

## Celebrating The Music that Refuses to Be Pinned Down



A woman who plays pine cones, tree branches, and leaves as if they were musical instruments—which, in her hands, they are.

A former stunt bike rider who went from crashing his bike, to punk rock bands, to free jazz improviser.

A magazine editor and suburban father who is also a conservatory-trained percussionist, art-rock drummer and composer of ambient sound collages.

These are some of the eight individuals whose portraits make up the heart of the film “Noisy People” which premiered to a sold-out house at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley last April. Filmmaker and musician Tim Perkis used a hand-held camera to make his documentary about the working lives of experimental musicians who live in the Bay Area. The movie is a love letter to the eclectic community which has nourished him and his own music for the last thirty years.

It’s also an insider’s look at the lives of working artists. Each of the people profiled in the movie face the economic challenges of being an experimental artist in a commercial world. Day jobs? No problem. These folks do everything from tutoring disadvantaged children to working in corporate America in order to finance their creative lives.

Finding support and an audience for melody-challenged music that defies all expectations of what music is supposed to sound like? Ah, that’s where this group shines. The community that has grown up around these musical experiments and improvisations, is arguably its best creation.

The music itself is an unclassifiable and unruly child born of avant-garde jazz, rock and modern composition, living on the extreme edge of each of these forms but making its own way. Jazz and its rich tradition of improvisation is the clearest cultural antecedent, but the notion of taking accepted musical structures and experimenting with them in an unfettered way (think Stockhausen) also comes from 20th century classical movements. Rock music, especially punk rock, also contributes both a sensibility of working outside the norm and a downright exuberant noisiness to this musical art form.

"In the Bay Area we have everything from music department academics to punk rockers to working jazz artists performing in the experimental music scene," notes Perkis. "They all belong to the same family of experimental and improvisational music composers, but each one produces work that is unique and different from the others."

"Improvisation, by its nature, fosters cooperation, so there’s a sense of being part of a tribe, a respect for each other and absence of competitiveness that is one of the real strengths of this community."

Filmmaker Tim Perkis knows his subjects well, having worked with many of them on stage over the years. This personal connection brings the sense of camaraderie to the film. The interviewees

are comfortable and revealing in front of the camera in a way that perhaps only an insider to the scene could elicit.

Perkis, originally from Ohio, claims he was a “crappy” reed player in high school. It wasn’t until college that he got into experimental video and computer art, and found that he was interested in electronic sound. After graduate work in film and video, he drifted back to electronic music because at that time you couldn’t do video work in your own studio, and he was too private a person to be able to do creative work collaboratively. The irony of course, is that his first full-length documentary feature is a tribute to collaboration and community.

Perkis is himself is a father who lives in Albany and has supported himself with technical computer work, a bread and butter “day job” that allowed him to carry on with his music at small experimental venues in the Bay Area and around the world. His list of musical collaborators reads like an international “who’s who” of experimentalists of all stripes, from the worlds of European improvisation, free jazz, contemporary composition and electronic music.

What began as a simple attempt to tell the story of a remarkable musical scene, grew to a project that he soon realized had a social and political dimension as well:

"For years I kept saying ‘I wish someone would document this amazing scene going around here.’ Finally I realized I was the one to do it. I soon saw that the film posed a more basic question: what is a creative life and how can one live it? Just by the creative way these people are living their lives, they offer a critique of current American culture, in which artists are forced to the margins by a dominant entertainment industry, and communities are reduced to being ‘markets’ for entertainment products. This film is the story of an alternative to all that, just one example of how real participatory culture can work.”

#### **FEATURED ARTISTS:**

**DAMON SMITH**, a young bass player who went from being a competitive BMX bike stunt rider and punk rock bassist, to free jazz player.

**CHERYL LEONARD** writes compositions for her ensemble that plays pine cones, driftwood and moss. A satellite dish installer by trade, she clambers the East Bay hills and trees looking for natural objects to be in her orchestra.

**GINO ROBAIR**, conservatory-trained percussionist and suburban family man who gets 40 musicians to show up for a 40th birthday party to record his improv opera "Emperor Norton." Robair is a man who isn’t afraid to use the sound of styrofoam on glass or vibrating pens on drum heads in a piece of music if it works.

**TOM DJLL**, an accomplished trumpet and honky tonk piano player, uses his "Mockracy Ensemble" to satirize government at the same time as experimenting with new musical forms. Djll has been known to play two trumpets at once and to disassemble his instrument and put it together backwards to see what new sounds he can get.

**GREG GOODMAN** has produced hundreds of both theatrical and improvisational music shows over the past 25 years or more in his Berkeley home, a performance space known as "Woody Woodman's Finger Palace."

Bass player **GEORGE CREMASCHI** divides his time between San Francisco and the Czech Republic, and does battle with club owners everywhere: "I don't mind being treated like the dishwasher, but at least pay me as much as the dishwasher!"

PHILLIP GREENLIEF plays his saxophone on classical compositions in the recording studio but also takes it to Native American reservations for free concerts of improv music.

DAN PLONSEY likes to write pieces for whomever, and whatever, is available in front of him, from kids beginning on the clarinet to Toychestra, a group of women who play musical toys, to guitar legends like Fred Frith.

**ABOUT THE FILMMAKER:**



TIM PERKIS has been working in the medium of live synthesized sound and video for many years, performing widely in North America, Europe and Japan. He is also a well known performer in the world of improvised music, having performed on his electronic improvisation instruments with over 100 artists and groups, including Chris Brown, John Butcher, Eugene Chadbourne, Fred Frith, Elliott Sharp, Leo Wadada Smith and John Zorn. Ongoing groups he has founded or played in include the

League of Automatic Music Composers and the Hub – pioneering live computer network bands – and Rotodoti, the Natto Quartet, Fuzzybunny, and Wobbly/Perkis/Antimatter. Recordings of his musical work have appeared on a dozen European and American recording labels. (See [www.perkis.com](http://www.perkis.com) for information on his musical career.) NOISY PEOPLE is his first feature film.

---

If you would like to schedule an interview with Tim Perkis, please call Kattt Sammon at 510.734.3667 or email [info@noisypeople.com](mailto:info@noisypeople.com).

Also available are DVD copies of the film, a CD of music and sound clips from the film, digital images and an essay by the filmmaker, all at [www.noisypeople.com](http://www.noisypeople.com).