

# Bob Ostertag

## Annotated Musical Biography

Born April 19, 1957 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA.

**1972-5:** high school in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Vaguely wanting to be an orchestra conductor, he learns a different instrument every year (flute, violin, percussion), but mostly plays electric guitar. He forms an ensemble to perform his compositions, with 2 electronically modified trumpets, oboe, English horn, piano, trap set, percussion, electric bass and electric guitar. The group rehearses for 2 years but there is nowhere in suburban Colorado for them to play.

**1976:** begins a contentious stay at the Oberlin College and Conservatory of Music, where he drops the guitar and instead builds a Serge modular synthesizer which becomes his main ax. He forms the Fall Mountain ensemble with Ned Rothenberg (reeds) and Jim Katzin (violin).

**1978-9:** Ostertag leaves Oberlin for good to tour Europe with Anthony Braxton's Creative Music Orchestra. Twenty years later, the Orchestra's concert in Köln is released as a 2-cd set on hat ART, **Creative Orchestra (Köln) 1978.**

Following the tour, he settles in New York City's Lower East Side and joins the scene of young, unknown musicians including John Zorn, Eugene Chadbourne, and Wayne Horwitz, as well as Fred Frith, who had just moved to NYC from London. His work is immediately singled out by Michael Shore writing in the Soho Weekly News, soon joined by Robert Palmer in the New York Times and Gregory Sandow at the Village Voice. Robert Fripp of King Crimson also becomes a public fan.

With electronics and synthesizers in general, the way most people see them seems very shallow to me. It's a waste of a potentially incredible device. The only guy I've seen recently on synthesizer who interests me is the young guy Bob Ostertag.

-- Robert Fripp in the Soho Weekly News, 1979

Bob Ostertag is currently New York's leading exponent of free-form synthesizer. He's developed a sharp mistrust of capitalist commodity-think: 'I don't want a grant! Where's that money come from, Rockefeller or someone? Where'd HE get it? I don't want his money. He didn't get it from experimental musicians, he shouldn't give it to them. Why doesn't he get some garbage men to clean up these streets' -- he gestures outside his Mott Street storefront -- instead of giving it to people nobody's ever gonna to hear anyway?'

Ostertag doesn't seem to mind that hi himself is an experimental musician nobody's ever gonna hear anyway, and that he damns himself in that bargain: "That's true, but I like it better that way. The music I make, with Fall Mountain, Fred Frith, Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, is HONEST music. It's a pure social, political, economic, and sonic statement of who we are and where we're at. It's all right there.

-- Soho Weekly News, October 18, 1979



Fall Mountain releases an LP, **Early Fall**, on Eugene Chadbourne's tiny Parachute label. But Ostertag also spends an increasing amount of time as an organizer in the movement to shut down nuclear power plants being built on the eastern coast, in Long Island, NY and Seabrook, New Hampshire. He is arrested several times, and organizes an anti-nuclear benefit concert with John Cage, Fred Frith and himself.

**1980:** Ostertag releases his first LP under his own name, **Getting A Head**, with Fred Frith and Charles K. Noyes on Frith's Rift mini-label. The record features Ostertag playing an instrument/invention created by himself and Bryan Medwed, consisting of 3 modified open-reel tape recorders linked together with helium balloons. The record marks one of the first, and to this day one of the only, times that tape manipulation techniques developed by the first generation of electronic composers for use in the studio were adapted for live performance and improvisation.



One Side one of Getting A Head, the sounds move in short, almost breathless little impulses, always lively and alert. You know that Frith and Ostertag are listening to each other with strong, even crazed concentration (sometimes with manic glee too), never just fooling around or digging deeper ruts. Side Two is peaceful. The search for new sounds moves much more slowly, evolving in long, supple arcs made of smaller, more weirdly twisted parts; and in between there's enough time between the beginning of one event and the end of the next to enjoy some curiosity about what might be coming next. The high, insistently lyrical final episode is especially lovely.

-- Gregory Sandow, Village Voice, January 7, 1981

Despite the label's near total lack of resources and distribution, over the next year the LP brings the first international attention to Ostertag's work.

Although common in many areas of contemporary music, complex tape systems are rarely used in improvised music. This new development represents an exciting possibility, with American Bob Ostertag's work being the latest in a short list. At its most intense, it assumes the proportions of electronic music, yet there are no synthesizer controls in site. Cascades of splintered guitar notes form the basis of a hyperactive and concentrated duet, both Frith

and ostertag drawing from an inexhaustible supply of musical and technical ideas.

-- *City Limits (London) November 5, 1981*

True we have a tape loop here, but don't confuse this with Robert Fripp's small, intelligent, mobile unit. There are a lot more surprises here, and there is a vital interaction between the people running the decks and playing the instruments. Also, sides one and two are radically different, lacking the sameness of Fripp's work and adding a good deal more 'hazard.' The result is a worthwhile balance of beautiful sounds and sensitive noise.

-- *OP Magazine, 1981*

Getting A Head is musical kissin' cousins with Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music. Ostertag uses a "highly unstable and peculiar recording system" which uses kiddie balloons to hold up tape loops between tape recorders that are made to malfunction in an assortment of ways, and another dimension is added when the home listener changes turntable speeds. But at 33, 45 or even 78, you will still be able to hear a pained cow fly through a time warp.

-- *unidentified British music magazine, 1981*

Following the release of **Getting A Head**, Ostertag becomes the first of his generation of musicians to have his work presented at The Kitchen, at the time NYC's premiere venue for new music.

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, January 27, 1980*

Ostertag also performs in the **Zoo Festival**, a week-long improvisation extravaganza at Giorgio Gromelski's Zoo Theater organed by Chadbourne and Zorn and featuring almost every one of the young musicians of the emerging downtown NYC scene. The festival is timed to coincide with, and in reality in opposition to, the well-heeled New Music, New York Festival at the Kitchen. Though the New Music, New York Festival (which later metamorphosized into New Music America) was supposed to showcase all the new music in NYC, not one of the raucous musical upstarts from the East Village was invited to participate. The Zoo Festival's final "big band" concert featured Zorn's first large ensemble game composition, **Archery**, and Eugene Chadbourne's **The English Channel**, which was then released as an LP on the Parachute mini-label run by Chadbourne and Zorn. Chadbourne's composition is based on zany juxtapositions of brief fragments of musical styles, pioneering a compositional direction later popularized by Zorn

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*

With the entire NYC music press behind him, his record receiving critical acclaim, and the success of the Zoo Festival and his solo Kitchen concert, Ostertag seems poised to be the first star of his generation. But by the time Getting A Head is out, Ostertag is already spending less and less time at music, and more and more at politics. In July 1980 he has a life-changing experience when he travels to Nicaragua where the Sandinista movement had just overthrown the Somoza dictatorship, with the idea of recording Nicaraguan music for the Rift label he is now running together with Frith. He returns to NYC and nearly abandoning music, throwing himself into raising money and doing public speaking on behalf of the guerrilla movement in El Salvador.

He ends the year returning to the Ktichen to perform his composition **General Hospital** on a program of emerging composers. Ostertaag reads a text which is a jumbled collage of an article in TV Guide about the efforts of a soap opera star to save stray cats, and news reports of the atrocities of Somoza's National Guard in Nicaragua. The piece builds to a climax as a tape builds from the sound of one cat meows to whole armies of cats hissing and spatting, while violinist Jim Katzin wails on amplified violin. [PROGRAM HERE???

**1981:** The year starts with Ronald Reagan's inauguration as US President, which combines with the Superbowl football match and the American hostages returning home from the US Embassy in Tehran, to produce the ugliest outbursts grotesque nationalism Ostertag has seen. He and Frith perform in duo the next week-end. In the first set is devoted to Ostertag's **General Hospital**, with Frith's guitar taking the place of Katzin's violin. The second set is an improvisation. Without telling Frith beforehand, Ostertag brings tapes he recorded from the week's television, as well as recordings he had collected in Nicaragua, and mixes them into the concert. Later that year, Ostertag and Frith travel to London for a gig at the ICA, where they are joined by vocalist Phil Minton. The next year Rift releases the two concerts as the LP **Voice of America**.



**Voice of America** features Ostertag's work on the synthesizer, as well as novel, improvisatory use of tape. This time, instead of the tape-deack-and-helium-ballon contraption of **Getting A Head**, he employs a pile of telephone answering machine cassette loops of varying lengths which he shuffles among several cheap cassette players, each modified to malfunction a different way. He uses this array to both playback the pre-recorded material from US television and his travels in Nicaragua, as well as to record Frith and Minton live during the gigs. Coming years before the invention of the sampler, **Voice of America** introduces techniques that would later become commonplace with the use of digital technology.

**Voice of America** 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, 1983*

Much further out and ultimately more powerful is **Voice of America**, by Fred Frith, the avant-garde guitarist, and Bob Ostertag, a leading electronic experimentalist. A huge variety of "found" texts, from Monte Hall, the Super Bowl and music to recorded dialogue from various Latin American revolutions, is distorted, commented upon, and melted together with tape treatments, homemade instruments, guitar (or so it says here), synthesized blips and whines and scratches, and uncanny vocalizations by Phil Minton. It's ambient as hell, but it sure isn't soothing -- no Music for Airports here, thank you. 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.

-- *Music and Sound Output, July 1983*

At the London gig that became Side 2 of **Voice of America**, Ostertag's synthesizer was destroyed in a technical mishap. With no money to replace it, the accident severs Ostertag's last ties to the music world and he immerses himself for the rest of the 1980s in the Salvadoran revolution.

**1982-1988:** Ostertag becomes an expert on the political crisis in Central America and publishes widely for a diverse range of publications, including *Piensamiento Propio* (Nicaragua), *Piensamiento Critico* (Puerto Rico), *The Guardian* (London), *the Weekly Mail* (South Africa), *Mother Jones* and the *NACLA Report on the Americas* (US), *AMPO* (Japan), and even the clandestine theoretical journal of the *New People's Army* in the Philippines. He alternates his time in Central America with organizing and public speaking in the US, giving lectures at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Rutgers, and many other schools and institutions.

**1988:** Oddly, after seven years of musical inactivity, Ostertag's work is "discovered" by *Keyboard Magazine*, who publish a survey of his work written as if he were hard at it.

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.

-- *Keyboard Magazine August 1988*

As it happened, the *Keyboard* article foreshadowed coming events. Finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a viable political space in Central America for the work he wanted to do, in late 1988 Ostertag returns to music. This turn of events was largely made possible by Fred Frith, who had remained close to Ostertag throughout the decade, and who now invited Ostertag to tour with his new band. Having not paid any attention to musical developments in the intervening years, Ostertag has never heard of samplers or MIDI. He rushes to the store to find an instrument to play and returns home with a sampler and a bunch of manuals. Weeks later he is in NYC rehearsing with Frith's new group, *Keep the Dog*.

**1989:** Ostertag tours extensively with Frith, and resumes his own musical work as well. The sampler now replaces the old Serge synthesizer and the tape recorders as his primary instrument. He makes his first NYC appearance in nearly a decade at the *Knitting Factory* playing one set duo with Frith and another set duo with John Zorn. Once again, the *New York Times* singles out the show for praise.

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 grumbings 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.

-- *New York Times*, September 9, 1989

**1990:** Ostertag continues touring with Frith, and releases his first recording in 9 years, **Attention Span**, with Fred Firth and John Zorn, issued by Rift in the US and RecRec in Europe.



Sample master Bob Ostertag follows the challenges of his chosen technology much farther than most. He intentionally uses limited sound sources. For "Slam Dunk" he deal with manic sax improvisation by John Zorn, for the mother , more moderate segment, "Sleepless," guitarist Fred Frith provided both the original sample source and after-the-fact duets while Ostertag 'played' Frith samples. Armed with this raw sound putty, Ostertag proceeds to reconfigure the existing materials into new forms. Zorn is served up frenetic doses of his own medicine. The lugubrious beauty of Frith's 'Drowning Offshore' bears distant aural resemblance to the electric guitar, but for the eerie metallic sheen.

-- *Option*, July/August 1991

Bob Ostertag is a pioneer in the world of electronic music. His experiments make most of today's synthesizer and computer music seem like kindergarten child's play.

-- *Oakland Tribune on Attention Span*, March 31, 1991

Ostertag literally blurs the definitional boundaries around the concept of "composing." The machine magically becomes a transparent medium for the musicians and the music.

-- *The East Bay Guardian*, August 1991



**1991:** Ostertag follows Attention Span with the release of **Sooner or Later**, his musical response to his years in El Salvador and the first part of a trilogy to treat the themes of grief, anger, and joy. Using only a recording of a Salvadoran boy burying his father and a small sample of Frith's guitar work, the composition's extreme emotional intensity (something not typically associated with electronic music) makes it a landmark work.

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 (Germany)*, 1991

The technological implications of the piece are dwarfed by the emotional enormity of the boy's grief; it's very hard to get through the entire 45 minutes without some goose bumps, if not tears.

-- *Pulse! (Tower Records)*, Number 100, 1991

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

-- *Cadence*, January 1992

Ostertag's music slices the boy's speech as thin as garlic cut with a razor blade, the 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 Magazine*, Fall 1994

Ostertag also begins his long collaboration with Quebecois film-maker Pierre Hébert. He performs **Sooner or Later** both solo and in duo with Hébert, in the US and Europe.

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 also an irony 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*, March 1992

Ostertag managed to develop a personal abstraction of the (Salvadoran) event built on pure emotion and sonic cadences without trivializing the grief.

-- *Cadence on Victoriaville show, December 1991.*

Ostertag is now performing extensively under his own name, solo and also in duo with Frith or Hébert.

Ostertag and Frith put on a fascinating show. The results, at times, were as beautiful in their own way as peeling the pastoral/celestial meditations of Brian Eno or Kitaro -- 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, September 30, 1992*

**1992:** The Kronos String Quartet commissions a new work from Ostertag. He records a riot for gay rights in his new home town of San Francisco. Using the novel technique of actually transcribing for string quartet, he composes **All the Rage**, adding a text by poet Sara Miles. The Kronos Quartet gives the work's world premiere at Lincoln Center in New York City, and once again the New York Times singles out his work for special praise.

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, April 28, 1992*

The Kronos Quartet performs **All the Rage** around the world, before finally premiering it in San Francisco later in the year.

Bob Ostertag's All the Rage was the most powerful work of Thursday's Kronos Quartet concert. It built into a cacophony of crowd noise taped during a San Francisco riot in 1991, then grew to scream pitch, with stringed instruments bowing furiously to the piercing sounds of the crowd, and the players blowing whistles at the same time. It was an intensely gripping work.

-- *Oakland Tribune, November 14, 1992*

The big news of the [Kronos Quartet] concert centered around the San Francisco premiere of Bob Ostertag's All the Rage, commissioned by the Kronos Quartet. The sheer ferocity of All the Rage could overwhelm, but it's hard to miss the poignancy of the text and Ostertag's expert technique...

Ostertag rises above the obvious. Rage is cleansing, but in this case humanity remains paramount. When the members of the quartet, singly and then in unison, blow whistles provided by Community United Against Violence, the effect is wildly theatrical and, strangely enough, reassuring.

-- *Bay Area Reporter, November 15, 1992*



**1993:** Kronos records **All the Rage** as a CD of the same title on the Nonesuch label, and for the first and only time Ostertag's recorded work is distributed with the backing of a commercial, corporate record label.

I believe "All the Rage" will become an anthem for our time.

-- *Gaze Magazine, October 1993*

A message-disc that speaks of the fury and frustration of the gay and lesbian community under attack. It's cleverly constructed, combining words and sounds of protest with music that underscores and sharpens the emotional content.

-- *Billboard, December 4, 1993*



Ostertag originally conceived **All the Rage** as a collaboration with writer/painter/photographer/film maker David Wojnarowicz, but David was ill with AIDS. When David dies before the collaboration can take place, Ostertag makes a second, solo piece from the riot recordings, **Burns Like Fire**, and dedicates it to Wojnarowicz. The work is released as a cd on RecRec. Ostertag also performs it solo, using gestures in space with infrared wands designed by synthesizer pioneer Don Buchla to manipulate the sound.

Critics on both sides of the Atlantic are coming to view Ostertag as a major composer in the electronic medium.

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

-- *Messenger Veneto (Italy)*

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

-- *Il Piccolo (Italy)*

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

--- *Il Gazzettino (Italy)*

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 March 17, 1993*



Ostertag forms his first performance ensemble since high school, the **Say No More Quartet**, with Mark Dresser (contrabass), Gerry Hemingway (percussion), and Phil Minton (voice). The group is based on an innovative compositional process of taking recordings of the members' improvisations, both separately and as an ensemble, as the source material for musique concrète computer pieces, which in turn become the basis of scores for the group's live performances. The group releases the first of what will become 4 cd's over the next few years, **Say No More** on the RecRec label. The group tours in the US, Europe, and Canada.

[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 (Germany) DATE??*

A trip into another dimension of music, and into a world as full of clashes and conflict as the one in which we live.

-- *Forum (Germany) DATE??*

**1994:** Ostertag follows up **Burns Like Fire** with another work dedicated to David Wojnarowicz, **Spiral**, this time using David's last text as the libretto. The extraordinary text, written while the writer was literally on his death bed, describes his experience of the dying process as feeling like one is turning into glass. Working with instrument builder Oliver DiCicco and Pierre Hébert, Ostertag creates a concert length work for actor, electronics, film and a chamber ensemble of specially constructed glass instruments (harp, drums, marimba, and more, all made from glass). Hébert's films are projected on suspended sheets of glass which double as percussion instruments.

**Spiral** receives its world premiere in San Francisco as part of the national **What About AIDS?** art show, and is then performed at the Walker Center in Minneapolis, in Brussels and Freiburg before the instruments are largely destroyed in transit by airlines, effectively ending the brief life of the work before it could be recorded or even performed much.

The year also sees the release of the **Say No More** quartet's second cd, and first cd as a live chamber ensemble, **Say No More in Person**, produced by the Kunstradio program of the ORF (Austrian State Radio) and released by the ORF in a limited edition pressing. The quartet tours actively.



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 May 18-22, 1995*



**1995:** Ostertag releases what is perhaps his most misunderstood recording, **Fear No Love**. Just as in the late 1970s Ostertag felt torn between his increasing political activism and his musical work in downtown NYC (where political interests were extremely out of fashion), in the 1990s a similar tension arises between his musical world, where his colleagues are all straight, and his social world, where his friends are increasingly queer. When John Zorn asks him to make a cd for a series on the Avant label where composers are supposed to do something completely different from what they normally do, Ostertag responds that the most different thing he could possibly do would be to make a dance record, and decides to use the opportunity to bring his straight and queer friends together on one project, **Fear No Love**. The queer press loves it, Zorn hates it, everyone else ignores it.



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 Farih. 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*, April 18, 1995

**Fear No Love** is, in its composers words, "a very San Francisco kind of thing, in the best sense." He's right: his project has the openness to experimentation, and the wealth of talent that we value in our little corner of the world. Maybe this disc will get some mainstream attention, maybe it won't. But those of use lucky enough to encounter it in its Japanese pressing will know what the world of graph-paper dance music is missing.

-- *Bay Area Reporter*, February 16, 1995

Is Ostertag Becoming a Pop Pig?

-- *Swiss jazz critic*

**1996:** Ostertag releases **Verbatim**, the third cd by the **Say No More** quartet, and **Twins!**, a collaboration with Tokyo-based noise DJ Otomo Yoshihide. He tours Japan in duo with Yoshihide, and Europe in duo with Frith. In Australia he creates a commissioned work for The Listening Room of Australian Radio (ABC), **Hunting Crows**, featuring the voice of Phil Minton and an instruction farm recording from the 1940s on how to shoot crows. While in the ABC studios, he also records an extended sampler improvisation that will later be released as **Like A Melody, No Bitterness**.



Ostertag is also asked to be a member of the Ars Electronica music jury. In Linz, Austria, Ars Electronica is the richest and most prestigious computer art festival in the world, with prizes in fields such as digital music, art, animation, web. The jury invitation is surprising given Ostertag's distance from the academic computer music that is the usual festival fare. Each year the festival publishes a hard cover book featuring, among other things, an essay by one member of each jury, and Ostertag is asked to write the essay from the music jury. He writes a scathing critique of the music submitted to the jury, concluding that "Computer Music" is dead and they should stop giving a prize for it. Needless to say, he is not invited back to Ars Electronica in future years. The essay is reprinted in Resonance, the journal of the London Musicians collective.

Ostertag also launches the **House of Discipline** and **House of Splendor** projects at a gig in San Francisco. Both groups feature Ostertag and Yoshihide, while **House of Discipline** adds vocalist Mike Patton and **House of Splendor** adds drag queen Justin Bond. The gig results in a record contract with Naut Humon's Asphodel label for **House of Splendor**.

Drag met outré electronic music when glittering genderfuck artist Justin Bond joined forces with experimental music luminaries Bob Ostertag, Otomo Yoshihide, and Mike Patton at the Great American Music Hall. The show was split in two sets, the first featured Ostertag, Patton and Yoshihide. The music was electronica at its most avant garde. Best known as the lead vocalist for Faith No More, Patton didn't so much sing as whimper, grunt, bellow, and giggle, performing with extraordinary intensity.

After a brief intermission, Ostertag and Yoshihide returned to the stage with Bond. Imitating Patton, who banged his microphone on the speakers, Bond went at the mic with a nail file. And when all out of idea, he plopped himself down on the edge of the stage and proceeded to file his nails while Ostertag and Yoshihide played on.

Clearly, Bond is as cutting edge in the drag arena as Ostertag, Yoshihide and Patton are in the musical one. This grouping of performers, which might have seemed odd initially, made perfect sense after all.

-- *Bay Area Reporter (San Francisco)* March 13, 1997



**1997:** Ostertag tours Italy and eastern Europe in duo with violinist Jon Rose, and the two produce a commissioned radio work, **Crows**, for Italian state radio in Rome. The **Say No More** quartet tours Europe. **Spiral** receives its European premiere at the Belluard-Bolwerk festival in Switzerland. And **House of Discipline**, with Yoshihide and Patton, plays an intense sets to an oversold house at the Angelica Festival in Bologna. The set is recorded and released by the festival on a compilation of festival

performances. (This is the only recording of **House of Discipline** available).



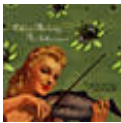
Working as an artist-in-residence at the STEIM electronic music studio in Amsterdam, Ostertag invents **The Window**, a novel instrument consisting of a video camera and a suspended sheet of edge-lit Plexiglas. The instrument is played on a dark stage by drawing shapes with one's fingers on the glass, while the video camera feeds the image to a computer which generates musical data from the shapes. The instrument is premiered at the Paradiso in Amsterdam in a duo performance with film maker Pierre Hébert.

**1998:** The **Say No More** quartet tours in Japan and Europe, and Ostertag makes his trip to South America as a musician instead of a journalist with a solo performance in Buenos Aires. He also creates a new, multi-media version of **Hunting Crows** which features him substituting crow sounds with toy instruments played on stage, and manipulating sampled sounds by making gestures in space with the toys while a video camera fed to a computer watches. The multi-performance premieres in Berlin to a sold-out house.

Ostertag goes to Köln to work with students at a UNESCO-affiliated high school to create a commissioned work to be broadcast on German radio (WDR) to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Working with 15 students ranging from fairly accomplished teenagers to kids with no musical experience, Ostertag creates **Dear Prime Minister**, which is broadcast on WDR and released as a limited edition cd by radio and the school. Students bang rocks together in rhythms derived from the names of atrocity victims at Auschwitz, Srebrenica (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and El Mozote (El Salvador). Others play rhythms using sand paper and hammers on wood. Those with musical skills play fragments of klezmer music, gypsy music, and more. Meanwhile, students take turns reading letters they have written to heads of states on behalf of specific prisoners of conscience.

The **House of Splendor** cd hits an expected roadblock with the tape the group creates lead to extreme tensions within the administration of the Asphodel label, where some administrators find it brilliant and threaten to resign if it is released. Lengthy negotiations ensue.

**1999:** Ostertag returns to Australia, this time as a guest artist of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival.



After 10 years working with the same sampler, Ostertag switches to a laptop computer and begins writing his own audio performance software, which he uses in performance with various controllers, including joysticks, game pads, and drawing tablets. He releases the improvisations he did on the old sampler at the ABC Sydney under the title **Like A Melody, No Bitterness**, his's only cd of solo improvisation, as a document of the decade he spent mastering the instrument.

Ostertag's endless label woes seem finally resolved when Seeland, the label run by the media guerrilla group Negativland, agrees to release all of his material. **Like A Melody** is the first Seeland release, followed by the controversial House of Splendor recording, rechristened as **PantyChrist**. The release is followed by a **PantyChrist** European tour which culminates at the prestigious Taktlos Festival in Switzerland. Wishing to avoid the misunderstandings that surrounded **Fear No Love**, Ostertag writes an essay for a Zurich newspaper titled **Why I Work with Drag Queens**.

To say that this has made me radically rethink my use of the word "queer" is an understatement.

-- *Q.U.E.E.R. zine*

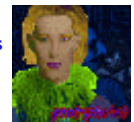
Odd and genius. Like nothing before or after, I promise.

-- *TORSO*

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

-- *Faster Than Sheep*

Justin Bond, who delivers PantyChrist's material in any number of effective voices, maintains a parallel career as a crossdressing cabaret performer with a wickedly satiric viewpoint on current conventions, straight and queer alike. In one of the record's best pieces he bitchily blurts out lines like "I didn't get my fingernails painted petal-pink just so I could come here and listen to this shit." Shades of a drag queen Lenny Bruce. The truly bizarre thing is, most all of it work, in a decidedly skewed and feverish sort of way. PantyChrist is a house-of-mirrors theater of the absurd and/or cruel, and much of the credit for its success has to go to Ostertag and Yoshihide. Their densely-layered combinations of turntable scratching, feedback-hungry guitar work and sampling create a rolling aftershock of apocalyptic fury that continues unabated throughout the album.



-- *San Francisco Reporter, August 11, 1999*

There is a special pleasure that comes from things that are genuinely fucked up. Things that only try are on 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.

Try putting a whole coconut, shell and all, into a high-powered blender with its lid off, and then punch the liquefy button. The ensuing chaos in your kitchen will provide a visual rough equivalent to track 1. After that things get really weird.

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, Fall 1999*



Ostertag is again working as artist-in-residence at the STEIM studio in Amsterdam when the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia begins. In response, Ostertag works with lighting designer Richard Board to create **Yugoslavia Suite**, a multi-media work for hand ballet and digitally-manipulated sound and video. Just weeks after the bombing ends, Ostertag and Board tour the work in the Balkans, including Beograd and Novi Sad in Serbia. The timing of the tour and the political nature of the work generate considerable attention in the region, where performances are covered on national television and Ostertag and Board are even briefly arrested in Serbia.

Finally, Ostertag begins work with Pierre Hébert and Salvadoran actor and playwright Baltazar López on a full-scale multi-media and theater work, **Entre Basura y Ciencia** (Between Science and Garbage), commissioned by Meet the Composer and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

2000: The year begins with the premiere of **Entre Basura y Ciencia** in San Francisco, which is followed by extensive touring of Yugoslavia Suite in Europe and Canada. The multi-media character of the piece brings Ostertag's work to film and new media festivals, as well as music festivals and venues.

Along with the **Yugoslavia Suite** tours are a series of ad hoc projects, including European tours in duo with Otomo Yoshihide and Phil Minton, as well as solo performances and an odd series of duos with pipe organists at an organ festival in the Netherlands.

In September ostertag returns to the Balkans to be a resident artist and teacher at the HEXPO Festival of Self-Organized art, a month long meetings of artists of various disciplines from around the Balkans.

He also begins a major re-working of "Entre Basura y Ciencia, now as a duo project with Pierre Hébert.

Finally, he begins work on a major new collaboration with Texas-based visual artist Jim Magee cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, who had just left the Kronos Quartet after 20 years with the group. He does his first-ever university residency at Colorado College, which commissions the new work along with the Colorado Springs Arts Center.