FUELING THE FIRE

Boise college artist Vicki Bennett balances her avant-garde sensibilities with a dose of good-natured irreverence. It’s all about her and the piece she performs under the name People Like Us. Her music is a blend of electronic and acoustic elements, creating a unique sound that draws from various sources, including her own experiences.

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—VICKI BENNETT

Fueling the Fire: How did your initial live improvisations lead to what became Music for the Fire? Vicki Bennett: People Like Us & Wobbly started collaborating in 1999 doing live college improvisations, mainly on synthesizers and some gigs. The great thing about radio is you invariably get a lot of time to try out new things and it doesn’t have the pressure of a bunch of people staring at you, plus the sound quality is perfect since it’s a studio set up. Through a bunch of radio shows, shows back-to-back, over a few years, we found a little bit of ground, and the initial compositions for Music For The Fire came from a session that we did on KFJC. We then went on to perform live and gradually discovered what was working while doing the concerts.

Jon Leidecker: We’ve offered live downloads of some of the radio shows and concerts that feature the material from this album as we work on it. Our initial KFJC sessions always seemed to turn us towards a studio album. The improvises kept producing unnegotiable ideas that we could try out in different ways, each time with different samples, and the more we meticulously tested all the best parts together. If the pacing works, it’s because we know those songs in the audience.

LV: You live in different countries. Can you describe your compositional collaborative process? VB: On the whole, a lot of these edits were made in the same room—and we collaborated though live improvising gradually building foundations that we gave vague names that we knew we had certain samples for. This way of doing live improv involves thinking of things you can come up with that would make the other person respond, or just as likely laugh, and you don’t tell them what you are going to do until you do it in the broadcast or concert. You have a creative conversation by going back and forth with sources, eventually the composition emerges without talk.

LV: Improvising in social settings is solitary. Is it a space for software to change this? VB: Currently most of the editing is software is designed to facilitate the individual‘s total control. I’d love to see networked editing programs come to develop. It’s just taking forever because it’s totally antithetical to every ingrained conception of the individual composer that we have. In any case, most of our work happens live, and I’m like Vicki and I look back on those concerts.

LV: What was your compositional strategy, particularly in the way you used very familiar sources, playing them just enough to be recognizable but then at the last minute pulling them apart, mid-concert? VB: Well you can’t have too much of a good thing, can you? And this is too much of a good thing. And you can’t have it. We both like destroying nice things and making nice things out of complete rubbish. There is something about exploring every possibility of something simply by rearranging it exhaustively.

Jon: Music that seems hopelessly kitsch often becomes emotionally devastating after it gets snarled around just a little bit. It’s tough love.

LV: What do we do in surprise in the emotional context and the messages within the album—random juxtapositions are frighteningly poignant and tragic. I actually didn’t want this album released for at least a year, and Jon had to fight me to agree—because it’s one cutting album as far as I’m concerned.

Jon: It’s very, very dark album. I had some doubts about releasing it as it will, but I got to feeling that the ending can’t cynically or definitively—the comedy is tied closely to the tragedy, but hopefully in a way that forces someone to laugh at all of the things they might otherwise be prone to wallowing in. But they definitely aren’t cheap laughs.

Kembra lives and works in Jesus City, and is currently attempting to keep it real.

http://littlevillagemag.com/content/2010/05/03/fueling-the-fire/