



Outlaw tonality: Ellen Fullman at Berkeley Art Museum, California, 2009

Ellen Fullman

Through Glass Panes

Important CD

Barn Owl & The Infinite Strings Ensemble

The Headlands

Important CD

One of the most resonant images to come out of the history of 20th century minimalism is the photograph of the composer La Monte Young's birthplace, a lonely wooden shack in an endlessly flat landscape. It implies a visual parallel to the single sustained note in a void of silence, though it also brings to mind the iconography of Country blues while suggesting the possibility of a portal between the two. The music of long string inventor and composer Ellen Fullman has a similar connection to notions of personal and cosmic topography, to the sound of distance, so much so that it feels like the physical corollary to the astral visions of La Monte Young, Terry Riley and Angus MacLise.

Throughout her work Fullman has sought to reconcile the revenant drone that vibrates in the background of the darkest Country blues with the blank, impassive landscape that birthed it. Alongside fellow long string conceptualists like Arnold Dreyblatt, she has pioneered a language that succeeds in translating concepts of praeter-human scale, the very quality of myth, through structural and vibratory confluence.

On *Through Glass Panes*, an album that sees Fullman circle between solo, duo and ensemble cello, violin and long string performances, she transmutes Geeshie Wiley's death-decadent "Last Kind Word Blues", a piece recorded in Wisconsin in 1930, to the point that it sounds more like the shadows in the shellac, the needle

cutting through the heavens, as melodies modelled on North Indian vocal music phase in and out of form. This is the sound of the long-gone, a form of stereo spiritualism that reanimates voices from the past by tuning into the kind of wavelengths that would attract them. The nebulous depths of a scratchy 78 are reanimated as a black scrying mirror, allowing occluded images of the past access to the future via overtones that feel like scrambled messages from another time and place. The tellingly titled "Events Location No 2" expands on the idea of alienation as revelation, with a macabre exercise in dissonant counterpoint that's almost mind-splitting, the tones teased apart until it feels like an empty lattice with the wind blowing through it. But it's "Flowers" that is the most powerful piece, beaming in on the sound of tropical birdsong while inviting comparisons to Blake's "Sunflower" with strings that rise up and die in weary cycles.

On *Through Glass Panes* Fullman's music has as much to do with American musician/inventor traditions and modern classical music as it does with 20th century minimalism, with two of the tracks originally written for The Kronos Quartet. Indeed, it's hard to think of another minimalist with a comparable focus on the specific physical qualities of the sound, on the actual location of the note in space. Her precisely tuned long string instruments mimic the shape of extended musical staves, maps of sonic possibility that operate as a visual metaphor in much the same way as the iconic shot of La Monte Young's birthplace, as structures that highlight specific sound events in the context of a vast uniformity. In its blurring of structural and performative modes, Fullman's music has less in common

with the automated drones of Young's Dream House and more with mythic notions of blues performance as a conduit or pact between the eternal something and personal circumstance. Her music gains a similar osmotic power by situating itself in a historical continuum that is normally the preserve of voices or stories. Instead, this is the space wherein the stories are played out: the crackle in the background, the sound of reified time.

This vision of drone music is informed by an engagement with outlaw culture as well as outlaw tonality, specifically her relationship with early American blues. Her collaboration with West Coast guitar psych duo Barn Owl as part of The Infinite Strings Ensemble alongside cellist Theresa Wong and producer/composer The Norman Conquest makes for an inspired fusion. Barn Owl play a form of amplifier-worshipping rock that combines barren Charalambides-style Frippertronics with classical arcs of feedback, and Fullman feeds her strings straight down their throat, cutting their slow-motion Early Music madrigals with a set of steel tracks that lead all the way back to a haunting image of the gospel blues. This is the realm of revenant spirits, and both groups are adept at articulating the precise series of keys to call them down. Together they succeed in capturing the euphoric appeal of the most strung-out West Coast jam complete with a transcendent aspect that feels closest to Holy Music, the guitars peaking to the point of almost complete dissolve, all memory of the body left behind or more properly risen above or beyond. As Geeshie Wiley sang on "Last Kind Word Blues", "*The Mississippi River, you know it's deep and wide/I can stand right here, see my baby from the other side.*" □

Two new discs by long string player **Ellen Fullman** explore America's mythic spaces by tuning in to the wavelength of the blues. By David Keenan