

Natural History à
Gogo

Written by DOUG HARVEY

Breaking the museum sound barrier



Horn section: Drew Daniel of Matmos uses deer antlers in his "Sonic Scenery" composition. Photo by Matmos

I've always kicked myself for not remembering to pack a Walkman — or, more recently, an iPod — on forays to two destinations. One is Home Depot, whose policy seems to be to make every nasal, unintelligible announcement three times before switching back to whatever treacly contemporary R&B radio station induces the most major-appliance sales. The other is The Museum — any museum, really, as most of them subscribe to an identical hushed-bank-vault authoritarianism that practically screams out for a more humanly scaled sensory corrective. And though contemporary-art museums occasionally break down and incorporate some audio artist's work into their programming, or someone at a museum of cultural anthropology will set a low-volume loop of powwow

songs running behind a tepee diorama, it rarely results in the kind of subjective experiential transformation you get from, say, looking at a roomful of Pollocks to the tune of Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*.

And then along comes the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum's attempt to harness this very niche of personal-reality modification using rentable infrared-sensitive headsets. Part of what makes "Sonic Scenery" so remarkable is its total unlikeliness. It isn't that it's such a radical idea — Morton Feldman's 1971 *Rothko Chapel* is probably the most famous in a lineage of synesthetic art-making with roots dating back at least as far as Wagner and the multimedia extravaganzas of Diaghilev. In recent years, local interdisciplinary virtuoso Steve Roden composed site-specific soundtracks for, among other locales, Rudolph Schindler's King's Road House. London's Victoria and Albert Museum commissioned soundtracks from a dozen or so contemporary musicians and artists for its 2004 exhibit "Shhh!" But the success of "Sonic Scenery" lies in the improbable fusing of unapologetic dorkiness and unimpeachable hippitude.

For all its attempts to reach out to the Gameboy-glazed little people, the Natural History Museum's strength lies in its dusty anachronisms, particularly the primitive virtual realities of its dioramas. "We don't want to in any way diminish the elegance and

atmosphere of the diorama halls,” comments NHM programming V.P. (and “Sonic Scenery” executive producer) Vanda Vitali. “We know from visitor studies that the best way to transmit a message — to teach, if you wish, without preaching — is to engage the visitor’s attention. We also know that music is one of the most marvelous tools to make the mind wander, and to kind of stop you. So we’re using music compositions developed by these artists as a way, a tool or device, for focusing visitors’ attention on our displays and galleries.”

When your displays and galleries contain arrays of stuffed possums, rock samples, fossilized bones and obsolete farm equipment, who would’ve imagined “tools” as cutting-edge as Jon Hassell, Ozomatli, Nels Cline, Matmos, and the Sun Ra Arkestra? The hipness quotient seems largely attributable to “Sonic Scenery” producer Ben Rogers, who has also overseen the adventurous musical portions of the NHM’s highly successful First Fridays public programs (as well as making mosaic paintings from cut-up LP vinyl in his spare time).

“Sonic Scenery,” in fact, opened with a pretty spectacular oddity of a First Fridays event — an evening of “silent sets” by performers included in the exhibit (Matmos, Languis) and other notable talents (Tom Recchion, Poly). These sets were audible only through a handful of headphone jacks for which listeners had to compete. It seemed like an awkward conceit, but somehow it worked — the artists performed mostly sprawling, repetitive improvisations that were easy to dip into, and there were enough alternate distractions to keep the mind occupied: a panel discussion featuring Hassell, KCRW art critic Edward Goldman and Dublab impresario Mark “Frosty” McNeill, a headphone-free DJ set by the Reef Project, and last but not least, the commissioned soundtracks themselves.

Of the 10 musical offerings, Hassell’s *Wilderness Psalms* is the most haunting. A text-sound composition built entirely from fragments of a recorded Swahili conversation between two Masai tribesmen, the chiming, disembodied voices seem to hover in the cloistered air of the newly restored African Mammal Hall, marking the space with a profound human absence. For Hassell, whose densely layered “Fourth World” soundscapes helped define and globalize ambient music in the ’80s, *Psalms* evokes more personal memories.



“One of the reasons I’m in L.A. is that I came here when MOCA opened,” he recalls. “Part of their opening ceremonies was Peter Sellars’ production of this Russian futurist play by Velimir Khlebnikov, and I did the music in a little house onstage. And I used a lot of pygmy voices raised up a couple of octaves, with orioles and other bird sounds brought down a couple of octaves, and I found they were extraordinarily similar. And these [Swahili] voices date from the same period.”

The opposite hall, North American Mammals, belongs to Matmos. The only contributors to take the task of responding to the exhibits to its logical extreme, the group provide 17 brief sonic vignettes, one for each diorama. Known for their droll conceptual sample sources — an entire CD constructed from plastic-surgery field recordings, for example — Matmos took an equally rigorous approach to their “Sonic Scenery” track.

“We decided early on that we didn’t want to use any real animals,” says Drew Daniel, lead laptopist. “We wanted to synthesize it as much as possible. So, for example, I made the sea-lion cries by taking a rubber superball and dragging it across a wooden table and then pitching it way down. And I have this neighbor down the street who does a really funny noise with his tongue, and I got him to imitate a porcupine.” While the rapid-fire cut-and-paste approach might suggest superficiality, the group succeed in conjuring a startling variety of cinematic emotional extremes — from ominous *Shining*-like drones (mountain goat) to giddy Looney Tunes banjo breakdowns (collared peccary) in just under seven minutes, with a sublime pastoral 90 seconds devoted to the plains bison at the far end.

Most of the works succeed in distinctly cinematic terms: Nels Cline’s layered feedback and backward masking swell as your eyes pan along the spine of the *Argentinosaurus*; Stephen Hartke’s slippery, Harry Partch-like percussionisms seem to emanate from the glinting surfaces as you move through the Gems and Minerals gallery; and the Sun Ra Arkestra — in an untitled piece improvised in the middle of the night in the very Ancient Latin American hall it was recorded for — brings three millennia’s worth of pre-Columbian figurative sculpture to lurching, joyous life.

“Sonic Scenery” reminded me of how the Walkman changed my life. With the soundtrack under my control, I found my mind free to wander, and life was suddenly more interesting — like a movie. I found myself making creative decisions about what to focus my attention on, and when to shift it. I started experiencing funny or deep synchronicities between the music and my life/movie. I think it was a couple of years before I took them off.

To test something I learned in that time, I walked through the NHM’s second-floor galleries, listening to the “Sonic Scenery” soundtracks set to the incorrect displays. Cline’s piece meshed nicely with the mock rainforest. The Arkestra’s piece could have been written for the Ralph W. Schreiber Hall of Birds. And Nobody and the Mystic Chords of Memory’s immersive *Blue Dissolve* was probably more poignant while looking at the decrepit series of dioramas depicting the life cycle of the sea turtle — only the last diorama has a functioning light, revealing voracious seagulls picking off the newborns as they scramble for the sea.

At first I felt a little cheated by the interchangeability, but then I realized that I was deeply engaged, carefully examining visual details I may have missed, creatively searching out points of serendipitous coincidence, having fun and discovering new meanings in things I might have otherwise overlooked. What else could I — or a museum — want?

SONIC SCENERY | Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles | Through May 3