

Sound American

SA Issue 7:

Five Questions (and more) with Al Margolis and Pogus Productions



Selected Sound Samples:-

If, Bwana: E and Sometimes Why - Gilmore's Girls

Tom Hamilton/Bruce Eisenbeil: Shadow Machine - Dusting Off Dada

Simon Wickham-Smith: Love & Lamentation - Sandokai

Enzo Minarelli: Fame - Gilgamesh Sumerian Poem

Luis David Aguilar: Tensions at the Vanguard (New Music from Peru) - MAYHUAY for string quartet (1971)

Noah Creshevsky: Rounded With A Sleep - Tomomi Adachi Redux II

Dimitri Voudouris: $A\Lambda\Theta=\Phi$ - $A\Lambda\Theta=\Phi$

Robert Rutman: 1939 - Three Bow Chimes

Kiva: Kiva - 11 April 1991 - 1

Frances White: In The Library Of Dreams - In The Library Of Dreams

Felix Werder: The Tempest - Banker

Philip Corner: Pieces From The Past - Philip Corner's Piece For Malcolm Goldstein By Elizabeth Munro

Leo Kupper: Digital Voices - Lumiere Sans Ombre

Al Margolis is one of those people you may not know has had an effect on your life. Maybe not ever, or at least not for a very long time. But, anyone who has spent even a small part of their life looking into experimental electro-acoustic music has been affected by Al. Not only is he the impresario of Pogus Productions and Sound of Pig cassettes, but he makes his own brilliant electro-acoustic work under the name If, Bwana (see Track One of the mixtape!). As if this weren't enough to convince you of Al's credibility, he's also involved with Phill Niblock's XI Records and Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening Records.

So, yes, you could say that Al Margolis is the one man dark cabal behind a great percentage of the experimental music that has come out of America in the past 20 or more years. I tend to think of him as the bizarro Karl Rove; a man helping to pull the strings, but in the most pleasing possible ways.

Our conversation was originally put together for a previous issue, and so it strays slightly from the tried and true 5 Questions format. I have been saving it for a special occasion and now, given Al's relationship to Deep Listening Publications, seems perfect. I find it a fascinating conversation due to the sheer longevity of Al in the context of experimental recording production and distribution. He has seen more change in the industry than most, and perhaps it has tempered his viewpoint a little regarding putting music into the world. Don't misunderstand me, though. He hasn't lost his passion. I still consider him very much a keeper of his particular flame, but there is a certain guarded pragmatism that comes from a long career of ringing the steeple bells and proclaiming the musical good word.

SOUND AMERICAN: First of all, can you give me a little background on you and your history with recordings? What was your first experience with music and how did it develop into the business of Pogus?

AL MARGOLIS: Well, my first tape deck was a reel to reel - i believe 7 inch tapes - used to record off the radio - probably around 1970 or so. I must admit I did not think in terms of doing any recording of playing etc.. I was totally into music and wanted to be a musician. That was "before the days of diy culture". I put quotations because there is always diy culture, just not everyone knows it or knows about it.

So, I was playing guitar, etc. but not seriously pursuing it. It was the days of "real musicians" (i.e. those who could play), and then punk just kind of freed it. I started reading about zines and cassette stuff. Since I always leaned towards the other, I started tracking some of that down which led to starting a cassette label: Sound of Pig Music (SOP). I was interested for a long time in being a "producer" and so this was it. Over the course of running a cassette label my listening and contacts grew and then the 2 combined so that Pogus Records began as a collaborative label between me (still running SOP) and David Prescott and Gen Ken Montgomery who were running Generations Unlimited, a label they had along with Conrad Schnitzer (if I recall correctly Conrad was more of a silent partner/inspiration than actually being involved so much with the label). Dave was doing electronic music and was djing on WZBC in Boston when we met and our interests were similar. Pogus began as a "before they die" label; [Giacinto] Scelsi and [Luigi] Nono and [Morton] Feldman had all recently passed and then lots of their work began to be released on cd. We were hoping to actually get some things out by composers who interested us before they died.

SA: It's funny that you mention taping things off of the radio, as that's what another person I'm talking to, Eric Isaacson of Mississippi Records, sites as a sort of beginning for him as well (and you both have dealt with releasing cassettes at some point). I wonder if you ever felt the need to capture something as ephemeral as a radio broadcast and have it contained in an object like a tape? I know I had periods of that and I still think that's probably part of my need and desire to release and own CDs/LPs/cassettes.

I like the idea of a "before they die" label. Folks like Scelsi, Feldman, et al. have gotten a lot of due in the last 10 or 15 years, but were they underappreciated during their lifetime? I guess it's never something I thought of, coming to their music after their deaths. Did you have a group of composers that you definitely had in mind, because of that, when you all started Pogus?

AM: Interesting about Eric..cool....I did not at the time feel the need to capture ephemerality as much as... well, I guess since back then [there were] no streaming or real radio playlists as today and fm radio was still a relatively open free radio thing (especially in the NYC area) so people played a lot of what they wanted. Being a young teenager with no dough and you wanted to hear music (much like today's youth i reckon) [I ended up taping music to listen to]

Feldman was known but I think his music was not actually able to be well represented until the cd format evolved because of the length and volume (or lack of?) in his pieces. And Scelsi was relatively unknown. We approached Kagel, but he wanted money, which we did not have. Off the top of my head I can't remember others, but the whole electroacoustic and experimental contemporary thing would have been our interest area.

SA: And, is that where you went from those early days? Focusing on electro-acoustic work? It seems now like you do a mix of things that represent composers that are either gone or near the end of their careers alongside people at the beginnings of their working lives. Do you have a specific curatorial vision now, or is it just something that moves you. What makes a recording something you feel needs to be out in the public?

AM: [Historically] Pogus does feature archival and lesser or unknown (relatively) composers, plus my own work, plus what moves me. There are still many untapped corners that are out there, and so one kind of flows to what is out there plus what is offered. Having lots of different interests, but not lotsa cash makes it interesting and frustrating. So, Pogus doesn't release just electroacoustic and electronic music, per se, but hopefully [music that's] experimental and interesting. I have been told that the label does seem to present a curatorial vision, so that is always good. I guess "my taste" plays into it. Generally speaking, it has to be something I like and I feel is unique. Plus, and it's a drag that this does become part of the equation (but then maybe in its limiting capacity, it's a good thing), only having a certain budget means that it has to strike my ears so that i want to spend the money on it. For instance, a number of things over the past few years have come to me that I have "passed" on. They were interesting, but not quite enough. Then they've shown up on other labels, which is of course good, and that makes me happy that Pogus resources were not spent on them...if that makes sense?

SA: Have you ever had a recording sent to you that you just felt like people absolutely had to hear and so you put it out?

AM: Most Pogus releases are like that. I can't think of anything specifically, but i think people absolutely have to hear everything on Pogus.

SA: Right. It feels like that, and I guess that's why I picked you as someone I wanted to include in this custodian issue. I always got a feeling that Pogus releases were presented as very important aural objects that you were offering to a specific group of a listeners. Beyond the day to day production of the discs, curation, promotion, etc. how often does building a community of listeners or exposing people to the music you release enter your mind?

AM: Well, I am very happy to hear that that comes across. I feel that they are like that. I guess on one hand [the idea of building a community] is always on my mind since my day jobs, so to speak, (as label manager for XI Records, Mutable Music and Deep Listening and also Pogus), entails me to think about this. There *is* a community of listeners, and there are always people willing to be exposed [to this music] these days; and with internet, streaming, digital, blogs, radio, etc., etc. they have many ways to be exposed. I think that if there is any "issue", and this is not a complaint, there is too much music. There is so much for the listener to take in that it has become almost *more* difficult to get folks to listen. its a strange dichotomy, and it has also bred these weird listening format fetishes. I sell more cassettes these days than cds almost, and lps! It's almost like folks are deciding what to listen to by what medium it is released on, as if the actual content is not what it is about.

SA: I think there are definitely people that are more attached to the object than to the music it contains. I guess that is shown by the amount of labels that are releasing the same recording on multiple formats, but it seems that if someone is into collecting cassettes at least you have a chance that they might stumble across the music as well and be transformed...maybe wishful thinking, but it seems like the fetishism of cassette culture, vinyl culture, stuff like that at least is a partial boon to folks like yourself who are involved in trying to get more of this kind of music out there, doesn't it?

AM: No, only because I really have had people say to me that they are only buying lps or tapes. They do not want

to buy cds, so that doesn't seem to be about the music, but about the object. I mean, if you are interested in the music what does it matter how it comes (physical, digital)...it's about the music.

Maybe i am getting peevisish in me old age.

SA: I see your point. I guess I see both sides of the coin in a way. On the one hand, you're right. If someone wants the music, it shouldn't matter what format it's in (I recently bought a cassette player, just so I could hear what they put out on Canary and Mississippi tapes), but I guess the naive idealist in me (the person who hasn't been in the business of releasing CDs!) thinks that those same people may actually stumble over something that kickstarts an interest for them. But, then again, I haven't been working like this as long as you have and so I am guessing that I would probably be disabused of that little fairy tale rather quickly.

AM: I am actually for *all* the formats. I do not have an issue with *how* people stumble across the music - stumbling is good. My issue is more about when someone will not buy (or listen) because it is on one format and not another. That seems to be a closing off of the stumbling process. I mean if you wanted to hear that Canary tapes stuff, but refused to buy their cds or lps only wanted tapes, and the stuff you were interested in wasn't on tapes, you wouldnt be hearing it. So, I like the all possibilities. I have a cassette deck, cd player and turntable at home so...

SA: With all your experience now, do you consider what you do a business, a passion, or a moral imperative?

AM: Well, I approach it as a "business", as that helps me keep it going and, unfortunately, as times get tougher if it fails as a business, Pogus will be gone or will become a digital only label). But, it is first and foremost a passion and a personal imperative. I need to do this and then hope it makes some small difference.



Al Margolis

If, Bwana was born on New Year's Eve 1984, making music that has swung between fairly spontaneous studio constructions and more process-oriented composition. A recent review of Margolis's work says: "Let it be declared that Al Margolis/If, Bwana is some sort of evil genius working with raw materials which are never adapted to a genre or a context, because they create one in that very moment. Those sources are radically altered up to an utterly unrecognizable state, anarchic manifestations moving in compact determination." (Massimo Ricci, *Touching Extremes*).

Al Margolis has been an activist in the 1980s American cassette underground through his cassette label Sound of Pig Music; was co-founder of experimental music label Pogus Productions, which he continues to run. Active under the name If, Bwana since 1984, making music that has swung between fairly spontaneous studio constructions and more process-oriented composition.

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