

On the Town

NIGHTWATCH • SPOTLIGHT • RECORDINGS • COURSES

By ERIC BRACE
Washington Post Staff Writer

"SEPTEMBRIST" is the first song on "Ilium," the debut CD from one of Washington's most creative and genre-bending bands, **Telegraph Melts**. It's a dreamy, swooping soundscape, with sharp-edged electric guitar embracing and animating the rounder, warmer cello patterns. But enough about the music, let's look at words.

Nightwatch

Telegraph Melts (what a great band name!): Communication. Modern, but not too modern. Breakdown. Dali's clocks.

Ilium (per Random House Webster): "The uppermost of the three bones of each half of the vertebrate pelvic girdle." Also, "Latin name of ancient Troy." Perhaps the greatest double meaning in the English language.

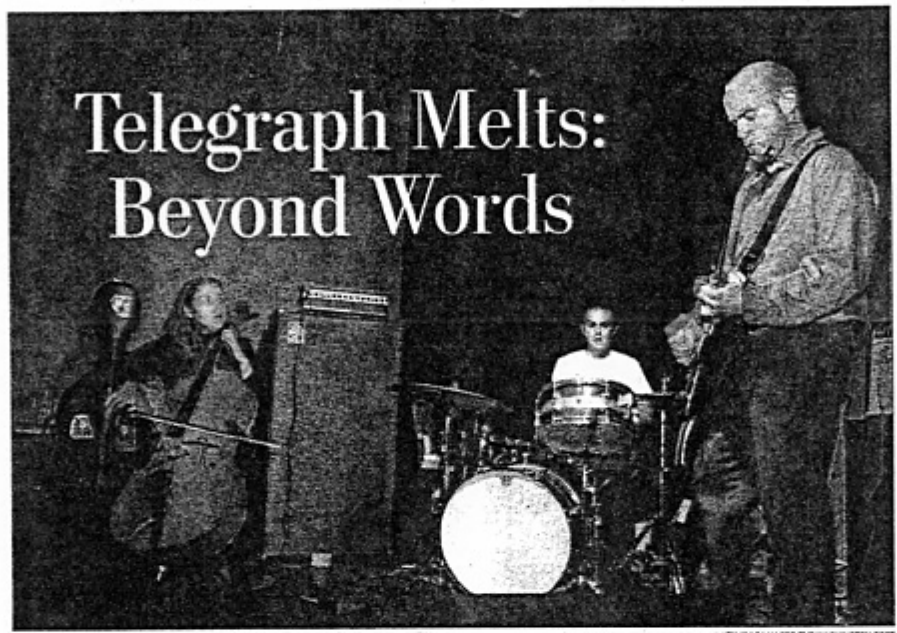
Septembrist: An invented word. One who loves September? An autumnal fellow? Definitely impressionistic, somehow a perfect song title, as are "Every Day a Sunrise, a Summer Every Year" and "In Eggshell Seas," two other compositions on "Ilium."

Here's the thing, though: For all the care and attention Telegraph Melts gives to words, you won't find any on "Ilium" because Telegraph Melts is an instrumental band. The brainchild of guitarist **Bob Massey** and cellist **Amy Domingues**, TMeIts (as they commonly abbreviate their band name) came to be after Massey moved to Washington from Richmond, where he'd spent 10 years in the avant-rock band **Jettison Charlie**. He was hearing things in his head that the music scene in Virginia's capital just couldn't accommodate.

"I really wanted a cellist to play the things I was coming up with on electric guitar, but couldn't find one in Richmond," he says.

1996: Massey moves to Washington, falls in with indie rock crowd, meets Domingues (playing bass in roommate's band, **Ex-Atari Kid**), pays some bills working as a part-time copy aide at The Washington Post (full disclosure and all that). 1997: Massey starts jamming with Domingues on cello, and they dub the duo Telegraph Melts. 1998: He does a stint on keyboards and guitar in **Tsunami** (with Domingues on bass). 1999: They get serious about TMeIts, recording "Ilium," one of the best local releases of the year.

TMeIts has recently added multi-instrumentalist **Devin Ocampo**, making for an even stronger live act than it already was. But so far there's still no singing, just the collaborative interplay of electric gui-



Amy Domingues, Devin Ocampo and Bob Massey perform at the Black Cat.



David Boothman of the Caribbean Jazz Ensemble.

tar, cello, drums and other sounds. "We haven't ruled anything out for the future," says Massey, "but the point was to not be singer-song-writers. That wasn't at all the sound I was interested in." (Massey indulges his inner lyricist with his other group, the **Gena Rowlands Band**, which features more traditional song structures, including words. You can hear them Feb. 27 at 2 p.m. at **Now! Music & Fashion**, 3100 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, 703/528-9059.) While the sound of TMeIts has some common elements with voiceless contemporaries such as Rachel's and Godspeed You Black Emperor (to name two that Massey himself considers spiritual colleagues), its inversion of pop expectations has him smiling in ways those two bands don't.

The songs are so cinematic,

they're like soundtracks to five-minute short films that are playing in your head. "I don't know what we call these pieces," Massey says. "We're not composers in a typical sense, but they are compositions. They're not really pop songs in a typical sense either, but they've got some pop sensibility. You know, we like melodies, but we also like dissonance and noise as long as there's lots of space in the music and room for silence." Hear Telegraph Melts play its singular stuff March 28 at the **Black Cat** (202/667-7960).

The idea of composition dovetails nicely with Massey's other significant contribution to the local music scene: the **Punk Not Rock Salon**. Held in the living room of his house at 900 Kansas St. in Arlington (703/528-8517), Massey's bimonthly salons evolved after

conversations with fellow indie rockers revealed that a substantial number of Washington's finest punks were also classically trained musicians. "I just figured, well if I'm into this and know other people who do," explains Massey (who studied violin and piano as a youth), "then it's likely there are others; so why not throw an event, get some folks to play, let folks know and see who shows up."

A couple of dozen like-minded critters showed up for the first salon early last year, and now, with number six taking place Tuesday night, it has become the coolest stop on the local music circuit. "It irritates me to think of the world of composed music as inaccessible to ordinary people, that it requires years and years of study to appreciate," Massey says. "I don't entirely buy that." He asks friends and new acquaintances to compose short pieces or to explore classical golden oldies. "We try to balance out new works with established canonical works," he says.

Check it out Tuesday, if you can get through the front door into Massey's now-crowded living room.

■ To hear a free Sound Bite from Telegraph Melts, call Post-Haste at 202/334-9000 and press 8109. (Prince William residents, call 690-4110.)

CARIBBEAN LEGACY

Lord Kitchener died last week at the age of 77, and if you're wondering who he was, just know this: You can't imagine Caribbean mu-

sic without him. He invented the steel drum orchestra, creating the particularly Trinidadian brand of calypso we now hear in our heads when we think of that sort of thing.

Trinidadian **David Boothman** is a pianist, composer and alumnus of Kitchener's "Calypso Tent" in Trinidad who admits he wouldn't be doing what he's doing if it hadn't been for Kitchener. "Anything that is Caribbean music now has at least some roots in what he did for the past 40 years," Boothman says. "The whole carnival scenario was created by him. All of the Caribbean jazz movement was born from the old calypso rhythms and melodies that he worked into the steel drum repertoire."

Boothman came to Washington in 1995 after 20 years of performing in his homeland (primarily with his brother **Michael** in the band **Kysofusion**) and quickly set about to form the organization **Caribbean Arts Central** (www.caribbean-artscentral.com) and its musical offshoot, the **Caribbean Jazz Ensemble (CAJE)**. CAJE has just released a CD, "Live @ Montpelier," documenting a concert given in October 1998 at the Montpelier Cultural Arts Center in Laurel. "What we did is try to capture the moment of the concert that was so intimate and sweet, you know? That's what we did," says Boothman in his Trinidadian accent, a song in every sentence. The CD features seven of Boothman's strong compositions alongside a Miles Davis and a Sonny Rollins tune. It's saying a lot that Boothman's pieces hold their own. (Besides Kitchener, Boothman credits Trinidadian jazz teacher and performer **Scofield Pilgrim** and his uncle, painter-singer-musician-actor **Geoffrey Holder**, with steering him toward his expression in music).

The band features **Elizabeth Melvin** on marimba, **Lennard Jack, Sherwin Thwaites** and **Lenny Rogers** on steel drums, **Jimmy Charlson** on bass, **Carlos Villegas** on percussion, **Andy Hamburger** on drums and **Major Boyd** on saxophone. They'll perform Sunday night at **Zanzibar on the Waterfront** (202/554-9100), a venue Boothman hopes will become a home base of sorts for his band. "I'm looking forward to playing at Zanzibar because their concept is very similar to what my family used to have in Trinidad," he says. "It was a restaurant and entertainment complex that was a home to all cultures, and a whole fraternity of musicians would come and hang out and play from sundown to breakfast. We used to call it 'Church,'" he says with a mighty laugh.

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