



# THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Monk, Eisenberg and Banhart: Oh Me, Oh My, They're So Unusual

BY JOSEPH HOOPER

It was Meredith Monk as much as anyone who taught New Yorkers that it's possible to open the mouth and make music without having to sing. In the mid-60's, Ms. Monk was a recent Sarah Lawrence graduate of bohemian inclination when she discovered her gift for shattering singing and talking into its constituent molecules. Instead of bars, she sang syllables, whispers, screams, yelps.

It was an abstract conception of music to say the least, ethereal and puckish. Allied with her audacious visual imagination, it yielded a series of influential dramatic tableaux, the first of which, *Juice: A Theatre Cantata in Three Installments*, involved 75 chanting costumed angels ascending the Guggenheim museum's spiral ramp. In 1969, that got people's attention.

Today, if anything, we've become overfamiliar with the static masterpieces that Robert Wilson and Philip Glass regularly ship off to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. But the quirkiness and malleability of Ms. Monk's own voice usually saves her from the trancy, snoozy pseudo-profundity that dogs the lesser realms of the Wilson/Glass oeuvre.

Which is not to say that I follow Ms. Monk's every chirrup with delight. If to her more casual fans her choices can sometimes seem arbitrary or precious or of more technical-how does her voice do that?-than musical interest, that's clearly a price she's willing to pay.

So, as Ms. Monk celebrates her 60th birthday and prepares for her upcoming B.A.M. Next Wave Festival concerts (Dec. 3-7), it's nice to report that her new album, *Mercy* (ECM), may well be her finest. The piece began life as a multimedia stage work with installation artist Ann Hamilton, a meeting of two MacArthur-certified geniuses, and that's the form it will take at B.A.M. But there's enough genius in Ms. Monk and her troupe of six additional vocalists and three instrumentalists (two of whom double as singers) to bring *Mercy* to life as a pure listening experience.

Gone is the vocal trapeze act, replaced by an organic ocean of sound with its ever-present undertow of sorrow. Occasionally the mood crystallizes into a single, comprehensible word: "Help." More often, it simply flows through the mass of voices singing in a liturgical vein of purely Monkish invention, something like Western plainsong shot through with the subtines of Tibetan chanting.

Back in 1971, Ms. Monk created an "opera epic" about Joan of Arc called *Vessel*, and since then her ardor for the severe and sacrificial has only been deepened by her immersion in Buddhism. In the case of *Mercy*, the music was composed before 9/11 but it sounds all too at home in its chastened aftermath.

It's been said that Meredith Monk's exploration of what she calls "extended vocal techniques" paved the way for avantish pop artists like Laurie Anderson and Björk. I'll add another reckless daughter to the list, Jewlia Eisenberg, the prime mover behind the mostly a cappella group Charming Hostess. Ms. Eisenberg and company were supposed to perform at the Center for Jewish History in Chelsea a few weeks ago but didn't (a logistical snafu, don't ask), though they are planning to play *Tonic*, on the Lower East Side, sometime in January. From Ms. Monk, Ms. Eisenberg inherits a disregard for song conventions and an ear for the priestessy, otherworldly sound of the trained soprano voice. But whereas Ms. Monk, the good Buddhist, is all about moving beyond words and ideas to get at some core essence, Ms. Eisenberg can't get enough of talking and thinking; she's practically drunk with feminism, Jewish consciousness, left-wing intellectual history. Just as Ms. Monk's *Mercy* succeeds in sounding meditative without being boring, Ms. Eisenberg's most recent album, *Trilectic* (Tzadik), manages the neat trick of setting the Jewish Marxist critic Walter Benjamin's 1920's *Moscow Diary* to music without succumbing to grad-school weediness.

After commencing the album with "Mi Dimandas," a centuries-old Turkish Jewish version of "What a Girl Wants" ("I have few demands. I want a house with a window I can leave out of. I want a bath attendant with sandals"), Ms. Eisenberg dives into Benjamin's *Moscow* period, specifically his romance with his Latvian Jewish mistress, Asja Lacis. Lacis may have been forgotten even by the Russian-history grad students who hang out at the Strand, but to Ms. Eisenberg she's an "an agit-prop diva who radicalized Benjamin." She is also the vehicle for a star-turn departure from the multilingual ensemble choraling that makes up much of the album. Ms. Eisenberg's Lacis is the slangy, throaty voice of female appetite, her needs couched in a homebrew of doo-wop and hip-hop with lots of vocalized breakbeats and heavy breathing thrown in for rhythmic punctuation. ("I like to get at all kinds of female sounds, like eating and sex," she told me over the phone.) In the song "Eskimo Suit," she imagines a languorous Lacis smitten with Benjamin: "When I'm with you, I am nine feet long and I'm made of fur, I'm covered with pearls. And I'm sweating." Appropriately enough for this album of intriguing bits and pieces, Benjamin was the great philosophical champion of montage, even if history remembers him best as the noble loser who committed suicide shortly before he

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would have been granted permission to escape Nazified Europe for America. In "Dream of Me," Ms. Eisenberg has Laci wish that the nebbishy Benjamin were a lover more on order of the swashbuckling Red journalist John Reed: "I dreamt you fucked me like John Reed, and I'm a good Red-I pushed back and begged for more / I dreamed the vanguard of the left she came so hard she had to scream / So now close your eyes and dig the dream that I dream."

Ms. Eisenberg lives in Oakland, in the cheap seats of the Bay Area, and she says there's more like her where she comes from. The name of her signature band, Charming Hostess, is a dig at conventional feminine stereotypes but also, she says, a serious description of how she sees her cultural role, making introductions within the art-rock/new-music scene that has sprung up in Oakland, the fruit of its proximity to the University of California at Berkeley, Ms. Eisenberg's alma mater, and reasonable rent. (Another notable member of the musical party is Carla Kihlstedt, a Charming Hostess voice and the violinist in the Tin Hat Trio whose latest effort, *The Rodeo Eroded*, is an estimable meld of conservatory bluegrass, Balkan minor modes and Piazzolla "new tango.") As for her Brooklyn roots, she honored them, sort of, by changing her name from Julia to Jewlia.

When it comes to divas, agit-prop or otherwise, sometimes geography just raises more questions than it answers. Take the case of Devendra Banhart, a 21-year-old folk singer (I guess you'd call him) who was raised in Texas and moved with his family to Caracas, Venezuela, where, as he writes in his one-page biography, "everything's fucked, but I love my grandmother, whom [ sic ] fed whiskey to me from her pinky, paid me to touch my earlobes, and let me pull her elbow flab." He wound up in a squat in New York, he says, where he came to the attention of former Swan Michael Gira's indie-rock label, Young God Records. Mr. Gira listened to his demo tape and rushed it into production, cosmetically unretouched, as Mr. Banhart's late October debut album, *Oh Me Oh My* ...

Walter Benjamin famously opined, "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art." In Mr. Banhart's case, his crude overdubbing on a barely functional four-track is indistinguishable from his "art naïf" persona. His songs are surrealistic one- or two-minute vignettes rendered by a single guitar and a choir of not entirely in-sync warbly tenors (the overdubbing) which at unpredictable moments will shift into a highly unsettling falsetto wail. On the new album a variety of subjects are covered, among them romance ("I know nature is beside me when he's inside you, I feel it too"), on several occasions teeth ("Lost in the dark, lend me your teeth") and, for some reason, Michigan ("Oh, Michigan State, how I wanna live in you").

Mr. Banhart's young career does raise the question of intentionality and self-consciousness and other subjects worthy of the next Charming Hostess album. Personally, I have no idea whether his sound comes from the open spaces and oil fumes of Texas and Venezuela or a close study of the indigenous grotesque in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and I don't much care. The kid's got a sound, as Bob Evans might say. In any event, with a midnight gig Nov. 27 at Williamsburg's BQE Lounge, a return engagement at Tonic in December and a profile in the works at *The Wire*, the prestigious British music magazine, Mr. Banhart's cult status seems pretty well assured. And deserved. The world should make a place for the truly unusual, Jewlia Eisenberg and Meredith Monk included.

#### Live Notes

Jason Moran, whose pianism incorporates hip-hop, classical modernism and Thelonious Monk without breaking stride, is having a big couple of weeks. With his trio, he plays the Village Vanguard through Dec. 1. Then, building on the critical success (as if there were any other kind in instrumental jazz) of his recent solo album, *Modernistic* (Blue Note), Mr. Moran performs a solo recital Dec. 6 at Symphony Space's Leonard Nimoy Thalia theater.

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