

**CRAWDADDY  
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## **The Transparency Label Refuses To Flinch**

**By Andrew K. Lau**

So, you think the industry is dead, do ya? Think we're all doomed and the remaining record labels are now more worried about the bottom line than taking chances or harvesting creative artists? Well, for the most part, you're right. But there's a beacon of hope out there for those needing more labels to quit worrying about Doomsday and concentrate on delivering the goods.

Out there slogging away trying to make a difference with the handful of other small companies is a little imprint called Transparency. Their expertise? How does this sound: experimental noise, free jazz, German art films, political seminars and acoustic folk rave-ups. From a beautiful, classically trained Italian pianist to a disgusting convicted criminal from Cincinnati strumming a guitar. A nutty Latin band, a jazz bagpipist. Even in more stable times, an eclectic mix such as that wouldn't translate into dollars or longevity.

Obviously, Transparency isn't churning out the tripe for the most cash. "It's not about how financially lucrative [a new release] would be," says owner Michael Sheppard, "it's about how many people it would bring in to know about the label." The idea gestated years ago and he knew this wouldn't be the usual company. "I wanted to do one imprint that would be music, film and live events," he tells me, "and then could cross platform markets to music books."

Based in Los Angeles, Sheppard spent the early 80's putting on concerts by underground visionaries. "I'd write to people in England like Throbbing Gristle and brought them to LA and San Francisco; I did a Cabaret Voltaire and Young Marble Giants show through dealing with Rough Trade and it was really successful." But the promoting world left Sheppard both exhausted and feeling empty once a show was over. He next set his sights on publishing instead where, as he explains, "the object would always exist even beyond my lifetime." He's kept that mindset going and considers his approach to running Transparency closer to that of a small book press.

I wonder, then, how he can keep afloat in today's shrinking music industry. The answer lies partly due to some of his releases being archival material which, he says, "seems separate from concerns of the outside greater music business." Transparency's first release came out in 1999, just as the industry was beginning to buckle under the strains of change. Anyone looking to start up a record company was in for a tougher uphill battle than usual; a battle which doesn't concern Sheppard. "I haven't thought it necessary to consider the label in terms of everything else that's happening in the world," he says. Still, adapting is inevitable. "Slowly everything is becoming available on iTunes which is reaching out to function within the world at large in a bigger context." Then there is the other hurdle, the hipper-than-thou syndrome: "I just wanted to put out this really cool stuff [but] I got the feeling that for most other labels the record release cocktail party was more important than the content of the album."

At the time of this writing, Transparency has put out 83 titles (134 CDs, 26 DVDs and a book). As predicted, more books are on the way. In addition to last year's Paraphernalia, Massimo Marchini's book about pianist Alessandra Celletti, there

are two scheduled this year: Mustafio: The Velascu Affair by Lane Steinberg and a book (and CD) of art, writings and music by Can's Malcolm Mooney.

What follows are a few favorites and should not be taken as The Best Of Transparency by any means. There are more than enough quality artists to write about (Rufus Harley, Cracked Latin, W.A.C.O. to name three), but these ought to show the depth of this label.

#### **AMK -- The Lonesome Echo, (Trans 0352), 2009**

In the 1950's comedic actor Jackie Gleason was putting out easy listening records for Capitol, most of which were quite popular due to the one-two punch of his fame and the bland music therein. Gleason himself had little to do with the actual making of the music (leading to some controversy about credit) but he was able to hum melodies and have them transcribed. His 1955 LP, Lonesome Echo, was yet another hit.

Cut to some forty-five years later and experimental artist AMK gets himself a copy of Lonesome Echo (now a thrift store staple), which he deconstructs and then reassembles onto a portable turntable. With help from Howard Stelzer and Jay Sullivan, AMK has turned it into piece of audio sculpture. A lot of which is based on the unsystematic chance of a skipping record, the "deconstructed" record. The skipping creates a loop and it's used as the background rhythm for many of the tracks and creates an entirely new entity. The Gleason LP acts as the bedrock but isn't the only source for the material as one can hear various other recordings and textures sweeping through the music; the fine print to the CD even points out: "AMK uses records, record players, montage flexi discs and field recording". So, put two skipping loops together along with sounds from different sources and you end up with a montage not unlike The Beatles much reviled "Revolution #9".

Fifteen separate tracks ranging from the tranquility of "Undertow" to the ghostly static and piano maze of "At One With The Cage". The first minute and a half of "Tangram" is constructed white noise before dropping off completely leaving absolute silence for the remaining twenty seconds. "Forever Only", begins with a few seconds of a skipping string section which continues to dominate the song, locking you inside; there's no getting out of or around it until it ends five minutes later. Even with the addition of other noises which slowly bleed into the track, your attention can't be pulled away.

Lonesome Echo is perhaps the best known of Gleason LPs due its cover art of an original Salvador Dali painting. AMK, leaving no part of this record untouched, has toyed with that as well, giving us clues to how his version of the record was crafted. An image of a flexi disc has taken the place of Dali's butterfly; a 1960's portable stereo sits in the background taking the place of a Spanish baroque guitar and the back of the original album is an amusing photo of Gleason shaking hands with the artist himself. For his version, AMK has replaced Gleason's head with his own and now it is he who shakes the hand of Dali. Though his talents are closer to those of other genius tricksters such as Luigi Russolo, Marcel Duchamp or Man Ray, the image of AMK shaking hands with Dali is still perfect and what you have here is the beauty of the random; a rather addictive and mesmerizing piece of work.

**Sun Ra And The Omniverse Jet Set Arkestra – The Complete Detroit Jazz Center Residency December 26, 1980 – January 1, 1981 (Trans CD 0307, 2008)**

Documents indicate Herman Poole Blount's place of birth is Birmingham, Alabama on May 25, 1914 (other sources say May 22<sup>nd</sup>) but the man himself claimed to be from Saturn and called himself Sun Ra; no one in their right mind would dispute him. As a music genius/savant under the golden influence of Duke Ellington, Sun Ra was an incredible Jazz pianist, bandleader, composer and visionary delivering some of the genre's most fascinating and controversial music against many odds though his long, varied career. He and his revolving line-up of musicians and singers constantly pushed the boundaries of what jazz (and, in a way, music as a whole) should be. Elegant solo piano pieces, big band freak-outs, extended drum breakdowns, synthesizer maelstroms, chanting slogans, skillful swing jazz, wild costumes, dancing on stage, dancing through the audience. Be it on stage or on record, Sun Ra remains unmatched; he and his band were there to teach awareness of peace and Afrocentric idealsthrough space themed philosophies.

Of the twenty-four (and counting) Sun Ra titles in their roster, Transparency has plenty to be proud of here. A 1971 Helsinki show is top notch not just because some consider it one of his (their) best performances ever, but it includes a bonus DVD with an interview and footage of the band setting up for the show, all licensed from the state broadcasting company of Finland. There's a fifty-three track monster called The Earliest Sun Ra (1946-1956) which goes all the way back to the beginning of his recording career (playing piano for Wynonie Harris) and gives a much greater understanding of his later work. There is the multi-volume Lost Reel series; a ten CD set from Toronto's Horseshoe Tavern and a six CD set from New York City's Slug's Saloon. Of the twenty-four releases, there are actually seventy-seven CDs and seven DVDs. A treasure trove. "I have this really strict rule that things picked to be released are the very best of the best," says Sheppard, "it's not like I'm indiscriminately putting these out."

To this reporter, however, nothing can top the mammoth twenty-eight CD set of a 1980 Detroit residency. For the sheer audacity of it, this one wins and I actually laughed when first seeing it. "Who's gonna buy this thing," I wondered while checking to see how much cash I had on me at the time.

A close look at the set list and you'll realize how many songs the band knew, how many songs were not repeated and how long they played. For the last night of this particular run, they played three sets (the final set starting at three a.m.) and ran through nearly one hundred songs. Plenty of improvisation at which they excelled, plenty of favorites ("Space Is The Place", "Fate In A Pleasant Mood", "Rocket #9") and, near the end, a few lessons on jazz history as they effortlessly roll through songs by Jelly Roll Morton, Chick Webb, Fletcher Henderson, Monk, Gershwin... "amazing" doesn't do any of this justice. Though not a great place to start for Ra beginners, The Complete Detroit Jazz Center Residency serves as a perfect time capsule showing the talents and scope of this quite gentleman from Saturn.

**Decoder (Trans DVD/CD 0373, 2010)**

While Transparency has put out many live music DVDs and a few political seminars, Decoder is the first real foray into film and what a doozie. Based on the tape experiments and writings of William S. Burroughs, this legendary 1984 German cult film comes close to Godard's Alphaville, except Burroughs actually appears in Decoder. Drenched in thick hues of monochromatic blues and reds and shot with handheld cameras, this low budget mind bender of a film implants political overtones to Burrough's normally apolitical themes with city- dwelling pirates, noise freaks, the evils of Muzak,

riots, early 80's computer technology, hamburger restaurants and people devoid of emotion...what more could you want in a movie? "A big part of [it's] charm," says Sheppard, "is the metaphor of the analog era – pre-Internet, pre-sampling, pre-everything we take for granted now."

Transparency has done us all a favor here by including the soundtrack with the DVD. In most cases, the soundtrack is just a throwaway but not with Decoder since many of the cast are primarily musicians. F.M. Einheit (who plays the lead) joined the German industrial band, Einstürzende Neubauten in 1981 as percussionist; Genesis P-Orridge (the high priest in the film) founded the English band Throbbing Gristle and later Psychic TV. Both contribute heavily to the soundtrack along with half of Soft Cell, David Ball and Matt Johnson from the English post-punk band, The The.

Interestingly, the music serves as a welcomed contrast to the sometimes harsh visuals of the film which can be jarring enough to eclipse the music. Transparency was smart enough to include it here so we can separate the two. One would think early 80's synth-based music hasn't aged well, but these tracks are fresh sounding enough to regenerate interest in the film, which is what a good soundtrack should do.

#### **Alessandra Celletti – Plays Baldassarre Galuppi (Trans CD 0347, 2009)**

Classically trained, soft spoken and unassuming in person, graceful at her craft, Italian Alessandra Celletti may be the opposite end of the coin for Transparency; the cool breeze to the other's fierce wind. That's not to say her musicianship is always subdued as I this witnessed first hand at a recent one-off performance at the San Francisco Italian Cultural Institute where at one point, during her hour long performance, she improvised between Baldassarre Galuppi (with her left hand) and Philip Glass (with her right) at the same time. It was stunning, but if Sheppard hadn't given me the heads up, I would've missed it altogether as it's easy to get lost in her hypnotic style. After all, this is a woman who recorded with German space rock/electronic pioneer, Hans-Joachim Roedelius last year, the highly recommended *Sustanza di Cose Sperata* (Trans 0348, 2009). The international press is all over her work drawing comparisons with Keith Jarrett and Glenn Gould while her 2000 album, *Esotéric Satie*, remains one of the best selling classical titles on the French charts. Oh, and director Guy Ritchie upped the popular culture ante by her recording of Erik Satie's "Gnossienne N° 1", in his 2005 film, *Revolver*.

Plays Baldassarre Galuppi, is a fantastic collision of two worlds. Galuppi being the composer from old world Venice whose sonatas were considered daring for the time, even avant-garde. Makes sense, then, that Transparency gets involved; although, the original idea was to have Celletti record Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*, she decided instead to U-turn back to classical music by taking on the work of this lesser-known composer.

There are plenty of recognizable melodies here making one believe Galuppi is more familiar to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ear than lead to believe. Or maybe it's her playing which delivers the music with a certain crispness and agility. "Celletti has once again produced an album that appears to stop time for the listener" writes one reviewer and from the my vantage point in the back of the room that night, there were more than a few people caught up in her musical wake, eyes were closed, heads were nodding; those familiar with her work were even conducting along with her playing.

Minimal, precise and striking, Celletti applies a distinctive attack to her playing; the Yamaha baby grand which she played during the performance I witnessed was a toy in her hands; the room resonated. She recently jetted to Mozambique for two shows at the behest of the Italian Ambassador who attended both performances. Local musicians had learned some of her work specifically for the second show where they joined Celletti on stage. The future is for her.

David Schafer – x10R.1 / x10R.2 (Trans CD 0107, 2002)

Bringing us full circle is David Schafer. The cryptic title stands for “Times Ten Resequenced With Two Second Gap” and “Times Ten Resequenced With Variable Gap”. Much like AMK’s *The Lonesome Echo*, Schafer has rearranged pre-recorded albums but instead of a Jackie Gleason LP, (and eerily running congruent with the plot to *Decoder*) he’s selected ten records conducted or arranged by people associated with the easy listening giant, the Muzak Corporation. Each record’s tracks were re-arranged from slowest to fastest and then those re-sequenced records were superimposed on top of each other creating an extremely dense blanket of non-stop sound. As indicated, x10r.1 incorporates a two second gap which means there’s a brief calming period between one barrage of sound to the next, but with no complete silence on the entire CD. Technically, X10r.2 is the same as its predecessor (even beginning the same way) but this one uses a variable gap which alters the entire piece from its predecessor.

The result is the sound of being stuck in ten different elevators at once. As the piece rolls on, you’ll catch an audible whiff of a familiar melody, then, just as you’re about to identify it, that melody gets washed away by a new rush of sound. Everything all at once building and peaking then fading away while another blur of sounds rushes in: orchestras, light ragtime, a lone someone whistler, orchestral vocals, choirs, a pop vocal group sounding a lot like *The Association* here, a fuzz guitar riff there. At thirty minutes in, the jazz piano coming out of the left speaker collides with the distinctive theme of *The Good, Bad And The Ugly* which, in turn, gets buried under a syrupy orchestra. A tornado of sound, dizzying, nightmarish, exhilarating. And that’s just the first disc.

On its own, Muzak is perhaps the most passive, the most bland and the most non-sexual, and least aggressive music. In Schafer’s hands it becomes a seething musical Frankenstein, drunk with power. All my verbal yammering aside, this has to be one of the most demanding titles on the label and not suited for the light of heart but it has to be experienced to be believed. Then again, anyone venturing into the Transparency world should know they’re facing the unusual.

When beginning this article, I was hoping that whoever was behind this stuff was some eccentric holed up in a small windowless apartment surrounded by reels of tape and crazy ideas about how a record label should be run. What I found, however, was an honest and savvy guy looking to share his love of music with anyone else who might be interested. When I suggested to Sheppard he was taking his love of off-the-radar music to a whole new level with his label, he dismissed that after some thought. “I don’t know, that sounds nice but it’s just what I really like most and, therefore, want other people to know about.”

Staunchly independent, true to its original vision, embracing outside music: Transparency does not compromise. And neither should we.