

# Introduction

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In February 1965, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* featured an article by the poet Kenneth Rexroth entitled “Thar’s Culture in Them Thar Hills.”<sup>1</sup> Noting that the San Francisco Actor’s Workshop had recently moved to New York, Rexroth was not surprised that the nation’s largest metropolitan area had looked across the continent to a small city for a theater company to reside in Lincoln Center. San Francisco’s cultural scene, he said, although on a smaller scale, was “incomparably richer and of higher quality proportionately than New York’s.”<sup>2</sup> Rexroth’s claim resulted to a certain extent from a frustration with the parochialism present, not only in New York and other East Coast cultural centers, but also in San Francisco itself. The achievements of San Francisco’s writers, artists, dancers, and musicians, he felt, were too often ignored, even by the city’s own mainstream institutions.

The history of the San Francisco Tape Music Center is a case in point. Although the Tape Music Center was at the forefront of advances in musical aesthetics during the 1960s, scholars, for the most part, have devoted little attention to its contributions.<sup>3</sup> This book provides a history of the Tape Music Center, examining its subject from a variety of perspectives. At its core stand vivid personal accounts of this history through interviews with and essays by the Tape Music Center’s founding members. These materials provide insights into the origins and manifestations of Ramon Sender’s highly original musical voice and his role in the San Francisco counterculture. They show us how crucial the Tape Music Center was for Pauline Oliveros’s compositional career and her continuing dedication to art as a community enterprise. They document Morton Subotnick’s pioneering work in mixed media and his collaboration with Sender and Don Buchla, which led to the creation of the Buchla 100 series Modular Electronic Music System. They help us understand how Tony Martin’s magical real-time compositions with light led to the development of a new interdisciplinary art form. And they document how the wizardry of the Tape Music Center’s technical directors Bill Maginnis and Michael Callahan opened up unlimited creative possibilities with limited resources.

The Tape Music Center was part of a larger avant-garde artistic scene that included such groups as the San Francisco Actor's Workshop, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Committee Theater, the Dancers' Workshop, and the Open Theater, as well as a diverse community of independent writers, artists, musicians, and dancers. Although it is not possible to cover this rich cultural environment without losing the book's primary focus, it would be a mistake to present the history of the Tape Music Center apart from its exciting artistic context. We have therefore included interviews with creative artists and visionaries who played important roles in the San Francisco avant-garde during the 1960s and who also had personal connections with the Tape Music Center. In this portion of the book, Terry Riley discusses his free improvisations with Pauline Oliveros and Loren Rush during the late 1950s and the genesis of his monumental work *In C*, first performed at a Tape Music Center concert in 1964. Don Buchla talks about his invention of the "Buchla Box" and his ongoing interests in instrument design and multisensory art. An interview with Stewart Brand covers the Trips Festival and his interest in the consciousness-expanding potential of LSD. Stuart Dempster sheds light upon the San Francisco new music scene from a performer's perspective. Anna (formerly Ann) Halprin, founder of the Dancers' Workshop, discusses her collaborations with La Monte Young and Terry Riley and her early interest in crossing disciplinary boundaries, which inspired composers at the Tape Music Center and generations of creative artists in the Bay Area to do the same.

The larger portion of this book consists of oral history, a genre that creates a degree of immediacy, bringing the reader close to what happened by sharing the experiences of those who were there. This method is richly informative, and its results are often far from passive, objective accounts. With this in mind, we have included Thomas M. Welsh's detailed chronology, a systematic examination of the Tape Music Center history based on archival research that complements the more subjective approach in the interviews. Our book contains photographs, illustrations, a list of archival recordings (transferred from reel-to-reel tape to CD by Maggi Payne) available in the Archives of the Center for Contemporary Music, F. W. Olin Library, Mills College, Oakland, California, and a DVD documenting the "Wow & Flutter" San Francisco Tape Music Center retrospective presented at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute on October 1 and 2, 2004. We have also included several short essays that cover the Tape Music Center's broader context: Janice Ross on Ann Halprin's Dancers' Workshop, Scott MacDonald on the Canyon Cinema, Fred Frith on the seminal 1958 KPFA improvisations, Lee Breuer on his early work in experimental theater at the Tape Music Center, Robert R. Riley on the development of the light show in

San Francisco, and my own essay on interactions between the San Francisco experimental music and rock “scenes.” The book begins with a cultural study in which I examine the history of the Tape Music Center in light of the political and social upheaval that occurred during the 1960s, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This book began as part of a larger project, an oral history of experimental music at Mills College, which I started with my colleague composer Maggi Payne more than ten years ago. Maggi introduced me to the wonderful community of composers and performers associated with Mills, of which she has been a member for almost thirty years. This community includes the founders of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, who all had strong ties to Mills.

Our research on the Tape Music Center began in the home of Bill Maginnis, where we first interviewed Bill and Ramon Sender in December 1994. I clearly remember talking with Ramon and Bill, looking over a box full of Tape Music Center programs and other ephemera, immediately realizing that something unique had happened in the San Francisco new music scene between 1961 and 1966. Subsequent interviews with Pauline Oliveros, Tony Martin, and Morton Subotnick confirmed this initial impression. Our contact with the founding members of the Tape Music Center exposed us to their creative achievements. It also led us to understand the underlying strength of the group as a whole—its communal spirit based on unwavering friendship and a shared commitment to artistic and aesthetic goals rather than the advancement of individual careers.

Our investigations have come a long way since 1994. Several years ago, Pauline Oliveros introduced us to Johannes Goebel, director of the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Johannes is a visionary, an innovator in the field of computer music, a pioneer of free improvisation in Germany, a writer on aesthetics and technology, and the leader of an institution dedicated to extending the potential of the arts through technological innovation. He has never hesitated to push boundaries when necessary, and he also has the wisdom to understand that artistic innovation, in his own words, “does not fall out of the sky”; it depends upon human creativity, both past and present. It was Johannes’s appreciation of the relevance of the past that led to his interest in and support of this book, which has greatly benefited from his guidance and feedback.

Thomas M. Welsh was another integral member of our team. The founder of San Francisco–based Elision Fields artist management and independent recordings,<sup>4</sup> he has an exhaustive knowledge of Bay Area culture. Thomas has a voracious appetite for accumulating documentary evidence and a genuine passion for getting the facts straight. As his finely honed chronology demonstrates, he contributed in-

valuable research to our book. Thomas helped curate some of the photographs that appear in the book and suggested that we consider a joint publication arrangement with the University of California Press, a strategy that fortuitously resulted in its music editor, Mary Francis, joining our team. Mary quickly recognized the significance of our book. It was a great pleasure to collaborate with an editor so familiar with its subject matter. This book owes a great deal to her unwavering advocacy and editorial expertise. It was also a pleasure working with senior editor Dore Brown and copyeditor Peter Dreyer; their editorial acumen made it possible for this book to reach its final form.

A complex project invariably involves contributions from many people. I would especially like to thank Renee Jadushlever (head librarian at Mills College), Janice Braun (special collections librarian), and Nancy Mackay (who prepared an extensive catalogue of Tape Music Center archival recordings) for their advice and support, and Ralph Johnson and David Kwan, who helped prepare some of the book's illustrations. Tony Martin's images are courtesy of the artist and the Fales Library, New York University.

I would also very much like to acknowledge my colleagues in the Mills Music Department, whose creative work continues to inspire me, and to thank the Mills poet Stephen Ratcliffe for his critical insights. Finally, special thanks as always to my family (Jamie, Jeremy, and Beverly) for putting up with me during another writing project.

## NOTES

1. Kenneth Rexroth, "Thar's Culture in Them Thar Hills," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, February 7, 1965, 28–29, 78–80.

2. *Ibid.*, 80.

3. There are several noteworthy exceptions. Joel Chadabe discusses the history of the San Francisco Tape Music Center in *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music* (Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 85–91. See also Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 206–8, and Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco, *Analog Days: The Invention of the Moog Synthesizer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 36–41. Ramon Sender's unpublished novel "Naked Close-Up" contains accounts of events that took place at the Tape Music Center.

4. See [www.elisionfields.com](http://www.elisionfields.com) (accessed July 4, 2007).