

arguably on a similar wavelength to Smithson or Heizer, say, *Trout Mask Replica* or *Safe As Milk* by Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band, found a popular audience, while the Earthworkers palpably didn't? Why did the likes of Richard Meltzer and Lester Bangs succeed as gonzo music journalists, while the art world seemed to insulate itself from these forms of anarchic writing styles, unable to reconcile the cerebral with the physical, and maintaining only the refined, critical mindset that in turn wrote (and write) tomes on the anarchic, art actions, processes, performances and installations? And why it is this way round? Why does art writing appear to need the justification of academe, and why can an avant-garde category, at the intersection of popular and musical culture, either not have to worry about this or just is not picked up and effectively made into a subject for scrupulous academic enquiry?

Fortunately these are questions *Avant Rock* doesn't pretend to address. That said, it does ask other rather interesting questions, within a 240 page romp. There is a level of relaxation and unhung-upness about the writing in *Avant Rock* that, despite being written by an academic scholar of Derrida, is marvellously refreshing and liberating. This may have something to do with the tradition of rock-writing intellectuals, which has been remarkably resistant to being integrated into the grove of academe. But *Avant Rock* is not a rock music book about either a specific chapter of rock history, or essays on various key artists, like the late Ian McDonald's essays *The People's Music* or Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*. There is much incidental connection-making with the world of philosophy, but the book is also so definitely not a philosophical tome, in the sense that philosophy tutors or students would recognise. The main feeling is that, like the music it unceasingly charts, it is out there. Out-there writing for out-there music.

It is also oddly arranged, in that in its three part sinfonietta, the middle section feels only tangentially related to the initial moves in the opening chapter, and the concluding part heads off again on a different tack. The book is an album, and each chapter a different track. This doesn't matter, at least to my mind, feeling like the man is doing what he wants to do, rather than playing by the narrative rules. The first part is an exhilarating ride through six key players who de-or/and re-constructed the rulebook of music making: Yoko Ono, John Cage, Glenn Gould, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor and Miles Davis, Martin using each to

illustrate stepping-off points in the expansion of the syntax of ideas that came to comprise something of the new vocabulary of avant rock for the next quarter of a century. Each of these musicians make new steps as part of an interrelated unfolding logic of next steps, which, sometimes purposefully, sometimes randomly, land musicians in altogether other logics. Yet as Martin says, 'Even exploded logics leave trails and generate consequences.'

And the consequences are multiple and open-ended. So while there is an ocean between Cage and Gould and the classical centre, both recognise the same ocean. But with John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor there is a sudden turn, which yearns and arrives at a completely other world, one where, within Trane's sheets of sound, there is 'an entire universe in a musical grain of sand'.

Into this initial section are rolled issues such as how avant rock, as with other avant-gardes, including art, integrates its relation to the spectrum of technique. That is, from accepting to refusing, and points between and above such as transcending, technique. And, another primary

characteristic, again shared with art, the absorption of ideas over skill, which has affected the forms of musical language. Authenticity and its inverse, recording-technology being used to augment or reorganise music, is another tension point, as is expressiveness, a personal author expressing emotional individuality. The conflict between technique aesthetics can be seen with the Beatles representing the high-musicianship end of the skill spectrum and the low technique non-musicianship of the Velvet Underground the other. Out of the Beatles comes Progressive Rock and other virtuosic approaches to musicianship; out from the Velvets comes a whole different course, from Patti Smith, New Wave, to ideas taking precedence over sound itself.

If you get into this philosophical riff, part two of *Avant Rock* 'Forest and Trees', may come as something of an initial disappointment, as it becomes clear that Martin doesn't have that much to say about the many groups and individual musicians he includes. Rather, this is list time, and he races through a veritable panoply of avant rock roots and offshoots, including his favourite time, the much derided progressive sounds of the seventies. There are long lists, medium-length lists and short lists of CDs, threaded together by shared histories, shards of connections and other sometimes tenuous or obscure linkages. It is pretty easy to imagine muso's faulting what he has left out – what!

