

JOHN SCHOTT/*Shuffle Play*: Elegies for the Recording Angel

New World Records 80548

Shuffled Notes

Old recordings

I guess I'm attracted to old recordings for the same reason I'm attracted to much New Music: they're strange, they speak in a foreign tongue. Often more noise than music, they require you to reach into the sound, and be a re-creative partner rather than just a passive listener. That implicit challenge brings with it the promise of unknown pleasures: the familiar made unfamiliar, a glimpse into another world.

The earliest recordings are unique in that they are the only recordings uninfluenced by other recordings. Within a very few years, recordings would be everywhere. The world sounded different before recordings; the earliest recordings at once capture that world and kill it.

Morton Feldman

"The degree to which a music's notation is responsible for much of the composition itself is one of history's best-kept secrets." But that applies only to the relatively small percentage of world music that is notated. The rest is shaped by other, equally influential factors. The successive stages of recording—cylinders, 78s, LPs, CDs, MP3s—provide an alternate history in which we can trace how music is shaped by a seemingly neutral medium. Each new development brought with it new sounds, time-capacities, packaging. The scratches and pops of vinyl, the precise clock-time of CDs, the MP3's threat to copyright—all of these make up a secret history.

For my part, recording has always been integral to my music-making. As much as I've ever wanted to be a guitarist or composer, I've also wanted to be an author. My records, whether under my name or in collaboration with T. J. Kirk or Ben Goldberg, have always been planned from the outset as formal wholes, suites that would tell a cumulative story. *Shuffle Play*, in its concentration and organization, continues that aesthetic, and in its disruption of a fixed narrative order, subverts it.

Thomas Edison (1913)

"Music lacks definite terms by which time may be indicated.... Music is too noble an art to be thus handicapped. In place of all these relative terms like "faster" and "slower" there must be rigid, definite terms. In establishing certain definite musical measurements, I am going to do exactly what I did for electricity when I invented machines to measure it...."

The nineteenth century

For a brief moment at the birth of recording, before the existence of the recording "industry," notions of style, genre, and even taste evaporated. Sound was documented pretty much at random, with a quasi-democracy characteristic of the New World. Marches, opera arias, "coon" songs, vaudeville farces, banjo solos, advertisements (thank God that didn't catch on!), vanity recordings, hymns ... the performers all just seem *deliriously* happy, exhibiting a purity and optimism beyond belief. The first cylinder machines could not record in darkness or night.

Musiklust

Records have always formed the backbone of my musical life; to me, my music-lust is indistinguishable from my record-lust. As far back as I can remember I was aware that *Abbey Road* was not simply four guys playing guitars. I loved Tom Lehrer, Broadway musicals, and Dr. Demento. The first LP I purchased was by the Alan Parsons Project. Shortly thereafter I learned that the "Project" was Alan Parsons himself, who had played, or programmed, all the instruments. The same was said to be true of Tom Scholz and Boston's records. In rock n' roll, records are fundamentally the creation of an identity, and this was not lost on me at age thirteen.

Glenn Gould wrote that his interpretation of Beethoven was influenced by listening to Schnabel's 78s, which of necessity divided most movements into two or three sides, thus imposing a certain structural grid on the music. Records are so embedded in our contemporary experience of music that it's almost impossible to imagine music outside of them. It's a commonplace of art history that photography had a great effect on modernist painting, but the obvious analogy, that of recording and modern music, hasn't received, to my knowledge, serious consideration. Yet, clearly, recordings are at the very least *implicated* in the unprecedented musical complexity of the twentieth century.

But if that's true, it's been a curiously unrequited romance. While Ellington and Stravinsky certainly shaped some pieces directly for recording, it continues to astonish me that almost no postwar American or European classical composers ever really embraced the record as a basic unit of musical expression, in the way that has been taken for granted in popular music—at least since Frank Sinatra's celebrated Capitol LPs. How strange that such far-thinking composers as Pierre Boulez or György Ligeti evince little or no interest in exploiting the unique attributes of the recording studio, or the CD as a specific medium. For them recording is a photograph of a sculpture; a picture, as it were, of the art, not the art itself. Whereas for the Beatles, the *record itself* was the art. To take another example, the great 78s of the twenties and thirties—and I'm thinking here of early jazz, blues, and rural Southern traditions—are typically very carefully orchestrated, as structured as a good sermon, their A and B sides dialectically engaged. What distinguishes the one approach from the other we could call *self-consciousness*.

Audio vérité

The *randomness* of old recordings: randomness of what was recorded, by whom, what survived, and in what condition. Random scratches and pops on the record's surface, in counterpoint with a pinhole view into the past. Just one battered 78 of Cousins and De Moss's *Poor Mourner* remains. Of Cousins and De Moss themselves, a complete blank: not first names, nothing. I record, thinking: "That could be me!"

What I did

I started with *Poor Mourner*. I researched the origins of the song in turn-of-the-century African-American and Southern folk-song collections. I became obsessed, listening to it over and over. I slowed it down, transcribed it, recopied the transcription, elaborated, scored it, scored it differently, slowed that down, multiplied the harmonies, compressed it into a single burst, folded it over on itself, applied distortion, filtered, signified, spiraled. For what it's worth, every note contained herein is traceable to that spiral, or would have been at one time. The other source recordings were brought in as further commentary, and were likewise thrown in the blender.

Item

"Since no method of duplicating cylinders was available in 1890, artists would recut a selection over and over until there was no longer a demand for that particular title. As technology improved, the master cylinders were sometimes copied by a pantograph. Brass bands could play into as many as ten horns at once, while singers with strong enough voices could simultaneously produce five original records. [George W. Johnson, the first recorded African-American] had such a voice, producing thousands of fresh takes of "The Laughing Song" and "The Whistling Coon" for the minimum scale of twenty cents a performance. According to a 1906 report in *Music Trades Review*, he once sang the same song 56 times in one day, and 'his laugh had as much merriment in it at the conclusion as when he started.'" —*Jas Obrecht*

All of the musicians

In addition to being improvisers and virtuosos, all of the musicians on this record are composers and authors themselves, often spectacularly so. I have profited much from their research and discoveries, and my work exists in a dialogue with theirs. Taken together, the recordings listed at the end of these notes constitute an elaborate compendium of strategies and solutions to our present musical situation. The listener is duly instructed to acquire as many of their records as possible. In addition, I count many of these musicians as my closest friends. Their support and enthusiasm during the many sessions for this record sustained me. Our great imperative must be to do the work *now*, regardless of institutional or private support. Seeds become trees.

The competition

On the just-issued fourth revised edition of Coltrane's *Interstellar Space* (each edition corresponding to a different corporation's owning the master tapes), one can rewind *backwards* from the beginning of track one to hear two previously unreleased snippets of false starts, thirty seconds of sleigh bells and drums starting and stopping, preserved quite by accident on the original tape reel.

Extra special bonus track

The would-be recording artist of today is competing like never before with the past, a past which is made continually new through incessant repackaging and technological upgrades, and which is infinitely more profitable for big business. In order to survive in this marketplace (e.g., Tower Records), artists have increasingly camouflaged their work as archival projects: "the music of—", "a tribute to—". I am no exception to this trend, and I am not hazarding judgment on any records per se; but taken as a whole, this is a disturbing state of affairs. We need new mythologies!

The idea

The idea was to develop the material from as many angles as possible: free improvisation, *musique concrète*, post-war composition, AACM-derived strategies, and pop music, to name a few. Sometimes these idioms are juxtaposed, more often they are integrated, in a sort of polylingual counterpoint. I wanted the tracks to be widely varied as to length, instrumentation, subject, and/or recorded ambience, so as to place in the foreground the listener's role in making it cohere: What do these pieces have to say to each other? It's an attempt to listen and talk back to history. The old records are telling a story, but the story is garbled, it cuts in and out, you can't quite make out what is being said. Each time you return, the message is different; you amass clues, but the piece that would make sense of the whole is always just out of reach. —*John Schott*

June 2000, Berkeley

Recordings used in *Shuffle Play*

1, 2, 3, 5, and 10 in this list courtesy of Edison National Historic Site, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior; 4 and 8 courtesy of Richard Spottswood;
6 and 7 courtesy of Symposium Records.

1. *Handel Festival at Crystal Palace* (rec. in London)—*chorus of 4,000 voices recorded with phonograph over 100 yards away.*

June 29, 1888. Edison cylinder, box E-2440, post #17.

This is believed to be the oldest surviving recording of music (one of three surviving cylinders recorded that day). It is previously unpublished. Unlike other source records used in *Shuffle Play*, it is presented here without any compositional commentary or interrogation.

Used on 22

2. Whistling by Mrs. Shaw. August 14, Little Menlo.

August 14, 1888. Edison cylinder, box E-2440, post #21. Used on 5

3. Soprano—sung by Teffie Stewart. January 1889. Taken by Theo. E. Wangemann.

February 25, 1889 (spoken in announcement on recording). Edison 565. 5

4. Noel Josephs—*Snake Dance Song*. March 18, 1890. AFS 14, 742 A10.

Recorded by pioneering ethnologist Jesse Walter Fewkes (1850–1930). An *a cappella* excerpt from a Passamaquoddy Indian religious ritual, in a language that was virtually extinct at the time of its recording. 21

5. Trumpeter Landfrey—*Bugle Call for the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava*.

August 2, 1890. Edison E-2626-6.

Landfrey was one of the last surviving members of the Light Brigade, who were victorious at Balaclava in October 1854, despite losing 503 of 700 men in battle with the Russian artillery. On this recording he plays the fanfare he played there, on the same trumpet, which was, according to Landfrey's recorded opening remarks, also used at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 (or have I misunderstood?). 5

6. Probably Emile Berliner—*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*. c. 1888–90, Berliner 26. 12

7. (no artist given) *The Spirit of '76*. October 30, 1894. Berliner 705. 1 21

8. Cousins & De Moss—*Poor Mourner*. c. July 1897. Berliner 3010.

One of the earliest surviving recordings of African-American music, this disc, of which only one copy is extant, is remarkable for its raw, undiluted African-American vernacular feel. It would be twenty-five years before anything this down-home and *wicked* would be recorded again. This floating-verse song was extensively anthologized in turn-of-the-century African-American folk-song collections. The refrain is: "You shall be free, when the good Lord sets you free," although in this recording, as in many others, the words "be free" are all but swallowed. 10

9. Richard Jose—*Nearer, My God, to Thee*. (Mason/Adams)

February 2, 1906. Victor 4818. From the Broadway musical *The Old Homestead*.

14 28

10. Thomas Edison—*untitled*. c. 1915.

This eerie recording, only recently confirmed to be Edison, has been the object of much speculation. Edison's musical tastes were very pedestrian, and his abilities meager. These facts make this haunting Scriabin-esque impromptu all the more tantalizing; no one has identified just what Edison is playing here, which raises the question: Was Edison "inventing"? 12

11. "Walt Whitman"—*America*.

The attribution of this recording—included over the years in several compilations of poets reading their work—has recently been shown to be spurious (see Allan Koenigsberg, "Walt Whitman Speaks?", *Antique Phonograph Monthly*, Vol. X, No. 3, 1992). It is most likely a forgery dating from the nineteen-forties, perpetrated by a down-and-out New York elevator operator. Rosco Haley (1889–1982) claimed to have a number of turn-of-the-century celebrities on rare cylinders. At one point, he was in negotiation with Yale for the sale of his purported collection. However, they grew suspicious when he could produce only acetate or tape transfers, never the originals. But someone's voice is on this recording ("...every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," wrote Whitman), and that voice is reading Whitman's *America*, and he intones it as if he were Jefferson reading the Declaration, which, in a way, he is:

America

Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,

All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old,

Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,

Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law, and Love. 5

Ensemble Diglossia

John Schott's compositions include works for theater and dance, as well as song cycles, and chamber and orchestral music. He also plays guitar in a variety of contexts, including jazz, free improvisation, old-time music, and blues. Schott's teachers included Gary Peacock, Bun-Ching Lam, David Schiff, and Julian Priester. He lives in Berkeley, California, with Naomi Seidman and their son, Ezra Hillel.

Steve Adams, saxophones and flutes, is a graduate of the School of Contemporary Music in Boston. Currently residing in Oakland, California, he is a member of the Rova Saxophone Quartet, the Bill Horvitz Band and the Vinny Golia Large Ensemble. He studied composition with Thomas Oboe Lee, Christopher Yavelov, and Alan Crossman, saxophone with David Birkin, and Indian music with Peter Row and Steve Gorn. His discography of over forty works includes seven with the Rova Saxophone Quartet, four with Your Neighborhood Saxophone Quartet and three as a co-leader for the 9 Winds label.

Scott Amendola, drums, has been the rhythmic backbone of numerous major label releases, including Charlie Hunter's *Natty Dread* and *Return of The Candy Man*, Pat Martino's *Both Sides Now*, Will Bernard's *Medicine Hat*, and Noe Venable's *No Curses Here*. He has also performed with Bill Frisell, John Scofield, and John Zorn. His first record as a leader has just been released on Art of My Heart records.

Myles Boisen, electric bass and production, is a founding member of The Splatter Trio and The Club Foot Orchestra, both seminal Bay Area-based groups that stretched the boundaries between composition and improvisation, and combined jazz with other genres. In several recent CDs, including his own *GuitarSpeak* and The Splatter Trio's *Hi-Fi Junk Note*, he has used digital editing and mixing in innovative ways, creating in the process a unique and necessary solution to the problem of translating free improvisation to the recorded medium.

Matt Brubeck, cello, was classically trained at Yale, and is at ease in a wide range of musical genres. He is currently a member of Sheryl Crow's band and has performed with Tom Waits, Sarah McLachlan, and the Indigo Girls, among others. Matt is also the leader of the Oranj Symphonette, which has recorded two CDs on the Rykodisc label and has played at a number of jazz festivals, including Montreal, Monterey, and New York.

Rob Burger, accordion, is a member of the Tin Hat Trio, whose debut record *Memory Is an Elephant* was released in 1999 on Angel. He is featured on the Oranj Symphonette's two Rykodisc CDs, Will Bernard's *Medicine Hat*, and has also performed and recorded with Tom Waits and Bill Frisell.

Beth Custer, clarinets, is a composer/clarinetist/singer/pianist and the proprietress of BC Records. She is based in San Francisco and composes for film, television, theater, dance, and the concert stage. Custer is best known for her recordings and performances with the silent film soundtrack group The Club Foot Orchestra, the fourth-world ambient group Trance Mission, a quintet of esteemed clarinetists in Clarinet Thing, and the trip-hop duo Eighty Mile Beach.

Trevor Dunn, double bass, is a member of the avant-rock band Mr. Bungle, whose three records on Warner Brothers have earned them a legion of devoted fans. Other longtime projects include Fantomas, a collaboration with Mike Patton; Junk Genius, a group with John Schott and Ben Goldberg; and his own trio, whose debut recording was released in 1999 on Buzz.

Tara Flandreau, viola, teaches at the College of Marin, and received her M.M. from Dominican College of San Rafael. She performs with the Marin Symphony, the Creative Music Orchestra, and the American Jungle Orchestra. Her composition *Metamorphosis for Chorus and Chamber Orchestra* was recently premiered by the Marin Symphony.

Ben Goldberg, clarinets, has an M.A. from Mills College, where he studied composition with Alvin Curran. He is well represented on disc: *Here By Now* (Music and Arts), *Eight Phrases* (Victo), *Twelve Minor* (Avant), *What Comes Before*, *Masks and Faces*, *Melt Zonk Rewire*, *Short for Something* (all Tzadik), and *Almost Never* (nuscope). In addition, he is, with John Schott, a member of Junk Genius.

Carla Kihlstedt, violin, is a member of the Tin Hat Trio, whose record *Helium* was released in 2000 on Angel. She also plays and sings with the group Charming Hostess, which has recordings on Vaccination and Tzadik. She has a B.F.A. from Oberlin, where she studied with Gregory Fulkerson.

Dan Plonsey, saxophones, earned a B.A. in math and music from Yale University and an M.A. in composition from Mills College. He has studied with Anthony Braxton, Martin Bresnick, and David Lewin. Plonsey is the composer of over 150 works for large and small ensembles, and was commissioned recently by Bang On A Can, which premiered his *Plonsey Episodes 1-10* in 1998.

Gino Robair, percussion, is a founding member of The Splatter Trio, who have performed and recorded together for more than fifteen years. He has also performed and recorded with Anthony Braxton, John Zorn, and the Rova Saxophone Quartet. He has performed at major jazz and improvised music festivals all across Europe and the United States. In addition, he publishes records on his Rastascan label, and is an associate editor at *Electronic Musician* magazine.

Jenny Scheinman, violin, recently moved to New York from San Francisco, where she performed with The Hot Club of San Francisco, Scott Amendola, and Linda Perry. She has records forthcoming on Avant and Tzadik.

Karen Stackpole, percussion, has performed and recorded with the metals/gongs duo Euphonics and Dean Santomieri, Ron Thompson, Mark Growden, Myles Boisen, and Moe Staiano. She has collaborated with the Onsite Dance Company and the San Francisco Shin Taïdo group. Karen also operates Stray Dog Recording Services and works as a freelance writer for *DRUM!* and *Electronic Musician* magazines.

Tom Yoder, trombone, is a veteran of numerous San Francisco-based ensembles, including Eskimo, Herb, and Baby Snufkin.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

John Schott. *In These Great Times*. Tzadik 7115.
John Schott. Ensemble Diglossia (forthcoming).
Junk Genius. *Ghost Of Electricity*. Songlines 1525.
T. J. Kirk. *If Four Was One*. Warner Bros. 46262.
Ben Goldberg, John Schott, Michael Sarin. *What Comes Before*. Tzadik 7120.
Ben Goldberg, John Schott, Trevor Dunn. *Almost Never*. nuscope 1007.
Trevor Dunn's Trio Covulsant. *Debutantes and Centipedes*. Buzz 76003.
Steve Adams. *Diatribes Parts 1–6* (forthcoming).
Ben Goldberg. *Twelve Minor*. Avant 035.
Dan Plonsey. *Ivory Bill*. Music and Arts 982.
—*Understanding Human Behavior*. Limited Sedition 006.
—*Open Door & Desire*. Felmway 7015.
Oranj Symphonette. *Plays Mancini*. Gramavision.
Scott Amendola. *Band*. Art of My Heart 001.
Tin Hat Trio. *Helium*. Angel 56935.
Graham Connah's Sour Note Seven. *gurney to the lincoln center of your mind*. Rastascan 043.
The Splatter Trio. *Hi-Fi Junk Note*. Rastascan 021.
Myles Boisen. *ScrambleDisc*. Wiggle Biscuit 005.

also:

Mystic Fugu Orchestra (a.k.a. John Zorn, Yamatsuka Eye). *Zohar*. Tzadik 7106.
Paul DeMarinis. *The Edison Effect*. Het Apollohuis 039514.
Mauricio Kagel. *Blue's blue*. Disques Montaigne.
American Pop: From Minstrel to Mojo. West Hill Audio Archives 1017 (9CDs).
Charles Dodge. *Any Resemblance Is Purely Coincidental*. New Albion 043.
Emile Berliner's GRAMOPHONE: The Earliest Discs 1888–1901. Symposium 1058.

For more information, visit johnschott.com.

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Producer: John Schott

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Dedicated to public libraries everywhere, the Berkeley Public Library in particular, and most especially to Ernest Schott: a lifetime of learning and teaching.

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Deep bows to Naomi Seidman, the Rova Saxophone Quartet, Eithen Fletcher, Allan Koenigsberg, Jerry Fabris, Richard Spottswood, KALX, KPFA, Ensemble Diglossia, Snorkel, Mark Schifferli, Ben Goldberg, Dan Plonsey, Ward Spangler, John Zorn, Beanbender's, Aimie Jory-Hile, Paul DeMarinis, and Het Apollohuis.

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To the listener:

This CD was conceived to be played in the "shuffle" or "random" mode. However, because not all players have this feature, consideration was also given to the normal sequencing of tracks.

1 *overture* 3:55

Steve Adams, flutes; Karen Stackpole, gongs; John Schott, organ

2 *eleven* 0:13

3 *poor mourner: intro* 7:30

Steve Adams, flute; Ben Goldberg, Beth Custer, clarinets; Dan Plonsey, alto sax; Karen Stackpole, percussion; Gino Robair, percussion, xylophone; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matt Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, bass

4 *passage* 0:30

Rob Burger, accordion; John Schott, National steel guitar

5 *elegy: america* 4:56

Dan Plonsey, saxophones; John Schott, guitars, organ, percussion, samples; Myles Boisen, electric bass.

6 *long grain* 5:42

Jenny Scheinman, violin; Scott Amendola, drums

7 *ten* 0:10

- 8 *graph with citation* 0:36
Steve Adams, piccolo; Ben Goldberg, Beth Custer, clarinets; Dan Plonsey, alto sax; Karen Stackpole, percussion; Gino Robair, percussion, xylophone; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matt Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, bass
- 9 *trio* 1:43
Ben Goldberg, clarinet; Steve Adams, alto sax; Trevor Dunn, bass
- 10 *poor mourner repainted* 5:04
Scott Amendola, drums; Tom Yoder, trombone; John Schott, guitar
- 11 *eighteen* 0:19
- 12 *elegy: thomas edison and emile berliner* 4:06
Ben Goldberg, clarinet; Karen Stackpole, John Schott, percussion; Jenny Scheinman, violin; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matt Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, bass
- 13 *temple blocks* 2:04
Steve Adams, bass flute; Ben Goldberg, contra-alto clarinet; Karen Stackpole, temple blocks
- 14 *elegy: nearer, my god, to thee* 2:09
- 15 *passage* 0:43
Rob Burger, accordion; John Schott, National steel guitar
- 16 *violin* 2:21
Jenny Scheinman, violin
- 17 *second graph* 2:06
Steve Adams, flute; Ben Goldberg, Beth Custer, clarinets; Dan Plonsey, baritone sax; Karen Stackpole, Gino Robair, percussion; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matt Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, bass
- 18 *drums* 2:02
Scott Amendola, drums
- 19 *28 seconds* 0:28
- 20 *poor mourner: snorkel* 4:32
Ben Goldberg, clarinet; John Schott, guitar; Trevor Dunn, bass; Scott Amendola, drums
- 21 *elegy: noel josephs and jesse walter fewkes* 6:52
Ben Goldberg, contra-alto clarinet; Karen Stackpole, Gino Robair, percussion; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Trevor Dunn, bass
- 22 *ground zero: june 29, 1888* 2:22
- 23 *nineteen* 0:19
- 24 *trio* 1:30
Ben Goldberg, clarinet; Steve Adams, alto sax; Trevor Dunn, bass

25 *elegy: yankee doodle dandy* 7:37

Steve Adams, piccolo; Ben Goldberg, contra-alto clarinet; Beth Custer, clarinet; Dan Plonsey, baritone sax; Karen Stackpole, Gino Robair, percussion; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matt Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, bass

26 *passage* 0:42

Rob Burger, accordion; John Schott, National steel guitar

27 *thirty-two* 0:33

28 *nearer (coda)* 2:17

Myles Boisen, faders

Ensemble Diglossia: Steve Adams, C, alto, and bass flutes, alto saxophone; Beth Custer, B flat, E flat clarinet; Ben Goldberg, B flat, bass, contra-alto clarinet; Dan Plonsey; alto, tenor, baritone saxophone; Tom Yoder, trombone; Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, violins; Tara Flandreau, viola; Matthew Brubeck, cello; Trevor Dunn, acoustic bass; Scott Amendola, drums; Gino Robair, xylophone, percussion, drums; Karen Stackpole, gongs, percussion; Rob Burger, accordion; Myles Boisen, electric bass; John Schott, guitar, organ, percussion

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org

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