.
Listening to both at once you have your
urbane stereotypes.

With hub you have hubba-hubba hobbies, fuzzy thinking hobbits.
With bub you have bibliophiles and bubbachambers

coming out of accelerator shootouts
of the Ten Most Wanted Particles.

I'm more hubba than bubba,
for bubba or verse.
How's about you?

Doin' the one with the two.
Doin' the one with the two.

07/90

Jay Bail, *The Book Reader*, July-August 1990, on *The Blue Train*:

“Whatever his subject, in every poem there is at least one mysterious evocation that jars the reader into a sense of the marvelous.”

04/96

“Articulating Artistry: The Madison Music Collective Presents Jazz Meets Poetry” By John Noyd, *Night Sights and Sounds*:

I must admit that I was somewhat baffled when the first four pieces offered at the Jazz Meets Poetry presentation at the First Unitarian Meeting House [Madison, Wisconsin] on March 26 [1996], were wordless, unaccompanied jazz piano numbers by Paul Hastil. His departing remarks were, “That is all I have to play and that is all I have to say.” In hindsight, it occurred to me that perhaps the piano was the speaker of motifs and phrases, that jazz and poetry need not have a human voice. Perhaps the next performance would reveal evidence of this theory.

The cyber-punk musical renegades Dangerous Odds were next in line. Again, they started out speechless. But like Paul, exhibited daring jazz talent. Working from a highly technical level, perhaps it was now the midi-induced electronics that were speaking. Their second number lent support to this idea. Enunciating UW-Whitewater professor/performance poet Ron Ellis joined the Odds for a scenario of computer chatter entitled “Parallel Interface.” The music warped and wove with wings of starry nights, responding to the linguistic twists with glittering hyperdrive. But this was just priming the pump for the next verbal assault.

Larry Giles modestly stepped upon the stage to relay his thoughts on John Cage, entitling his piece, “What the Piano Player Did to Me.” Larry had the hep beat knee jerk jive spurting gone pitter patter of the layered jingo down pat, and his play of words seemed to whip up a maelstrom of fragmented infinities from the Odds. Of special note were the processed vibrations of woodwind player Al Jewer. His carpetbag of goodies included a bass flute with a sound that seemed to come from some crater on the moon. When Ron came back for a reading of “Canto 71,” the double-barreled blast of twin basses from Al and multi-instrumentalist Arthur Durkee scratched and scrounged around some celestial cellar to produce a thick bed for the curlicue queries of Ron’s scrambled stream of conscious rhetoric. Larry returned with a fiery work entitled “April Conversation,” and Ron ended the set with a tune hoisted by Middle Eastern twists of catapulting rhythms courtesy of drummer Tom Hamer.

After a short intermission, pianist Dave Stoler performed. His two song set included an improvisation to a written text by Dave read by Dangerous Odds violinist Biff Uranus. Titled “Urban Legends,” it rejoiced in a time when jazz and poetry were more kissin’ cousins than they are today. The reading recalled the beat attitude which merged a flurry of intuitive creativity jazz was known to celebrate.

This casual improvisation was carried through with the last act of the evening. Kelly DeHaven and bassist Jeff Eckels scatted and scuttled like a cubist’s daydream with the popular tune “Bye Bye Black-

bird,” then, as they were performing in a secular setting, a gymnastic work-out of “Amazing Grace.” But the highlight of their set came when they invited pianist Paul Hastil up on stage to tear through a version of “Charlie Parker’s Blues.” With a reading of Jack Kerouac attached to the end, it came closest to the late fifties coffeehouse feel with which jazz and poetry are best associated. A narrative diary run through debut by Alvin Hishinuma ended the set and the presentation for the evening. No one put on berets and clicked their approval, but all were visibly encouraged that the creative freedom that jazz and poetry call for has not been forgotten.

11/96

Student Review of a Dangerous Odds Performance at UW-Whitewater:

I had the opportunity to view the dramatic poetry readings of Dangerous Odds on the twelfth of November, 1996. The audience was mainly composed of English 102 students that congregated in the McGraw Auditorium. As I walked into the auditorium I was not prepared for what I was going to encounter. There was loud instruments that didn’t make any attempt to harmonize in any way. It kind of reminded me of my days in Woodstock. As my first poetry reading performance, I did not walk away with a good impression. The band in the background provided psychotic music that did not contribute to the mood of the poetry, the visual films on the big screen did not have anything to do with the poem content, and the poems themselves had negative themes and left one in a helpless mood.

The background setting was comprised of a small band with diverse instruments and an overhead screen projecting various short film segments that had no correlation to each other or towards the poetry that was read while it was being played. There was no point and time where I really knew if the band members knew how to play their instruments or not. Through the duration of the first two poems, (“Now Listen” and “Dangerous Odds”) I came to realize that there was no pattern to the ambiguous banging and strumming of notes that polluted the air. At first, I thought that the “music” set the eiree mood that was present behind the first couple poems, but then it became very apparent that the perpetuating noise coming from the instruments was a standard choice for all of the poem’s backgrounds.

The visuals on the big screen were comprised of film shorts ranging from psychedelic colors to National Geographic centerfolds to the crew of Apollo 13. The audience was left to try to discover a connection between the randomly selected film excerpts and the meanings of the poems that they were being read with. An example of this would be in the poem reading of “There’s a Hush”. This poem was obviously a satirical admonition against the dangers of destroying the world’s precious resources. Oddly enough, the film that was supposed to correspond to the poem included a moving locomotive. I don’t understand what the common denominator was between the two ideas.

The poetry itself consisted of a wide range of topics from Kurt Cobain’s suicide to environmental issues to a drug-dealing kid facing his father. Overall, the poetry left one with a lack of hope dealing with negative overtone. For example, “The Dead End Kid” can be summed up with the concept of a loser kid who sells drugs and his father is confronting him about his future in life. Unfortunately, this poem (like all the others) reveal a common problem in the world and never provide a solution for it. Another point that I found extremely annoying was how the poems contained incorrect grammer rules. In “There’s A Hush” the sentence “yeah I had his ass killed ain’t that a shame” when authors write in the vernacular it’s hard to understand what points he or she is trying to get across in his writings.

I don’t think the audience was expecting what they were experiencing. In fact, I think everyone was in a state of utter shock. As I looked at my other peers, I noticed the same dazed and confused look plastered across my fellow classmates’ faces. After talking to some of my peers, we tried to establish a better understanding of the performance’s theme but collectively came up to the conclusion that it was very confusing to determine what the significance of the poetry that we were supposed to pick up on.

Dangerous Odds wasn't what I had expected at all. The music really didn't accommodate the mood of the poems and the films held no meaning for me. The poetry itself dealt with negative topics that presented me with real-life problems and left me with a sense of hopelessness when no potential solution was offered.

08/98

"Critics' Choice", *Isthmus Guide to Arts and Entertainment*, Madison, August 7, 1998:

AL JEWER & RON ELLIS: Here's a perfect coffeehouse gig, recalling the days of beatniks and bongos (sic). Jewer and Ellis are members of Dangerous Odds, which combines musical improvisation with poetic flights of fancy; they'll offer more of the same in this duo format, with Jewer weaving saxophonic filigree around Ellis' hip phonemes. Fri., Aug. 7, 1998, Mother Fool's Coffeehouse, 8 pm.

08/98

Review of the Dangerous Odds Album by Vivian E. Lee:

The Best of Dangerous Odds, Vol. 2

Label: Laughing Cat Records

Release Date: 1997

Dangerous Odds are Al Jewer (flute, woodwind synthesizer, sax, bass), Art Durkee (Chapman stick), Tom Hamer (drums), Diedre Buckley (viola), Ron Ellis (poet), Larry Giles (poetry, voice). Guests include Biff Blumfugagange, Ross Nielsen. Heather Figi, Kristina Hord, Blain Kennedy, Rick Murphy are featured as special guests.

"The Best of Dangerous Odds, Vol. 2" is the Madison, Wisconsin group's debut, titled because of material taken from performances in the band's second four years 1993-96 (See? So the title does too make sense).

Dangerous Odds formed in 1990 as a re-formation of The Chamber Rock Ensemble, a prior poetry/music project featuring Al Jewer. Ron Ellis dubbed the band "Good Odds" at first, then Durkee wanted "Danger" in there somewhere to reflect the band's commitment to performing without the "safety net of rehearsal". Since then, the band has been playing in "all styles of music from classical to jazz to experimental to groove-based rock, and many more—frequently at the same time."

Devotion to improvisation aside, another factor marking this group as unusual is the "Guitar Free Zone" declaration. Almost all the tracks but a couple on Vol. 2 are without guitars, creating an interesting musical climate.

If experimental spontaneous music and spoken word performance created in a Guitar Free Zone tickles your eardrums, I dare you to try Dangerous Odds.

The Best of Dangerous Odds, Vol. 2 is available via mail-order for us \$15 + \$1.00 S/H at the Laughing Cat label's web site, <http://www.lafcat.com/>.

Track listing:

"Dangerous Odds": This track starts with a slow steady bass riff in a regular rhythm while mid tone flute flutters about and harmonies in spurts through out the song. Ron Ellis' sing-song recital of stream of consciousness verses takes forefront amidst various instruments being played. Ellis' voice doesn't rank with James Earl Jones but it's not glaring or boring.

"Clocks in Chaos" starts with the constant ticking of a clock in time. In the distant background Larry Giles atonally recites lyrics about time, chaos and famous scientific theorists like Einstein and Heisenberg.

"AgGaGahGiGihGao". The wackiest track features vocal cacophony in the style of McFerrin overlapping and interplaying while a flute wavers and warbles alongside bass notes. Gentle percussion as the song ends with sax and the coos of an infant (Jewer's baby son) makes you wonder of the song title wasn't

inspired by baby talk. Funny and wildly silly, this stand-out song could be a real laugh-riot performed for a live audience.

“Remote Manipulator”: Rather than monologue poetry recital this song features dialogue between a human and a machine monolith—the Hal 2000-like Remote Manipulator.

“I Want My Ph.D”: A chorus languidly sings a capella style “I want my Ph.D.” To the tune of Dire Straits’ “Money For Nothing.” Is this an ode to the virtues of education? You decide.

“Ricochet”: Ron Ellis chants verses amidst eclectic instruments being played in harmonic cacophony.

“To Steve Reich”: Larry Giles’ dedication to Reich laps over an orchestra of instruments and sounds like melodic string synth.

“Bone Flute”: The bone flute intro recalls to mind R. Carlos Nakai playing in the Native American musical tradition. The lyrics spoken here have a spiritual, mystical feel to them (“Please make a flute of my bone”). The use of the viola guitar is notable here.

“Nhema Mutato”: African musical traditions get the Dangerous Odds treatment as Durkee plays a Zimbabwean sub-contrabass mbira, commonly known as a thumb piano. One hears the intermittent sounds of car shocks. The song has an Art of Noise vibe going on.

“Cellular”: The single guitar-like note seems to sing throughout the song while Ron Ellis sparingly recites poetry.

“L’hôtel”: A jazzy slow bass riff introduces Larry Giles delivery of unenergetic poetry with a faux French accent. As much as I liked that bass line, this was a weak song.

“I Love a Parade”: A booming kettle drum intro wakes the ears, heralding Biff Blumfumdagunge’s high pitched voice reciting the keys on a keyboard, Q-W-E-R-T-Y. Whatta happy racket is this wacked out parody of circus music!

“Tantrum”: This instrumental includes synth sounds that sound like Edward Van Halen going wild with his guitar, accompanying unbridled Stick sounds.

“Darkness”: A dirge like piece with a Gothic feel evokes the peace of the crypt. Not. This song is eerie, dammit. It’s almost as if the players are mourning the end of the CD.

11/03

Annie Randall, Village Booksmith, November 8, 2003:

“With a layered collage of words and sounds, the art of ‘Fuzzy Logic’ is at once mystical and edged. Meanings, sharply clarified, float and then blend on shimmering ponds of music. A wonderful eclectic... electric...experience!”

08/04

Joseph Lisowski, Ph.D., on “CANTO 01 *Hung-up and dried*,” and “CANTO 04 *Ponder underpinning*,” September 21, 2004:

Canto 1 is tremendously rich in association, filled with movement and energy. It’s a virtual orgy of sound and image, while still remaining grounded in the scene. Actually, I’m envious of what you were able to do here. Where Canto 1 talked to Dante, Canto 4 talks to Pound with maybe a sidebar to Charles Olson. And it gives a touch of Herbert and again, an echo of Dylan. Wonderful stuff.

06/06

Joseph Lisowski, Ph.D., on “The Story of Andro,” June 5, 2006:

“What a wonderful artistic experience “The Story of Andro” is! You have a truly remarkable, compelling voice (and your phrasing contains a hint of Warren Zevon, a pinch of Leonard Cohen). I particularly like how well the music counterpoints your voice and theme. My wife Linda was also impressed. If the

cantata has a flaw, it's perhaps that it requires much of the listener. In this respect, I'm wondering if the CD is a finished product or work in progress. If it's in progress, maybe you could consider adding a chorus or at least a refrain to many of the cuts. That way, the listener has something to hang on/come back to. The way you begin "But of course" seems to reach for that kind of thing."