The San Diego Union/Chris Cavanaugh

Jonathan Glasier displays several musical instruments in his downtown gallery.

Zing, wheeze: music to his ears

Face to Face

Lianne Stevens

The San Diego Museum of Sound and Light.

It's Jonathan Glasier's dream, and when he talks about it you can easily imagine right along with him:

The huge, skylighted room is filled with what looks at first like modern sculpture. But as you enter, your ears are greeted with a great array of sounds — music, yes, but there seem to be more notes than you have ever heard before, notes between the notes. Glasier describes it as a fuller "rainbow of sound" than our traditional, 12-tone octave allows.

Technically, musicians call it "microtonality," or "alternative tunings." The few hundred pioneers scattered around the country who are "into it" have been busy building instruments in the last several decades — the stringed Harmony Harp, for instance, which yields up to 100 tones per octave. Imagine keys between the keys on a piano, 100 of them from middle C to the C in the middle of the musical staff.

world-renowned Exploratorium, where he spent a year as an artist in residence, building a Pentaphone for the hands-on, science-as-art museum. But the dream is not as distant as it used to be.

Six months ago, Glasier opened a match-box prototype of the museum in a tiny storefront on F Street. He calls it the Sonic Arts Gallery.

"The reason I started this place is that I felt that I couldn't just write people about this vision, I had to start manifesting it myself," the 42-year-old musical inventor explained.

All of the instruments described above, except for the singing crystals, have been invented. Several of them (and some not mentioned) are on display at the gallery, which

major. Partch didn't stay (he was too controversial for even the most avant-garde music department in the country, which Glasier says UCSD had at the time). But Glasier stayed long enough to finish his degree.

Partch died in 1974, never having gained much acceptance from the music establishment. He left behind his instruments (given to SDSU music professor Danlee Mitchell), his writings ("Genesis of a Music"), his compositions (performed by the Harry Partch Ensemble), and his most ardent admirer and promoter — Jonathan Glasier.

"I feel sort of, in a way, (like) a guardian of the future of music," Glasier mused.

He said he started his magazine, *INTERVAL — Journal of Music Research and Development*, four years after Partch's death because he believed the idea of microtonal music was "just fizzling out, slipping away."

"But there were just voracious letters being written back and forth between these great

of them from middle C to the C in the middle of the musical staff.

The musicians before you in the imaginary museum are not professionals. They are ordinary tourists from all over the world, or schoolchildren, or even yourself.

You pick up a nearby mallet — actually a multicolored rubber ball with a stick jammed into it — and drag it across Godzilla, a steel oil drum painted black, with thick metal curlicues soldered on like sparse strands of kinky hair.

A deep, mournful sound that makes you think of a crying whale resonates across the room.

All around you are people experimenting, instant musicians who have become captivated by the Tubulongs, Pentaphones, Megalyras, Wings, Waterphones and Laser Synthesizers filling the place with sweet tinklings and odd twangs.

On one side of the open space, the carefully preserved instrument-creations of microtonal pioneer Harry Partch are on display, rescued from their present consignment to a cramped classroom at San Diego State University.

On another side, scattered across a wall, is a pattern of light-sensitive photocells, each wired to produced a different tone (a sophisticated creation borrowed from the doorjamb buzzers commonly found in retail stores). When you walk, or dance, between the photocells and a nearby light source, your movement creates a splash of song.

In a corner, roped off from the busy main floor, some resident artists are building a new instrument, one that will "make crystals sing," Glasier hopes. It combines modern electronic technology with ordinary human appreciation for the beauty and mystery of these perfect resonators.

On special nights there are beautiful light shows, and concerts by musicians who are struggling to adapt this expanded world of sounds into a new musical language ...

What time do they open? Sorry. So far the San Diego Museum of Sound and Light is just a dream, modeled by Glasier on San Francisco's

invented. Several of them (and some not mentioned) are on display at the gallery, which encourages non-musicians to give them a zing, wheeze or clunk.

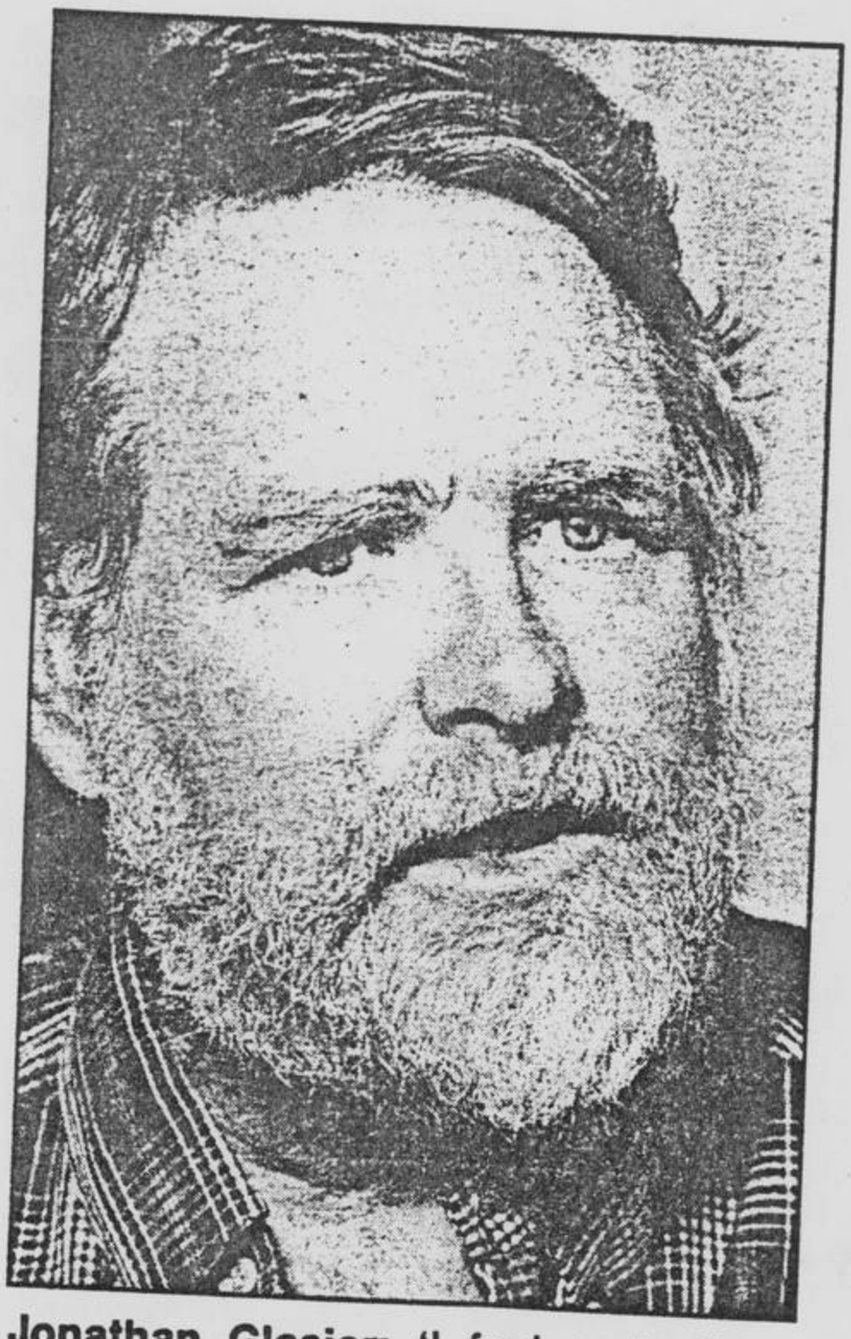
The current gallery feature is Stephen Kent Goodman's "Automated Musical Ensemble," a series of seven person-sized "modern sculptures" of crooked wooden pipes, glass bells and tubes that are controlled by a single "keyboard" of electrical circuits. Touch a metallic dot, and somewhere a valve opens to allow air to pass through, producing a sound.

Glasier likes the instrument because it is "a good balance between sound and art ... (which) is why I hocked myself up to the gills in order to actually purchase it. I feel that this (instrument) has a real place in the history of music. This is the essence of the idea of sonic art."

Glasier's passion for such things began he was 4 years old. His father, John, was a musician and composer (and string player for the San Diego Symphony for 27 years). John Glasier befriended Harry Partch, who came to live with the Glasiers for a short period of time.

Young Jonathan was suddenly faced with two types of music: the kind that is "almost ingrained in our DNA," the 12-tone-equal-temperament system that J.S. Bach chose more than 200 years ago and helped promote into total acceptance by Western ears — and Harry Partch's expanded universe of sounds.

The younger Glasier became a devotee of Partch's experiment. When the composer, known for his "difficult" personality, landed a post at UCSD, Glasier enrolled as a music



Jonathan Glasier: 'I feel sort of ... (like) a guardian of the future of music.'

written back and forth between these great minds about the possiblities (of microtonal music) ... I said, let's make some of these letters into articles and let's whip some of th stuff into shape so that it will be available to people.

"I see, on a negative side, that keeping the 12-tone-temperament is sort of like keeping what I call the conspiracy of duality," he continued. "We divide everything into good ar bad and right and wrong and everything, into 12 equal things, and it keeps people from expanding, because it's so easy to just say 'either/or', or 'black and white.' To me, reality is not like this. A black and white picture is 9(percent shades of gray, you know."

Glasier is fully aware that he and the 350 music theorists and inventors who subscribe t his magazine are revolutionaries challenging "the very essence" of music. Many musicians who have spent thousands of hours learning their instruments — and whole catalogues of music based on the 12-tone octave — are not eager to embrace microtonality. But Glasier i certain that the future leads in that direction, not displacing Beethoven and Mozart, but opening up a concept of music.

"Not everything is going to sound great" right off the bat, he admits, but patience shoul pay off.

"In order to expand our consciousness, we have to have more tones. That's why a lot of these are dissonance, because it's places that we're not familiar with. But we've got to do this in order to get beyond the place, the squirrel maze that we've put ourselves in, of going over and over and over, doing the same thing all the time ...

"As much as music, I'm really interested in the development of consciousness on the planet," he added. "But I feel my own specific purpose is to help people see this through musi and to realize that music is a key — just a key, not necessarily *the* key — but a key to do this."

Stevens is a free-lance writer.