

PHILL NIBLOCK • 1933–2024

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HOW DIFFERENT Phill Niblock’s life would have been if he hadn’t moved into a third-floor loft on Centre Street, near New York’s Chinatown, in 1968. It was his home for the rest of his life, and it was there that the composer/filmmaker/photographer transformed the Experimental Intermedia Foundation, originally a performing-arts organization founded by choreographer Elaine Summers, into one of the premier artist-run experimental-music venues of downtown New York. Spontaneously inaugurating its concert series in 1973 with a gig of his own—relocated at the last minute from the Kitchen, which was deemed unusable after a blood-soaked performance by Hermann Nitsch the night before—he hosted hundreds of now-legendary artists. It was the most convivial and soulful avant-garde music spot imaginable: The performances took place in Phill’s spacious living room, complete with a formidable sound system with self-built speakers, while the socializing centered in the kitchen. There was no “backstage”; everyone was free to mingle throughout his abode. The bottom-shelf red wine flowed freely, and admission was \$4.99, so nobody worried about a guest list (or a door person—you threw your five-dollar bill into a bowl at the front). Phill had room for everybody, literally and figuratively; he was very approachable himself, and proactive about having his guests become acquainted with one another. I introduced myself to Phill at an Éliane Radigue concert at Experimental Intermedia in 1993, and would return to the venue countless times, as a performer, audience member, interviewer, recording artist for his label, fellow live-music programmer, and friend.

What was even more endearing, and a bit puzzling, was how someone this sociable, globally connected, and community-minded was personally so low-key and understated. “What’s happening?” was Phill’s stock greeting, on the phone or in person, uttered quickly but mildly at the same time, suggesting a kind of mock urgency. That was Phill; his demeanor was casual, quiet, belying a very active lifestyle. This duality informed his artistic practice as well. He was a maverick composer with a lowercase *m*, one who sidestepped orthodoxies rather than striving to upend them, more a paradox than a rebel. Virtually untrained (save for a few weeks of piano lessons as a child), he devised the majority of his pieces with the same meticulous, intuitive method: recording multiple tracks of a solo instrumentalist playing numerous examples of a few selected pitches (usually fewer than five) sustained for as long as possible, with slight variations in tuning so that they would create a wobbly beating when mixed together, with Phill layering them to build a loud, thick drone whose source instrument often becomes indistinguishable. The recording wasn’t

a document of a performance of the piece; it *was* the piece itself. Phill considered playback at the highest possible volume—which turned the pitches’ accumulation of ordinarily faint natural overtones into a swarming hive of psychoacoustic phenomena—as also being integral to his music’s performative identity. He preferred experiencing music at top volume even when spinning jazz records at home. Late one night he turned me on to the album *Ellington Uptown* (1953), the strains of Louie Bellson’s atomic drum solo on “Skin Deep” vibrating the loft’s dark wooden floors.

Phill mostly worked with the traditional acoustic instruments associated with classical music and his beloved jazz, yet he never followed the compositional forms of those genres—even when he made pieces for string quartet or orchestra. He wrote for specific players, not specific instruments, and not to showcase a player’s virtuosity but out of a mutual affinity and interest in working together (at times, part of the attraction to a particular musician may have been his or her access to an unusual instrument—memorable examples include

bagpipes, a hurdy-gurdy, and a didgeridoo). All of his concerts took the same form: He would play recordings alongside his films, occasionally inviting live musicians to accompany the tracks, never soloing, just blending in with the sound. I played his piece *Guitar Too, For Four* (1996), live many times as well as on the “massed version” of the CD release, and Phill would not give a lot of instruction, other than that you were supposed to play a B with an e-bow—a handheld sustainer device—and move to A about halfway through, and after that you could stay on A, or move back to B or play an E. In the prerecorded piece, by contrast, the A joins the B near the beginning, with a gradual shift in weight between the two as the prominent tone taking place vaguely in the middle. So when you play along, you’re really letting your ear guide you in choosing which note to try to emphasize. By the end, the tonal center often reaches a state of perpetual ambiguity between the three notes and their attendant harmonics, making the piece one of Phill’s most perceptually enigmatic.

Given his initial mid-’60s intermedia collaborations as a filmmaker with Judson dancers such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, and Summers, Phill’s first concert presentations included accompanying dancers as well as film screenings, initially films of nature studied in close-up. In 1973 he replaced the bodily movements of the dancers with screenings of the “Movement of People Working” films, 1973–91, featuring footage

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Phill Niblock at the Hermit Symposia, Plasy Monastery, Czechia, June 1992. Photo: Iris Honderdos.



Above, top: Arthur Russell, Elodie Lauten, and others performing at Experimental Intermedia, New York, ca. 1983–84. Above: Robert Poss, Ulrich Krieger, Lee Ranaldo, Seth Josel, and Thurston Moore performing Phill Niblock's 1996 *Guitar Too, For Four* at Merkin Hall, New York, October 14, 1999. Photo: Hiroyuki Ito/Getty Images. Above, top right: Still from Phill Niblock's series "The Movement of People Working," 1973–91, 16 mm and video, color, sound, variable duration.

of people in different countries, mostly outdoors, doing all sorts of manual labor. The inherent repetitions of the workers' activities, the long takes, and the lack of camera movement or montage have obvious parallels to his music's continuous tones, but often the concurrent goings-on in the background—light reflecting on the water or something flapping in the wind—also have an unforeseen correspondence in the bustling overtones. The films were never made for any specific piece, or vice versa, and he would just run them with the music randomly; no combination of sound and image was ever repeated, at least not exactly. Often a piece of music would end in

the middle of a section of a film and another would start immediately, with no pause for audience reaction. There would often be multiple films or videos shown on multiple screens. At one point, Phill showed me some raw video he had shot, and it seemed quite mundane; but a few weeks later I went to a concert where he had added music, and the same footage was utterly hypnotic.

His concerts could run for six hours or more, but the individual pieces rarely last longer than twenty minutes—unlike his fellow first-wave Minimalists, he never had a magnum opus à la La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964–), Terry Riley's renditions of *Poppy*

Nogood's All Night Flight (1967), Philip Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–74), or Steve Reich's *Drumming* (1971). Even more than Young, Phill resisted releasing his music on LP prior to the CD era, as he didn't think either home stereos or domestic environments could replicate the sonic experience of his work in live spaces under his supervision, although he later made up for lost time with CDs and DVDs; he even started a CD label, XI, as part of Experimental Intermedia.

Digital technology also expedited his compositional/recording process, and laptops greatly simplified his onstage setup. He became much more prolific, touring nonstop once he retired from teaching photography and filmmaking. He kept up the pace until the past few years, when his health began to fail. I would still see him out here and there, more recently in a wheelchair, which I think he secretly enjoyed. (Watching him race down an alley after a show at New York's Artists Space, I remembered that Phill was once an avid motorcyclist, and would drive himself everywhere on tour in Europe—he was truly a man of motion.) He still traveled; we were playing the same day at Cafe Oto in London this past May, and just weeks after his ninetieth birthday, in October, he made it to a twenty-four-hour presentation of his work in Berlin. This past December, I attended his annual Winter Solstice marathon, which was usually held at Experimental Intermedia but now took place at Roulette in Brooklyn. I hoped it wouldn't be his last but was concerned that it might be. I arrived near 8 PM and was absolutely spellbound for the next four hours, even after having experienced this event just about every year since the '90s. Some of the pieces were fairly recent, and just as good if not better than anything I'd ever heard by him. How many artists with a six-decade career can you say that about?

I thought the audience might start to clear out as the hours passed, but most people stayed for the duration, giving Phill a standing ovation at the end. "There should have been an encore," I teased him, and he gave a sly grin. I stood aside to make way for more well-wishers, and slowly stepped out into what was left of the longest night of the year. □

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