

CRAWLING WITH TARTS

Crawling with Tarts are a collaborative duo consisting of husband and wife Michael Gendreau and Suzanne Dycus-Gendreau. On top of making sounds for 13 years, the two have also worked together on visual arts, a household, and their daughter Madeleine (after whom the recent *Crawling with Tarts* CD on Sulphur Records is named). *Crawling with Tarts* began in 1983 in Santa Cruz, where Michael and Suzanne met in a band that they both soon left so that they could work with each other. At first, the duo collaborated on a magazine and cassette release. The UC-Santa Cruz radio station had the good sense to play their cassette, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Michael comes from a science background, but he is also a trained drummer. Suzanne's background is in graphic arts. The combination of their divergent experiences is the aesthetic foundation that formed the basis of *Crawling with Tarts*. Musically, *Crawling with Tarts* are something of a puzzle, as their work brackets a lot of different genres — to such an amazing extent that unless you have made a conscious effort to hear the bulk of their catalog, you may only know one of their areas of interest. Their releases include quirky pop, scored "noise" pieces (made with machine sounds and non-instruments in a live acoustic environment), and the now somewhat famous *Grand Surface Noise Opera* series (featuring very distinctive turntable collage).

As I ran errands on a beautiful and textbook San Francisco day, I had some expectations about meeting *Crawling With Tarts*, but nothing could prepare me for how great they really were. "Beautiful, friendly, genuine, and brilliant" describes them as people, but fails to get across how impressive they were as a whole. Add to that the inspiration of the almost two year old Madeleine, who punctuated (and in a few cases interrupted) our conversation with noises of her own, and you might see how perfect things were. In an effort to get all the important parts of the interview across, I have omitted Madeleine's significant contributions from the text (the sort of thing that classic communications modeling describes as "noise"), as well as some of the factual aspects of the interview that I have covered in the above paragraphs. We pick up the conversation at the tail end of the requisite band formation question, so please reread the first part of this intro if necessary. (Bob Boster)

TF: So were these magazines and cassettes the first public material, visual or musical, that either of you were involved in? And you've been at it since then?

Suzanne: Mmm-hmm.

Michael: Pretty much. There have been lots of other little things, but that basic collaborative idea is what we've been continuing on and modifying in various ways. The initial spark of elementalism is something I think we've always been trying to attain.

Suzanne: We really like working with each other. We really like playing music with each other a lot.

TF: How did the name develop and was that an early part of the process or did that come later on?

Michael: I think that name came sometime in early 1984 and it's from a book by the photographer Brassai.

(Actual quote: "I also spent several nights in the neighborhoods around the Bassin de la Villette with Jacques Privert, where we reveled in the 'beauty of sinister things', as he used to call the pleasure those deserted quays, those desolate streets, that district of outcasts, crawling with tarts, full of warehouses and docks, gave us." — Brassai, *The Secret Paris of the 1930's*)



J. T. Gendreau

Michael: I guess *Crawling With Tarts* was the name of the first cassette, we didn't really think of it as a band name, but it sorta stuck. We didn't really think of ourselves as a band, we still don't in some ways. It is just one of the labels attached to the collaboration. The magazine was called something different ("*Youths Go Camping*").

Suzanne: I guess we don't think of ourselves as a band because what we do is create music once. When we perform music we always create a piece for that performance. We hardly ever do things like a band does: like you rehearse, rehearse, then you play and then you tour with that idea. Instead we go in with the idea that we'll create something new for whoever wants to see us play our music.

TF: For a specific performance, is there even any attempt to shape things towards one particular type of the different aspects (or "genres") of your work?

Michael: I think there are two parts to your question. The pieces that we're working on now are structured in form. Or are you asking about how we create a form for a particular show? We had a performance with a bunch of other noise bands, so we got a person that we've worked with often, Cliff Neighbors, and we made kind of a rock band for this situation. It was sort of this different thing, where we had these rock elements connected with electronic stuff in the middle; scored out in one long piece. But we've also been asked to play with rock bands and we've done like little motor pieces or something like that. We occasionally pick things for the context like that. However lately we haven't been thinking about it much at all; we're developing these pieces and then we put them in whatever context arises.

TF: How do people respond to the non-band aspect? Do you feel like people come to see a band, expect to hear a piece that they've heard on a recording, and then end up surprised?

Michael: Oh yeah, that happens a lot.

Suzanne: One time, all these kids came from out of town to see us at the Heinz Club. They had previously seen us perform a motors piece, but this time I just got up on stage and sang two little songs. Or when we did that *Lug Rock* show, some people were like, "Uh, I didn't know you did things like that."

Michael: Or even more recently, we had a radio show at KZSU and out of curiosity some of the DJs came to see us, because we're kind of invisible in a lot of ways; people hear our recordings and they don't really see us. They don't really know what to expect or what we're like in reality. So I asked some of the DJs, here and there, what they were expecting to hear, and I found it was really split. There was a lot of them that really thought we were going to play some songs, in fact the majority of them. A few of them knew that they shouldn't have any expectations, and John McGuire, who set it up, was more familiar with what we were

doing. In fact we played a piece called *Motorini Electrici* which is electric motors and contact mics with these big constructions - wood and metal things, resonators. And then a styrofoam piece. A bunch of structured noisy stuff. We like that, we really like opening up some ears. Having people hear something that they are not expecting to hear. That's important. I think in general a lot of people are not very open-minded to different forms. They have one style of music that they are used to listening to. While we certainly don't like all music, we find good things in many different forms. Basically, we don't limit ourselves to say that we are going to have to play this sort of post-classical noise music to be more respected; we could care less about that really. It's good to surprise people.

Suzanne: And we change constantly too, our music changes, so you just sort of have to go with what we're doing at the time.

TF: How about documentation, are you careful to keep track of new pieces as they come up or do a lot of things drift away after they've come up?

Suzanne: They're scored.

Michael: They are, in form and content, strictly scored. What tends to happen lately is that we score them, then we do a couple of performances of the piece, and then we record it, and then go on to something else. And then those things are kept in files so we can use them later. We expect that we are going to do some touring, probably in the next couple of years, in which case we'll have to be able to perform a lot of our older pieces in order to not get bored, continuously repeating the same thing. We make them so that we can resurrect them if we need to. We're getting a fair number of requests to record things, so we're basically kind of behind, as far as producing things for people.

Suzanne: We're doing more recording now and less performing.

Michael: It's also because we've been getting a little bit more complicated in these pieces that we've been making and so it just takes longer to be content with the way something is.

TF: Talk about the records and appropriation, and what that's about for y'all.

Michael: There's a couple of aspects to that. One, we started using records because we needed ways that just the two of us could perform more complicated pieces. The initial reason was just so that we could make more sound. At the same time, though, we had also been listening to these transcription disc recordings that we had been finding. Do you know what I'm talking about? They are kind of like one-of-a-kind discs that people recorded on in the 50s and the 40s and the 30s. Are you familiar with these things?

TF: Just roughly...I'm aware of what they are and that you've been using them.

Michael: We had just found a few sources for these things (transcription disc recordings). We found that this was the most fascinating stuff to listen to, as opposed to intentional music, and so we wanted to use it in some way. The other aspect of this that I should emphasize is that we're mainly using these as sonic material. It is kind of a different thing than the appropriation concept. We're not necessarily trying to gain a political advantage or something like that by recontextualizing things. That ends up being an aspect of our music that is peripheral in some ways. The

main thing that we're looking at is the sonic element. What it breaks down to is that there is more information in the noise and in the complicated historical context or the cultural implications or whatever than simply what is said on the source discs. So the text itself is sort of borderline and less interesting to us. But sometimes the content of the disc is used as a formal element. Like we'll decide to have a particular movement within an opera be identified by the recorded content of a group of discs, but what we're actually doing is taking those discs and using them for the noise that is recorded on them.

TF: I should tell you that when I first heard the operas on college radio, I didn't know if they were live or recorded collage.

Suzanne: That's interesting. We always thought that we'd like to have someone else play our turntable operas so that we could watch rather than perform, in the sense of seeing it live.

Michael: We're trying to leave behind some scores. We use specific discs and tracks, so that when we perform them they will essentially be the same over and over again, but with certain variations. We like to keep it interesting; we set up the form, but we allow variations within the form.

TF: And then there's the sort of micro level of changes...the vinyl changes every playing...

Michael: That's right.

TF: And the electricity in different spaces, depending on how loud you turn it up.

Michael: Not to mention the condition of these turntables we're using, which is pretty awful. So sometimes you have one with a blasted needle, or something like that which happens in the middle of a performance but still sounds interesting. In fact, in one of the recordings — we had a needle get pretty worn out in Grand Surface Noise Opera No. 4. It's kind of unique to that recording, because one of the needles got kind of flattened out. But it works.

(Digression about famous "electric blender/sandpaper on turntables" Aphex Twin show at the Knitting Factory.)

Michael: Our new CD coming out has got a piece that's related to radio. It's called "Radio Compressor Test"; it's got some very short sounds and then airspace so that the listener can play a compressor. It'll be interesting to hear on the radio. I played it once but I haven't had a chance to hear the air check.

TF: So I was trying to describe *Crawling with Tarts* to a friend and, for lack of a better term, I referred to you as a noise band. And she said, "that's not a noise band." When pushed to explain she said it was because there was a woman in the band and because the sound geography is much more fragile and sensitive, even on the "noisy" releases.

Michael and Suzanne: Ahhh.

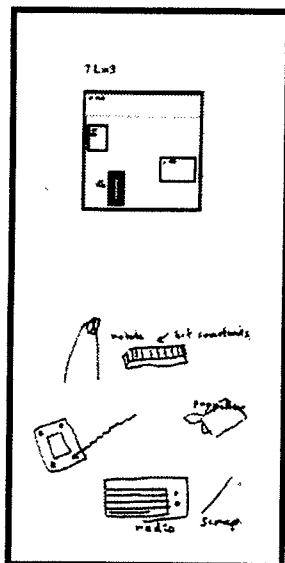
Michael: Does she think CCCC is a noise band? There's a woman in that band.

TF: And Merzbow, for that matter.

Michael: There was an internet thread about that for a while, and I was following it because I was interested to see how many noise bands — and it branched out into industrial bands too — had women in them. I say "noise"....in some ways, I don't really think of us as a noise band. First of all, I don't know what you know about the origin of that term, but from what I remember of it from more than ten years ago, people were using the term when industrial music split into non-dance music and dance music. People started saying "noise". Maybe what we were doing then could have been characterized as noisy, maybe more noisy than now. In some ways that term's time has gone.

TF: Well, any term becomes obsolete about fifteen minutes after its first usage.

Michael: Well, I agree with your friend that it's really hard to describe *Crawling with Tarts* as noise because it doesn't fit in with what hardcore noise listeners would listen to; we don't really fit



in with that group of bands.

Suzanne: We don't fit really into any category.

Michael: We fit into primitive bands, whatever they are.

TF: I would say it's more that you fit into a number of different categories depending on what recording one is listening to. I've never seen you play live, but I would assume that such is the case with the live experience as well, depending on whatever happens.

Michael: That's true. We almost never perform songs or stuff like that. We've only done that once or twice. We did it once in 1984, and we did it at the request of the person setting up the show that Suz mentioned at the Heinz Club. That's not our performance music; it's too hard for one thing — you need a band. Performancewise, we might be what people consider to be experimental music, using unusual instruments and things like that.

TF: Let's talk about that for a minute. How does CWT fit into the context of academic-influenced, 20th century classical or post-classical music? Why call it "Crawling with Tarts", which sets it into a band context, when it is so fluid in terms of those genre considerations?

Suzanne: I have a lot to say about that. It just depends on where we perform. If we played at Mills College, then we would be accepted as contemporary music. If we played at a bar in San Francisco then it would be something else. It just depends where you play...that's another thing we have to talk about. Performance spaces change so readily. It depends on who you network with — who accepts your music determines where you get to play. As anything else is....galleries....that whole thing is about who knows who and who you get lumped in with...if someone's doing a big noise show and you're going to be part of that...you know what I'm talking about, it is very political, you know? I think radio is a bit more free than performing live.

Michael: That's a good point, I think it is a matter of positioning and politics. We've always taken a basic stance of isolationism. As to how it fits into academic music — you probably know that academia is, by its nature, a little stagnant. I had to go through it to experience that and to understand exactly what that sort of music is doing. Unfortunately, what happens is that academic music moves slower than music that's happening and it certainly moves slower than popular music. But popular music is also a very inadequate medium, so we would rather be away from both. We'd rather just work. Its one of the reasons we try to avoid competitions or festivals, even noise festivals or classical music festivals. It can be fun to do stuff like that, of course, but we don't feel like we really belong to those worlds necessarily. Invariably, when you get set up in situations like that, you are either facing a judgment panel, or if you are going to be involved in a festival, you're invariably going to have to behave to the restraints of the festival in some way or other and we don't find those to be very good working situations. But on the other hand, we love to have our music interpreted in either world and we have no problems with either. We've been asked to give lectures about our music in academic situations and we've been included in rock music festivals. Its fun to do both, but we don't pursue either. It's an interesting question you ask, because it has to do with where

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academic music is going. I would say that in the future, the academic music environment is going to really be different than it is now and has been in the past. The individual composer is going to become less important; I just think that at some point the star system isn't going to work any longer.

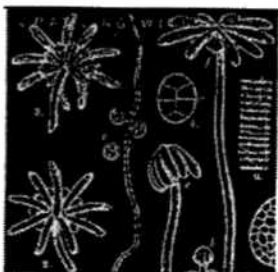
TF: Everything grinds to a halt when you can't have a reputation for a school to hire. That's so involved in the process.

Michael: I know — that's an interesting problem. It would be interesting to think more about this and try to work it out. I feel like the system — the whole system of resumés and having people who have better resumés than others and therefore become more of a figurehead in any particular environment — is a false one. It is not conducive to experimental music.

TF: I see from your discography that you were active in the cassette underground. Is that still an aspect of your work? Are you still involved with those people?

Michael: When we started working in music there seemed to be more of a network going on through the mail and that doesn't seem to be going on as much, perhaps because of the internet and for whatever other reason.

TF: Do you mean in terms of correspondence/mail art or in terms



CRAWLING WITH TARTS — *Motorini Elettrici* double 7inch (Gyjtja)

This release offers yet another side to these geniuses of the "letting sounds be themselves" school of music. Crawling with Tarts are probably best known for the Surface Noise Operas, but much of the band's history is made up of composed pieces for machines and found objects. Here are four sides of very different, but still linked, motors as sound catalyst. Through the use of homemade resonators and extensions (structures/devices used to amplify or change the sound of the motors), a beautiful music is made in carefully composed fashion. If the idea of "noise" scares you with thoughts of Merzbow screaming endlessly, then take a look into this realm of almost Cornell-box-like delicacy and precision for another perspective on the word. (Bob Boster)

of the cassette underground?

Michael: Both, actually. The cassette underground seemed a little stronger in the sense that it had it's time when it was an important way of communication, and now it's not as important, for one thing people don't need to make cassettes anymore because it's so cheap to make CDs now. Correspondence just doesn't seem to be as important, but maybe it's just our experience, we can't really tell how it is for everybody. But from that network, we developed lots of friends that we still see every once in a while. I was just in Madrid visiting Francisco López, who we've known for five or six years, initially by correspondence. We met and performed with him when he came out here and hopefully we'll do the same in Madrid some time. There is an international community that we stay in contact with. In fact, it has always tended to be more out of our area that we've had these solid contacts. We have some good friends in the Bay Area, but many more outside of it.

Suzanne: Yeah, in the bulk of ten years, I feel like there was the beginning, and then there was a whole bunch of stuff happening about 4 or 6 years ago.

Michael: You're talking about with the cassette network?

Suzanne: Yeah, in the early part of our music. And now, we're at this point where we're all of a sudden at the point to change, but we don't exactly what we're changing. Or how music is changing. But there seems to be a change happening, a shift. Not to speak of "was" or "we were", not like that, but in the sense that we're going someplace different too. I think performance is changing a little bit. There's a shift happening in this type of music.

Michael: Yeah, it has kept things interesting, because the way of communicating with people has changed a lot over the time that we've been working. I think it's much better now; it's so much easier to distribute a recording.

Suzanne: That's opened up, and I think gobs more radio has opened up. Before it was like at 3 o'clock in the morning where you could only hear this music. I think performance spaces will start changing too. We were talking about where you could see the music that we do...in San Francisco you are either going to be playing at a museum type place, or an academic place or you're going to be playing at a bar. We were hoping that there would be a new type of place opening up, a new space to perform where it wasn't just anybody after 10 o'clock at night, or you had to be quiet and see a serious piece between 7 and 9, at a performance space where it's really quiet. These type of people (**gestures to Madeleine**) could never see this type of music, or they could never hear because they'd be in bed — little kids. With our type of music, not just that we have a child too, but it's kind of enlightening to think that there's a whole audience that could hear the music but hasn't been exposed to it because of time slots and performance spaces and all these things.

TF: There's an automatic filtering of the possible audience based on venue. If it is at this club then obviously X percentage of the population would never consider going just because it is at such and such a club, where they would never go after dark.

Suzanne: Exactly. And I think that's another thing that is going to start changing, you know, that's changing along with the type of music too. I'd like to think that it can change. Its obvious that it is in flux, because you can play at one performance space one

CRAWLING WITH TARTS selected discography

Motorini Elettrici double 7inch, (Gyttja, 1996)

Sarajevo Center Metal Doors CD (Realization Recordings, 1995)

Grand Surface Noise Operas Nrs. 3 & 4 CD (ASP, 1995)

Madeleine CD (Sulphur, 1995)

Mayten's Throw CD (ASP, 1994)

Operas LP (ASP, 1993)

Radio 45 7inch (ASP, 1991)

Appearances on Compilations:

"Noche Gato III" on *Town and Country #1* double 7inch (Sedimental, 1994)

"The Dream of the Fallen Soldier" on *America the Beautiful* CD (RRR, 1994)

"Motors V3i" on *(Y)Earbook Vol. 3* CD (Rastascan, 1993)

"7.6.90(i)viii" and "7.6.90(i)ix" on *Mighty Risen Plea* LP (Sacred Frame, 1990)

(The complete CWT discography includes well over 50 items; this distillation offers only the releases that are available on vinyl or CD. Write to ASP, PO Box 24908, Oakland, CA 94623 for ordering info or for a more complete listing.)

year and then the next year it's closed down, and then you have to say, where do we play now? "Oh, there's this other place..." That happens all the time. It's always moving around, there's never a constant place except for at a university or radio station. (**More discussion about different performance situations.**)

TF: So do you expect any sort of reactions from people when you perform?

Michael: We're not trying to push people's buttons by using a simple confrontational thing like pornography.

TF: Or a sheet of sound that's at 120 decibels non-stop...

Michael: Yeah, exactly. We aren't really looking for that kind of effect on people.

Suzanne: What we're really interested in is sound, creating different sounds, and creating instruments that make different sounds. In that aspect, we're really not often using computers. We're more into creating some type of hardware, like some type of wood box that gyrates with this little motor that is this sound that we could never have heard before. That's what we're really interested in, and then blending those, just different sounds, something different.

TF: Do you feel there's a component where you are trying to inspire that in your audiences?

(**Madeleine interrupts with an impromptu harmonica recital**)

Suzanne: (laughing) We're breeding them, that's what we're into is breeding.

Michael: If anything, we might be trying to inspire wonder in people. That would be kind of a nice way of saying it, and it seems to happen. If we are getting audience members who are interested enough to sit and listen — which quite often happens, because we often play quiet and that forces people to sit and listen because if they move around too much then something is lost. We see people when we're playing, and they're sitting and they're listening and it seems like they're getting a little bit of wonderment about what's going on and trying to pick out what the form is that's happening. (**Madeleine resolves her playing.**)

Suzanne: (quietly) Nice job, Maddie.

Michael: I think that would be ideal to inspire in people.



Cliff Neighbors