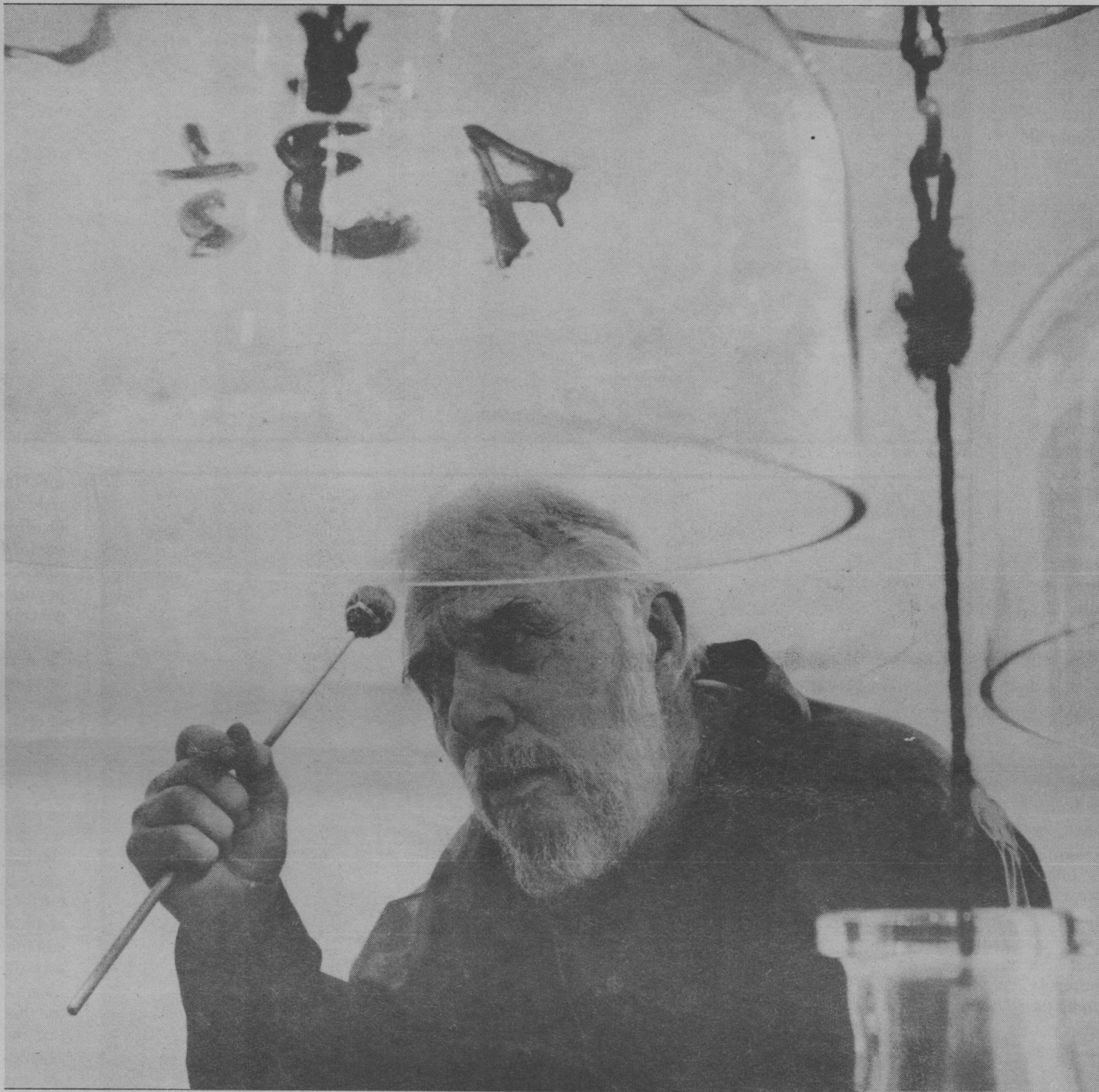


THE PARTCH REVERBERATIONS



Harry Partch

Photograph/Lingua Press and the Partch Foundation

NOTES ON A MUSICAL REBEL

But perhaps the most mysterious thing he ever said about it was this. I was questioning him on the subject . . . and had incautiously said, "Of course, I realize it's all rather too vague for you to put into words," when he took me up rather sharply by saying, "On the contrary, it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can't be expressed is that it's too definite for language."

—C. S. Lewis, *Voyage to Venus*

It is a warm August morning — an omen that summer heat will vie for one's attention all day — and the fragments of haze that remain from the dawn seek refuge, in slowly receding shadows, from the sunlight. Inside an auditorium of the music building at San Diego State University, however, shadows dominate. They surround a dimly lit stage where a collection of large, strange, beautiful musical instruments stands in silence. Each instrument looks more like a piece of sculpture, yet each is capable of producing the sounds inside of a normal musical sound. They are made from all sorts of unlikely, though carefully tested, objects, such as Pyrex containers lopped in half, eucalyptus boughs, artillery shell casings, and empty bottles of Harvey's Bristol Cream Sherry. And they have mysterious, evocative

names like Zymo-Xyl, Quadrangularis Reversum, Mazda Marimba, and New Boo. They are part of the priceless, controversial legacy left behind by Harry Partch, a visionary musical composer, when he died in San Diego six years ago. Partch, a Magellan of Western music who designed and built the instruments and who explored numerous uncharted regions of sound, also left behind several theatrical/musical compositions that, when performed, roll into you like auditory tidal waves, that articulated the reaches of harmony and discord in his own heart, and that force you to add at least thirty-five new colors to your conception of a rainbow. He also left behind an armada of unanswered questions and problems.

(continued on page 7)

BY JEFF SMITH

THE PARTCH REVERBERATIONS



Harry Partch

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PARTCH

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Generally the death of a composer creates problems. But if the composer wrote for the conventional instruments of an orchestra, using the dominant tuning system of the West — the twelve-tone scale of the piano — the problems are usually matters of interpretation and proper emphasis during a performance of the works. At age twenty-nine, however, Harry Partch gathered up fourteen years of music he had written, based on what he called the “tyranny of the piano” and the twelve-tone scale, and summarily burned it in a big iron stove. He termed this act his *auto-da-fe*, “a confession to myself that in pursuing the respectable, the widely accepted, I had not been faithful.” He felt he was only an imitator of the tradition he found dumped on him, without ever questioning the ideas that lay beneath it or its ability to express the confluence of oceanic, non-Western minisounds he heard in the world around him. For the next four and a half decades, most of the time working in virtual obscurity, Partch devoted his entire life to the production of those sounds. Only very late in life did he acquire a belated but significant international reputation (to this day he is still more revered in Europe than America) as both a major musical composer and as an innovative genius. When he died in 1974, he had

built around thirty instruments and had devised complex theories of intonation and even of performance to accompany them. His legacy has created problems equally complex. It has constituted, in music circles, almost a national debate.

The questions are easy to ask, the problems easy to understand. Stated simply, they are: What now? Where does one go from here? What is being done, or should be done, with the unique nature of the Partch legacy? The answers and solutions, however, are like the music of Partch — a vast array of conflicting opinions, suggestions, and opposed proposals. And Dan-Lee Mitchell, a teacher at San Diego State University who worked with Partch for eighteen years and who legally inherited the legacy, has been the focus of both praise and criticism for the work he has done with the inheritance.

Other problems intrude here as well. The instruments are in varying states of sickness and health. While some can be replaced — improved even, as is the case with the New Boo built by local composer Cris Forster — others cannot. The Cloud-Chamber Bowls, for example, which sound like liquid gongs, are made of brittle, twelve-gallon Pyrex containers, which Partch obtained from the radiation laboratory glass shop at UC Berkeley in 1950. If one shatters during the heat of a performance, it is irreplaceable. A substitute bowl necessitates rewriting the parts of the score in which it appears. And the Harry Partch Foundation, headed by

Mitchell, has only limited sources of funding at present (derived largely from the royalties on Partch’s intriguing book *Genesis of a Music*), a large portion of which goes into the upkeep and repair of the slowly deteriorating instruments. Also, the Harry Partch Ensemble, an ever-changing group of volunteer musicians trained to play the unique instruments, requires enormous amounts of time (yet with no financial reimbursement) from its members for rehearsals and performances. And only six or seven performers of the original ensemble remain, two of whom are leaving the area shortly.

Of this and other problems, one member of the Harry Partch Ensemble has said, “The legacy is like a dying species in a zoo. The instruments are one-of-a-kind, and they are so cumbersome it’s very expensive to get the music heard. The large fee required just to move them around is self-limiting. And yet people all over the world, who think they and only they know what to do with it, are dying to get their hands on Partch’s stuff. But just what are they going to do? It’s kind of like people crossing a field in 1750 and coming across a football. People don’t know what kind of game to play with it yet.”

Others, of course, have expressed the opposite opinion, and charge that devotees of Partch are either too intellectual (or too anti-intellectual), that the time has come to demystify the man and to concentrate on this or that aspect of his work (very few agreeing on which one). In fact, speaking

to the various people who knew, worked with, or have since his death become involved with Partch and his work is like asking the disciples of twenty-five different religious sects about the true nature of the Godhead. Each sees a different Partch, contribution, and direction for the legacy.

* * *

Harry Partch was an outsider, and he liked it out there. One day in his youth, Partch recalled, he watched “bad men” through a telescope outside of the whistle-stop town of Benson, Arizona. It was 1906 and Benson, located in southeastern Arizona about twenty-five miles north of Tombstone, was still in the “dying gasps of the Old West,” according to Partch. An occasional desperado still refused to kowtow to the call of civilization. Peering at the bad men as they were “holed up in some nearby rocks,” with a local posse swarming around them, Partch said, “I fear that my five-year-old sympathies were all for the hunted.”

Harry Partch was, one might say, spiritually allergic to limitations of any sort. Imagine someone dissatisfied with an apparently inexhaustible quantity — someone who finds even that quantity severely limiting for his purposes. Imagine a poet, for example, who complains of a confinement imposed on him by his own language and grammar — a cultural conspiracy designed to restrict the expressive urges of his soul — even though the same

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linguistic resources have served his fellow poets for centuries. Or imagine a painter who sees colors in nature for which there are no existing pigments and who must, by necessity, grind his own. Now imagine a musical composer who finds the twelve-tone scale, which has served his ancestors, to be a prison that bars him from producing the sounds (and sights and colors) he experiences in the world around him. Harry Partch was actually all three of these people. And more, since his metaphorically allergic reactions to limitation were not restricted to his art; they also dominated his life — the rugged, difficult existence of an outsider. Here is one of his favorite poems, which he found on the wall of a screening room for children's films in Los Angeles (he always read with interest the writing on walls):

Once upon a time
There was a little boy
And he went outside.

Partch was born in Oakland, California, in 1901. His parents had been Presbyterian missionaries in China who endured the Boxer Rebellion. Two years after his birth, they moved to southeastern Arizona to homestead, but never for long in any one place; after age fourteen, in fact, Partch never stayed more than three years in any single residence. He roamed all over — in Hawaii at age twenty; throughout the Midwest and East (Chicago; Ithaca, New York; Madison, Wisconsin; Evanston and Champaign-Urbana, Illinois); and California (San Francisco, Sausalito, Petaluma, Gualala, Van Nuys, Venice). In 1964 he came to San Diego, first to Del Mar, then to Encinitas, and finally to a small, wood-frame, two-bedroom house on Felton Street near Adams in Normal Heights. His reasons for eventually settling in this area were twofold: he was offered a teaching post at the then relatively new University of California (he lasted one term); and he especially liked the temperate climate of San Diego, since extreme changes of temperature play havoc with the delicate constitution of his instruments. But Partch never fretted all that much about where he lived. He told *Rolling Stone* writer Jonathan Cott, "Hell, man, I don't care where I am. If I were in the North Pole I'd go on writing. I don't care if I'm in euphoria or despair — I'd go on producing. It doesn't make any difference."

To support himself, Partch worked at the oddest of jobs; his résumé would bedazzle a prospective employer. When he was fourteen, he had part-time work, according to Cott, "delivering pharmaceutical drugs on his bicycle to the red-light district of Albuquerque." In his late teens Partch enrolled in the music department at USC in Los Angeles. But after six weeks, "I was fed up and quit." So he hitched to Washington, D.C., where he spent close to two years in the Library of Congress, teaching himself Greek and "devouring the idea of music." He supported himself in this period by washing dishes seven days a week. He picked fruit during the Depression in the San Joaquin Valley. He lived as a hobo for almost ten years. He had several jobs as a proofreader (when he worked for the *Brawley News*, he hitchhiked from El Centro to Brawley every day). And at another time, say San

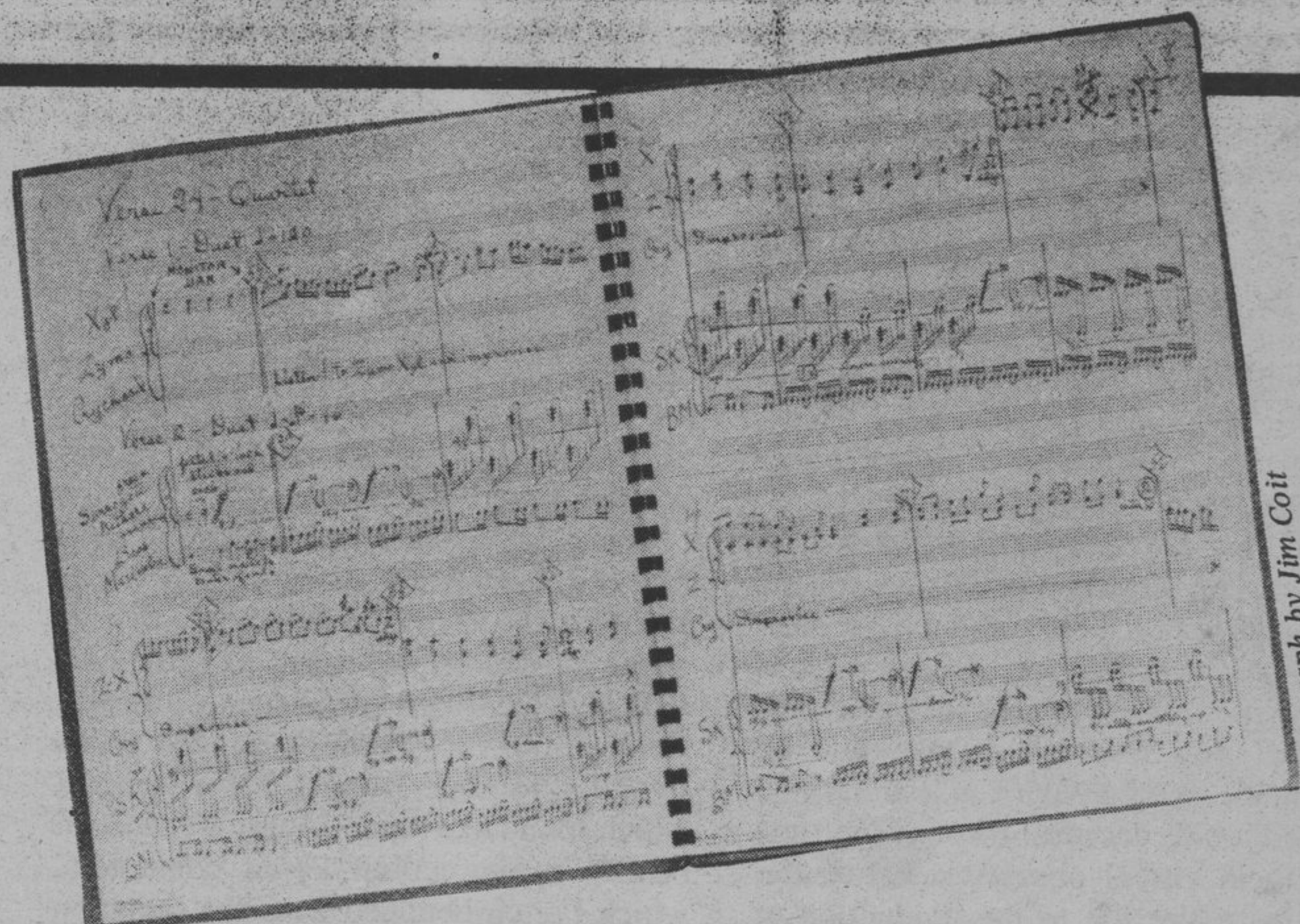
Diegans John and Aleta Glasier, who met him in 1942, Partch was instrumental in the planning of Borrego Springs. "He was actually in the office of the planning commission when they laid out the city," says John.

For most of his life Partch also survived on grants, fellowships, and the university system in general. The last, however, was a financial necessity he often detested, since he felt universities to be mere repositories of musical dogma. "It is very difficult," he said, "to recline alongside dogma with serenity."

Because of a continual lack of funds, Partch himself had to manufacture everything he needed, like a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. In order to achieve the sounds he heard, he had to build his own instruments out of whatever materials presented themselves to his scrutiny ("I am not an instrument builder," he said, "only a philosophical music man seduced into carpentry"). He also built countless pieces of furniture, an icebox and a cooler — for a trip from California to Madison, Wisconsin, in a used Studebaker — a shower and sunken Grecian bathtub in Gualala, California, and so on.

Partch attributes this capacity for self-reliance to his experiences as a hobo, from the early Thirties to the early Forties. "I always took a job if I could find one, but it gave me a feeling of immense satisfaction to be on my own, to be able to cook my own meal and not have to eat in some hash joint; to sleep under the stars and say, 'Thank heaven I don't have to go to a flophouse.'"

"Any good hobo can take care of himself," he said. "Long ago I said to myself, 'I think life is too precious to spend with important people.' There are too many plays for status and selling; but one gets among a group of hobos, or among transient orchard workers and, right away, there's human contact. Which doesn't mean they always like each other, but



Photograph by Jim Coit

there's a human contact without this fighting for place constantly. It's just a little sidelight on why I felt it necessary during the Depression to be a hobo and take a pack on my back."

And yet during this same period, the hobo met a very important person, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. In 1934 Partch received a Carnegie grant to study the history of musical intonation in England. While there, he made an excursion to Ireland and met with the master poet. Partch played the Adapted Viola, the first of his

original instruments, and "Yeats loved it." The artistic exchange was mutual. From Yeats, Partch received renewed impetus to explore. And one of his favorite sayings comes from writing Yeats has done on theater: "I hear with older ears than the musician," said Yeats, "and the songs of the country people and of sailors delight me. . . . I have to find men with more music than I have, who will develop to a finer subtlety the singing of the cottage



UCSD, 1968

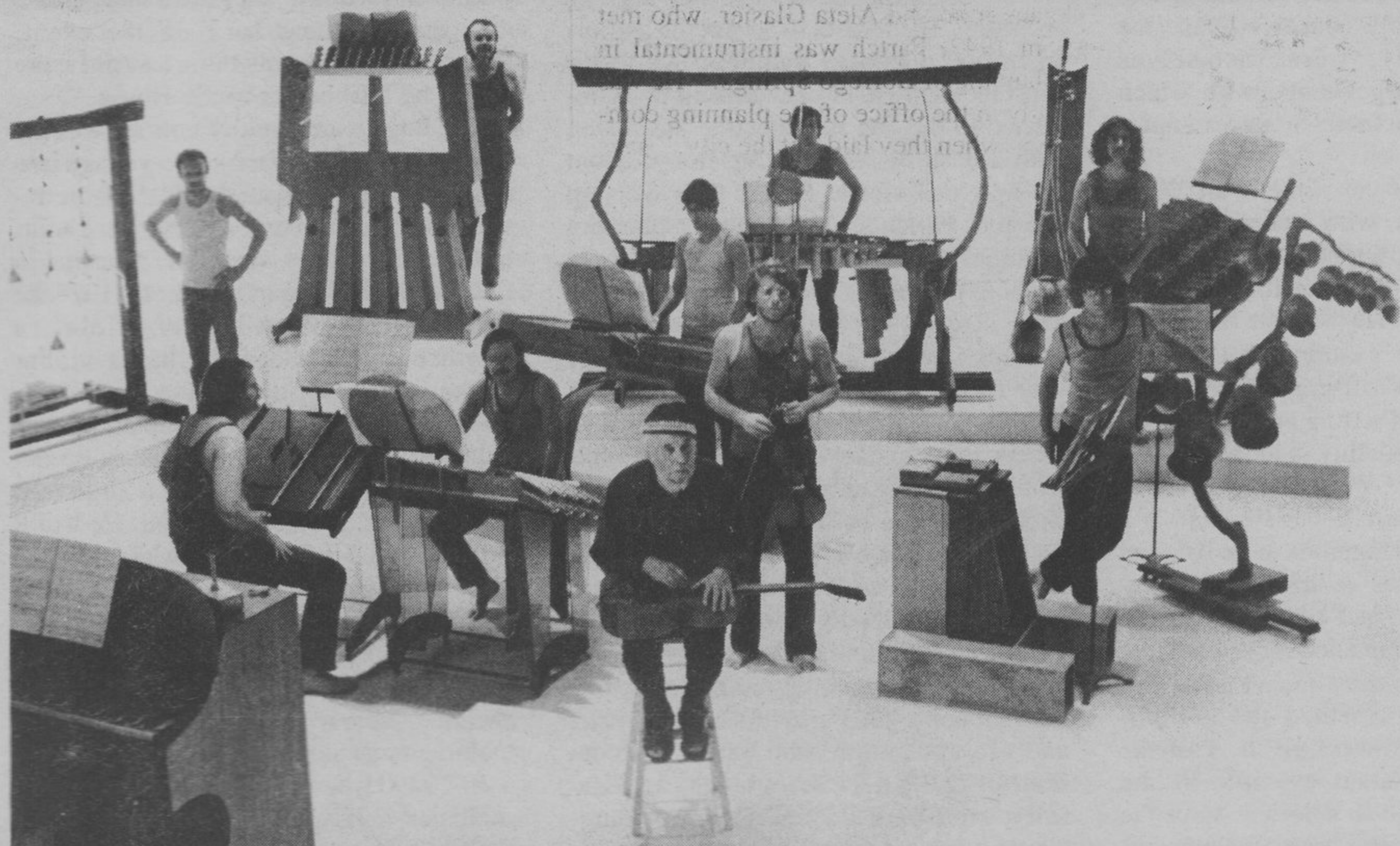
and the forecastle."

The hobo and the poet? A contradiction? Some would say so, and they would contend that the biography of Harry Partch (whom these people usually call "Partch") would be one continual listing of contradictory impulses. But others (who usually refer to the man as "Harry") argue that the most deeply human aspects of his life are its extremes and that he could range, to invert one of the chapter titles of his book, from the vacant lot to Emperor Chun. One thing is certain: any simple attempt to label the man (as a hobo, or an intellectual, or a prophet, for example, and he has been called all three) will be misleading.

Though no two people can agree completely about the character of Harry Partch, there are several areas of intersection, which are best summed up in the words of DanLee Mitchell. "Harry was a very responsible person. He could scream at people toward the end of his life for doing dumb, immature things. He would fly off the handle — but not for long or too deeply — when people wouldn't carry out a job in the most efficient amount of time. He was a completely unrepressed individual, never holding back any reaction to his environment, never suppressing anything. And yet you always knew where you stood with Harry. His tantrums would end, and later he would apologize to you with an equal amount of concern and care. Harry would never use something like guilt as a weapon of power. In fact, he hated all games of that sort. He was probably the most sane person you'd ever run across, and his fierce dedication never worked to the detriment of someone else. Harry labored his whole life on his own vision, knowing it would never be embraced as a musical fashion. He continued anyway, always faithful to his principles and to his method of disciplined belief."

Jack Logan, an associate professor of music at San Diego State and a colleague of Mitchell's, recalls that "Partch was warm, kind, generous — a turn-the-other-cheek type." And yet Logan can also recall a day when Partch was not so. In the fall of 1969, Partch taught a course about his music at UCSD. The class, which met in an old Quonset hut on Matthews campus at the university, was going well for the eleven or so students enrolled. Then one day Partch came in very drunk

"The Partch legacy is like a piece of choice beef out in a desert, and the buzzards are beginning to fly in from all over."



1972

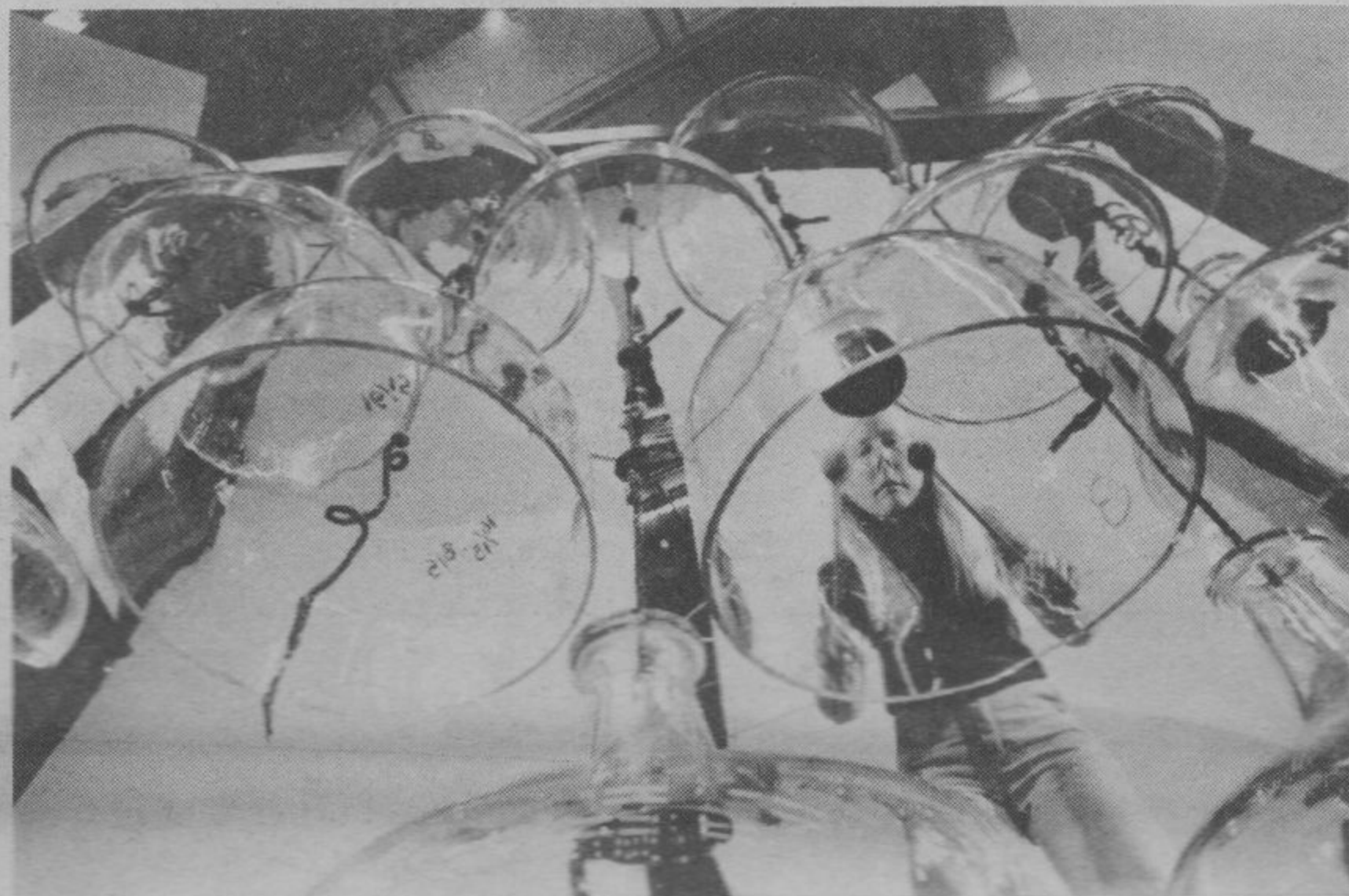
(the class met at 8:00 a.m.) and became almost violent. After an hour of dramatic flurries around the room, Partch asked the class if they understood him. When they said no, he went into a two-hour harangue about his being misunderstood in general. He made the class a test case, asking each person a question about his book *Genesis of a Music*. "He asked questions about his tuning system," Logan says. "He would give the first three ratios of a hexagonal chord and you would have to select the other three. Most of the class had no idea what he was talking about." And Partch stormed around the room.

"We became symbolic examples," Logan continues, "of the frustrations he must have felt continually in the larger world, where his music was so often misunderstood. At the end of the class, he gave a concluding statement and said, 'The class is over; you may go.' We left the room not knowing what to think. And yet the final class of the term was one of the most warm-hearted things I have ever experienced. Harry had a present for each student. He gave every member of the class one of the original recordings he made, back in the 1930s, of his music. It was a very touching moment."

Partch's quicksilver emotional extremes — one minute Mt. Etna, the next loving and kind — have prompted Jack Logan to say that Partch is a "case study of the paradoxes of living, in high relief, with all the aspects of his character standing out." For him, moderation, like limitation, was for the feeble of spirit, the lily-livered. Logan recalls that Partch would often come to class inebriated ("but his lectures were always thoroughly prepared"). Others agree that he enjoyed more than just a sip of the sauce. One morning in 1974, the last year of his life, Partch decided to pour a drink for himself and two members of the ensemble, Randy Hoffman and John Szanto. Though neither Hoffman nor Szanto can agree on the precise hour the libation was prepared (somewhere between 8:00 and 11:00 a.m.), both concur that it was the strongest mint julep they ever experienced. "A tall glass full of bourbon, an ice cube, and a leaf of crushed mint," Szanto says. And neither could finish his portion. Partch became so offended that he got on the phone late that night to Mark Hoffman, Randy's brother, and complained that Randy and John were nothing more than "Plymouth Rock Puritans."

Seen from within the confines of tradition and conventional social mores, Partch looks extreme to most, larger-than-life to some. He wasn't larger-than-life, just

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Photograph by Jim Coit



DanLee Mitchell

Photograph by Jim Coit



Photograph by Don Booth

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more deeply embroiled in it. He rejected what he called "specialization" in art and life. By this he meant any attitude that promotes blind acceptance of a small part of something rather than embrace the whole entity to which it belongs — settling for a knoll when you could have a mountain range. He even contended that whole entities, as presently conceived (like the entity of music), were themselves abstracted from larger units, with which they should be rejoined. Some examples should help here.

Partch was bisexual. Like Walt Whitman in this regard, with whom he shares other affinities, Partch believed that nothing should be held back with respect to sexual exploration. He liked the Broadway musical *Hair*, for example, because he liked the uninhibited display of the human body in a theatrical setting and because he felt that to limit sexuality is to limit levels of possible reality. What is important to note here is that Partch was bisexual at a time when it was dangerous to be so. And in his sexuality, as in his musical experimentation, he had to live with the paranoia that accompanied those choices.

Long before the most recent advent of feminism, Partch resented the conventional roles women were given. This, he argued, was a blatant example of the "specialization" he so detested, since the roles imposed definite limits for women. In particular, Partch was downright insulting when confronted with examples of what he disparagingly termed "professional Mom-ism" — a woman who relished nothing more, in his eyes, than being a housewife. These attacks, especially the legendary tirade he delivered to one such homemaker in the nine-items-or-less checkout counter of a supermarket in Normal Heights, have given some observers the impression that Partch was a misogynist. The opposite is the case. In

this instance, as in many others, newer attitudes have caught up with Partch, in whose life women played a major role. Anais Nin the novelist, for instance, was a continual supporter. In 1955, after hearing a recording of Partch's music, she wrote in her diary, "It was as if one had drunk the music instead of accepting it through the ears." Other women who were continual supporters include Berthe Driscoll, who wrote the first favorable review of his music; the late Betty Freeman of Los Angeles; and Aleta Glasier.

The libertine, however, was also an anchorite. His refusal to accept the authority of any dominant tradition, due to his constant distrust of specialization, is reflected in the one statement he has made, with a dash of self-effacing irony, about his religious views. Rather than worship one god, Partch paid homage to a plurality of deities. "I am not a one-god man. I have a whole pantheon, and they're probably a little screwy, just like I am, which is perhaps why I am just as I am, and perhaps why I am so faithful to them"

It follows that the man who refused to accept the standard conception of things would not allow himself — with one huge exception — to be tied to objects in general. This Dionysus of multiple explorations was also wedded to extreme austerity; he was decidedly antimaterialistic. He wasn't all that upset, for example, when Phil Keeney (a member of the ensemble who looked after Partch in his last years and who found him dead on the bedroom floor of his Felton Street home) accidentally smashed Partch's faded blue, eleven-year-old Chevy station wagon into four other cars one night in 1974. Instead, after he and others got Keeney out of jail, all Partch wanted to know was if Phil was okay. "He didn't give a damn about the Chevy," says Keeney.

On another occasion — and this tale has multiple versions, which is in keeping with his pluralism — Partch was invited to compose a musical score for one of the first science-fiction movies at RKO. At almost any time in his later life, if he wanted to, Partch could have supplemented his

meager income by doing work that he felt ducked beneath his standards and concepts. ("If I would write a series of 'backgrounds' for television — for airplane crashes, drownings, and murders in the park, I suppose — I might make a lot of money.") Any number of other twentieth-century artists have done it. So Partch was brought on the set and shown a rough-cut version of the film. Thinking he could do a good job, Partch immediately asked for more control. When it was not granted, he told the producer and director where they could, with difficulty, shove the film. Looking back on the event, Partch said, "The only thing I would score would be a filibuster in the House."

The huge exception, of course, was the fleet of instruments he built to voyage into uncharted seas of sound. Most of the instruments, according to Partch, were built, initiated in some way, or rebuilt, in California. He began small. In 1928 he constructed an Adapted Viola, a lengthened fingerboard he had a violin-maker in New Orleans attach to a viola. Then he made a similar adaptation to a guitar in 1934. In this same year, he designed and built the Ptolemy, a large reed organ, while he was in London. He had it shipped to Santa Barbara, "where it stood abandoned in a garage." To this day the whereabouts of the Ptolemy are unknown. "The abandonment," Partch said, "was not unintended. Eight years of hoboing lay ahead." Someone must have had one titanic garage sale.

In 1949, when he moved to Gualala, a small community along the coast of northern California near Ft. Bragg, Partch had about ten instruments, including the Chromelodeon, an adapted harmonium about the size of a piano. To move into his new home, Partch used a makeshift trailer, towed by his old Studebaker. It took him almost a full day to make the short drive from the Coast Highway to his new residence, since he had to negotiate a narrow dirt road — a roller-coaster trail that must have been a burial ground for deceased boulders. About halfway up the grade, at a spot where both sides of the road gave

way to a 1000-foot drop into vacant space, the Studebaker broke an axle. Undaunted, Partch carted each fragile instrument by hand (including the cumbersome Chromelodeon) to its new home on the hill.

From 1949 to his death in 1974, Partch built and rebuilt around twenty-five string and percussion instruments. He crafted giant Kitharas, stately modified replicas of the ancient Greek harplike kitharas. One of these, which stands well over six feet in height, requires two performers to play its seventy-two strings. He built several types of percussive instruments: some out of bamboo (Boo, Mbira Bass Dyad, and Eucal Blossom); some out of metal bowls, bells, and other "found objects" such as artillery shell casings (the Spoils of War) and empty bottles of Harvey's Bristol Cream Sherry and Gordon's gin (the Zymo-Xyl); and four large, resonating marimbas, made of Pernambuco or Brazilwood, the visual splendor and rich sound of which soon put to shame their distant cousin the xylophone (Diamond Marimba, Quadrangularis Reversum, Bass Marimba, and the Marimba Eroica).

Though he treated each of his instruments with the abundant love of an overdoting parent, Partch had a special affection for the Marimba Eroica, which is four Sitka spruce bars attached to the tops of four long, slender, boxlike resonators. Partch urged that these deep bass resonators, which often produce sounds more felt than actually heard ("If one sits on the floor," he said, "it ripples through his bottom"), be played in the more furious passages of a score as if the "Eroicist" were "Ben Hur in his chariot, charging around the last curve of the final lap." He also dreamed of an Eroica that is not moveable, "with reinforced concrete resonators going down into the ground and blocks mounted above them like a stairway. One could then trip up the scale to bed and waltz down to breakfast in the morning — or one could trip *both* ways at once to a musical apotheosis."

As each new instrument appeared, transporting them became increasingly

difficult. Partch once complained about this manner of materialism in a letter. After he was asked to make a long-distance trek with the instruments for a performance, he complained that "this is exceedingly difficult." He then poked a sharp, satirical barb at another musical innovator, known for his experiments with "found instruments." "Hell, I'm not like John Cage. All Cage needs is a gong, a carrot juicer, and a toothbrush."

Harry Partch was a hell-raiser, an iconoclast, a hobo, a visionary, a Bacchic monk, a schizophrenic (some say), a mass of complexities (or contradictions, some say), a dove and a great white shark. He was a man who, according to Harold Driscoll, "remembered all kindnesses favorably," and yet who would denounce the things he saw unfavorably with the vehemence of an evangelist. In one area he was totally consistent: he detested any single ruling attitude or tradition, about which he said, "The extent to which an individual can resist being blindly led by tradition is a good measure of his vitality."

Another thing. About the foregoing attempt to characterize him? He wouldn't have given a damn. He would have said, "Concentrate on my works, the instruments, the theories," which respected critic Jacques Barzun called "the most original and powerful contribution to dramatic music on this continent." And to which we now turn.

* * *

Harry Partch wasn't trying to stand the musical establishment completely on its ear. Rather, he wanted to rowl out the wax that had accumulated in it over the last 300 years and allow it to hear new alternatives. Partch regarded the history of music in an almost Biblical fashion, as a fall from wholeness into "specialization" and, his most bitterly uttered term, "abstraction." Originally, according to Partch, music was part of a much larger aesthetic unit, a combination of the aural and the visual, the human voice and human body, dance, drama — all intertwined by the religious tendrils of ritual. Somewhere along the way (Partch doesn't say specifically when)

each of these united elements became cut away, "abstracted" from the whole. The consequences of this rift are that now dancers merely dance, musicians merely play music (collared by the "inhibiting incubus of tight coats and tight shoes"), and actors merely act — each separate part having been locked into "sealed spheres of purity." And each had become entangled in its own discrete tradition, something that Partch regarded about as highly as the remains of yesterday's breakfast. "Traditions in the creative arts are per se suspect. . . . They exist on the patrimony of standardization, which means degeneration. They dominate because they are to the interest of some group that has the power to perpetuate them, and they cease to dominate when some equally powerful group undertakes to bend them into a new pattern." Partch was one such bender, and the new pattern he attempted to forge was a return to the wholeness he envisioned in the theatrical music of the ancient Greeks.

Partch looked everywhere around him and saw only rigidity. "The ancient, lovely, and fearless attitude toward the human body was gone." The concert hall had become petrified by "rampant formality, huge impersonal assemblies with closely placed, hard, stiff-backed seats, black and white tails, brisk robots on stage." Looking at the spectacle of these automatons, Partch allowed himself a dash of wry nostalgia when he recalled a more innocent time. "Back in the early Twenties, long before Hollywood Bowl became a cemented, be-shelled, be-uniform ushered stadium, a few of us would take sandwiches and bottles of pop high up on the hillside there, and consume them quite without regard to whether we liked or did not like the music being played. That is a singular memory, and never since has the idea of the symphony orchestra seemed so painless in contemplation." Musicians, in Partch's mind, had become second-class citizens, relegated to the pit and forced to perform like mannequins in a tuxedo shop. And, Partch says, "I have watched them jealously guard their precious misconceptions."

In place of this stolid spectacle, Partch envisioned its opposite. He put his musicians on stage, in a theatrical situation, and had them not only playing the huge instruments but also performing in the drama itself, becoming an integral part — joined with the actors, mimes, and dancers, all in vigorous movement. This "body feeling" rejoins the physical aspect of man with the music, achieving not an inversion of spirit back into flesh but rather a condition in which each infuses the other with its own qualities. Partch called this coupling "Corporeality," a difficult term he never pinned down completely, though his musicians came to understand it.

When John Szanto first learned to play the Boo (sixty-four sections of bamboo arranged in seven rows that produce a sharp, dry sound), he bent over it from the waist. Formally trained as a percussionist, for John this was standard form. During a rehearsal, Partch took one look at Szanto and cut short the proceedings. He rushed over and groaned, "Man! Oh no, man! To play the Boo, you have to bend at the knees, like an athlete . . . not at the waist like an amateur California prune-picker!" Szanto learned Partch's dictum quickly that the instruments must be played with athletic, Corporeal grace.

Szanto also had one of those ineffable experiences that can happen to members of the Harry Partch Ensemble during a Corporeal presentation. They were near the end of a performance of *The Bewitched*, a "dance satire" about lost musicians who achieve a developing "at-one-ness" through the beat of their music. The score called for Szanto to reach way down, with now tired knees deeply bent, to the lowest level of the Boo (this part comes just after section ten, entitled "The Cognoscenti Are Plunged Into A Demonic Descent While At Cocktails"). Exhausted from the performance, at the conclusion of his part, Szanto collapsed to the floor, which was perfectly in keeping with his role — though not written into the score. "I fell to the floor naturally. If I would have *thought* of doing so beforehand, it never would have worked." That perception — the

fluidity of the spontaneous act perfectly in tune with the entire arrangement of the stage, the music, the drama, the sounds of human speech, the movement — is Corporeality. And Partch himself knew of the difficulty of sustaining it when he said, "Perception is a sand flea. It can light only for a moment. Another moment must provide its own sand flea."

What Partch was after in a Corporeal performance of his works was an "attitudinal technique." The players of his unique instruments were to be constantly aware that they are "on stage, *in the act*." Merely playing the notes in a masterful style, the goal of "abstract" music, was not enough. "When a player fails to take full advantage of his role in a visual or acting sense, he is muffing his part — in my terms — as thoroughly as if he bungled every note in the score." For this reason Partch thought any performance, for example, of Beethoven's works (and the composer himself) was too abstract. Any composer who tries to pole vault into the ethereal regions without being grounded, at the same time, in the soil from which he springs is not "emotionally tactile," according to Partch.

While Beethoven was too abstract for Partch, the early Elvis Presley was not. Partch saw in Presley, the unfettered kid from Memphis who sung from the hip, the occasional glimmerings of Corporeality — the dramatic fusion of human speech, music, and movement, an *inseparable* combination of these parts into a larger whole. Partch, however, did not appreciate the later Presley at all. He saw the man becoming an imitation of his earlier vitality, the whole being separated back into its various and obviously detectable parts once again. And Partch did not like rock and roll in general. Calling it the "dominant mediocrity" of the day, he wrote one of his greatest musical dramas, *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*, partially in an attempt (only "partially" because he is after much bigger game in this masterwork) to demystify the growing, follow-the-leader conformity and false

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idolatry he saw in popular music — and music in general, all of which he called “hollow magic.” “Let us give to nuts and bolts the standardization of thread that we have come to expect, but let us give to music, magic; to man, magic. . . . My peaks of wrath and nadirs of depression, through some four decades, were akin to the fulminations and despair of the Hebrew prophets, and for exactly the same reasons; the endowed priests of the temple sanctifying form without content, ritual without value, *hollow magic*.” (*Revelation in a Courthouse Park* concentrates on two locales: ancient Thebes and modern-day Hollywood. Each city is ruled by manifestations of the same impulse to rejoin the human body into a religious context. Thebes is ruled truly, by Dionysus, while Hollywood is ruled falsely by Dion, a contemporary rock and roll star. The latter represents nothing more than the worship of what Partch has called the “dominant mediocrity.” When Partch finished the score — around 1960 — a new rock and roll star emerged — Dion, of Dion and the Belmonts. Partch only learned of this figure long after the completion of *Revelation*.)

Along with his concept of Corporeality, Partch tore off in another, non-Western direction. He became fed up with the system of tuning known as Equal Temperament — the twelve-tones-per-octave scale of the piano — because its twelve equal intervals distort true sounds, according to DanLee Mitchell, “in order to gain an intellectual hedge in certain compositional procedures like modulation and transposition.” In all, there are four major theoretical tuning systems: Equal Temperament, Pythagorean, Meantone Temperament, and Just Intonation. Partch felt that the last, a tuning system based on the relationship of two or more tones vibrating in

phase with each other (at least in their lowest vibrational relationships) is a more natural and a more precise system than any other, since it not only reflects the sounds in nature but is also in keeping with the various components and processes of the human body. And though he was by no means the first Western composer to advocate the system of Just Intonation (in 1550 a Partch-like composer named Don Nicola Vicentino experimented with it, and many non-Western cultures — Japanese, Indonesian, African, Balinese, as well as native American Indian — base their music on it), Partch was among the first to embrace completely its possibilities.

Just Intonation enabled Partch to expand the number of notes in a musical octave. This choice opened for him the floodgates of “microtonality,” which means, simply, more than twelve notes per octave. Many of the instruments he built can go as high as forty-three notes per octave (an “arbitrary” personal choice, he said, and by no means the limit), creating a plurality of sound, especially when combined with the other instruments and the Corporeal nature of a production. One devotee of Partch, who worked overtime for a year in New Jersey to save enough money for a flight to San Diego to catch a few rehearsals of the ensemble, said, “The whole thing is like the Great Flood. Makes you want to build an Ark. Not to escape — but to ride those waves forever.”

It can be explained this way, using an image suggested by Jonathan Glasier. A clock has twelve numbers. Where most people just see the cardinal numbers on a clock, Partch would see through them to the minitemporal divisions — the sixty seconds — inside. Translating the twelve numbers of the clock into the twelve-tone scale, Partch contended that the majority of Western composers were stuck with those cardinal numbers (Harry might have called them “Papal” numbers since they were so predominant.) And Partch, as we have seen, couldn’t put up with any sort of limitation. Calling Equal Temperament a “tyrannical monolith,” he felt it “closes

all doors for any meaningful adventures in consonance and dissonance” (the harmonic and discordant elements in music). He often questioned its right to rule. “The statement in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* that the advantages of the system far outweigh its flaws (p. 735) is made with such authority as almost to convince me that the *Dictionary* got it from Bach, and that Bach got it from God.”

Two features regarding Partch’s break with tradition need to be stressed here. One is that he was not an experimenter for its own sake. He was not a timid dabbler with a new microtonal toy (that would be the path of the “foolhardy” man or the “publicity-seeking mountebank,” he says). The instruments he built and the scores he composed all have specific purposes. They were never designed solely for the solution of acoustical problems or theoretical issues, even though he wrote a large text about it, which many commentators have suggested does a lot of intentional leg-pulling. Partch hated theory. He always preferred the *doing* of something to the analysis of it. There was always an idea for each instrument, a place for it, in other words, in his overall conception. In effect, Partch left theoretical concerns for the next generation.

The second feature in need of stress is one of the wildest aspects of the whole Partch enterprise. It takes at least half an hour to tune most of the instruments before an actual performance, often even longer. But most of them go out of tune within ten minutes, and Partch knew this. The expertise required to play the instruments (and the six months required to rehearse a single performance) forestall the advent of total chaos. But part of Partch’s Corporeality is that anything can happen — within the approximated guidelines of the score — on stage after the initial tuning. Colors of sound leap out that no score can document, no theory can articulate. The initial tuning, done with painstaking precision, serves as a point of departure for the multiple, yet rarely muddled, prisms of sound that emerge, an audible heterophony in which all sorts of diverse effects happen at the

same time. Once during a rehearsal, Partch told one of the performers he was hearing colors not written into the score. “By God, man, *keep them!*” he shouted.

While on the one hand Partch abandoned the Western musical tradition, in his concept of Corporeality, in what he mock-snobbishly called his microtonal “adventures into acoustical profundity,” and in his beautiful instruments, on the other hand many of his works focus on the speech patterns, the rhythms, and the pulse of America. His intuitive path led him to write music based on harmonized spoken words, many of which draw on his experiences as a wanderer. His large work *The Wayward* is composed of four smaller works, each concerned with the voice of the streets. *U.S. Highball*, the musical account of a “Transcontinental Hobo Trip from San Francisco to Chicago,” utilizes the language of the hobo in a nonepic, nonheroic light (“in the *aleness* of his experience . . . his achievement in the face of small difficulties — more or less constant hunger, loss of sleep, filth, and a good deal of petty apprehension and danger — he is the focus of a work that suggests epic feelings”). *Barstow*, another part of *The Wayward*, takes its cue from “hitchhiker inscriptions copied from a highway railing,” and *San Francisco* is filled with the cries of newsboys. Thus, amid his many departures from the norm, there is embedded into his work a return as well — a journey he felt was necessary back to the native speech patterns of his homeland.

In all of his departures — to ancient patterns of Corporeal ritual, to Just Intonation and microtonality, to his emphasis on human speech — Partch never intended himself to become a tradition. “The work is not offered as a basis for a substitute tyranny,” he said, “the grooving of music and musical theory into another set of conventions. What I do hope for is to stimulate creative work by example, to encourage investigation of basic factors, and to leave all others to individual if not idiosyncratic choice. To influence, yes; to limit, no.”

The message of Harry Partch, for musi-

cians and nonmusicians alike, is that there are still choices to be made and independent paths to pursue. On several occasions near the end of his life, Partch contended that he did not want people to consider his work the only worthy destination but rather one viable direction (deserving serious scrutiny) among many. He feared slavish imitators of his work almost as much as he feared its being misunderstood in general. Imitators, he felt, were like remora fish that attach themselves to larger fish; as they hitch a free ride, they abandon their creative responsibilities. In one of his last utterances, Partch blasted this phenomenon. "The widely revered master-disciple concept represents, on both sides, too easy an escape into the limbo of *no* responsibility. I have said that if anyone calls himself a pupil of mine, I will happily strangle him. But this is simply the expression of an attitude, and — amazingly — in its deeper meaning it is an expression of hope."

* * *

At the conclusion of an excellent, half-hour film about his work called *The Dreamer That Remains* (distributed by Tantalus Films, L.A.), Partch makes a statement that decomposes his own personal stake in the work he has done. Although he wishes that the work be understood and appreciated, Partch appends a cryptical tag that, though not necessarily ambiguous on the surface, has generated numerous, conflicting responses, as if it were a message from the Oracle at Delphi. Partch says, like the primitive cave painters in the south of France who never signed their efforts, "I would choose to be anonymous. There is no author there. Who cares who did them? *Who cares what the name was?*" The various reactions to this apparently self-effacing remark reflect in microcosm what has happened to the Partch legacy since his death in 1974.

Although Partch's statement appears to divorce himself from his works, most interpreters recombine the two when they read it, and they also see in it clues for what

remains to be done. John Szanto expresses at least one side of a multisided structure of opinions. "Everyone has had to resolve Partch and the legacy in some way. The music is so unique, so expensive to perform — since it can be performed only on the fragile instruments he made, which cost a bundle just to move — that maybe the music should be like Harry. Let it rest. It's done its thing. He did it, and it was great. End of movie. Credits. Like the cave painters, this was Harry's moment, and now it's gone. His wish for anonymity is the strongest affirmation of belief he could have made about what he had done."

David Dunn, another member of the Harry Partch Ensemble, sees a different Partch, and a different direction for the legacy. "You must remember the context in which Partch made the statement. He didn't say it in the privacy of his own home. He put it *on the record*, in a film about his work. It is a dramatic flourish and its intended effect was to promote himself and his works. The time has come to get beyond glorification and deification of the man, which do him an extreme injustice, and begin to take his work seriously, looking at both its strengths and weaknesses. Right now, everyone wants to use Partch the way they see him, based on their own subjectivity, which is inescapable. But we should get beyond all the rhetoric and try to see what is actually there in Partch's work."

Both Szanto and Dunn knew Partch, as did San Diego composer Kenneth Gaburo, who worked with Partch at Illinois in the Fifties. Gaburo, who directed the ensembles' most recent performance in West Germany — for which the German government paid \$100,000 and the success of which is also open to conflicting views among its performers — sees in Partch a host of schizophrenic contradictions. "Partch built and lived a self-destruct system and therefore planned his own obsolescence. He didn't make it easy to repair his instruments, for example, because he built them out of such rare materials. In

this sense he was both a creator and a destroyer. Whatever flaws and exaltations exist in the man also exist in the music. His is a flawed system. I don't mean this as a negative statement, but rather as an affirmation of his human frailty. Whatever influence he had in the Twentieth Century," Gaburo continues, "has already long ago been felt. The influences have dissipated and have become other things."

And David Carey, a student of music doing his doctoral work at UCSD, adds another position. "It is unfortunate that without his instruments, the music is impossible. Putting the instruments in a museum would kill the music, which should be not only heard but seen in a live, Corporeal performance. The most positive thing would be one production, at least, per year with financial backing, though money has always been one of the continual problems with the legacy — that and giving the instruments a decent home and space for rehearsals."

As should be obvious by now, any attempt to resolve these and twenty-five other differing views into a clear-cut synthesis of opinion would likely be futile. Partch deeply moved everyone he touched, and yet he moved each in different ways. Some argue that he was, in fact, a deliberate promoter and that now his music should be promoted vehemently as a result. Others contend that his was a private struggle and that his work should, as Szanto says, be put to rest. Still others demand immediate access to his scores (most of which are as yet unpublished) and to his instruments — for an array of reasons that, when combined, are so vast as to seem microtonal in nature. As one member of the ensemble put it, "The legacy is like a piece of choice beef out in a desert, and the buzzards are beginning to fly in from all over."

For all of his protestations to the contrary, real or contrived, Partch left behind several clues regarding the future he wanted for his works and instruments. For those who would have them housed away in a museum: "I can only partially sym-

pathize with the curator's attitude toward rare and unique instruments. Paintings and sculpture and many other museum objects are fulfilling their purpose in being looked at. Whether or not the dead can experience frustration, I for one feel an intense frustration for those artisans who created instruments to *sound*, when I see the results of their labor placarded with the injunction 'Do Not Touch' or displayed in locked glass cases."

On another occasion, in a manual he wrote regarding maintenance and repair of the instruments, Partch said, "The basic and essential need as of this moment is someone who can and will — if necessary — take my place (1) to see to it that the instruments are in good structural and playable condition; (2) to keep them in tune as well as this is humanly possible; and (3) to demand that they be played competently, and that the attitudes be right, even at the risk of arousing momentary hostility."

Partch left his legacy — the instruments, the scores, his writings — in the care of SDSU's DanLee Mitchell, who was one of Partch's most trusted friends. An inheritance this important, this priceless, is certain to arouse more than the "momentary hostility" of which Partch spoke. And Mitchell, who derives no personal income of any sort from the legacy, has been criticized for the essentially moderate path he has taken with respect to promoting the music. A partial reason for this, many of his admirers have suggested, is that he shies away from using the legacy in any apparently self-serving capacity. Another reason, suggested to me by Randy Hoffman, another member of the ensemble, is that "DanLee is in a no-win situation. You can't do anything without financial support. And when you don't have it, you get killed for not doing anything."

One example of the heat Mitchell has felt came in a blistering article written by Peter Garland, editor of a musical journal called *Soundings*. In 1973 Garland got Partch to agree to the publication of *The*

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Bewitched in Garland's magazine. Forty-one months later, more than three years after Partch's death, Mitchell had not sent Garland the score. So Garland shot from the hip: "DanLee has been active performing, lecturing, and teaching about Partch's work — I will grant that. But if one does not live in California, or more specifically San Diego, one is left out again."

In reply to this incident, Mitchell says, "When Garland contacted Harry, he and I were busy putting out the second edition of his book, *Genesis of a Music*, and we were also making the film *The Dreamer That Remains*. Publishing the music was not that important at that time. After Partch died, my efforts went into productions of *The Bewitched* and *U.S. Highball*, and Peter was left on the back burner. He

blasted me in his journal, and I can understand his anger. He was well intentioned, but I don't think it would have worked out, because neither Peter nor I were set up to distribute the material properly after the printing. I've since given Ken Gaburo Harry's letters, documents, and rights to publish the scores, and I think everything has worked out for the betterment of Partch."

The main problem facing the legacy, according to Mitchell, is financial. "There is no grant money for maintenance," he says. "It all goes for creative work. And I don't have rich acquaintances in San Diego who would invest in the Partch Foundation as a tax-deductible contribution. Right now, the Partch Foundation receives about \$2000 per year from royalties on his book. But that's about it, and the money goes into the continual repair of the instruments."

At present, though they are the personal property of Mitchell, the instruments are housed at San Diego State. Jack Logan,

another member of the music faculty there, says that the situation is inadequate. "I find it appalling that DanLee cannot find sufficient space at SDSU to house all the instruments. We have one of the most important repositories of experimental musical instruments in the world. Partch's music is still so little known that the university hasn't fully realized the potential for research and practical application that these instruments imply. We're all frustrated that this condition exists. Partch's creative imagination could be used as an example to put forth — a self-made, creative, individualistic genius. For a major university to overlook this potential seems to me to show very little foresight. But I'm sure that the leaders at SDSU are much more able to deal with a problem like this than they have been in the past. The ideal solution, it seems to me, would be expensive but also worth it. It would be to put the instruments into a *living museum*, where they can be seen, repaired, and above all, where they can be heard."

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In the shadows of the auditorium on this warm August morning, the instruments stand in the dim light like strange sentinels. They look like the sculpted playthings of the mythical Greek Titans of pre-civilization rather than the objects of such feverish concern, such a cacophony of varied opinions. A seismic shudder, of either supersonic or subterranean origin, bowls through the depths of the mesa, and a few of the stringed instruments awake briefly from their slumber and hum a barely audible, microtonal chord. "Where do things go from here?" I ask, surprised by the event and half expecting a detailed answer as a result of his momentary communication. "Perhaps," replies a voice way inside my imaginings, "perhaps only the gods know for sure. But right now they are extremely busy. They're trying to track down a fairly recent arrival, a fireball of an upstart who has gone and retuned all the lyres in paradise to his system of Just Intonation." □