



CRAWLING WITH TARTS  
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1



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THE

TUDOR TAPES

1989

## CRAWLING WITH TARTS INTERVIEW

by Bill Waid

Mystery and unpredictability are two elements often considered cornerstones of successful experimental bands. One has only to consider some of the major noise-related groups—Nurse With Wound, Current 93, The Hafler Trio—to see that the formula works in a big way. Yet, to call it a formula is misleading. It's true that too much access, too much explanation, or repetition, subverts the atmosphere of tension and listener interpretation integral to the conceptual success of much experimental music. To create such an atmosphere is in fact the mission of the music.

In the less glamorous but often more productive cassette world, few bands could rival Crawling With Tarts for sheer mystery and sonic diversity (not to mention exotic packaging, which is perhaps the best anywhere, and a feature that looms large in the purpose of CWT). Prolific output, matched with consistent quality—no matter what the tools of composition be at the moment—makes the experience of every new CWT cassette a fresh de/ascent into the vast possibilities of music.

In March 1990 I paid a visit to my Oaklandian neighbors, with the hope of shedding a moment of light on their ever-mutating ideas. Michael Gendreau and Suzanne Dycus—the core duo of CWT—live in a sunny central Oakland flat which, upon entering, gives one the effect of walking into a living Miro canvas. Everything from the couch to the

soap dish seems a surreal object d'art, but not untouchably so. Primarily Suzanne's labor of love, the artwork is open and colorful, full of the same odd angles evident in CWT packaging. We sat down and plunged into the story of one of the West Coast's most enigmatic cassette-network bands...

**BILL WAID:** First of all, where did your name come from?

**MICHAEL GENDREAU:** From a quotation in a book called *The Secret Parts of the 1930's*, by a photographer named Brassai. He was the only photographer I know of taking pictures of the Paris underground at that time. The quote goes, "I also spent several nights in the neighborhood around the Bassin de la Villette with Jacques Prevert, where we revelled in the 'beauty of sinister things', as he used to call the pleasure of those deserted quays, those desolate streets, that district of out-casts, crawling with farts, full of warehouses and docks, gave us". A strange sentence.

**BW:** Yes. So how long have you been involved in music around here?

**MG:** Since December of '83, when we moved to Santa Cruz, from Ventura to Oxnard, California, and started doing music as a duet. I had been involved in music since I was a small child, and was doing sound collage even then—not necessarily as a musician, of course—but I come from a long tradition of combining sounds. Then I met Suzanne, who was a visual artist with a long background which complimented the music that I was doing, so we started doing both: she started becoming a musician and I started doing visual art.

**BW:** Did you start doing shows around that time?

**MG:** No, we did cassettes first. We've done very few shows in our career—a lot of radio shows, but only a few live ones. Our most recent was with a band from Washington D.C. called New Carrollton, who we did three shows with. We may do more in the future, but the problem is that we'd have to fill a lot of positions—find people who'd be interested in performing our music. We've done it in the past, but it's an awful lot of work.

**BW:** So the visual side, the packaging, was a big part of your first cassette releases, and is still an important part of your music.

**SUZANNE DYCUS:** Yeah...we work really well together, and our life has never been separated from our music, or our art. It's a complete blend. So coming up with the packaging is part of coming up with themes, since most of our tapes have been autobiographical. We'd make a lot of tapes and then edit down what we liked, and that would always coincide with a period of time in our lives, like when we were living in Santa Cruz or Los Angeles. We moved a lot, every six or nine months for a while, until Michael started going to school in Santa Cruz, studying physics. Then we stayed put. I started making and selling jewelry, which I still do, and which goes along with our music also—like a brooch I made that I called "Angry King", which is the name of a song we put on a compilation. Santa Cruz is also where we met Das (Big City Orchestra) and started doing things with him. But actually we didn't meet him until about two years after we began sending him our tapes.

**MG:** We were pretty secretive about what we were doing. This new tapes (*Greed Tool Hand in the Lee of Icebergs*) in fact is only the second time we've ever put our names on a tape. We worked mostly through the mail under our business name, ASP, and didn't really know how much we were being heard...Das' show on KZSC was the first confirmed broadcast, but I'm sure we were played on other stations...

**BW:** How many tapes have you done now? How have you distributed them?

**MG:** I think this one is number 18. But five of those are magazines. So cassettes, actually 15. At first we worked strictly out of our own house, but then we were planning a trip to Europe and we had a tape ready, so we decided to release it on someone else's label so we wouldn't have to deal with distribution while we were gone. That was Sound Of Pig, Al Margolis' label. The more complicated packagings we still do from our house. Some packagings are non-reproducible, like one which uses envelopes we got in Mexico, so the tape is permanently out of print in that form. With some we've

just used regular J-cards to make it easier.

We've appeared on a number of compilations from Insane Music, Tellus, Zamizdat Trade Journal, Sound Of Pig, and others. Also Tryst 3. In Europe, Calypso Now! has been our main distributor. Also SJ Organisation in Paris.

**BW:** You started out doing magazines?

**MG:** Yeah. That was before CWT. The magazine was called *Youths Go Camping*, and it was a collection of artwork, poetry and other things done by artists we knew, and we sent it around to our friends...actually, our first CWT cassette has a booklet in it that was sort of an extension of the magazine. At first we didn't really consider ourselves as a band, just an extension of what we'd been doing, and now it's gone further and further into the music.

**BW:** So, at first the instruments you were using were...

**MG:** Tape, drums, lots of primitive percussion instruments. Electronic instruments and some hand-made things, many of which we still use. Found tapes, tapes of conversations, guitar, wind instruments, whatever we have around.

**BW:** What was your first show?

**MG:** We did a show with Randy Greif at Be-Bop Records in Redwood in 1984. It was just the two of us, and it was very complicated because we used different instruments on just about every song, but we rehearsed a lot so we could do quick changes. We had a map that we followed.

**SD:** But that isn't the way that we do most of our music. We don't practice or rehearse many pieces...in fact, a lot of pieces on our tapes are improvisations, and we've done mostly improvisation live and on radio shows.

**BW:** Improvisation is mostly how you work?

**MG:** Yes, mostly, but not all of it. I'd say 75%. The *Tudor* set, for instance, is probably 50% improvised, 50% composed. The new one is more like 90% improvisation. We use different forms and different approaches when we need to express an idea. Sometimes it's very simple, and when we're finished it embodies exactly the feeling we want it to. Like the 20-minute piece on *Broom* which was done at 4 A.M. in San Francisco—a guitar and voice was all we needed. At other times we want to use more complex techniques. But most of the pieces on our tapes are integrated, usually marking the end of an era, and so they're connected by some sort of temporal permanence.

**BW:** What do you mean by "the end of an era"?

**SD:** Well, we move through different eras in our music. Like this new tape—everything on it was done since we moved to Oakland. When we got here we started experiencing all new visual aesthetics...you know, every place has its own symbols. You start going down different roads, shopping at different stores, eating new kinds of food. When we moved here from Santa Cruz it gave us many new messages which we could transfer into our lives and our music. But the tape before *Candy Tooth Ceylon—Broom*—was very organic. We lived in the middle of an apple orchard, and I was outside all the time, doing a lot of gardening. It wasn't an urban experience at all, it was totally rural. So the tape has sticks and bean shakers and things from the land. We've done these transfers—from urban to rural to urban to rural—basically from tape to tape. *The Tudor Tapes* were inspired by a lot of historical studies. We had a radio show and we were doing historical particulars, readings, and I was very interested in Mary Queen of Scots during the whole Tudor period...and then it ends, the era ends. We're always moving on to new books we're reading, or situations we're experiencing, or whatever plants we're growing. Like right now I'm growing a mango tree, an avocado tree, and a grapefruit tree...I'm into seed propagation...but our lives follow these different eras and we try to transfer them into musical expression.

**BW:** What kind of music do you listen to?

**MG:** Not much. We're really musical isolationists. I love music, but we have so much of our own that we're always working on that we don't have a lot of listening time. And I don't like background music because I'm a very attentive listener, and I have to concentrate on it 100%. I need to get inside music. But we're influenced by so many things, I'm sure some of it is music...some of the

music I really love is Iannis Xenakis, as well as Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry in Musique Concrete. And The Hafler Trio—like the Concrete composers did, they're putting things together very carefully, which fascinates me.

**SD:** At one point in our lives we went to sleep with the radio on, and always listened to music, but now we're really trying to shut out the outside and focus on sounds we can create from the inside, from our own experience. We just got back from the coast, and we were on the beach, and there were these little sand crabs on the rocks that sounded like castanets, and we'd like to recreate that sound...

**MG:** Our influences are very diverse. We don't hear a style of music and say "we want to sound like that". We're naturalistic, but also abstract and conceptual. We could describe our aesthetic at any given moment though.

**BW:** Can you describe it for me now?

**SD:** Well, I just ended an era, so my feet are kind of shuffling on new ground...the sea experience in Mendocino was a big thing, and before we went I imagined going up there, thinking I'd see colors like purple, golden, dark blue and brown—and we did, like all colors of seaweed—but also there were sea anemones that were mint green, and pink, and starfish...and the crabs, who seemed to be really aware of our tone. We didn't even have to bend down or anything, and they'd be aware of us, so there was this tone communication going on. I'm also really into clay at the moment, and I want to make instruments like bells from clay. Everything is still very earbound. Also a Borneo thing (laughs)...I'd like to go to the South Seas, near Malaysia, and wear a sarong and play percussion by the ocean. But then another part of me wants a total urban experience, so I fluctuate between these two sides constantly. Michael...?

**MG:** I've been thinking a lot lately of what I call "parataxis": the combination of things which go together, and you know they're supposed to go together, but the connection is illogical. I'm trying to explain it from many different disciplines like non-linear dynamics and literature, and biology and neuro-biology especially. I'm trying to understand this idea of non-causal connections.

**BW:** Seems like a cousin to the concept of synchronicity.

**MG:** Yeah, actually, someone told me to look into that. You're the second person to mention it. I'm interested in chaos theory, which is a non-causal science, but they're not sure of the applications yet. I have a lot more research to do before I can figure out how to apply it to the music.

**BW:** Okay, back to that: equipment-wise, aside from natural instruments, what else do you use?

**MG:** We have a big collection of percussion instruments and stringed instruments that we use; horns too. But also we'll do things like...once we put a contact mike up near a spider web, and this fly got caught in it and the sound came out like this wild saxophone. Lately we've been going into the studio at Mills (College, Oakland) once a week and trying to work in a studio environment with all their equipment. We were working on an album about two years ago, and we have a lot of material that we generated for it, but we haven't finished it because the studio we were working in was too disconnected from our normal working environment; but at Mills we can go in and be the only two there, and engineer it all by ourselves, so I think we'll get a lot more done. A great resource there is the musicians, who we've been working with.

**BW:** Have you worked in any other media, like video?

**MG:** We have a Pixel camera—it's a toy, a Fisher-Price camera—and we've done several films with that. And we made a larger, more ambitious film with a fellow who lives on the other side of the Bay, a twenty-five minute piece.

**BW:** What other musicians have appeared on your tapes?

**MG:** We've worked with a number of other musicians like Peter Cavallero and Scott Triem, and we still do things with them. Scott's on the new tape, and there was a conversation between he and Suzanne on *The Tudor Tapes*. Actually, we have a box of tapes we're going to put together some time and start releasing—music that's all collaboration with other people.

When I started working with Peter we were breaking music down into essential, primitive ele-

ments—we call it "elementalism"—and it's something we've done throughout our whole career: using the most primitive aspects of music, natural rhythms that can't really be notated. Like Jung's collective unconscious, there's a collective elementalism, like the way someone might tap his fingers on a table, which is something we've always been very interested in. And tunings especially—tuning an instrument in a way that's different from any documented scale—out of tune, in a way, but then we'll adjust it a bit to fit what we're doing. We'll find tones, especially when we play guitars—de-tuned guitars—we'll be trying to get the sounds out of a really loose string, for instance, not using it as a traditional pitch instrument, but more as a percussion instrument, or a tone generator, something to get a sound out. We're mostly interested in tone and levels of density.

**SD:** We want to get away from the Western way of tuning. I've always thought there is no right way—there's no perfect pitch. That would be generalizing too much, saying it has to be tuned like this, or has to sound like this...like we're being graded by a Western historical aesthetic that's not ours. So how can you say what's right or wrong? You have to do it the way that lets you live comfortably in the world.

**BW:** Do you feel like you're getting as much as you want from the cassette format?

**MG:** No, I don't think we're ever totally satisfied with cassettes, but we like the fact that we can make them at home, that we have a lot of control over what we do. The underground cassette network is a brilliant system for creating connections between diverse people, but it has a lot of holes in it. If you were to limit yourself to the cassette medium you'd be missing out on contacts with a lot of other people. It would be very interesting to us for someone to hear us on a record, for instance, who didn't know anything of what's gone on before.

**SD:** Sometimes we'll meet people who are interested in the music and they'll say, "Oh, you can buy tapes of this kind of stuff?" Despite the fact that it's been going on for so long...so it seems closed off to much of society, and I don't know whose fault it is. But on the other hand art is always going to be closed off in ways to the masses until they can get used to it. But the good thing about the cassette network is that people are getting out and doing something, which is very important. It's an instinct to continue creating and listening and interpreting, no matter what.

Crawling With Tarts tapes currently available:

ASP 113: *Loneliness* (C60)

ASP 11: *Voccianna* (C42)

ASP 12: *Haselrute* (C60)

ASP 15: *Broom* (C44)

ASP 16: *Candy Tooth Ceylon* (C83) and ASP 17: *The Tudor Tapes* (C30)—Ltd. edition double box set

ASP 18: *Greed Tool Hand In The Lee Of Icebergs* (C52)

SOP 32: *rhlinkouis* (C60)

SOP 131: *Boots* (C60)

aT 49: *Bled es Siba* (2XC90)

**Crawling With Tarts Contact:** ASP, 633 Cleveland St., #4, Oakland, CA 94606-1006

**Bill Waid operates Asta's, a great record, tape and magazine store you should check out if you're ever in the San Francisco Bay area. Write to Bill at 5469 College, Oakland, CA 94618.**