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Michael Snow 'Two Radio Solos'

December 3, 2008 by [continuo](#)



01 Short Wavelength (39:14)

02 The Papaya Plantations (47:12)

Total time: 86:26

Recorded 1980

Cassette released by Freedom In A Vacuum, 1988

Two Radio Solos is a cassette of 2 playing-the-radio improvisations done in 1980 and released in 1988 by a no longer existing Toronto company (it's still available though).'

[Michael Snow, 2005, ±]



Apart from being one of the greatest experimental film makers of all time, Canadian **Michael Snow** (b Toronto 1929) has also extensively played piano, trumpet, synth and percussion on numerous records and live performances. His recorded output includes many jazz and improvisation records, with the Canadian Creative Music Collective (CCMC) amongst others. Snow issued several legendary experimental albums on his own as well, like 1975's *'Musics For Piano, Whistling,*

Microphone And Tape Recorder [excerpt [here](#)] or *The Last LP* in 1987 (full album [here](#)). *Two Radio Solos* was recorded in between those 2 masterpieces and offers lengthy improvisations played on a Nordmende radio receiver (pictured above). Here as well, Snow is dealing with long durations, like in his films *Wavelength* (1966-67) and *La Région Centrale* (1971). The tracks are vast collages of foreign radio broadcasts, static bursts and abstract electronic sounds, all 'played' with the radio surfing the shortwave frequencies (2 to 30 MHz). Chinese and Russian languages are recognizable, as well as english. I suspect there was a kind of post-production editing of one kind or another, contrary to what Snow states on the cover: some recordings are noticeably sped up, some passages juxtapose 2 sound sources and some cut-ups are obvious. The B side is a joyous collage of languages from around the world, embarking many exotic world musics, lounge music, electronic sounds and gray noise as well, all sourced from the Nordmende. *The Papaya Plantations* at times sounds like regular electroacoustic music, but mostly like an autonomous sound organism with a noisy life of its own. In the liner notes to *Musics for Piano, Whistling...*, Snow writes about the *'hearing/seeing/thinking experience of certain parts of certain of my films'*. I assume one could consider the radio listener as defined by all the wavelengths he receives at a given moment, so that the human being is inhabiting a specific region of the electromagnetic spectrum. Listening to the radio you tune to all frequencies, all at once. This tape conjures such magic. PS: I really wonder where is located the *'North Canadian cabin'* where this was supposedly recorded. I can't help envisioning a desolate and isolated landscape like *La Région Centrale*.

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Michael Snow solo recordings:

- **1962** *Theft/Sunset Time*, 45rpm, Astral Records, Toronto
- **1975** *Musics For Piano, Whistling, Microphone And Tape Recorder*, LP, Chatham Square Records, New York (recorded 1970-72)
- **1977** *Hearing Aid*, sound environment with metronome, four C90 cassettes, 4 tape players (2002 CD reissue by Supposé and Galerie Klosterfelde, Berlin)
- **1978** *Vie D'Or* LP, Music Gallery Editions 11, Toronto
- **1987** *The Last LP*, LP, Art Metropole, Toronto
- **1988** *2 Radio Solos*, cassette, Freedom In A Vacuum (recorded 1980)
- **1989** *Sinoms*, cassette, Art Metropole, edition of 50 and CD, Musée du Québec, ref. MUQ89D-02 [listen [here](#)]
- **1991** *They Changed the Lights* incl. in 'Masterpieces From The Music Gallery' CD
- **1992** *Somewhere Else* in Musicworks cassette and CD #54
- **2001** *Snow Solo Piano Solo Snow (3 phases)*, 3CDs, Ohm Editions, Québec

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10 Responses to "Michael Snow "Two Radio Solos""



1. on [December 3, 2008 at 3:16 pm](#) [twinkle](#)

Somewhat like John Cage's Radio music "Imaginary Landscape #4" (for twelve radios) - but this is still a solid listen.

Thanks as always.

Twinkle

Re: Imaginary Landscape #4

Two performers are stationed at each radio, one for dialling the radio-stations, the second performer controlling amplitude and timbre.

Durations are written in conventional notation, using notes, placed on a five-line staff.

The rhythmic structure of the work is 2-1-3 and is expressed in changing tempi. Cage uses proportional notation where 1/2 inch equals a quarter note. The notation is not entirely proportional though, since accelerandos and ritardandos are still present in the score. The score gives notations for tuning (controlled by player 1) as well as volume and tone color (controlled by the second player).

When one listens to the work, it is obvious that one cannot predict what will be heard, which is exactly what Cage was

aiming at with this composition. Apart from that it was a way of abandoning his preferences and dislikes (Cage wasn't very fond of radios). As he puts it himself in *For the Birds*: "I had a goal, that of erasing all will and the very idea of success". The method of composing is basically the same as used in *Music of Changes*. Cage used the I-Ching to create charts which refer to superimpositions, tempi, durations, sounds and dynamics. In the sound charts 32 out of 64 fields are silences. In the charts for dynamics, only sixteen produce changes, while the other maintain the previous situation. Similar charts were produced for the the other parameters. Cage gives an extensive description of the composing means in his *To Describe the Process of Composition Used in Music of Changes and Imaginary Landscape No.4* (In 'Silence', pp.57-60).



2. on [December 3, 2008 at 4:47 pm](#) *continuo*

All this business of scores, conventional notations, etc, seems rather far from my conception of freedom, let alone anarchism. I prefer Michael Snow's improvised process and complete isolation in a remote cabin. This is how I like my Thoreau. Get it?

Thanks for your knowledgeable comment. Hope you're doing well.



3. on [December 3, 2008 at 5:34 pm](#) *Dave M*

I see what you're saying about Cage, but given the context of classical music at the time, it strikes me as even more anarchic. In fact that might be the reason that I'd rather listen to Snow. In any case thanks for this!



4. on [December 3, 2008 at 5:58 pm](#) *continuo*

You're welcome, Dave.



5. on [December 3, 2008 at 8:43 pm](#) *twinkle*

Not a radio piece per say, but check out Cage's *Imaginary Landscape no. 1* (for 2 variable speed turntables, frequency records, muted piano & cymbal (1939)) here:

<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/impact/f01/Papers/Hildebrand/turntablism/john%20cage%20-%20imaginary%20landscape%20nc>



6. on [December 3, 2008 at 11:09 pm](#) *ankh*

Hello Continuo. I would like to recommend you [this one](#).



7. on [December 4, 2008 at 7:26 pm](#) *JR*

bang bang!



8. on [December 4, 2008 at 10:18 pm](#) *rain*

tu peut trouver également "music for piano" ici

<http://allegory-of-allergies.blogspot.com/2008/09/alan-lichts-next-ten.html>

et puis

sinon cassette sur ubu

et "the last lp" que je te conseille ici

<http://lamaraba.blogspot.com/2008/03/michael-snow-last-lp-198687.html>

et bien sur re-voir ms.....

à très vite

rainier



9. on [December 5, 2008 at 11:26 pm](#)  [twinkle](#)

Wolf Vostell Radio Work at UbuWeb:

http://ubu.artmob.ca/sound/vostell_wolf/decollage/Vostell-Wolf_Decollage_01_Radio-de-collage.mp3



10. on [December 8, 2008 at 12:17 am](#)  [Robert Olver](#)

Hi Continuo,

Re the Snow cassette — I am SO glad you've put this one up, since it's one of the few Freedom In A Vacuum releases I no longer have a copy of. Here's what I can tell you about it. Well OK, maybe I'd better start by explaining the FIAV - Music Gallery connection.

Freedom in a Vacuum was originally the name of a radio program I hosted in Toronto for a couple of years before starting the label. In early 1988, a few months after launching the Freedom in a Vacuum label I was sent a cassette by John Kamevaar.

John was a long-time member of the seminal improvisation band CCMC along with Michael Snow (CCMC are the Music Gallery "house band" and at that time were its Board of Directors as well, thus the FIAV - Music Gallery connection was born), but the tape he sent was of solo works under the name 'Kaiser Nietzsche'.

This tape and two others by Kaiser Nietzsche were released by FIAV shortly after. Kaiser Nietzsche also recorded one side of a split LP with Japanese sound artist Yuzuru Syogase which was later released by FIAV. Also, the Noctovision label of Japan released Kaiser Nietzsche's "Heterology" LP.

It was John who introduced me to Michael Snow, who had been looking for someone to release the "Radio Solos", which I agreed to do. We met several times to discuss the release, usually in a huge shed where John and several other artists were preparing the casts for Michael's "The Audience", which adorns Toronto's SkyDome, or whatever they're calling it now. As further trivia I'll add that the shed, flooded with water, is pictured on the cover of Kaiser Nietzsche's "Signal To Noise Ratio". I've attached a couple of fairly so-so photos of Snow's sculptures for "The Audience", but I don't have a scan of "Signal To Noise" at the moment — sorry.

I believe Michael mentioned that the "little cabin" was somewhere in northern Quebec, though I could be mistaken.

One issue we needed to discuss arose from the fact that the original recordings were in one-channel mono. This didn't bother me in the slightest, but it seemed to send everyone I played it for nuts. I thought that was pretty good for a laugh too, but in the end I could foresee too many returned cassettes and boring conversations about them, of the sort wherein you explain 100 years of art history by way of assuring someone, usually not very successfully, that their tape isn't defective. We didn't want people to feel ripped off and we thought they probably would if we released the cassette in its original form so we remastered it to two channel mono, which is what you hear on the tape as released. I did the remastering digitally at my house; John Kamevaar was there too.

Cover by Michael Snow. FIAV address on cover given as c/o Music Gallery because Mike didn't have my mailing address when he was doing the layout. Colour xerography chosen as medium of reproduction because of the way this process degenerated the image. It seemed a nice reflection of what was going on with the sounds being reproduced by the radio, which were being altered by the quality of the radio itself, by a man playing the dial, by the quality of the recorder, the loss of battery power and then by mastering and the cassette dubbing process - cassettes were chosen as the release's format for this reason. Information being mediated/mutilated by its means of reproduction is a recurring dynamic in Michael's work, especially in film.

I don't really find much similarity between this tape and any of Michael's other recorded musical output, with the exception, in a way, of "Falling Starts", at least I think that's the piece — it's been a long time since I last heard it. I find that "2 Radio Solos" bears most relation (so far) to his work in film. The sounds derive a lot of their unwieldy, or even "autistic" poetry from the somewhat arbitrary way they're messed around by their means of reproduction.

It's really great to hear this again now - thanks again for upping it! I'm still really glad I released this one.

Robert Olver [Freedom In A Vacuum]

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