

Memphis Musicaux

BY VAN DYKE PARKS

MATHEMATICIAN-PHILOSOPHER PYTHAGORAS WAS BORN AND RAISED IN THE COUNTRY. YET, HE HIT THE ROAD EARLY. HE HIT MEMPHIS (EGYPT) AND CAIRO (NOT ILLINOIS). HE MET THE PHARAOH (THOUGH NOT SAM THE SHAM). THAT MEMPHIS WAS A SCANT CAMEL HOP FROM THAT CAIRO. 12 MILES I RECKON.



Pythagoras was as global as one could be. He met all the Who that *were* Who in those days (6th century BC). He was a giant. He had Charisma, Warmth, and Charm galore. Star qualities!

They were quieter times. You could hear yourself think. Pythagoras dug music. He took time to design the Octave and the Fifth. He figured out how we would sing to the Gods and each other, by codifying the modes. Some modes were rosy as in the Ionian "Onward Christian Soldiers." Some were blue, as in the Aeolian mode "One Meat Ball," Aeolian... nascent of the Hungarian minor with its *tzigane weisheit*.

Rules governed modal use and gave music its traction and purpose. One such rule introduced by Rome, that decreed the tri-tone leap taboo "Diabolus in Musica," was unlocked only after many medieval ghosts had been exorcized from the mind of Western man. Enlightenment

of that sort was the direct result of moveable print. Yet, I digress.

Pythagoras grew up, enrobed with his Students at the Acropolis. On that sacred hill, they paused among the temples. Zephyrs gently caressed the stones. Each structure shuddered with a barely audible tone. Those math students heard each tone, and their teacher identified their pitches. They all went away humming them. They called those pitches "fundamentals." Thus, Modal music, fit to please the ear of some God or another, was born.

Just one Greek made what we call Western music. Such a brainstorm could only have been generated in a time when you could hear yourself. Think of it! We owe much to Pythagoras. Yet, I fear this music-history anecdote would be lost entirely on a rock audience today, attending Yanni's recent gig at the Acropolis.

It would take a millennium for attorneys and accountants to learn how to cook the books. About the time these camp followers perfected their racket through the legal Esperanto in recording contracts, I'd gotten my ears wrapped around "canned music."

Actually, my first memory of canned music was in 1948. That was with the phenomenal Spike Jones' "Cocktails for Two." His sonorities had a profound effect on my future.

So, they started pumping the power of "canned music" into New York elevators in a novel way in the '50s. It beefed up the urban audio environment. I was there, and got Muzak memories from Otis Elevators. It was in one such elevator that my Uncle Sam introduced me to "The General." My Uncle Sam and me—we ascended in that RCA Building with William Sarnoff, who had



Opposite:
Van Dyke Parks' sculpture by Charles Ray

Maurizio Vetrugno,
Discover America, 2005.
Hand-embroidered silk thread
on cotton, 40 x 40 cm.
Private Collection, Los Angeles

invented broadcast music with his idea of commercial radio in the USA. He called his companies NBC and RCA. He liked folks to call him "The General." Before him, most Americans' musical entertainment was from some hard back-boned hymnal held in hand but once a week, or from an occasional holiday parade. We rode up the elevator with that giant of American media.

Just as I recognized the song-title of some song's instrumental, it dawned on me "They're telling us what to Think and Feel, with this mood music!"

I was but ten years old, a naturally skeptical age. Yet, I'd read George Orwell, and I knew one thing for sure: Things were getting louder.

Before we hit his high floor, the General asked Uncle Sam what kind of music appealed to him, and by what means did he hear it. Uncle Sam admitted to classical music, Fats Waller, jazz greats Eddy Duchin and George Shearing. Then, he added that he didn't have a record player.

My Uncle must have been some good ad-man for the General, for it wasn't long after that he received the entire Red Seal catalogue from Sarnoff as a gift, delivered to his home in Long Island. It dazzled me that the RCA Library came with the competitor's model player. It had a

state of the art disk changer. It was a Magnavox. That spoke volumes of the General.

That was back in 1953, the year Elvis took his first acetate home ("My Happiness") to his mother. A belated birthday present. Elvis would shake things up. Like the Psalmist David before him, he'd take on giants with the power of song. That year, Elvis made a blip on our national radar.

Music went from "Popular" to "Pop" in '63, just about the time that Andy Warhol sold his *Campbell's Soup Can*. I entered the music industry the same year. Songs were gaining political potency. I was looking through the rear-view mirror as I flew through the windshield. All, to Discover America. ●●●

Inside, all was mellow. Hardwood and Mahogany. Our ascent was faintly scored with a narcotic Mantovani string arrangement of "Song from Moulin Rouge." It was Spring time, 1953. That was when I first heard such background music for the masses.