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Sounds from the megacity

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Epiphanies

Los Angeles Free Music Society's **Rick Potts** finds a door to another dimension jamming with freaks in an old Pasadena office block

LAFMS members with Rick Potts (left) at the Raymond Building, 1976



At 17 years old I was the kid of the crew. My older brothers had eclectic musical tastes and I recall Tom (who shopped in the 'miscellaneous' record bin) bringing home Morton Subotnick's *Silver Apples Of The Moon*, Harry Partch, Ravi Shankar and whale songs. Joe had free jazz, Terry Riley's *A Rainbow In Curved Air*, avant garde Nonesuch and *Odyssey* collections, Stockhausen and Cage; and they both had the obligatory Beefheart, Zappa and rock classics.

My friend Chip Chapman turned me onto a lot of mind-expanding music and ideas, and it was during his hours of student studio access at Cal Arts that our quartet Le Forte Four recorded in the institute's electronic music studios. But after a year and a half Chip left school, we had to use our own gear to play and record, and we were back in the suburbs outside of Los Angeles.

After the Second World War many businesses in Pasadena moved across town leaving behind a neighbourhood that by the 1970s was derelict, as were many of its denizens. It was a playground for drug addicts, hippies, drunks, artists, criminals, prostitutes and adventurous suburban young adults. Thrift stores and junk shops yielded great finds from dissolved estates. Turn of the century mansions and homes lined the edges, and their original owners were dying off. There was a wealth of junk.

Poobah Record Shop was the main attraction. We'd recorded most of our album *Bikini Tennis Shoes* at Cal Arts, and after we'd brought some copies to future Los Angeles Free Music Society member Tom Recchion at Poobah we were introduced to the other music freaks who jammed after hours in the back.

One weekend night in 1975, at a time when LAFMS was little more than us in La Forte Four, we met up with The Doo-Dooettes (Tom Recchion, Harold Schroeder, Dennis Duck and Juan Gomez) at some cheap studios they had access to in a decaying office block, the Raymond Building, a few blocks away. Joining forces

with Tom, Fredrik Nilsen, Dennis, Juan, Ace, The Professor and the rest of the crew around the shop resulted in a lot of experimentation. Playing with these guys was fun and new. We were all trying to find ways to create sounds by building instruments, playing the ones we had in new ways, or playing found objects. We were trying everything we could get our hands on, and our gear was found, borrowed, repurposed or second hand.

Fredrik had a thrift shop reel-to-reel that he made loops on. Some were percussive recordings of his beer can marimba augmented with savage vocalisations. Tom had a collection of tabletop noise makers such as springboards, music box harps, street cleaner bristles and tiny objects he amplified with a contact mic. Le Forte Four had a fake Beatle bass, a borrowed amp-in-the-case Silvertone guitar, a Univox piano, my Bundy tenor and cardboard boxes full of toy instruments and Mexican percussion. Harold Schroeder brought his Steiner-Parker Synthacon (like a Mini Moog only better). There were piles of gear and friends floating through, and we traded instruments.

That night, in a dirty old office lit by a couple of clip lights, we were banging on pots and pans, mauling broken guitars, toy instruments and homemade flotsam. We were trying to find something. Usually jamming was fun, although often it didn't gel. One thing we'd learned was to let a tape recording age before you judged it. Sometimes, despite the frustration, it sounded good, but you had to distance yourself to appreciate it. We went through tons of tape because we didn't want to record over any happy accidents – those moments were priceless and could not be repeated.

I'd had the feeling before to a degree: things fall into place for a moment. You get in the flow. It's like a trance yet you feel focused. But this time I was taken away. That night a door opened to another dimension.

I was hitting an array of metal objects with a broken

drumstick. Others in the room were doing things to guitars, drums, saxes, toys, an abused zither and other noise makers. It was a big headache, six people all struggling to make something from this junk. A favourite instrument at the time was a large popcorn tin whose dented bottom could be popped in and out like an old oil can to produce several different steel drum-like tones. With the group of us all going at it, we were creating utter chaos.

Then it happened – suddenly and surprisingly it all came together like magic. Each non-musician's part miraculously fitted together in an uncanny way. Everything felt perfect. In a group mind-meld we connected into a non-verbal sonic whole, all listening with one big ear. There was almost a feeling of movement, like you hopped onto a moving platform. Then, like riding a wave or soloing on a bicycle the first time, after riding a few feet you realise, "I'm doing it!" and wipe out and skin your knee. We all glanced up to acknowledge something was happening; it was as if a balloon popped, and we were back to chaos in a dirty dim room.

We kept coming back to the studio and usually those moments happened. One day I realised we were becoming better non-musicians and we could get there sooner and stay in there longer. After a while I didn't care if I was a musician or a non-musician, or if you called it noise (which deflected arguments) or music. I just wanted to keep doing it. It's not just musicians who get swept up in those moments. Listeners can get pulled in too.

40 years later, making patterns that form out of chaos and then shift back like an optical illusion in sound is something I still do to generate the kind of sensations I felt so strongly that night. It seems to open the right door. □ Members of The Los Angeles Free Music Society play the first Uncanny Valley festival, an event dedicated to their work and legacy, in Ghent this month: see Out There