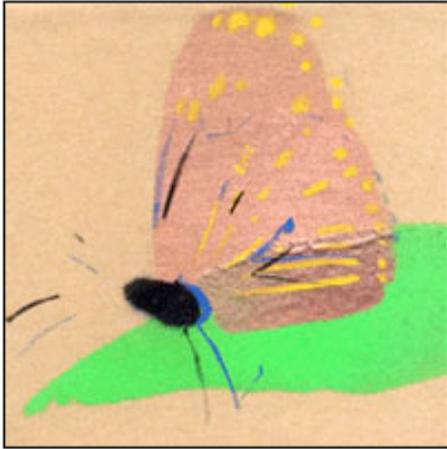


MUSIC REVIEW

John Davis: At Home and Afield

By Buzzy Jackson | Jul 07, 2006



Consider the virtually simultaneous appearance on earth of the following: Ambient music (mid-1970s); the Sony Walkman (1979); MTV (1981). Coincidence? Yes, but...

Admit it: you have spent time -- valuable time -- imagining what a TV show or film based on your life would look like. Who would play you? Who would play that jerk of a kid who picked on you in junior high? (May I suggest Seth Green?) And, most importantly, what would be on the soundtrack?

Music has always been personal, but the Walkman made it private. And what is private music, if not a soundtrack? Yes, before the Walkman it was possible to take one's music along to a picnic, but boomboxes actually were a means of sharing music. Although the gentle (ha!) folks at Apple like to claim their iPod as the revolutionary music

player of the modern era, they're just wrong.

The advent of MTV and other cable channels dedicated to niche pleasures (food, animals, home decor, etc.) further encouraged consumer citizens to see the world as one's own personal pleasure dome. We could all star in the biopic of our own lives. Fun! It was nice to listen to The Smiths' "How Soon is Now" while feeling glum and riding the bus around town... alone... (sniff, we were fourteen) but what about the moments in life -- in the ongoing film of one's life -- when pop songs don't apply? That's when you need ambient music, something without vocals or attention-drawing solos, to simply enhance the mood of the moment -- your own, private moment.

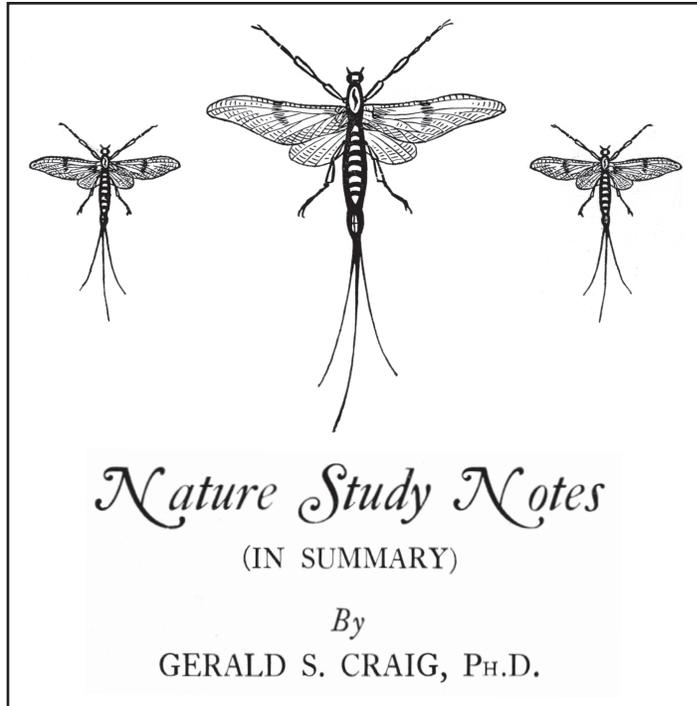
Thus, John Davis. Well, not exactly. Perhaps the San Francisco-based artist John Davis is the anti-ambient musician, in the sense that his music and his entire aesthetic project is designed to engage the listener. Is that capital-A Ambient? I don't know. But his use of found sounds and love of long chord progressions tags him for the genre anyway. Sound recordings are just a part of his ongoing artistic oeuvre, which can be experienced at various artsy establishments around town. But his newest CD is the sweet and clever *At Home and Afield*, released by local label Root Strata. It's a 3", two-track CD that sounds like the inner yearnings of an old television antenna. Don't just take my word for it, according to Davis's website the instrumentation includes "field recordings, guitar, bowed cymbals, and household objects." Think metal whisk, not George Foreman grill. It's beautiful and slow and would make the perfect soundtrack to your six o'clock meander through an abandoned industrial warehouse. Find an old boombox, record the CD onto a cassette tape, pop it into a Walkman, and go.

The CD is packaged in a lovely little hand-stenciled case, and included in the reasonable price of \$4.98 are the makings for your own tiny contact microphone, which can be used to record pretty nature sounds or to spy on your arch-nemesis. Davis has created an online archive of found sounds and would love to post your recordings there, too. Now that's what I call personal -- if not private -- music.

Note re. scarcity: The first edition of *At Home and Afield* has sold out, but Root Strata has promised another pressing posthaste. Contact Root Strata for ordering information.

AT HOME AND AFIELD | ROOT STRATA 2006

This two track 3" CDR incorporates field recordings, guitar, bowed cymbals and household objects, as well as a host of outboard effects for seasoning. Included is a field guide complete with information for turning the piezo transducer included in the box into a contact microphone; all housed in a four color hand-painted stencil work by Chris Thorson. Information is also included for those interested in submitting field recordings for an online database that will become part of an interpretive sound library.



REVIEWS:

“Another amazing piece of mysterious musical sound art from local sound sculptor and field recordist John Davis via the splendid Root Strata label, run by Tarentel's Jefre Cantu Ledesma. This 3", near 20 minute cd-r captures more of Davis' gorgeous and glacial looped soundscapes of scrape and creak and groan, deftly smoothed out into rich harmonious drones. The sound is definitely metallic, but like metal wrapped in gauzy grey clouds and held under water. A soft somnambulant drift, hovering somewhere between the dark drone of Coleclough and the fuzzy processed soundworlds of Christian Fennesz. Streaks of glistening shimmer reverberate and gently vibrate, the resulting hum is rife with muted

overtones and muffled feedback, even occasional crackle give the pieces the effect of some unearthed sonic artifact. As always, totally captivating. The packaging is very reminiscent of an old naturalist's display case, a small brown cardboard box, with a leaf and butterfly motif screened in green and metallic gold ink on the top (by local artist Chris Thorson). Inside a hand sewn, mini-booklet, detailing the study of nature and the steps in getting your own recordings, and most impressive of all, nestled on a soft bed of billowy white cotton, an actual piezo contact microphone, which is a beautiful object on its own, but as the included note suggests, the mic may be used to make your own field recordings.”

- **Aquarius Records, San Francisco**

“Root Strata has one hell of a track record at this point in its existence, and Jefre Cantu-Ledesma's label shows no signs of letting up any time soon. John Davis already did one lovely CD-R for label last year (called Instructional Sculpture for Children), but the most recent release, a 3" CD-R entitled “At Home and Afield” is even better. Glacial Drones and beautiful, subtle sonic landscapes float on a wave of terrestrial debris. Housed in a handpainted mini-box with hand-assembled mini-booklet, you've got nothing to lose picking this up. It's absolutely stunning.”

- **Eden Hemming Rose for Foxy Digitalis**