

New Age musicians exhibit classic talent



Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack

Liz Story chats with the crowd during a performance Tuesday night in Rudder tower.

By Cindy McMillian

Tuesday night found the usual OPAS crowd milling about the lobby of Rudder Center. Well-to-do patrons and season ticket holders were on hand — the women wore fur wraps and black patent heels, the men wore coats and ties.

The night's entertainment, however, definitely was not the standard fare. Steam rose from the stage as Liz Story, Philip Aaberg and Night Noise drifted one by one into the spotlights and began the opening number.

These musicians exhibited technical skills to rival those of many classical artists. Their mastery combined with soaring expressiveness, freedom of form, and audience communication painted an exquisite, ethereal and moving portrait of beauty.

And humor. Story, a solo pianist, used a mixture of sentimental and quirky anecdotes to introduce her songs from the recent album, *Escape of the Circus Ponies*. The three Celtic members of Night Noise (the fourth is a New Yorker) made several Irish cracks, one of which led into the best musical moment of the evening.

After preparing the audience for an Irish tune ("It was written by an Irishman," explained flautist Brian Dunning), two members of Night Noise began a rendition of Van Morrison's "Moondance" that amazed the crowd. Dunning began on alto flute with a low,

mournful version of the melody, then switched to C flute and picked up the tempo with smooth glissandos and jazzy slides. Michael O'Domhnaill played guitar, and both performers were on fire. Dunning's energy was the highlight of the evening.

Aaberg's solo segment was another crowd pleaser. Along with some beautiful piano work, his humor stole the show. He would begin with some shimmering opening chords and then break into a kind of surreal boogie-woogie. His version of the Christmas classic *The Nutcracker* sounded like Jerry Lee Lewis' soul playing in Claude Debussy's body.

Story's performance was serious business — beautiful and moving. Rich bass lines supported soaring melodies in her solo selections, and her duet with Aaberg was rhythmic and exciting.

Though it ran a bit long, the show was interesting, moving and enjoyable. Some audience members accustomed to more traditional performances from the MSC Opera and Performing Arts Society may have been surprised, but I doubt many were disappointed.

The three acts toured together to promote a compilation album of seasonal New Age music. The album, *Winter Solstice III*, is available on the Windham Hill label.

a look at Liz Story

Liz Story took some time out from Tuesday's soundcheck to share a few thoughts about performing and her career as a soloist.

"Traveling's tough," she says. Though she started touring several years ago with romanticized visions of seeing city after city, life on the road is often "just a series of airports and motel rooms."

But performing for an audience has its rewards, she says. In a sense, performing live is the way music should be, and studio work can be an attempt to simulate live music.

Studio work has its moments of excitement, like when she knows the tape has started and she's actually putting something down on vinyl, she says. But her favorite is "live performing, by far."

Liz Story's last visit to College Station was on Valentine's Day, 1989, when she performed a solo show in Rudder Auditorium. For the last two years, she has been travelling with two other Windham Hill acts, Philip Aaberg and Night Noise, playing selections from the second and third *Winter Solstice* albums.

She has fun with the group and enjoys not being by herself. The change has been worth it, she says, but logistics can be a problem.

"When you travel with a group, the whole style of touring completely changes," she says. Trying to follow a group pattern is often difficult — more hotel rooms, longer soundchecks, more waiting. "I've spent a lot of time wandering around backstage," she says.

Story's most recent release, *Escape of the Circus Ponies*, is all solo piano music. On her next album, she plans to work with other musicians.

She has done three out of five albums without accompaniment, but becoming a solo artist "just kind of happened."

When she first approached Windham Hill with her music, Story had a job in a French restaurant playing solo piano, so all her music was written as a soloist. She signed and toured alone, but not because she set out to, she says. That's just how her career worked out.

The combination of opportunity, direction and circumstance determines what careers most of us find, in the arts and in other areas, she says.

"You go in the general direction of what you want to do," she explains. "I wanted to play piano."

—C.M.

Mutilated thumbs up to Skinny Puppy tour

By John Righter

You're in a crowded room. There's a man on a stage with a gas mask on who keeps knocking himself to the floor with his fist. He struggles back to his feet, blood-soaked and screaming.

As he becomes more enraged, he reaches into a sac, a marsupium-like appendage attached at his belly, and tugs a squirming fetus by its umbilical chord from it. He bites into the fetus, spits a chunk toward you and then sticks the dismembered figure back in its pouch.

Above him and to his side lie a dozen screens and television sets with disturbing visions of open-heart surgery, abortions, slit throats and tortured animals. Perched behind him is an ominous tree, engendered with vacillating limbs and a hinged opening, entombed with death and rebirth. The tree, as him, is cloaked by a thick fog and dark, flashing lights. Directly above the madmen awaits a noose, limply swaying in spell-like fashion. It is from this noose that the madman will soon hang.

By this point, you're wondering a) what in the hell am I doing here, and b) how in the hell do I get out? For the capacity crowd at Houston's Numbers, the last thing wished was an escape from this macabre freak show. Vincent Price, himself, couldn't have devised a more perfect setting for

those intrigued by the dark and ordinary, and for those who find themselves enchanted by a voluminous imagination.

Skinny Puppy does not feature today's most entertaining musicians. But the Canadian band quite possibly performs the most entertaining set. Utilizing their trademark "audio sculpture," the homogenizing of visual, sound and message, Nivek Ogre, Dwayne Rudolph Goettel and cEVIN KEY are dead serious about Puppy's music and message. Without prior knowledge of the method that belies Ogre's madness, Puppy's songwriter and center-stage madman, the show is a deeply disturbing spectacle.

Alice Cooper was a campy side-show. Cooper might procure an occasional wince, but largely he was left with the laughter of spectators that grew up watching Christopher Lee, Vincent Price and Peter Cushing. Skinny Puppy goes far beyond a few, cheap gimmicks and instead, attempts to forge a complete aura.

In the same vein as GWAR and the Butthole Surfers, Puppy strives for fascist, violent images to derive their paradoxically positive messages. While most bands eye for the margins, Skinny Puppy grovels for the center sludge.

In this sense, the group is much closer to the aforementioned GWAR

and Surfers then to Ministry and the Revolting Cocks. In fact, the group performed the mettallish "Tin Omen" as its second song to rid themselves of the proverbial slam. "Omen" was the lone song that aroused the audience enough for a true pit.

The rest of the show was spent staring at disturbing images, robotic limbs that transformed Ogre into a giant, and the degrading sight of Ogre cutting himself and forcing up his own vomit with his fingers. Pleasantries were few and far between.

Skinny Puppy is a band that tours infrequently and performs limited engagements. The reason is obvious — Ogre literally mutilates himself on stage. The man must be physically and psychologically devastated by set's end. It was Ogre's breakdown that led to the cancellation of last year's tour when he temporarily left Skinny Puppy to join Al Jourgensen and Ministry (who produced part of *Rabies*).

I can't in good conscience make a sweeping recommendation for Skinny Puppy. But, fortunately, I really don't need to.

Those accustomed to the rebellious underground scene will find nothing particularly shocking by the performance. Music-goers that are more ignorant to the wonders of avant-garde shows, will probably freak. Me, I give it a mutilated thumbs up.

Top 10 albums of 1990

By Kevin Robinson

Every reviewer usually feels the need to do a top ten list for the year, be it in movies, records, books, whatever. I guess the main reason is that it's the ultimate ego trip to place in print what you've personally been enjoying for the past twelve months. It gives the reader a taste of what the reviewers themselves enjoy, and judge by that whether or not their opinion means a whole lot to them.

If you go by my tastes, 1990 was one of the best years for music in a long time. Acts that I've waited years for a second album finally put them out. Groups like Public Enemy, Sinead O'Conner, and Jane's Addiction finally got the recognition they deserved. Most of all, it seems that the so-called "underground" is finally moving forward into popularity.

For what it's worth, here are my top ten of 1990. They're in no particular order. Sinead O'Conner and Fugazi may have the same haircuts, but to compare the two is silly.

1) Lou Reed and John Cale- *Songs for Drella*: Although vastly underrated, the Velvet Underground were probably the most influential rock band ever, outside of the Beatles. *Songs for Drella* reunites two of the founding members in a touching tribute to their former friend/mentor/producer, Andy Warhol.

2) Public Enemy- *Fear of a Black Planet*: I agree, most rap is in the same adolescent mindset as most heavy metal. One of the few exceptions is Public Enemy, a group that honestly turns rap into an artform and has plenty to say while they're at it. Don't believe the hype!

3) Jane's Addiction- *Ritual de la Habitual*: Alright, most people don't consider this as good as *Nothing Shocking*, but I see it as an expansion from their art-metal basics. With a fierce originality, continued exposure and a cult of fans that's been growing for four years now, Jane's is soon going to be huge. That is, if they don't break up first.

4) Bongwater- *Too Much Sleep*: If the Beatles had made "Sgt. Pepper's" in 1990, it may have sounded something like this. Vocalist/ Performance artist Ann Magnuson and Musician-/Producer Kramer create a musical collage of psychedelic sounds, surreal lyrics and bizarre samples.

5) Sinead O'Conner- *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*: I was beginning to think that Sinead would never make another album. This record still doesn't live up to her classic *The Lion and the Cobra* from 1987, but it's still a beautiful album in its own right. In case you're wondering, yes, I got sick of "that song" too.

6) The Glove- *Blue Sunshine*: I guess it's cheating to include an album originally released in 1983, but this year was the first time that the Glove project had been released in the United States and was brand new to most people. A collaboration between Robert Smith of the Cure and Steve Severin of Siouxsie and the Banshees (which Smith was a temporary member in at the time), the Glove project is the ultimate psychedelic album, which probably reflects more on the massive amounts of hallucinogenic drugs that both members were consuming than anything else.

7) Fugazi- *Repeater*: I've always liked Fugazi because while they still incorporate their no-drugs, no-alcohol, no-sex lifestyle into their songs, they don't seem as preachy as many other straight-edge, hardcore bands. Also setting them apart from most of their contemporaries is their fluid, hook-ridden music, which is just as much a joy to listen to as the lyrics.

8) Dead Can Dance- *Aion*: This little gem is available only as an import from 4AD records right now, which is a shame. Combining ethereal melodies reminiscent of the Cocteau Twins with the occasional 14th century Spanish piece or a traditional Middle Eastern melody makes for some of the most unusual sounds I've heard in a

while.
9) Revolting Cocks- *Beers, Steers, and Queers*: The good news here is that frontman Al Jourgensen is finally having some fun again. The Cocks new album puts him back in the party mode after the heavy grunge of the last two Ministry albums. After putting up with weak "industrial pop" from Nitzer Ebb and Nine Inch Nails, it's nice to see the Cocks back in action. By the way, the title tune was written by the Skatenigs about everyone's favorite rival university.

10) Brian Eno and John Cale- *Wrong Way Up*: Who would have thought that a John Cale project would have made it on a top ten list twice? The big news here, though, is Brian Eno's return to vocal music after more than 13 years of making ambient albums and producing and playing with Ultravox, Talking Heads, U2 and others. This album makes it seem like he never left and "Spinning Away" is one of the best songs he's ever written.

Among those that didn't make the list, but deserve to be mentioned anyway include new efforts by the Replacements, Pogue's, Skinny Puppy, William S. Burroughs and the Digital Underground. Has this been a great year or what? Let's just hope that the rest of decade lives up to it.

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