

MODERN DRUMMER[®]



Jim Mussen

Jim Mussen has been surviving in New York City as a drummer since 1982. He came to town from Berkeley, California, where he had played in an Allman Brothers clone band and a more ambitious Art Ensemble Of Chicago type aggregation. He also studied for a while in San Francisco with George Marsh, who hipped him to polyrhythms. Then, after arriving in New York, he checked into the Drummers Collective, where he studied with the likes of Billy Hart, Kenwood Dennard, and Horace Arnold over a period of two years.

Mussen put together a band called Doctor Nerve, which evolved out of a series of jam sessions with fellow Downtown musi-

icians like saxophonist Michael Lytle and guitarist Nick Didkovsky. Through those associations he met Elliott Sharp, and eventually played in his Carbon ensemble both on record and in performances around New York. During this time he also played in a fusion outfit called Shadow Lines, led by vibraphonist Marc Wagnon. His band Doctor Nerve recently released its second album on Cunieform Records, *Armed Observations*. He describes the music as "King Crimson, Frank Zappa, and The Sex Pistols rolled into one big ball."

Though Mussen has been closely associated with the Downtown scene for the past six years or so, he says he's slowly seeking to expand his horizons and get involved in more lucrative settings. "The great thing about the Downtown scene," says Mussen, "is that the musicians are very sensitive improvisors. But it's almost impossible to survive just by playing in these Downtown circles. So I started to branch out into pop about a year and a half ago, programming drum machines and computers for a recording studio in town that specializes in dance remixes."

Meanwhile, he's getting more involved in electronics with Doctor Nerve. "I'm now using a mixed kit of electronics and acoustic drums. It's a Premier set with trigger mic's on all the drums, sending signals to an Emulator SP-12 or a Casio FZ-1 sampler. I also have a set of Roland Octapads that triggers the SP-12 or an Akai S-900 sampler."

And now that he's covered on the technological end, Mussen is working on getting his groove together. "What I'm trying to do now on the drums is what people like Pharoan Ak Laff, Bobby Previte, and Ronald Shannon Jackson are great at. These people can play very solid time but also do incredibly strange things with phrases. They can play a rhythmic grouping or just a free thing, and still keep the time involved. I want to be able to play with that kind of solid basis, but still be able to do interesting polyrhythms and phrases around the time. It's called being creative without getting in the way. That's what I'm learning more and more. There's a lot of room to make an impact and play simply, but still play very creatively and say something of value. It's a question of taste and the ability to discern when is the right time to just go for it. When you're younger, you tend to go in for reckless abandon at the expense of maintaining a really solid groove. But seasoned players like Bobby or Shannon have reached that level where they have the power, the taste, and the chops, plus the knowledge. I'm reaching for that."

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DR NERVE

ARMED OBSERVATION (Cunieform Rune 8)

Recorded: New York, 1987.

Dave Douglas (t, flhn, p); Michael Lytle (cl); Yves Duboin (saxes); Nick Didkovsky (g, triple); Anne Brudevold (vln); Mike Leslie (b); Kyle Sims (b); Marc Wagnon (vib, perc); James Mussen (d)

DR NERVE are presently among the few picking up the pieces after rock's noisy haemorrhage. Of course they're not alone, and declare sympathies with Ronald Shannon Jackson's Decoding Society, Material and possibly James Blood. New York No Wave plus. *Armed Observations* is their second album, led by Nick Didkovsky and produced by one Frederick Frith.

Didkovsky studied under Christian Wolff and there are clear parallels between the polyrhythmic patchworks that characterise *Armed Observations* and the way electronic music cuts and glues disparate sources. Rapid cross-cutting rhythms hold the attention over 17 pieces, varying from 11 seconds to over seven minutes in length. Distressed soul, free funk putting the melody in the metre and the world into the word. Tightly wound bursts of scratch-guitar funk power the killer tracks on side one, "Out To Bomb Fresh Kings" and "Mister Still Fries A Dozen", whilst the astounding "Nor Everyone's As Rich As Your Parents" matches Duboin and Douglas on clarion against the erratic Yes-No percussion of James Mussen. Side two opens with "Three Curiously Insubstantial Duets" lasting about a minute each and playing off reverberation with raw cacophony.

"Don't Worry Do" introduces Samm Bennett as guest percussionist, instigating a frantic duel with Didkovsky, while the closing track is a suppressed TV theme overlaid with flapping percussion. *Armed Observations* is full of (as Spalding Gray might put it) "perfect moments", certainly one of the best this year. This isn't some eccentric backwater; Dr Nerve are about wit, about America and clearly about the future.

RUSSELL LACK