



Bob Ostertag

Composer, musician, multi-media artist

Bob Ostertag has been at the cutting edge of new music for two decades. His creative and unorthodox work with digital sampling and recording has established him as an influential pioneer in these media. He has created a string of major multi-media works, combining sound, image, and live performance. He designs his own sophisticated performance software and instruments. His compositions for the Kronos Quartet, his own *Say No More* ensemble, and others, have been recognized as major modern works. His frequent use of political themes compliment his many years of political activism. Twenty CDs of his compositions have been released, and he has appeared at music, film, and multi-media festivals around the globe.

Born in Albuquerque in 1957, Bob Ostertag dropped out of the Oberlin Conservatory after two years, and has eschewed working within the confines of academic music ever since. Instead, he has worked with a radically diverse range of collaborators: avant garders John Zorn and Fred Frith, heavy metal star Mike Patton, cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, jazz great Anthony Braxton, dyke punk rocker Lynn Breedlove, drag diva Justin Bond, film maker Pierre Hébert, and more.

Ostertag settled in New York City in 1978 and immersed himself in the emerging "downtown" music scene of the period. He left music at the end of the 1970s to work in Central America, and became an expert on the region. His writings have been published in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and he has lectured on the topic at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Rutgers, and many other universities. In 1988 he relocated to San Francisco and resumed his musical activity.

He is the recipient of numerous commissions and awards, from the US National Endowment for the Arts, the Aaron Copland Fund for American Music, Lincoln Center, Meet the Composer, the "What About AIDS?" national art exhibit, Austrian State Radio (ORF), Australian Broadcasting Corp. (ABC), and others. He is the author of a forthcoming book on politics, culture, and the human body, *Creative Life*.

Recent Works and Productions



Desert Boy on a Stick. 2001. For cello, slides, and spoken word. Collaboration with cellist Joan Jeanrenaud and artist Jim Magee. Commissioned by the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center and Colorado College. World premiere at Colorado College, October 2001.

Between Garbage and Science. 2000. For digital music and video. Collaboration with film maker Pierre Hébert. Commissioned by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Meet the Composer. World premiere at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 2000.

Dear Prime Minister. 1999. For 18 music students and spoken word. Commissioned by WDR Radio (Köln). World premiere at the Hansa Gymnasium Köln, December 1999.

Yugoslavia Suite. 1999. For digital music and video, and hand choreography. Commissioned by Real Art Ways and the Rockefeller Multi-Arts Production Fund. World premiere at Real Art Ways, Hartford, October 1999.

Hunting Crows. 1997. For interactive digital sound and video. World premiere at Podewil, Berlin, December 1997.

Spiral. 1996. Based on a text by David Wojnarowicz. Collaboration with film maker Pierre Hébert and instrument builder Oliver DiCicco. For chamber ensemble of specially-constructed glass instruments, film, and spoken word. Commissioned by the "What About AIDS?" national art exhibition and the San Francisco Exploratorium. World premiere at the Cowell Theater in San Francisco, April 1996.

All the Rage. 1992. For the Kronos Quartet. Commissioned by the Lincoln Center (NY), the Wexner Center (OH), and the San Antonio Performing Arts Association. World premiere at Lincoln Center, April 1992.

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Discography



Say No More Project CDs 1 & 2. 2002. Originally released separately as **Say No More** (1993) and **Say No More in Person** (1994). Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2002. With Joey Baron (percussion), Mark Dresser (bass), Gerry Hemingway (percussion) and Phil Minton (voice). Assembled on computer from fragments of solo improvisations.

Say No More Project CDs 3 & 4. 2002. Originally released separately as **Verbatim** (1996) and **Verbatim Flesh & Blood** (2000). Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2002. With Gerry Hemingway (percussion), Mark Dresser (bass), and Phil Minton (voice). Third and fourth CDs from the Say No project. Assembled on computer (3) and recorded live in Gent, Belgium (4).

PantyChrist. 1999. With Otomo Yoshihide (dj) and Justin Bond (vocal). Seeland 510.

Dear Prime Minister. 1998. With the students of the Hansa Gymnasium. WDR/Hansa Special.

Twins!. 1996. With Otomo Yoshihide (dj). Resampled "twins" of parent tracks by Herb Robertson, Chris Cutler, and Yagi Michiyo. Creativeman (0030).

Fear No Love. 1995. With Mike Patton, Fred Frith, Justin Bond, Lynn Breedlove, 15 others. Avant 041.

Like A Melody, No Bitterness: Bob Ostertag Solo Volume 1. 1997. Solo improvisation. Seeland 508. Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2001.

All the Rage. 1993. Kronos Quartet plays Ostertag's transcriptions of gay riots in San Francisco. Libretto by Sara Miles. Elektra-Nonesuch 79332-2.

Burns Like Fire. 1992. Riots, country and western, and gospel. Companion piece to All the Rage. Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2001.

Sooner or Later. 1991. Solo. Based on a recording of a Salvadoran boy burying his father. RecRec Music (RecDec 37) Re-issued on MVORL/Seeland in limited edition in 2001.

Attention Span. 1990. With John Zorn (alto sax) and Fred Frith (guitar). Rift Records (Rift 14) and RecRec Music (RecDec 33). Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2001.

Voice of America. 1982. With Fred Frith (guitar) and Phil Minton (voice). Recorded in concert in London and NYC. RecRec Music (RecDec 907). Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2001.

Getting A Head. 1980. With Charles K. Noyes (percussion) and Fred Frith (guitar). Uses unorthodox instrument built from tape recorders and helium balloons. Rift Records. Re-issued in MVORL limited edition in 2001.

Fall Mountain: Early Fall. 1979. With Ned Rothenberg (wind instruments) and Jim Katzin (violin). Recorded at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. LP on Parachute Records.

Other Releases

* **Anthony Braxton: Creative Orchestra (Köln) 1978.** 1998. HatArt CD 2-6171.

* **Angelica 1997.** House of Discipline: Mike Patton, Otomo Yoshihide, & Bob Ostertag. IDA 013.

* **Zattere Alla Deriva.** With Fred Frith. 1997. MØMUS 003.

* **Angelica 1994.** With John Zorn and Fred Frith. CAICAI 006.

* **John Zorn: Pool.** 1980. LP on Parachute Records. P0011/12

* **Eugene Chadbourne: The English Channel.** 1979. LP on Parachute Records.

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Brief Press Quotes

The New York Times:

Bob Ostertag's improvisations on various non-keyboard synthesizers are about as far removed from the electronic music clichés of the past as can be imagined.

Die Zeit:

Sampling technology is used in a significant way for the first time. The music encircles reality, decomposes it into music and recomposes it until reality is no longer able to escape. Great music, that has something to do with life again.

The New York Times:

Bob Ostertag's "All the Rage" turned the evening on its head with a devastating roar of gay anger. Of recent concert pieces having to do with AIDS, "All the Rage" seems by far the most powerful example. Mr. Ostertag's stern, purifying gaze has swept away the sentimentality and melodrama that have compromised more famous compositions in the genre.

Music and Sound Output:

Perhaps the oddest music I have ever heard, it's also more the sound of lives lived, and lives lost, than any music I have ever heard.

Cadence:

Truly powerful political art is rare, but this is some.

Torso:

Odd and genius. Like nothing before or after, I promise.

Messenger Veneto:

Bob Ostertag is the blaspheming priest of the art of noise. Genius underlies his performance.

Faster Than Sheep:

Part of you will have to be frightened, part of you hopefully will be enlightened, and part of you may be dumbfounded.

San Francisco Bay Guardian:

As beautiful as the pastoral/celestial meditations of Brian Eno or Kitaro would be -- if either one of those musicians chewed glass.

Jazzthetik:

Astonishingly, the music never seems artificial. The border between live improvisation and computerized manipulation blurs and is finally made irrelevant by the music which results.

Il Piccolo:

Bob Ostertag is the hero of the digital frontier and leader of new performance in sonic exploration.

Il Gazzettino:

Ostertag's music brings together audience and musicians alike in an almost corporeal bond -- music of enormous emotional impact.

Keyboard Magazine:

A gleeful savagery, with the droll wit of Satie's piano pieces, the breathless silences of Japanese music, the collaged clutter of Stockhausen's short-wave radio suites, and the political bite of Brecht/Weill songs.

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Press Selections (1)



By almost any measure, electronic music composer/improviser Bob Ostertag is an extreme radical. His raw material is the world. He digs his trowel into the wet cement of everyday life, where nothing is really permanently set, anyway, and plasters it in impressionistic smears and pointillistic dabs across the walls of our perception. His strategies range somewhere between those of John Cage, academic computer musicians, brutally expressive free improvisers, and Che Guevara.

With entrance into Ostertag's world comes a severe attitude adjustment. You have to curb your brain, dump your 'common sense' judgments, and peel away the calluses that have built up over the vulnerable core of your senses. Listening becomes cultural time travel at warp speed. Time, however, jumps off its linear tracks. You have to accept both the simultaneity of your feelings and your hapless inability to control them. Scary stuff.

Listening to Ostertag can be like looking at an aged oak. It's as if the same force that turns gnarly bark, twisted trunk, and random crooked branch patterns into a perfect, beautiful tree is transforming these coarse and ostensibly unrelated sounds into music. The 'music-ness' of Ostertag's work is no less than the 'tree-ness' of the oak; we're just not trained to hear it.

-- *San Francisco Bay Guardian*

With the Kronos Quartet: All the Rage

Bob Ostertag's "All the Rage" turned the evening on its head with a devastating roar of gay anger. Of recent concert pieces having to do with AIDS, "All the Rage" seems by far the most powerful example. Mr. Ostertag's stern, purifying gaze has swept away the sentimentality and melodrama that have compromised more famous compositions in the genre.

-- *The New York Times*

Sooner or Later

Bob Ostertag did not simply create a political piece but a musical reality, in which sampling technology is used in a significant way for the first time. The music encircles reality, decomposes it into music and recomposes it until reality is no longer able to escape. It is this clarity that makes *Sooner or Later* great music, a music that has something to do with life again.

-- *Die Zeit*

Bob Ostertag made his Canadian solo debut at Victoriaville an opportunity to showcase his formidable talents... It was remarkable to see Ostertag seated at the keyboard, alone on the CGEP stage, creating a massive sound sculpture, the mutated sound of a child's crying causing the listener to get a choking sensation in the throat. It is ironic that in an era where the technology of torture and death, smart bombs and their ilk, have allowed some in North America to look away from the obvious and terrible conclusions of war, an artist like Ostertag is able to use simple technology to create such a devastating portrait of human suffering. Frames flew by, hypnotic.

-- *Coda Magazine*

Ostertag's music slices the boy's speech as thin as garlic cut with a razor blade, then blows each instant up into its own requiem. By examining each breath, each impact of shovel to ground under the audio microscope, he magnifies the pain so large as to engulf the listener with a wave of pure empathy while at the same time making art. Listening to this piece is like embracing someone who has no skin, as if the boy was a bare mass of nerves and guts and blood, which stain your own clothes when you touch him."

-- *High Performance*

With Fred Frith

Ostertag and Frith put on a fascinating show. The results, at times, were as beautiful in their own way as the pastoral/celestial meditations of Brian Eno or Kitaro would be -- if either one of those musicians chewed glass. The listening, the interplay, the subtle dance between Frith and Ostertag was brilliant. From their jarring deconstructivist noises they were raising real music -- music that could only come into being because those individuals were there at that moment, music that was so intense that it was barely contained by their virtuosity. The musicians dissolved before us and we were presented with a new, vivid angle on reality.

-- *San Francisco Bay Guardian*



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Press Selections (2)

With John Zorn

Ostertag's first show at the Knitting Factory, featuring saxophonist John Zorn, opened with a series of intense improvisations. The show was Ostertag's first performance under his own name in eight years: at one time a regular collaborator on the downtown scene, Mr. Ostertag recently spent time as a journalist. Mr. Ostertag was in good humor, and on the opening piece he lowered the pitch of sounds Mr. Zorn had made by playing his instruments in water, transforming them into the intestinal grumblings of a Hollywood monster. The audience laughed, and Mr. Zorn honked and screeched. [The concert finished] in a staccato section that had all the excitement of a funk band, and had the audience cheering.

-- *The New York Times*

The Say No More Ensemble

[Say No More] is more than an experiment and much more than merely sensational. Astonishingly, the music never seems artificial. With acute sensitivity, Ostertag catches the strengths of his partners and lifts them up to a new level, magnifying the skill and intensity of these extraordinary virtuosos. The border between live improvisation and computerized manipulation blurs and is finally made irrelevant by the music which results.

-- *Jazzthetik*

With Say No More, Ostertag elevated the sampler to the rank of musical instrument and gained recognition as a true visionary that cannot be ignored. The border between free improvisation and *musique concrete* will never be the same. Any serious fan of avant-garde music needs to hear this, one of the rare avant-garde albums where the relevance of the artistic argument equals the relevance of the result. A classic.

-- *All-Music Guide*

Bob Ostertag: a complex human being, an expert of the sampler, a brilliant composer, but most important a highlight of last month's festival. His Say No More project is an intricate affair about which pages of ink could be spilled. Here was Phil Minton -- like Sylvester the Cat on helium: miraculous vocal cords at their prime. Here was Mark Dresser -- all resonant bass, kicking it wherever he could. Here was my favorite drummer Gerry Hemingway, all hard-hitting guts through and through, interspersed with the subtlety and the restraint that he's so loved for. Minton was left literally gasping for air, as he scrambled to respond to the sound of his own voice that Ostertag was throwing back in his face. If I had to cast a vote for the most energetic, the most quirky, and the most unrepentantly original ensemble of recent history, this would be it.

-- *Exclaim Magazine (Toronto)*

PantyChrist

There is a special pleasure that comes from things that are genuinely fucked up. Things that only try are one of the late 20th century's greatest annoyances, but things that succeed are one of life's timeless pleasures. I don't mean bizarre, who's-drugged-the-water-supply things, and I don't mean odd, does-it-really-exist things. The particular joy I am talking about is reserved for a precious few things in this life, and it's a joy whose expression finds its repose in a face cloudy with disbelief while the mouth attached to it, hanging half-open, slurs: "Whoa, Dude. That's some enormously fucked-up shit." It gives me the pride of a surrogate parent or a good house sitter, then, to alert you to the existence of a CD by this deeply aberrant, singular thing that calls itself PantyChrist. If you've ever bought a record just because it was God-damned weird to just let it sit there on the rack getting ignored, you probably ought to pick this one up.

-- *Last Plane to Jakarta*



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Press Selections (3)

Fear No Love

Ostertag is a true rarity: an experimental musician widely respected in avant garde circles who is openly queer and makes a point of it. *Fear No Love* deals with the phobias surrounding queer love -- fear of intimacy, fear of femininity, fear of masculinity, fear of stereotypes, fear of AIDS, fear of rejection, fear of fear. To do this, he's assembled a startling array of talent, most of it queer, all of it daring. There's Lynn Breedlove, vocalist from the punk dyke-core band Tribe 8, rapping over dance beats. He's got singer Mike Patton from the platinum-selling hard-rock band Faith No More dueting with drag performer Justin Bond. On guitar is the internationally celebrated noise expert Fred Firth. Rounding out the CD are soul singers, performance artists, and many uncommon combinations of musicians. The result is what queer radical music pioneer John Cage would have sounded like if he'd hung out in '90s dance clubs. There is an intensely homo sense of humor and humanity at work that enlivens the experimentation.

-- *The Advocate*

Voice of America

A gleeful savagery, with the droll wit of Satie's piano pieces, the breathless silences of Japanese music, the collaged clutter of Stockhausen's short-wave radio suites, and the political bite of Brecht/Weill songs.

-- *Keybaord Magazine*

Effectively captures the anger, chaos, and mayhem of armed rebellion. Sounds scream, bounce off walls, sicken, and unnerve. *Voice*, however, is quite exhilarating and refreshing, and is certainly more intriguing than the current slew of "political" drivel being served up by most bands now.

-- *OP Magazine, Spring*

Ostertag, Zorn, and Chadbourne: NYC 1980

With the "New Music, New York" series happening at the Kitchen, it is important to note the existence of another experimental music scene. I'm referring to the wild rebel underbelly of "free" musicians which includes Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, and Bob Ostertag. This is one scene that is below the underground, without even as much established recognition as the established school represented at the Kitchen. In the past few weeks, solo, duo, trio, and other recitals have been given by most of the local practitioners of this art, as well as a few imported from other areas of the world. There were duets between guitarist Chadbourne and reed man Zorn, the former rubbing balloons against his strings, the latter placing a miniature football in the bell of his alto sax. Bob Ostertag crouched over a forest of tangled wires and produced finely controlled, indescribable sounds, and interfaced a radio with his synthesizer to stunning effect. Two week later, brilliant Britisher Fred Frith joined them. This music is in a whole new realm. These guys aren't just peering into the doorway of the unknown: they've taken a flying leap into the Black Hole. DEVO described their first album as "The important sound of things falling apart." Ha! They don't even know the half of it.

-- *Soho Weekly News, 1980*

First NYC Solo Show: 1980

Bob Ostertag's improvisations on various non-keyboard synthesizers are about as far removed from the electronic music clichés of the past as can be imagined. Much synthesizer music still sounds like an imitation of something else -- conventional instruments, natural or machine sounds, and so on. But the sounds that go into Mr. Ostertag's music, while they can be exceptionally elusive, seem indigenous to the idiom in which he is working. They do tend to be sounds rather than pitched melodies, but what comes out is unquestionably music, a shifting, dappled patchwork of sounds that combine in clusters, circle each other in a kind of wary counterpoint and develop into other sounds in a disciplined manner. There were moments that faintly suggested birds, moments that suggested warfare, and indescribable overlays that each seemed to carry a specific emotional weight. An exceptional performance.

-- *New York Times*