

making sense of the creative, ecological and even political potential of field recording is the subject of *Ears To The Ground: Adventures In Field Recording And Electronic Music*, the first book by Ben Murphy, who has written extensively for publications including *Clash*, *Crack*, *Fact* and *The Guardian*. Immersive, thorough and deftly written, *Ears To The Ground* serves as a vital introduction to the practice, based on interviews with dozens of musicians, producers and sound artists who incorporate field recordings into their work.

In some respects, the book is as much about geography as it is about sound. The 12 chapters making up the first part focus on how artists across the UK and Ireland engage with their immediate environments. Ranging from composer Llyn Y Cwnn's bleak soundscapes shaped by the mountains of North Wales, to Flora Yin-Wong's attempt to capture acoustic ecology, and Ukraine born, Ireland based Natalia Beylis's sonic diaries, this section documents artists exploring notions of place, identity and memory while blurring the boundaries between the synthetic and the organic. There's an obvious ecological bent to many of these projects, from Scanner's recordings of melting ice in the Antarctic, to Leafcutter John's investigation of the Norfolk Coast Path, a landscape threatened by erosion.

Away from the UK, there's a section dedicated to prolific Nairobi born sound artist KMRU, whose intricate tracks took on an extra resonance during lockdown; Baltimore's Matmos and Brisbane's Lawrence English also get their own chapters. The book also examines the work of Egypt's ZULI, Jamaica's Equiknoxx, Morocco's Guedra Guedra and China's Yu Su. This laudable attempt to incorporate non-Western voices and perspectives feels slightly rushed in comparison with other chapters, perhaps missing an opportunity to fully explore global field recording practices.

But this is a minor complaint on an



A page from Aaron Lange's *Ain't It Fun: Peter Laughner & Proto-Punk In The Secret City* (2023)

otherwise enjoyable journey. As Murphy states in his introduction, field recording has much to offer beleaguered ears, providing a deeper sense of meaning and more intimate insight into artists' inner lives, while grounding electronic music in the corporeal world, when so many of us are stranded in the emotionless, algorithmic wasteland of the digital.

Adam Quarshie

Ain't It Fun: Peter Laughner & Proto-Punk In The Secret City
Aaron Lange

Stone Church Press Pbk 222 pp

Ain't It Fun takes the form of a graphic novel whose central core is a biography of the long-gone musician Peter Laughner, although the bulk of its pages are devoted to detailing the history of Cleveland, Ohio, where Laughner lived most of his short life.

In the course of setting the scene, Lange squeezes in a lot of historical data. Much of this is musical and/or countercultural, but a lot also deals with more general topics – industry, crime, architecture, pollution and what have you. Lange seems intent on providing the full context for Laughner's activities, injecting interesting factoids into almost every page, but there are passages where hard-core musos are almost certain to feel their concentration flagging.

Things pick up when DJ Alan Freed hits the Cleveland scene, followed by the whacko television host Ghoulardi, and the brilliant ill-starred post-Beat poet da levy. Eventually, The Velvet Underground arrive to play a residency at La Cave in 1968 – a signal event, especially for Laughner and a bunch of other underaged wannabe-musicians for whom Lou Reed was a totemic figure. And so it began.

Laughner had already been in several bands by this point, but Reed's schtick gave him new focus. Besides playing guitar and writing poetry, Laughner began writing about rock music for local papers (and eventually *Creem* magazine), while working at record stores to supplement the financial support his parents provided. As with many of his peers, Laughner also developed a taste for self-destruction via drugs, drink and guns to complement his literary interests in music and French poètes maudits.

Thus, despite the fact he was involved in several foundational Midwest proto-punk bands, notably Rocket From The Tombs and Pere Ubu, Laughner tended to get kicked out of even those combos he'd been responsible for forming. But Laughner's tale has many phases. He knew a hell of a lot about music and displayed a taste in cover tunes so wide it is matched only by Yo La Tengo. But Laughner ended up drinking himself to death at 24, and it was only after his demise that various archival recordings actually started to appear. It turned out that he was as talented as all his friends maintained. But he was also a mess, as this book makes clear.

Ain't It Fun includes great swathes of info on contemporary Cleveland underground bands, like electric eels, Mirrors and Frankenstein, as well as bits about other Ohio musicians like Devo. I was surprised to see no mention of 15-60-75, whose members included

Chrissie Hynde's brother Terry, or Cleveland expat Miriam Linna, who was Laughner's main contact in New York, and I felt as though John 'Dromette' Thompson got somewhat short shrift, but this is Lange's book, not mine. His drawing style is great, with splash pages tying together all kinds of disparate freak-facts. *Ain't It Fun* is a sprawling picto-bio of Cleveland's forgotten boy – something I never dreamed would get done so well. Very cool that it exists.

Byron Coley

20 000 Words: Interviews With Antoine Le Bousse
Sylvain Darrifourcq

Hector Editions Pbk 138 pp

Sylvain Darrifourcq, French percussionist and bandleader, trained classically before turning to rock and finally jazz/improv. I've long admired his music, but didn't realise that he's a real musical thinker. That's clear from this short book of interviews, crammed with insight and produced with style. Darrifourcq is a frank interviewee, and there's often a painful honesty in his musical self-analysis.

The interviews were conducted by writer Antoine Le Bousse during Covid, when musicians were forced into a period of reflection. Darrifourcq describes how he was taught at a small music school in Orthez where he grew up, specialising in percussion from age 15. He joined a jazz class and began to play with other musicians in Toulouse, eventually moving to Paris.

His family had no experience of a career in music. "The codes and values I grew up with were the ones of the workers' and farmers' world," he explains. Hauntingly, he stresses "the impression of never being where I belong, that my background is a handicap and its codes indelible marks...". In 2003, he saw a production of *Lulu*, Alban Berg's unfinished opera – an overwhelming experience: "I'd never listened to an opera before... I had a big lack of culture and felt socially handicapped."

As a composer, Darrifourcq is strongly influenced by the disordered timeframes of William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett, and his aural assaults often use elaborate polymetres. He explains how his group In Love With created abrupt ruptures with the effect of sonic zapping. The trio plundered their earlier repertoire and glued the results together anarchically: "I was hoping to trigger a kind of short circuit in the way we feel time," he adds.

Darrifourcq's MILES DAVIS QUINTET!, featuring Valentin Ceccaldi and Xavier Camarasa, embraced the mechanisation of repetition. The musicians knew the work of Nancarrow and Ligeti, but made these connections retrospectively. "By de-incarnating our playing, we lost all the individualising and hierarchizing properties of our instruments," he adds. They didn't really try to interact.

20 000 Words reveals how much Darrifourcq's inexpressive-seeming style is deliberate. "Once the gesture starts, I try to play with a very equal dynamic and remove any expressiveness that isn't directly asked for by the music," he comments. "I'm obsessed with the precision of the sound's emission,

A collection of interviews with female innovators in Latin American electronic music reveals underexplored histories

By Mike Barnes

Switched On: The Dawn Of Electronic Sound By Latin American Women

Luis Alvarado & Alejandra Cárdenas (Editors)

Contingent Sounds Hbk 210 pp

Anyone who draws a blank on early electronic and electro-acoustic music made by Latin American women musicians can be forgiven – this book's editors describe it as “a previously unknown history”. They are Peruvians Alejandra Cárdenas, a musician now based in Berlin who performs and records as Ale Hop, and researcher Luis Alvarado, who runs Buh Records. *Switched On* is a fascinating, illuminating exploration of music and culture. It concentrates on female musicians who were significant figures back in their day but whose music has often been overlooked or unheard – until recently. An accompanying YouTube playlist displays a particularly high level of invention. Given the geographical and cultural breadth of the subject, the editors have wisely resisted making sweeping categorisations or generalisations, and instead present case studies in which these pioneers, who began making music in the latter part of last century, are interviewed by younger artists.

But in their foreword Alvarado and Cárdenas do identify some unifying factors. In the 1950s and 60s drive towards modernism, institutions were set up in many Latin American countries to explore electronic and electroacoustic music, for example the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM) in Buenos Aires, founded by Alberto Ginastera in 1961 and partly funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. But when often faced with a volatile political climate, these artistic aims often “clashed with economic reality”. They go on to claim that when Western composers incorporate non-Western influences, they are “interpreted as innovative” but when non-Western musicians “adapted and blended their music with local influences”, they are “perceived as subordinated and imitative”.

An interesting point, although advocates of Ginastera, Astor Piazzolla, Tan Dun and Toru Takemitsu might disagree. But now we can judge for ourselves, and one featured playlist composition, Graciela Castillo's *Alma Mía* (2000), is a dazzling mix of deconstructed tango, processed voices and electronics.

Initially, she says, she “had no idea of the existence of concrete music, the information I had was minimal and fragmentary. I didn't consider it music; I was only looking for evocative and symbolic enjoyment.”

Castillo worked at the Experimental Music Center of the School of Arts of the National University of Córdoba, Argentina (CME) in the 1960s. Interviewed by composer/teacher Gabi Yaya, she notes that once operating within the artistic avant garde, she was viewed as an equal by her male peers, but patriarchal social structures restricted women's access, with few exceptions.

Venezuela's Oksana Linde approached music from a completely different angle. She worked as a research chemist but loved the ocean and rivers, as demonstrated on *Aquatic And Other Worlds* (Buh, 2022). This first album was recorded between 1983–89 after she had saved up enough to buy a Polymoog and recording equipment. “I work with my interior,” she reveals. “I'm not used to this attention.” Linde was influenced by Debussy, Vangelis and UK progressive rock, and although compared to Delia Derbyshire and Daphne Oram, she refuses to accept being called a pioneer, even as her music is original and full of vivid shapes and colour.

Switched On provides an inroad into a multifaceted subject and points the way towards further investigation. Contemporary Costa Rican composer and musicologist Susan Campos-Fonseca also writes on her own work in highlighting contemporary Latin American female composers and says that if they have a manifesto, their declaration is: “First of all, to say, ‘We are here!’” ●

Oksana Linde



dynamic control, and [mixing of] timbres.”

After he produced a close-up cymbal recording for composer Yoann Sanson, he explains, “a new world opened to me! The low-end halo was so amplified that it sounded like something else than a cymbal altogether.” He'd also been frustrated by percussion's inability to produce long acoustic sounds.

Darrifourcq covers a broad terrain in this short book, featuring both musical and social issues. Particularly interesting is his discussion of the special economic situation of the musician in France – there's a limited social security net, based on intermittence, a temporary show business worker status. But it's impossible within a review to cover the wealth of topics discussed. *20 000 Words* is one of the most articulate and stimulating discussions of their work that I've heard from a musician – or indeed any artist.

Andy Hamilton

The Future Of Songwriting

Kristin Hersh

Melville House Pbk 128 pp

Kristin Hersh's revelation – “Holy shit, that's it” – comes during a conversation with an acupuncturist who describes her job as to facilitate healing: “The energetic is between the cure and the patient ... the patient cures itself.” Hersh hits upon the idea that songwriters should, likewise, seek to remove themselves from the equation, thus restoring to its paramount status the only thing that really matters: the song. “If there is a future for songwriting,” she concludes, “the stars will be the songs themselves.”

For Hersh, songwriting has got lost and the music industry is largely to blame. A founding member of Throwing Muses and 50FOOTWAVE, as well as a prolific solo artist, she knows better than most the frictions that can arise between musicians and the corporate

machine, and this book is a diatribe against the forces that caused her to “jump ship in horror at the sexist product they demanded”.

As an early proponent of audience crowdfunding (in 2007 she launched a model which allowed fans to subscribe to her music at different levels of investment) Hersh is a seasoned antagonist to the imperatives of the music biz. As she puts it: “The fashion/status game may be the only game in town, but that doesn't mean we gotta play it.”

For a book that proposes radical changes to the cultural economy, some of the politics of *The Future Of Songwriting* feels a little undercooked. The freedom to create, for instance, is often painted as universal, divorced from such humdrum matters as material security, the luxury of free time, or attentive nurturing and encouragement. More discussion of how musicians can resist the commercialisation of their music, and