

# Ether Talk

Dispatches from the digital domain. This month: Marcus Boon trawls through UbuWeb's massive sound art and concrete poetry archive



Père Ubu and progeny: UbuWeb's Ken Goldsmith with Allen Ginsberg

"Visual. Concrete. Sound." announces the sleek, minimalist homepage of UbuWeb, giving little indication of the vast store of sonic, visual and textual treasures that lies within. Inside are thousands of MP3s and Real Audio files that archive a vast area in the international history of sound poetry, sound art and concrete poetry: Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky and Dadaist Hugo Ball (from 1916); Antonin Artaud's 1948 radio broadcast; a miscellany of Beats, Lettrists and Fluxus participants including Henri Chopin and Bob Cobbing; plus more contemporary sound work from the likes of Vito Acconci, text-sound composer Charles Amirkhanyan and even Cecil Taylor. You'll also find articles from pioneer sound art magazine *Tellus*, a complete MP3 set of poet John Giorno's out of print Poetry Works LPs, including the historic *Dial A Poem* series from the early 1970s and the William Burroughs celebration *The Nova Convention* (1978). And to go along with it, there's a large selection of writings that document the evolution of the worlds of sound and concrete poetry.

UbuWeb was started in 1996 by New York based visual artist, writer and DJ Kenneth Goldsmith. Charles Bernstein, guru of language poetry at Buffalo University, offered him unlimited server space at the university, and Goldsmith has made full use of it, making UbuWeb the largest resource for the sound/concrete poetry nexus on the Web today.

Growing up on a diet of punk, funk, jazz and 'head music', Goldsmith was converted to sound art around 1990 while working in his studio in downtown Manhattan. "It was around the time of the first De La Soul LP," he recalls, "and somebody was walking by with a beatbox blasting. And as I listened, it sounded just like musique concrète to me. I thought, 'Wow, someone is walking down Houston Street playing Pierre Henry.' And I realised it was actually a break between two rap tunes. With HipHop, you could take any sound at all, even the most abstract ones, and the minute you put a beat behind it, it's legitimised. Whereas if you take the beat out, it becomes completely illegitimate and has no place in the culture."

Goldsmith has made this illegitimacy his modus operandi on his WFMU radio show, *Unpopular Music aka Anal Magic*, which has become infamous for the sonic headfucks it broadcasts to New Yorkers. His own work has walked a fascinating path between concrete poetry, John Cage and HipHop. When a project with rapper Del Tha Funky Homosapien fell through, he entered into collaboration with vocalist Joan La Barbara on a book/CD called *73 Poems*. While a lot of language poetry sounds pretty academic, Goldsmith's interest in HipHop has given his work a vibrancy that's firmly rooted in everyday NYC language and experience. Speaking of his book *No 111* 2.7.93-10.20.96, a large catalogue of found and

processed words, he notes, "I was listening to a lot of rap, but seeing the connection between James Joyce and rap in the compounding of words. 'Funkdoobiest' could be something ripped out of *Finnegans Wake*."

He sees the Web in the same terms. "For a long time, the URL for [sports shop] Modell's wasn't *modell's.com*," he explains, "it was 'gottagotomos.com': it's out of HipHop culture and it's out of *Finnegans Wake*. The Web is the manifestation in concrete language terms of the meaning of HipHop and Joyce."

Because the Internet provides an enormous archive of sound, Goldsmith sees the future of sound poetry being digital and Web-based. As an example, he cites Stock, Hausen & Walkman's "Flogging", from *Ventilating Deer*, which contains a sample of Henri Chopin's sound poem classic "Rouge". "Everybody's grabbing stuff from the Web, including UbuWeb," remarks Goldsmith. "People are going to be chopping this stuff up and reassembling it. It's totally thrilling. I hope people are sampling the hell out of UbuWeb!"

Asked whether he's had any copyright difficulties after making such a vast collection of proprietary audio material available, he shakes his head. "If John Giorno called me and told me he was putting the Poetry Works stuff back in print, I'd take it down tomorrow because the job would be done. The distribution for these things are extremely marginal in the first place: mostly they just die, or become collector's items. None of the

MP3s on UbuWeb are in print. The Henri Chopin all comes from out of print vinyl. I'd never take an in print Alga Marghen record and put it up. I realise there's no economy there, and I'm not going to take money out of the hands of people that are doing good work. I'll put up Real Audio files, but the sound quality there is degraded to the point that it just stimulates sales for the CDs."

Goldsmith sees UbuWeb (on which he is an anonymous presence, and for which he receives no money) as an example of the way in which the Web functions as a gift economy. Low production costs and free distribution make possible a utopian cornucopia of hitherto unknown experimental richness. "The Web is a new way of giving shit away — in a major way," he enthuses. "And the Web is made for poetry. The avant garde remains the counterculture — non-narrative, opaque, things without beats and stories, things that are weird. As the culture gets more and more oriented towards pop, beats, and R&C — rhythm and capitalism — this stuff is just forgotten. There was a moment where the avant garde and the main culture came together in the 60s, when The Beatles were talking about Stockhausen and Cage, all that crossover stuff. The 80s killed it. So this stuff remains as potent as ever. Nobody makes money doing this, so why not give it away? It's beautiful!" □ UbuWeb: [www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com). Goldsmith's writing is at [epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith). His music writing is at [www.wtfmu.org/~kenny](http://www.wtfmu.org/~kenny)

## Go To:



Part of a glut of music zines online, London based **Absorb** ([www.absorb.org](http://www.absorb.org)) are unreformed Warpholicals, and offers articles and reviews on various electronica faves such as Schematic, Funkstörung and Mouse On Mars too — read this while listening to Radio Absorb. **Noiseloop** ([www.noiseloop.com](http://www.noiseloop.com)) is a community inviting contributions from its visitors. Apart from up-to-date events listings, you'll find reviews and interviews with Cex, Philip Jeck, Herbert and (remember him?) Goldie. **Sonomu** ([www.sonomu.com](http://www.sonomu.com)) has grown out of the busy London based **State51** ([www.state51.com](http://www.state51.com)), a collective comprising 'Web TV' channel **The Skam** ([www.skam.com](http://www.skam.com)) and links machine **Musicbee** ([musicbee.com](http://musicbee.com)).

Sonomu ("Sound Noise Music") is now taking over from what used to be **Motion** ([motion.state51.co.uk](http://motion.state51.co.uk)): a myriad of reviews of artists ranging from Aphex Twin to Frances Marle

Uitti. You can opt to receive updates, and it promises a future function where you can add your own reviews to create a music forum. All this to the soundtrack of whatever's rocking Sonomu's boat in their radio section. **The Milk Factory** ([www.themilkfactory.co.uk](http://www.themilkfactory.co.uk)) is another good source for reviews. Heavy on electronics, their monthly issues may be less eclectic than Sonomu, but their text is well laid out and all reviews are followed by a handy discography and artist links. HipHop, R&B, Techno, two-step Garage is the obsession over at **Hyperdub** ([www.hyperdub.co.uk](http://www.hyperdub.co.uk)). If you can't get into the hype about London's many Garridge pirates, then jump right to the gems: Kodwo Eshun's appraisal of 'digital rock group' N\*E\*R\*D and Simon Reynolds's thorough survey of Ecstasy in HipHop. Connecticut's **Fake Jazz** ([www.fakejazz.com](http://www.fakejazz.com)) publishes semi-regular issues covering avant rock, nu jazz, and experimental electronics. With

personal writing and a incongruous section of 'bands who are cooler than you', Fakejazz is a worthy stop over for anyone looking for second opinion before buying a CD. John Darnielle at **Last Plane To Jakarta** ([www.lastplanetojakarta.com](http://www.lastplanetojakarta.com)) is short on advice but big on ideas. 'Famous' for being the man behind underground lo-fi-ers The Mountain Goats, Darnielle lives in Iowa and the lim-ed zine is only available in selected shops, so the site is as close as you're likely to get to this publication. Full of personal anecdotes, the 'Amnesiac diary', a personal journey through Radihead's music allows you inside Darnielle's head. With articles, thinkpieces, reviews, MP3s, illustrations, photography. **Neumu** ("Art Music Words") ([www.neumu.net](http://www.neumu.net)) covers contemporary music across the board, including movies. This smooth, tastefully grey site will keep you coming back. **ANNE IDEAS NESET**