An Interview with John Zorn

by PHILIP BROPHY

In the liner notes to the first volume of *The Carl Stalling Project*, John Zorn states that "All genres of music are *equal*—no *one* is inherently better than the other—and with Stalling, all are embraced, chewed up and spit out . . ." While he was describing Stalling's approach to music, Zorn could have easily been referring to his own—showing just how much the work of Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley has, undoubtedly, influenced the way music has been written for other kinds of music than that for cartoons, whether you use the label serious, art, avant-garde, contemporary, or experimental.

John Zorn is most often identified as a jazz musician, yet his vast output as a composer in every possible style and format defies this label. A wide variety of creative elements mediate his work: his varied compositional techniques (indeterminacy; structured improvisation or "game theory"); his work with other modern musicians/groups and composers (Bill Frisell, The Golden Palominos, Guy Klucesvek, Naked City); his exploration of Jewish heritage (his record label, Tzadik, has released more than sixty albums in the Radical Jewish Culture series, including several by Zorn himself); and most importantly here, his experiments with the styles of other composers—Ennio Morricone, Ornette Coleman, and Carl Stalling, among others. Zorn's manner of creating pieces in many ways follows Stalling's, in that both take pieces from every imaginable genre and style—including sound effects and, in Zorn's case, dialogue tracks and musique concrète—and string them together to create a coherent musical narrative. As Zorn points out in this interview with Philip Brophy, Stalling influenced both his compositional style and the way he came to appreciate the fundamental structure of music—showing that cartoon music isn't just for kids.

PHILIP BROPHY: What sort of pleasure do you get from Carl Stalling's music?

John Zorn: The way it's all chopped up: that's what I respond to right away, have since I was young. There's an insatiable love for music. Anything gets thrown into the mix without any fear whatsoever of being a colonialist or a thief. He just takes and makes, that's what great composers do, what Igor Stravinsky did. "The great composer steals, the lesser composer borrows" is one of his great quotes. Stalling is a perfect example of someone able to use different quotes, different elements, sound effects, other peoples' music: Raymond Scott's, which was available in the Warner Bros. catalog at the time and was free.

Carl Stalling was a very different composer from Raymond Scott. Although he used elements and melodies from Scott, it's not unlike the way Charles Ives used American folk themes. Stalling's sense of time, his sense of narrative, completely revolutionized the idea of musical development. This was before the post-modern experiments. He created something completely new, and he did it in part in collaboration with people at Warner Bros. Studios, such as Milt Franklyn, who did the orchestration, and Treg Brown, who did sound effects; I assume that the directors of the cartoons had some input. Stalling is an interesting composer because he was a nine-to-fiver, he just did his job, he wasn't trying to make the great avant-garde music of the 1940s. He probably didn't even think of himself as a composer. From a young age he was playing for silent movies. That helped create his weird sense of musical logic. His music was always connected with a visual counterpart, and that guided the music to non-musical development, more a filmic sense of development. Themes never appear again: they happen once, then are thrown away when the gag is done. He's truly a visionary, even though he was self-deprecating. Directors thought the great thing Stalling did was to arrange Tchaikovsky. Not at all. What was great was his "mickey mousing," which functioned as the meat of the composition. This is still shockingly original.

PB: It's interesting you mentioned Treg Brown, because I've never been able to figure out the relationship between him and Stalling. It's hard to distinguish between the sound effects and the music score, almost like Satie's *Parade*. Violent percussive sounds become musicalized. Sometimes with Stalling's music you hear this "daroom boom" and wonder: what was the actual orchestration?

JZ: There are many different examples. I've seen Stalling's scores, and he had a very particular ear for sound and for orchestration. I know that Milt

Franklyn did a lot of the work. Quincy Jones didn't do his orchestration, and even Jerry Goldsmith, who is one of the great geniuses of film music, had Arthur Morton to do all his orchestration. They all worked very closely with an orchestrator. You do your job and then pass it onto someone else.

PB: You said something once that has always stuck in my mind. You were talking about the ear "growing tired of tape splices." When I read that, I thought of Varèse saying the opposite. It's a contradiction but linked; when he said the tape recorder was the thing that he was always waiting for . . .

JZ: We're talking about something different. Varèse was waiting for the tape recorder whether he liked tape splices or not. We're unsure if he would have been able to create works without using any tape splices. We don't know, maybe Stockhausen loved tape splices: this is speculation.

PB: The point I was making is that Stalling has got that organic tape splice effect in his music. . . .

JZ: Absolutely. He used tape splices, because the music was too complex to be able to perform it all the way through. The way he worked is like the way I work in the studio, doing sections at a time. But I have a multi-track at my disposal, and can keep it on one piece of tape without splicing. He would do sections at a time and then splice them together, pick the best takes and use a click track, which was one of his great inventions. The one luxury Stalling had, that I do not, was that he could do many takes and keep them all. . . . I can't keep them. I have to wait for the right take and then move on. I've got to make a decision. Keep it and move on, it's a trade-off. For me it works.

PB: In a way *Torture Garden* [1989] reminds me of Carl Stalling, because of the violence but also because of the bizarre comic sense.

JZ: I'm not going to lose that no matter how old I get. There's always going to be a weird sense of humor. Rather than violence, I'd say *extreme*. . . . There's something very extreme about *Torture Garden*. It's like taking the aesthetic of Carl Stalling to an even greater extreme. It's one of my most popular records; it's been used for Sega TV commercials, video games, for the past couple of years.

PB: Have you found with your music that it is dealing with a "cartoony" sensibility? By that I don't mean a kitsch, campy, nostalgic sensibility, but the actual structure and density and form of cartoons.

JZ: This is another interesting point—the difference between appreciating kitsch and appreciating art. I'm very serious about my approach to cartoon music, about my own music. But it doesn't mean that I can't put humor into it. It is very difficult to communicate with people. Humor is even more oblique, because it's not a word, it's a kind of a flavor. Humor goes right to the heart of the matter, it's very personal, and people get very upset. I can only be who I am, and do what I do. It's strange to be so serious about something like cartoons.

PB: Obviously you don't even consider that you are being serious about them.

JZ: I'm digging them! I'm digging them! But I'm digging them on another level than other people. It is a personal vision of another kind of music that never existed before, has never existed again and could never exist again. In the 1950s, Les Baxter experimented with all kinds of world instruments, strange time signatures, "wall paper." This man was a genius, as original as Igor Stravinsky or Anton Webern. I'm not anti-European-music—Berg is one of my absolute favorites. But there is an American sensibility, a maverick tradition of living in this crazy country and forging a vision out of rock. People who survive the tribulations a person with an original idea has to go through in this country are heroes. Stalling and Les Baxter are completely unknown. It's our duty to do something about that.

PB: Can you talk about your working relationship with the Kronos Quartet?

JZ: The piece I want to speak about is "Cat o' Nine Tails" [1993] which is subtitled "Tex Avery, Director, meets the Marquis de Sade." They really loved playing it. It was difficult for them because Stalling created many different mood and genre shifts, but kept the same tempo for most of the piece. Then he goes through these crazy shifts with "Cat o' Nine Tails" every few bars. For a small group, this is very difficult and it was a challenge to them. But they took it on very seriously and performed the piece wonderfully. They are really good at playing American music. Maybe it's part of the humor. They under-

stand there's a wit there, there's something not European, not weighted down with centuries of history. Maybe I'll be criticized, but I can answer to my own conscience, and talk with my peers.

PB: Have you actually done any film scores. . . ?

JZ: They are very obscure little films. I have done some major ones too. I did *The Golden Boat* [1990], which is a Raoul Ruiz film. I did the original score for a film Walter Hill directed. It was interesting the way they pillaged what I had done for them. It was very inspiring in a certain way.

PB: Did you do anything for the Japanese films?

JZ: Yes, I did some Japanese cartoons. There's a cartoonist named Kiriko Kubo, who does *Cynical Hysterie Hour*. It's a hysterical play on American words and it's weird. She always had a dream of making a cartoon series in the Warner Bros. tradition, on that artistic level. She made a lot of money and decided that she would finance herself to do four seven-minute cartoons for shorts in movie theaters. It was a great project. I orchestrated four cartoons with slightly different groups. It was a nice opportunity. All my records come out on Japanese labels now, because I spent ten years there and I've developed a very good working relationship with three record companies there.

PB: John, is there an extensive musicography of what you have done?

JZ: It's funny you should mention that. There are these guys on the Internet . . . there's a Zorn thing on the Internet, they're maniacs. Those are the recent discographies . . .

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