

Tod Dockstader

From The Archives

Starkland CD

After the Massachusetts based electronic composer Tod Dockstader completed his landmark piece *Aerial* in 2003 – released over three volumes by Sub Rosa between 2005–06 – he slipped back into the relative obscurity out of which, ten years previously, he had been plucked when Tom Steenland launched his Starkland label with a batch of Dockstader reissues.

From The Archives presents 15 previously unreleased pieces, all created between 2007–08, and selected from over 150 hours of material found on Dockstader’s computer when he was already in the advanced stages of the dementia from which he died in 2015.

In her sleevenotes, *Wire* contributor Geeta Dayal suggests that Dockstader had preferred to keep these valedictory compositions to himself; and certainly, compared to the expansive forms and integrated momentum presented over three volumes of *Aerial*, there’s a pervasive mood of concision and of structures turning in upon themselves. Some pieces existed in multiple drafts, others in questionable stages of completion. But throughout this 65 minute spyhole into Dockstader’s final thoughts, the fluidity of his technique and poetic vision impresses deeply. Some pieces chisel source materials together in the manner of classic musique concrète, while elsewhere objets trouvés are transformed using advanced studio techniques, including granular synthesis – but never as mere demonstration of technology.

Each miniature – the longest track runs close to eight minutes, while most check in around three – instead defines a compelling fantasy world of its own. “Basement Passage” lets loose spectral harmonies, which fly free like doves liberated from a birdcage. Dockstader chases some daringly plain sequences of stock triads, but his uncanny sense of when to intervene and defamiliarise the ordinary is unfailing; syntax-busting edits, an obvious cadence point nonchalantly bounced away with a glissandi, and an increasingly warped temperament – all keep the interest accruing. The speedball energy of “Chinese Morph” represents another side of Dockstader. A stampede of rapidly rotating ambient sounds, cobwebby circuits of beeps and sprinting crescendos are eventually sucked inside sustained bell-like drones.

“Piano Morph” comes closer than anything here to academic electroacoustic music as piano sounds are transformed beyond recognition then massaged into various slow motion and high speed pianistic paraphrases; but weighed against that has to be bonus track “Big Jig”, which with its pumping pulse and knotted harmonies sounds like techno bumping headfirst into Xenakis.

Philip Clark

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