

# CP Arts



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## The Pastiche Is Prologue

A group of local musicians tries to meld rock's wreckage to the arcana of modern classical music.



Strings Attached:  
James Wolf and Jean Cook  
belly up to the Bartók.

By Virginia Vitzthum

Bob Massey can barely bring himself to say "postmodern." He apologetically mumbles the art-fag buzzword when explaining his musical approach, then quickly dismisses it as "trite" and "a kind of disease." Yet the concept is unavoidable in discussions of his particular kind of musical genre-hopping. In his guitar-cello-drums band Telegraph Melts, Massey pushes an attitude of catholic openness, of cutting and pasting of high art and low end. This summer, he launched a sort of salon dedicated to the same ideal.

Massey sent out an e-mail in June inviting all "who dig film music, who were classically trained,

or who have cultivated an interest in classically structured forms" to his group house in Arlington for an "orchestrator's salon/workshop/showcase." The format for the first two "Punk Not Rock" events, the first held July 8 and the second Aug. 25, was to bracket the performances of two standards by established composers around the premiere of a piece (as opposed to a song) by a local rock musician.

Massey doesn't fault his post-punk friends for staying inside their rock caves. "The classical music community wants you to feel like you need to know all about it to appreciate it," he declares. "But that's bullshit. Beethoven's Fifth—you can hum it, right? Beethoven's Fifth can kick your ass just as hard as 'Iron Man.'"

For many rock 'n' roll primitives, the old is just that—old—and the new is inaccessible. Classical music—aka new music, serious music, modern music, or (inevitably) post-classical music—has spent more of this century retreating up its own ass than kicking anyone else's. The Paris audience famously threw chairs at the 1913 premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, but, after that incident, the form evolved into one in which academics produced mathematical exercises for other academics. In 1958, serialist composer Milton Babbitt dispensed with audience reaction altogether in his state-of-the-art essay "Who Cares If You Listen?"

Around the same time, Chuck Berry had to go back a century or two to kick over high art's

chair—"Roll over Webern and tell Schoenberg the news" was not going to mobilize the teenage troops. Unlike 12-note composition and its pointy-headed ilk, rebellion set to electric guitars found scores of listeners. Rock 'n' roll stirred things up for 10 or 15 years before it began to bloat into the 50-year-old car salesman it is today. As serious music turned rarefied, fun music got bought; some of the smartest (and most aggressively postmodern) music-makers of the last few decades raid both camps for scrap material.

"Ambitious rock people, the brainiac guys," Massey says, "take music to a cerebral level, way past that 12-bar blues where it started. Radiohead isn't really swing-your-hips music." He calls Public Enemy one of the few groups that move both booty and brain: "They have kick-ass beats, and they're complicated, sonically and lyrically."

Telegraph Melts reflects Massey's belief that pop audiences will stretch past verse-chorus-verse. In the trio's recent DCCD appearance, his guitar (adorned with a picture of James Joyce) threw a scratchy blanket of feedback over the melancholy cello lines of Amy Domingues (who, until last week, worked at the *Washington City Paper* and who now teaches strings in Fairfax County schools), while drummer

Devin Ocampo swung between smashing and whispering. The trio's dreamlike dissonance, which evokes Sonic Youth at its most languorous, went over surprisingly well on the Melts 1997 tour with Tsunami. "We sold a lot of records to the indie-rock kids there to hear straight-up pop," Massey says. "If you don't impose a genre on people, they'll just say they like it—or not."

Massey is a freelance writer and self-described "piss boy" at the *Washington Post*. (The paper's term is "news aide.") Among his work pals is ex-classical critic Tim Page, who broadened Massey's musical horizons by turning him on to Captain Beefheart. Massey seems as genuine and down-to-earth as his friends from the *Post* and the music

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