



FUELING THE FIRE

British collage artist Vicki Bennett balances her avant-garde sensibilities with a dose of goofiness—perhaps more so than some of her other peers in the sound collage underground. The British experimental music magazine *The Wire* describes her music as “a freeform, unfolding imaginary landscape that is liberally peppered with slapstick.” Bennett—who performs under the name People Like Us—demolishes the demarcations between high and low culture, and she has brought her unique aesthetic to highbrow arbiters such as Tate Modern, the Walker Art Center, and the BBC.

On *Music for the Fire*—a new release on the Illegal Art label, home to Girl Talk and others—her musical collaborator is the Bay Area sound collage artist Jon Leidecker, a.k.a. Wobbly. Both have teamed up with Matmos, most notably on the album *Wide Open Spaces*, and Wobbly has worked with like-minded artists such as Negativland and Otomo Yoshihide. He has also imploded minds on *Wild Why*, his frenetic solo album.

Next month, People Like Us and Wobbly

will release their newest collaboration, and it's clearly their best. At its heart, *Music for the Fire* is a deeply weird work of art. Both funny and disturbing, it's a collaged concept album about the dissolution of a relationship, all told through samples from the music of others. Unlike labelmate Girl Talk, who lets the listener revel in mashed

up hooks, this duo performs a kind of musical interruptus. They give us just enough of, say, a soft rock classic to make it recognizable, but then put it through the sample shredder, often with beautiful results.

Little Village: How did your initial live improvisations lead to what became *Music for the Fire*?

Vicki Bennett: People Like Us & Wobbly started collaborating in 1998 doing live collage improvisations, mainly on Californian radio and some gigs. The great thing about radio is you invariably get a lot of time to try

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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 back-to-back over a week one can break a lot 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 discover what was working while doing the concerts.

Jon Leidecker: We've offered free downloads of some of the radio shows and concerts that feature the material from this album as works in progress. That original KFJC session always seemed to point us towards a studio album. The improvs kept producing «songs» we could try out in different ways, each time with different samples, and then we meticulously pasted all the best parts together. If the pacing works, it's because we broke those songs in before audiences.

LV: How many samples did you use, and can you talk about how you worked with the wide variety of material found on *Music for the*

Fire—which ranges from pop hits to spoken word recordings?

VB: I'm sure Wobbly has a list of sources, because he remembers the sources and name of everything, whereas I'm far more vague in my memory of these things! My sources were probably at least 200 if you count every single sound bite, not that I want to.

JL: I added at least another several hundred, but then I think they all had kids so who knows.

VB: The sources were collected over time to

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.

JL: Improvising is social, editing is solitary. There's a potential for software to change this,

but currently most of the editing software is designed to facilitate the individual's total control. I'd love to see networked editing programs continue to develop, but it's taking forever because I think it's truly antithetical to every ingrained conception of the individual composer that we have. In any case, most of our work happens live, and then Vicki and I took turns on finalizing.

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-chorus?

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.

JL: Music that seems hopelessly kitsch often becomes emotionally devastating after it gets smacked around just a little bit. It's tough love.

VB: What we do is surprising in its emotional content and the messages within the often-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.

JL: It's a very, very dark album. I had some doubts about releasing it as well, but I got to feeling that the ending isn't cynical or defeatist—the comedy is tied closely to the tragedy, but hopefully in a way that forces someone to laugh off any of the things they might otherwise be prone to wallowing in. But they definitely aren't cheap laughs. **lv**

Kembrew lives and works in Iowa City, and is currently attempting to keep it real.



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use for various radio improvs, rather than for this project alone. So it happens that Jon and I very much were focusing on sources to do with things going wrong, or tragedy—and so it became unknowingly rather thematic.

JL: And once we found the theme, we began to aim. We'd edit the live shows down to the core topic and the connections would come out.

VB: The pop and spoken word that we sourced from could be altered slightly to have a rather darker connotation. We found things of interest if they already had a certain ambiguity to them, at least to us.

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 through the live improvising, gradually building

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