So Much Guitar #2: Bill Orcutt



One of the coolest surprises of the recent Big Ears Festival lineup for 2023 is the Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet with Ava Mendoza, Shane Parish, and Wendy Eisenberg performing Orcutt's new album, *Music for Four Guitars* (Palilalia Records). I've been listening to this fantastic set on repeat for about a month now and I never imagined it would be performed live.

Four Guitars is Orcutt's seventh solo release, a mesmerizing set of fourteen 2-3 minute miniatures that evoke the string strangling of his early work but with the more formalized construction that has emerged since his return to active duty in '09. Imagine Beefheart's Magic Band playing Steve Reich's Electric Counterpoint or Fripp's League of Crafty Guitarists gone electro-anarchic and you get an idea, but there is no clear antecedent to *Four Guitars*. There is nothing *shimmer* about it. Sonically aggressive ambient soundscapes, perhaps? Works for me.

"At a Distance," the longest cut at just under 3 minutes, recalls Celtic music in a roundabout way. Check it out, but don't stop there; this is an album that bears multiple through-listens. At a certain point the layers separate from one another and the sub- and cross-melodies begun to jump out at you.

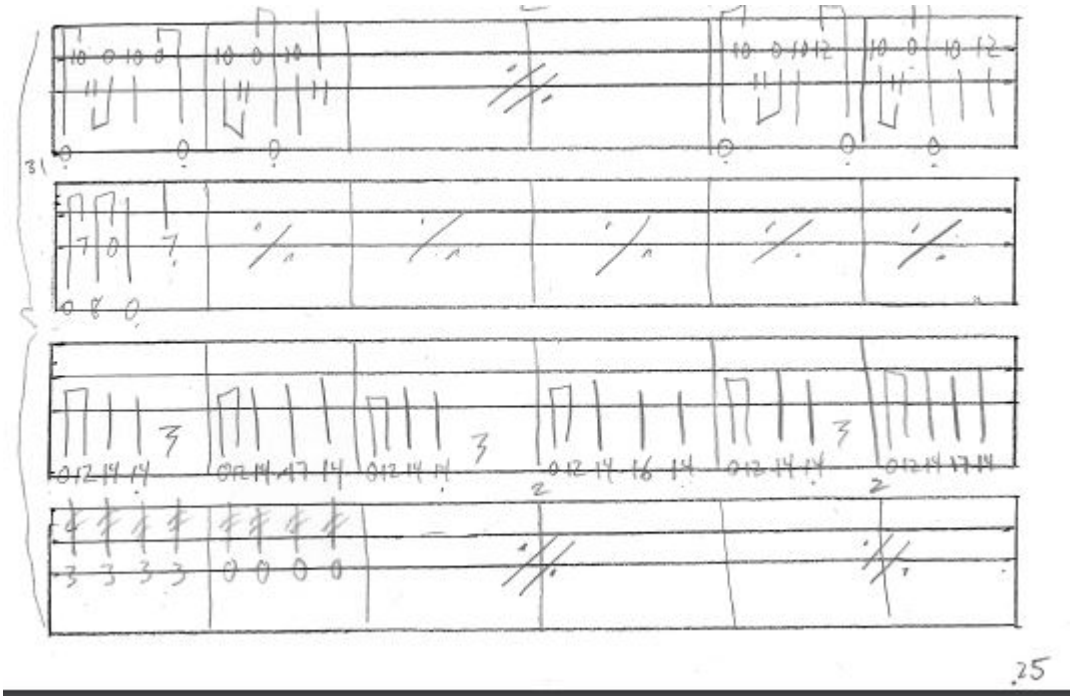
Music For Four Guitars by Bill Orcutt

Orcutt built these thorny little etudes out of loops he fed

into his Logic recording software, the raw material for tons of editing and reconfiguration, a true Frankenstein affair. A live performance? Unpossible! Where would you even begin?

Maybe start with asking guitarist Parish to transcribe the music. I asked him how he detangled everything.

> *[Bill] sent me isolated guitar tracks [and] an overview of the Logic sessions… I transcribed each riff separately before plugging them into the larger structure. I had to make my own tablature paper to look like his guitar neck. He said he liked the way my handwriting looked, kind of like a graphic work of art, so that's why we went with the handwritten version.*



Music for Four Guitars excerpt

The 84 page tablature is included with the digital album download so you and your pals can re-create the music yourselves, your own version of the super-quartet Orcutt recruited. How hard could it be to find three killer guitarists willing to learn idiosyncratic music that has never been played before? All of them on mutant 4-string necks, standard guitars with the 4th and 5th stings removed, the only configuration Orcutt plays any more.

Whatever happens, reckon, we're gonna have a chance to hear it live.

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Orcutt first crossed my radar last year with *Made Out of Sound* (Palilalia 2021), a duo with drummer Chris Corsano. Across pandemic 2020, Corsano recorded improvised drum tracks in Ithaca, New York; Orcutt added his improvisations in his Bay Area studio and stitched the bits together. It lives in a haywire realm between jazz and rock, an on the edge 'going for it-ness' that put *Made Out of Sound* on my best of 2021 list.

His six mostly-improvised solo guitar albums since 2009 have garnered critical acclaim, but he remains something of an underground figure. To my ears, Orcutt fits in a zig zaggy lineage that runs across oddballs like John Fahey and Gary Lucas through Fred Frith, Nels Cline, and Sir Richard Bishop. Orcutt's playing often sounds like two or three guitarists at once, with an edgy tone as sharp and brittle as a stone knife.

Orcutt has been on the noise guitar world's radar since the 90s with his work in the band H@rry Pu$sy, a duo project with his wife of the time, Adris Hoyos. (The real spelling is all letters, nothing fancy. But once I searched the name my ad feed on google and twitbook has been offering some, um, oddities.) Imagine the White Stripes on the harshest acid since the Woodstock brown stuff and wrung through a Beefheart/Yoko filter. The short songs – typically between 30 seconds and two minutes – are sexually explicit and anarcho-violent. I think. Intelligibility of lyrics was not an evident concern; neither was conventional song structure. Orcutt has called HP "my perfect band." Not my cuppa, but the kernel of Orcutt's unhinged guitar techniques are evident. And you can't get where you're going if you never went where you been.

HP dissolved along with the marriage in the late 90s. Orcutt dropped out of the music world for about a dozen years,

working in the Bay Area as a software engineer riding the dot com train. In 2008, he compiled a bunch of old HP tracks and felt the itch to play again. His 2009 release, A New Way To Pay Old Debts is a set of fractured blues and all out assaults on a broken, barely repaired, borderline unplayable Kay guitar. (It was the origin of his four-string excursions, born of accident and necessity.) He never looked back. You can hear the wild attack of HP here, but in service to more or less recognizable tunes.

His next outing, How the Thing Sings (2011), is in the same vein but with the tunes veering toward more formal coherence. The final track is a 14 minute exploration titled "A Line from Old Man River." It was a harbinger of the next release, *A History of Every One* (2013), with a set list pulled from a b-level version of the Great American Songbook. As Orcutt explained it to The Guardian, "I just chose the most debased songs I could think of." Nevertheless, the melody genie was out of the bottle.

With the release of 2017's *Bill Orcutt*, our intrepid string mangler returned to electric guitar – a Telecaster in the now-standard 4-string configuration – that highlighted his ongoing interest in standard tunes. From the opening of Ornette Coleman's classic "Lonely Woman," his playing is sensitive and filled with space.

Bill Orcutt by Bill Orcutt

While Orcutt never gets close to the kind of pastoral shimmer that Frisell brings to his oldies excavations, this album and the 2019 companion follow-up of mostly originals, Odds Against Tomorrow, are brimming with Telecaster tunefulness and thoughtful exploration. *Odds* finds Orcutt working with multi-tracked guitars for the first time (I believe), a technique that will reach its fullest expression (so far) on *Four Guitars*. Check out the title track.

Odds Against Tomorrow by Bill Orcutt

The distance from the Orcutt of HP to these albums could not be more pronounced, but he remains capable of epic skronk. On the aforementioned *Made Out of Sound* and *Brace Up!*, his 2018 studio set with drummer Corsano, Orcutt delivers the kind of paint-peeling blasts of free playing that he has long been known for. Yet both these sets bear more than ample witness to Orcutt's growing affinity for recognizable form.

With *Four Guitars*, it appears all the elements have come together. The form is there; there is plenty of space, too, and enough moments of skronk to please fans of his sharper-elbowed days. How will all this play out live at Big Ears? I dare not predict, but it is absolutely one of the shows where I will crawl across glass to find out.

Go. Listen.

Next Week in So Much Guitar: Ava Mendoza