

UP FRONT: MUSEUMS

Back to the sounding board

A customized musical score modernizes the Natural History Museum's vibe.

By CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS
Times Staff Writer

ONE night last September, long after visiting hours, 15 men infiltrated the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Once inside, they eyed the exhibitions in the Ancient Latin America room, pulled a set of well-fingered instruments from cases and set to draping the pre-Columbian pottery in spontaneous sound.

These were the players of the Sun Ra Arkestra, an offbeat big band known in musical circles for its cosmic inclinations and collective improvisation. And, yes, they were invited.

In a rare experiment among American museums, the museum had asked 10 composers and composing teams to come up with sounds to match the long-standing exhibitions on the institution's ground floor. Called "Sonic Scenery," the "exhibition" will run Friday through May 3 at the museum in Exposition Park.

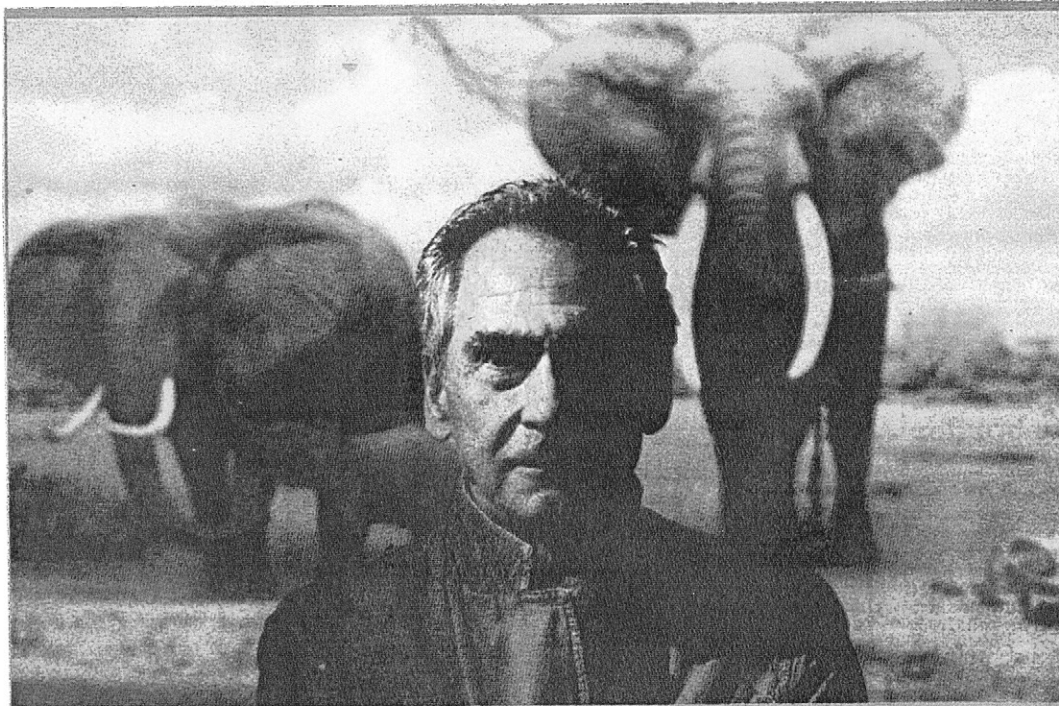
"It's like doing music for a movie in a way," said composer and trumpeter Jon Hassell, another contributor, whose most widely heard composition is probably the theme from ABC's drama "The Practice."

The assignments included twinkling minerals of the gem vault, the looming skeletons of the dinosaur rooms and the stuffed mammals that have crouched, slouched and lolled in frozen diorama poses for decades.

In some respects, this show is an acknowledgment that those dioramas and simple presentations of artifacts — state-of-the-art educational tools in the 1930s — don't always speak so loudly to a generation weaned on digital technology.

Indeed, most museums "are essentially places that communicate visually," said Vanda Vitalli, the museum's vice president for public programs and executive producer of "Sonic Scenery."

The idea here, Vitalli said, was to stand that habit on its head — "to focus a visitor's relationship and discovery through music.



STAFF PHOTO BY GINA LOS ANGELES TIMES

ALL OF THE WILD: Composer Jon Hassell wrote a piece to be heard while strolling past life-size dioramas of African mammals.

The beauty of music is that it slows you down. It creates a mood for thinking, particularly the kind of music we have selected. So we are using music as a tool to focus visitors' attention."

To hear the composers' work, visitors will pay the museum's usual entrance fee of \$9 (for adults), plus \$3 for headphones. As the visitors move from room to room among the animals, vegetables and minerals, infrared sensors will cue the headphones to play appropriate tracks.

The pieces are primarily instrumental, each running roughly three to six minutes. All were written and recorded between mid-September and Jan. 9, mostly off-site. And the contributors, recruited from a broad batch of genres, took approaches as varied as the collection.

Marched with the 17 dioramas of the North American Mammals hall, the duo Matmos came up with 17 vignettes, most lasting no more than 45 seconds, coaxing sounds from sources including guitars, banjo, Jew's

harp, antlers, a rubber ball and peanut butter. Meanwhile Hassell confronted by an ark load of African mammals scattered through another 17 life-size dioramas, instead assembled a single four-minute audio montage.

Hassell, whose last commercial recording was "Maarifa Street," a 2005 stew of jazz, dub and traditional Arabic elements, said he was at first dismayed by the low-tech "dustiness" of the old dioramas. But the setting also gave Hassell a sense of broad possibilities, and very quickly, he said, he realized that he could make use of a field recording in his collection.

"I had this conversation," Hassell said, "these two Masai tribesmen talking, and didn't know what they were saying. The fact that I don't know what they're saying allowed me to focus on the speech as music, extremely melodic and beautiful and rhythmic."

For the piece, "Wilderness Psalms," he looped and tweaked the Kiswahili-speaking voices, playing with pitch, harmony and

repetition.

"They are actually speaking, or singing, in major chords. But the rhythms really come from the internal dynamics of the language itself," Hassell said.

IN the case of the Philadelphia-based Sun Ra Arkestra, museum staffers arranged a midnight recording session to capitalize on the combo's presence in Los Angeles for a performance at UCLA.

With a 24-track recording setup rigged to capture their every toot and tap, the musicians spent about four hours harmonizing with history, their four saxophones, two trumpets and assorted other instruments — sounding remarkably tight for a group improvisation — evoking ancient ceremonies as the fiberglass replica of an inscribed-stone calendar loomed behind them.

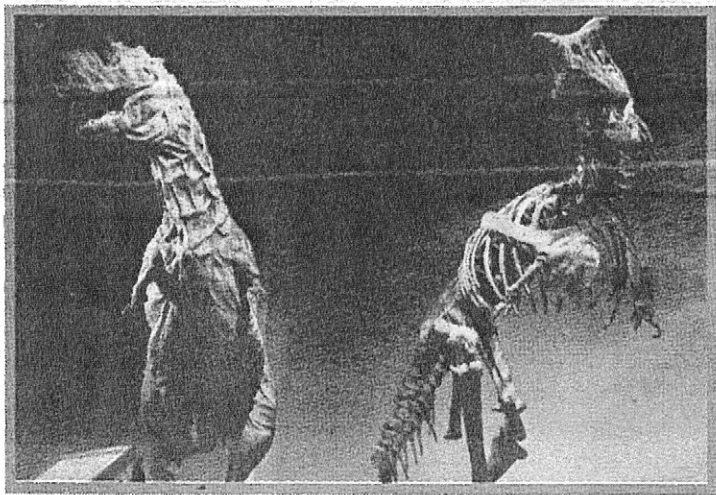
Most composers, thinking in ambient terms, throttled back on rhythmic elements, especially the gentle, underwater-sounding

approach that the trio Nobody and the Mystic Chords of Memory took to the Mesozoic Sea Fossils Room. But the veteran Los Angeles band Ozomatli produced "Tickle Me!," a light-hearted groove so danceable that the Cenozoic fossils seem likely to rise and rattle at any moment.

"The element of surprise helps loosen up a visitor," exhibition producer Ben Rogers said. "They're going to encounter things they don't expect."

The rock band Autolux took on the room devoted to American machinery of the 19th and early 20th centuries, from farmers' reapers to a 1902 Oldsmobile to a strange, horned, table-top device known as a phonograph. The track begins with a lurching mechanic sequence, a melody gradually developing inside the machine rhythm amid throbbing pulses and high warbles suggestive of a short-wave radio.

Nels Cline, a guitarist who joined the rock band Wilco in 2004, took on one of the dinosaur rooms with a piece that builds to



JURASSIC SPARK: *Nels Cline of Wilco took on the challenge of dinosaur exhibits with rock quartet Langui.*

an oozing, clanging, extinction-suggesting climax. The atmospheric rock quartet Langui took on a dinosaur room and, having heard of the Arkestra's on-site performance, grabbed the chance to record there. Other contributors included David J and Stephen Hartke in the gem and mineral rooms.

VITALI and Rogers said they arranged this effort as a follow-up to last year's show "Conversations," in which the museum invited half a dozen visual artists to make works based on items in its collection.

For the museum, despite the unorthodox nature of the project and the rock-star credentials of some participants, going musical proved more affordable than most home-grown museum shows. Vitali said the project cost less than \$250,000, and with the sale of CDs and iTunes downloads will bring some revenue beyond ticket sales. And then there's the prospect of luring in a different audience than the museum normally pulls.

Many art museums have invited visual artists to respond to items in their collections — in fact, the Getty and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have undertaken such projects in the last six years — but sound projects have been less common.

The most similar may be "Shhh... Sounds in Spaces," a 2004 project of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, which specializes in decorative arts. The V&A commissioned 10 composers and other artists to respond sonically to collections and spaces within the institution — including David Byrne, whose contribution included the sound of a toilet flushing in one of the museum bathrooms.

Though nobody at the Natural History Museum

went that route, the institution's building itself did play a role in the music that emerged.

"We really took advantage of the natural echoes of the hall," said Langui keyboard player Alejandro Cohen.

"We took a couple of visits," said John Girgus, who played guitar and electronic effects on the Langui track. "Then once we chose the space, we decided what we'd do, which was basically 'dark, psychedelic dinosaurs.' It was one of those rare instances where the plan worked."

'Sonic Scenery'

Opening party

What: "Sonic Scenery" opening night party, as an installment of the Natural History Museum's monthly First Fridays series

Where: 900 Exposition Blvd., L.A.

When: 7 p.m. Friday; "silent sets" (performances that can be heard by plugging your headphones into a listening station) by Matmos, Langui, Tommy D, Daedelus, Tom Recchion and others begin at 9 p.m. DJ set by Reef Project in the foyer.

Admission: Attendees need to download "Sonic Scenery" from iTunes (cost: \$9.99). There is no admission fee if you bring the music and guide. For download instructions, visit www.nhm.org/sonicscenery

Info: (213) 763-DINO or www.nhm.org

Exhibition information

Regular hours: 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays; 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekends.

Price: Admission is \$9 for adults; \$6.50 for seniors, students and children 13 and older; \$2 for children 5 to 12; free for children 4 and younger. A limited quantity of listening devices are available to rent for \$3.