Music continues to fill the gaps as it replaces chewing gum, cell phones and sex. As digital and pre-digital life become more integrated we seem, musically speaking, to be entering a period of a “new common practice” where electronic and acoustic, composed and improvised, bourgeoisie and lumpen are obsolete. Musicians will at last assume the prodigious but quite natural task of forging a new vocabulary from every sound ever heard or imagined—Cage will never stop laughing.


The electric guitar, undoubtedly THE iconic instrument of the twentieth century, sits in a strange holding pattern between what it was and what it will become. As hip-hop replaces rock in the mainstream of global expression, the instrument has lost some of its potency as the knife-edge vanguard of youth and populism. As America recedes from its position of global dominance, so too does its musical avatar recede from the pride of place it once held in the world’s jukebox. The symbolic power of the guitar was always founded on a partnership between the instrument itself—loud, portable, space-age sculpture that it is, and the musical styles associated with it. As those styles become less contemporary and more historical, the guitar’s role as a political and inspirational tool is diminished. This decoupling of instrument from style provides a new opportunity to explore the instrument on more abstract terms.

Over the past twenty-plus years, Seth Josel has established himself as a leader in helping to shape the electric guitar’s burgeoning future as a “classical” instrument. This album is a statement not only of his artistry as a performer, but also as a curator of new music for the guitar. The six pieces on this recording demonstrate a variety of means and approaches spanning the reified electric flamenco of David Dramm to the sound-art abstractions of Gustavo Matamoros.

Two of the composers featured on the album, Michael Fiday and David Dramm, have each written works that deal directly with the guitar’s popular identity: a stylistic choice that the composers’ biographical similarities—including periods of tutelage under the Dutch composer and guru Louis Andriessen—may or may not account for. Andriessen, who Stewart Mason describes as a “spiritual mentor” to recent American music, is an important figure, in part, for the ways that his music and thought have helped build a rapprochement between European and American streams of composition. Andriessen has helped to make American minimalism and the incorporation of vernacular influence (particularly rock) acceptable to the European new-music mainstream in much the same way as English rock musicians of the 1960s reshaped African-American blues and exposed it back to white America. Without him, it would have been much more difficult to reach the point where a CD of “classical” electric guitar music could be received as much more than a novelty.

Raised in San Diego and currently residing in The Netherlands, David Dramm (born 1961) studied under Robert Erickson at the University of California at San Diego and, later, with Andriessen at Yale. His work The Stroke That Kills for three guitars (all played on this recording by Seth Josel) was written in 1993 for the Amsterdam Guitar Trio. The Stroke That Kills is rooted in the fierce rhythmic strumming of the flamenco style, but its translation to the electric guitar propels the music to a harder, more vicious place. To quote the composer:
I've always loved rhythm guitar more than guitar solos. Freddie Green, who played for fifty years with Count Basie, sounded like a drummer playing chords. That's my idea of a guitar player. When the Amsterdam Guitar Trio asked me for a piece, I looked for a way of approaching classical guitar through a rhythm guitar model without giving up its richly detailed palette or making the players sound like they were trying to play rock or swing. That's when I hit upon the idea of using flamenco technique for “Stroke.” The basic texture of the piece is neat and simple, taking the three main “strokes” of flamenco and placing them on top of each other. This, combined with many open strings in the chords, creates various quick drumroll-like patterns and slower, floating resonances. In later sections, I leave out the fast notes, creating a clearer interplay of flamenco-based cross accents.

Also born in 1961, fellow American Michael Fiday studied with George Crumb at the University of Pennsylvania before winning a Fulbright to work with Andriessen in Amsterdam. The self-described “diehard rock fan” directly addresses the gestural literature of the rock style in his work *Slapback* for guitar and delay unit. The composition is inspired by a live recording of The Who in which the guitarist Pete Townsend plays a duet with himself as his sound echoes off the arena wall. In *Slapback*, the guitar performance—heard in the right stereo channel—is repeated, by means of an electronic delay unit, one eighth-note later in the left stereo channel. While this conceit of exact repetition at a fixed temporal distance may initially strike one as being (merely?) a canon, it is actually quite different. In most live performances of canons, the rules of meter supersede those of the repetition. That is, a note that, when repeated, falls on a weak beat or an off beat will likely be performed as a weak beat or an off beat even if that note fell on a strong beat in its original statement. Because electronic repetition leaves such musical features as volume and articulation unchanged, the short distance between statement and restatement create an intricate web of shifting accents and rhythms, especially as the piece veers off into more complicated and uneven metric structures. *Slapback* was composed in 1997 as a commission for the American Composers Forum. Seth Josel gave the premiere performance in 2000 at Berlin’s Ultraschall Festival.

Given that Dramm and Fiday spent their formative years in the time of rock guitar’s cultural ascendancy, it might seem a bit surprising that the work of the similarly aged and similarly American Eve Beglarian (born in 1958) shows none of these influences, particularly in light of the keen pop sensibilities she demonstrates in such projects as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (available on the album *Tell the Birds*) and her performance duo twisted tutu. No mystery here, however, as *Until It Blazes* is written to be performable not just on guitar, but on any melodic instrument whose timbral characteristic comprises a sharp attack followed by a steady decay, such as piano, harp, or marimba. Like *Slapback*, *Until It Blazes* utilizes an electronic delay to augment the guitarist’s performance, but unlike in the Fiday, Beglarian’s use of echo does not create a separate contrapuntal line. Rather, it helps create a soundspace in which the delay effect promotes a sense of ambient depth and a more subtle sense of syncopation. This effect is achieved in part because Beglarian’s echoes are significantly softer than the live music instead of an exact sonic repetition as in *Slapback*. To get a sense for the delay’s contribution to the music, keep in mind that the opening forty seconds or so of the work are performed as a steady pulse and compare that to the result.

It is an important detail of *Until It Blazes* that the delays do not impose too much of a rhythmic sense onto the musical surface so as not to interfere with the rhythmic development of the main cellular material. To quote the work’s program note:
The overall idea of the piece is to set up various repeating patterns and then gradually group the notes so that new melodies grow out of the accents. For example, when you are playing a three note pattern, if you accent every fourth event, you will get one melody; if you accent every fifth event, you will get a different melody.

It is up to the performer to determine the accent patterns that will produce the cross-melodies, thereby making this recording not only a unique version of the work, but also, in a real sense, marking the music as a collaboration between performer and composer.

As in the case of Fiday and Dramm, it is interesting to speculate on the extent to which the biographical similarities of expatriate composers Tom Johnson and Alvin Curran may be responsible for certain parallels in the way their pieces approach the guitar. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, on December 13, 1938, Curran studied under Elliott Carter—a student of Charles Ives and one of the giants of twentieth-century American music—at Yale as part of an extraordinary class that included not just Tom Johnson, but also many significant composers such as Joel Chadabe and Richard Teitelbaum. In 1964, Curran was awarded a Ford Foundation fellowship to Berlin in order to continue his studies with Carter. Soon after arriving in Europe, he and Chadabe set off for Rome where, in 1966, Curran formed the seminal group Musica Elettronica Viva. By combining advances in music technology with a working methodology distilled equally from jazz, academic modernism, and Cage, MEV helped set the stage for the breakdown in aesthetic and cultural distinctions Curran discusses at the top of this essay.

Tom Johnson, born in 1939, grew up in Greeley, Colorado, and studied at Yale before expatriating himself to Paris in 1983, where he has lived ever since. From 1972 to 1982, he served as music critic for The Village Voice, which may help account for the extremely sharp self-awareness that seems to be present in most of his compositional output (his essays from that period are available for free on his Web site). Often considered as part of the Minimalist tradition, his career-long focus on the precise application of rigorous logical and numeric constructs wedded to simple forms and scales make him, like his mentor Morton Feldman, the type of individual voice whose work is relevant to a variety of traditions and concerns and whose influence can move future generations of composers beyond the technical and intellectual divisions of the past. Johnson’s more well-known compositions, such as The Chord Catalogue and Rational Melodies, apply his logical proclivities toward pitch construction, and in doing so demonstrate a vision that is in at least partial sympathy with the typical high-Modernist concerns of American serialists such as Babbitt. On the other hand, his most famous composition Failing: A Very Difficult Piece for String Bass turns its attention to the logic of the performance act itself, turning the music into a work of conceptual theater that is very much at home in the post-Modern, post-Cageian landscape of the Downtown scene and, through that, finds congress with composers such as Dramm, Fiday, and Beglarian. His Canon for Six Guitars (1998) inhabits an intertwined middle ground between these two approaches—a process piece where rigorous adherence to its initial conditions of pitch and rhythm ultimately produces something of a commentary on itself. The work’s five-measure theme is composed of only six pitches, which are stated linearly/melodically during the theme’s first four measures, and vertically/harmonically during the final one. Details such as the arpeggiation in the second measure and the outlining of the theme’s registral extremities in the fourth help create an overall affect of transformation within the theme, thereby allowing the concluding chords to be understood as the culmination of a musical progression from melody to harmony. As the piece builds, the canonic entrances become more closely spaced, resulting in textures of increasing density. Through this density, the thematic process of transformation is played out on a large scale. Ultimately, the guitar parts are stating so many notes that each of the music’s six pitches is always present. Globally then, since every pitch is being continually stated, the aggregate of these overlapping thematic statements has become a single giant chord, thereby making the whole piece a presentation of the same process of melodic-to-harmonic transformation as the opening theme.
The idea of building a composition around a formalized exploration of the guitar as a harmonic medium is also taken up by Alvin Curran in 1999’s *Strum City*. As you likely know, *strumming* is a performance technique where the guitarist strokes multiple strings in quick succession to produce a chord. The first movement is relatively straightforward and presents a long series of chords, not unlike a chorale, through the aural gauze of the strum.

One of this work’s most interesting facets is the way it highlights a peculiar paradox of strumming technique and perception. Usually, the intent of the strum is to produce a chord that is generally understood as a single, simultaneous harmonic unit. However, in producing a strum the guitarist is really performing an arpeggio, since the strings are not struck simultaneously, but in rapid sequence. While *Strum City*’s first movement is uncritically and unabashedly strum-centric, the second and third movements break apart the strum’s dual temporal nature, each focusing on one of the strum’s dual aspects. In the second movement, the chords are heard as slow arpeggiations, while in the third, the performance eschews the plectrum for the naked fingernail, which allows for true simultaneity of attack, since each finger can pluck an individual string.

As in Johnson’s *Canon*, *Strum City*’s opening gestures adumbrate this large-scale compositional concern and provides an *in toto* overview of the work. This opening gesture is the key to understanding the later movements not just as contrast, but as commentary. The opening chords (eighth notes at quarter equals forty-four beats per minute) are each heard as individual events. As the tempo accelerates over the next several measures (to eighth notes at quarter equals two-hundred-and-seventy beats per minute), the eighth-note attacks lose their sense of individuality (there are approximately nine chords per second by the fifth harmony) and become a unified sound mass of chords analogous to how the strum itself is understood as a unified sound mass of notes. From the work’s opening moments, therefore, the piece demonstrates an understanding of the strum technique as one whose affect is highly dependent on the speed with which it is realized.

Like Johnson and Curran, Gustavo Matamoros (born 1957) also mines the post-Cageian soundscape in search of new musical experiences. Matamoros, a native of Caracas, Venezuela, studied music in Florida at the University of Miami and was later mentored by Earle Brown, a close associate of Cage and a pioneer in the development of open-form music. He says “the most significant lessons [I’ve] learned have resulted from countless moments of interaction with colleagues, musician friends, and artists in other disciplines, and from a personal quest for a deeper understanding of the relationship between composer and community.” This personal focus on musical community finds an outlet in his role as Artistic Director of the Subtropics Experimental Music and Sound Art Festival in Miami and in works such as *Stoned Guitar* (2005), which was composed and premiered in the summer of 2005 to help raise funds for the Dorsch Gallery of Contemporary Fine Art in Miami, Florida.

As heard here, *Stoned Guitar* (2005) comprises two separate sub-pieces: *Stoned Guitar* and *TIG Welder*. *TIG Welder* is a recording of the eponymous device that is played simultaneously with the performance of the *Stoned Guitar* score. The balance between guitar and recording is determined by means of external electronics as stipulated by the composer. Even more so than *Until It Blazes*, *Stoned Guitar* depends on a true collaborative relationship with the performer for its success. The entire score to the work reads as follows: “With a stone, trace the strings of the guitar slowly from bridge to nut.”

—Alan Tormey

*Alan Tormey is a composer and erstwhile guitarist. He is presently Assistant Professor of Music at Grinnell College and would very much like to buy the world a Coke.*
Seth Josel has become one of the leading instrumental pioneers of his generation. After acquiring his Bachelor of Music degree at the Manhattan School of Music, Josel enrolled at Yale University and earned the Master of Music, the Master of Musical Arts, and the Doctor of Musical Art degrees. His teachers included Manuel Barrueco and Eliot Fisk. He is the recipient of numerous awards and prizes, including a Fulbright-Hays grant from the United States government and the Artists Stipend from the Akademie Schloß Solitude, Stuttgart. As an ensemble player and soloist he has been involved in the first performances of more than one hundred works. He has concertized throughout Europe as well as the U.S., Canada, Israel, and Japan, and he has been a guest performer with leading orchestras and ensembles, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Southwest German Radio Orchestra, the South German Radio Choir, the DSO Berlin, and the Schönberg/ASKO Ensemble of Amsterdam. From 1991–2000 he was a permanent member of the Ensemble Musikfabrik NRW, a state-subsidized ensemble devoted to the performance of contemporary music. In recent seasons he has been appearing as a regular guest with KNM Berlin, Ensemble SurPlus of Freiburg, as well as with the Basel Sinfonietta. He is a member of the Amsterdam-based electric guitar quartet Catch. During the period 2002–2005 Josel appeared as a soloist at several major European festivals including Salzburger Festpiele, Donaueschingen, Huddersfield, and MaerzMusik, musikprotokoll Graz. In addition to his solo CDs featuring American music (CRI, O.O. Discs), he has recorded with Ensemble Musikfabrik NRW, the DSO Berlin, Rundfunksinfonie-Orchester Berlin, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken, Schönberg Ensemble Amsterdam, and Champ d’Action Antwerpen. He also recorded Berio’s Sequenza XI for the complete Sequenza cycle released on Mode Records in 2006. He is the co-founder of www.sheerpluck.de, a Web site database dedicated to the contemporary guitar literature and is currently working on a performance technique handbook.

Eve Beglarian’s concert music has been commissioned and performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, the American Composers Orchestra, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the California EAR Unit, and the St. Luke’s Chamber Orchestra, among many other groups and individuals. Highlights of her work in music theater include Mabou Mines’s Obie-winning Dollhouse, Animal Magnetism, Ecco Porco, and Choephorai, directed by Lee Breuer; Forgiveness, a collaboration with Chen Shi-Zheng and Noh master Akira Matsui; and the China National Beijing Opera Theater’s production of The Bacchae, also directed by Chen Shi-Zheng. She has collaborated with choreographers including Victoria Marks, Ann Carlson, Susan Marshall, and David Neumann, and with visual and video artists including Shirin Neshat, Cory Arcangel, Barbara Hammer, and Anne Bray. Performance projects include Songs from a Book of Days, The Story of B, Open Secrets, Hildegurls’ Ordo Virtutum, twisted tutu, and typOpera. Her music can be heard on recordings from Koch, New World, Cantaloupe, Innova, CRI Emergency Music, O.O Discs, Open Space, Accurate Distortion, Atavistic, and Kill Rock Stars.

Democratic, irreverent, and traditionally experimental, Alvin Curran (b. 1938) travels in a computerized covered wagon between the Golden Gate and the Tiber River, and makes music for every occasion with any sounding phenomena—a volatile mix of lyricism and chaos, structure and indeterminacy, fog horns, fiddles and fiddle heads. He is dedicated to the restoration of dignity to the profession of making non-commercial music as part of a personal search for future social, political, and spiritual forms. Curran’s music-making embraces all the contradictions (composed/improvised, tonal/atonal, maximal/minimal . . .) in a serene dialectical encounter. His more than 150 works feature taped/sampled natural sounds, piano, synthesizers, computers, violin, percussion, shofar, ship horns, accordion, and chorus. Whether in the intimate form of his well-known solo performances or pure chamber music, experimental radio works or large-scale site-specific sound environments and installations, all forge a very personal language from all the languages through dedicated research and recombinant invention.
David Dramm (b. 1961) was born in Illinois, growing up in San Diego, California. His composition studies began with Robert Erickson at the University of California, San Diego and, later, at Yale University with Louis Andriessen and Earle Brown. His music is performed regularly in concert halls and rock clubs as well as being used by choreographers, theater groups, and filmmakers throughout Europe. Major festivals who have commissioned and programmed his music include the Holland Festival, Moers Festival, New Music Days in Tallinn, Estonia, November Music, New Music Days in Bratislava, Time of Music Festival, and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Recent commissions have included works for the Albany Symphony, ASKO-Schoenberg Ensemble, Frances-Marie Uitti, Netherlands Wind Ensemble, Orkest de Volharding, Aurelia Saxophone Quartet, Scapino Ballet, and choreographer Kristzina de Châtel. His Master Bop Blaster (1992) for rapper and saxophone quartet has become an unlikely standard work, performed at nearly every saxophone festival in the world. The Warsaw Autumn Festival commissioned his electric guitar concerto Zero Roll. Recordings of Dramm’s music are available on BVHaast, Vanguard Classics, Einstein, Attacca, Composer’s Voice, X-OR, and NBE Live. Dramm’s music is published by Donemus/MCN and voLsap Music. Dramm has lived and worked in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, since 1989.

Michael Fiday’s music has been commissioned and performed extensively throughout the United States and Europe by a diverse range of performers such as the Atlanta Symphony, Oakland East Bay Symphony, Percussion Ensemble of The Hague, pianist Marc-André Hamelin, and electric guitarist Seth Josel. Born in 1961, Michael Fiday began his musical training as a violinist at age eleven, turning his attention to composing only a few years later. He studied music and philosophy at the University of Colorado before pursuing graduate studies in music at the University of Pennsylvania. His principal teachers in composition have included Richard Toensing, George Crumb, and Louis Andriessen, with whom he studied in Amsterdam under the auspices of a Fulbright Grant. Mr. Fiday is the recipient of numerous awards, grants, and residencies from, among others, BMI, ASCAP, American Composers Forum, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, The MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Headlands Center for the Arts, and the Ohio Arts Council. He is currently Assistant Professor of Composition at the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati.

Tom Johnson, born in Colorado in 1939, received B.A. and M.Mus. degrees from Yale University, and studied composition privately with Morton Feldman. After fifteen years in New York, he moved to Paris, where he has lived since 1983. Johnson is well known for his operas: The Four-Note Opera (1972) continues to be presented in many countries; Riemannoper has been staged more than thirty times in German-speaking countries since its premier in Bremen in 1988. His largest composition, the Bonhoeffer Oratorium, a two-hour work for orchestra, chorus, and soloists, was premiered in Maastricht in 1996, and has since been presented in Berlin and New York. Johnson has also written numerous radio pieces, such as J’entends un choeur (Radio France), Music and Questions, and Die Melodiemaschinen (WDR). Recordings of his music are currently available on XI, Lovely Music, Ants, and Pogus. The Voice of New Music, a collection of articles written 1971-1982 for The Village Voice, is now in the public domain and can be downloaded on Johnson’s Web site (http://www.editions75.com). Johnson received the French national prize in the Victoires de la musique in 2001 for Kientzy Loops. His latest orchestra piece, 360 Chords, was premiered in July 2008 by the Bayrischer Rundfunk Orchester.

Gustavo Matamoros (b. 1957) is a composer and media artist who often works with simple materials and forms to create perceptually complex installations, musical compositions, and performance works at various scales. Matamoros is also the founder and director of the Subtropics Experimental Music Festival, an annual event in Miami with a 20-year history.
WEB SITES
Eve Beglarian: www.evbvd.com
Alvin Curran: www.alvincurran.com
David Dramm: www.daviddramm.com
Michael Fiday: www.michaelfiday.com
Gustavo Matamoros: www.subtropics.org
Tom Johnson: www.editions75.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

**Eve Beglarian**
*Overstepping*. Eve Beglarian, vocals; Kathleen Supové, keyboards; Margaret Lancaster, flute. OO Discs OO33.
*Play Nice*. twisted tutu: Eve Beglarian, vocals; Kathleen Supové, keyboards. OO Discs OO66.
*Tell The Birds*. Lisa Bielawa, voice; MATA Ensemble; Roger Rees, voice; Jessica Gould, soprano; Paul Dresher Ensemble Electro-Acoustic Band; Corey Dargel, voice; Margaret Lancaster, piccolo; Eve Beglarian, voice and electronics; Bill Ware, vibes solo; FlamingO Ensemble, Brad Lubman, conductor. New World Records 80630-2.

**Alvin Curran**
*Animal Behavior*. Alvin Curran, sampler, piano; Annie Sprinkle, voice; Roy Malan, violin; Donald Haas, accordion; Peter Wahrhaftig, tuba; William Winant, percussion. Tzadik TZ 7001.
*Canti Illuminati*. Fringes Archives 02.
*Inner Cities*. Daan Vandewalle, piano. Long Distance Records 560304 (4CDs).
*Schttyx*. Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio. New World Records/CRI NWCR 668.

**David Dramm**
*Blow!* Aurelia Saxophone Quartet. Challenge Classics CC 72005.
*Body O’ Graphic*. Analecta. X-OR CD 06.
*Hello Pop Tart*. Tomoko Mukaiyama, piano. BVHAAST CD 9801.

**Michael Fiday**
*same rivers different*. Carla Kihlstedt, violin; Graeme Jennings, violin; Bart Feller, flute; James Tocco, piano. Innova Recordings 716.
Tom Johnson

The Chord Catalogue. Tom Johnson, piano. Experimental Intermedia XI 123.
Failing, a very difficult piece for string bass. Robert Black, double bass. Included on Bang on a Can, Volume 1. New World Records/CRI NWCR 628.
Organ and Silence. Wesley Roberts, organ. Pogus AG 05.

Gustavo Matamoros

Re: David. David Manson, trombone. Included on Beast. iso 4205.
Re: Elizabeth. Elizabeth Panzer, harp. Included on Dancing in Place. O.O. Discs OO56.

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THE STROKE THAT KILLS
SETH JOSEL, ELECTRIC GUITAR, ELECTRIC BASS
80661-2

1. Eve Beglarian (b. 1958)
   Until It Blazes (2001) 10:33
electric guitar solo with stereo delay unit

Alvin Curran (b. 1938)
5 electric guitars, 2 electric basses
2. I
3. II
4. III

5. Michael Fiday (b. 1961)
   Slapback (1997) 12:18
electric guitar and delay unit

6. David Dramm (b. 1961)
   The Stroke That Kills (1993) 11:34
   (3 guitars), version for electric guitar by Seth Josel

7. Gustavo Matamoros (b. 1957)
   Stoned Guitar/TIG Welder (2005) 9:20

8. Tom Johnson (b. 1939)
   Canon for Six Guitars (1998) 4:53

TT: 62:00

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