

To mark their 40th anniversary in 2012 Los Angeles Free Music Society splintered into 25 performance units; four years later, the results of this experiment have emerged. By **Byron Coley**



Box Gallery, Los Angeles, 2012

LAFMS Box Box Various

The Box 13xLP

Created by a cabal of SoCal oddballs in the early 1970s, Los Angeles Free Music Society's influence and reputation expanded slowly and sinuously through underground corridors over the last 40-plus years. Their initial impetus was mind expansion via record collecting. The groups evolved around Poo-Bah, a still-active record store in Pasadena that had a fine experimental music bin stocked by Tom Recchion. After hours, the store became a place to try out new tricks learned from days listening to records on labels like Saturn and BYG and Incus.

The first LAFMS band were Le Forte Four, created when Chip Chapman and the Potts Brothers (Rick and Joe) began mixing pre-recorded sounds with live instrumentation. Simultaneously, Recchion started up what became The Doo-Dooettes, along with Dennis Duck, Juan Gomez and Fredrik Nilsen. These bands joined forces to form Airway with vocalist Vetza. Duck was also involved in the local anti-hippy collective Smegma, who soon decamped for Portland. Ace Farren Ford had Smegma ties as well. He and Robert 'Duce' Pfaucht brought their Ace & Duce operation into the fold. John Duncan, part of the Poo-Bah circle, was a visual artist whose work began to incorporate harsh sonics.

With a few additions, this was the core of the original LAFMS, an organisation which released 14 LPs and various whatisis between 1975–82. The compilation albums they assembled involved participation from The Residents and Half Japanese (among many others), as well as cover art by Captain Beefheart. Indeed listeners often first found LAFMS through these tangential connections. Others discovered them when Airway, The Doo-Dooettes, Le Forte Four and

Smegma appeared on the Nurse With Wound list. And several lucky locals actually had the pleasure of stumbling into one of the live shows they sponsored.

The label ceased most record production in 1982, but there have been periodic revivals of ensembles, while Smegma are into their fifth decade of active existence. Most of the individual LAFMS's participants remained active in experimental music, however, and (as with The Germs' blue circle gang) associate membership in LAFMS is bestowable on people who choose to march under its flag. The final ensemble to be granted full status were Extended Organ, a quintet in which visual artists Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw (of Destroy All Monsters/Poetics) joined Nilsen, Recchion and Joe Potts.

The first large scale reappraisal of LAFMS's work was the amazing 1996 anthology, *The Lowest Form Of Music* – 11 CDs, largely issuing music recorded during the 1970s. It remains the definitive overview of the label and its artists, although there have been a few subsequent stand-alone reissues (*Dennis Duck Goes Disco*, the *ID Art* compilation, etc) that provide more semiotic weight. That box set title was also used as the banner of a weekend-long LAFMS festival Sound & Music hosted in London in 2010. This was followed in 2012 by *Beneath The Valley Of TLFOM*, a six week installation filled with the invented/altered instruments, fliers, videos, photographs, art, weird objects, a pop-up record store and musical performances, all held at downtown Los Angeles's Box Gallery. A vast array of LAFMS and related musicians played at the event. This amazing box set contains shards of every set that was heard.

The box itself is a physically impressive object. Each of the 13 LPs is packed in a stiff colour inner sleeve. There are three posters – one for the event, one of Mike Kelley's

toy guts installation, and one that lists all members of LAFMS with explanatory notes on the back. There is also a large book with photos of participants, and all kinds of other stuff. It's a large ass package, fully worthy of the project it documents.

The albums are divided among the 25 ensembles who participated in the concerts, arrayed in chronological order. It starts with two sides by a nameless tentet who played the opening reception. This unique ensemble included Dennis Duck, John Duncan, Ace Farren Ford, Joseph Hammer, Mike Kelley, Fredrik Nilsen, Joe Potts, Rick Potts, Tom Recchion and Vetza. Between them, one or another of these players has appeared as a member of the vast bulk of LAFMS units. And their sound – a great randomised gabble of voices, percussion, electronic zyzzyzles and squonks of unknown origin – gives an excellent sense of the amateurism (in its purest sense) LAFMS always stood for. This is music carved from pure love of the creative process. It's music played to confound and surprise the people with whom you're playing. These are sounds that feel like they are a joy to squeeze out. That they also happen to sound pretty great is only a happy accident. Or so one assumes. But the overall quality of the music presented in this box makes it seem not so accidental.

Most of the key groups are represented by a full side of music. Refraining from song-like structures, The Doo-Dooettes create a crumbling landscape of bong fog, natives in trouble and loosely plucked strings. Le Forte Four take the outfit's record-player/cassette-recorder cartoon-based musique concrète dynamism and turns it into a sampler battle royale for huffers and smurphs. The result's a barrage of sources, but they fit together snugly enough to appear friendly. Smegma's side is under ten minutes, but is packed to the nipple-rafters

with aktion. featuring avant garage rock readymades that devolve into limp pools of vocal chitter and percussion/sax pandemonium. Airway's appearance reminds me of what Art Ensemble Of Chicago's *Saravah* album with Brigitte Fontaine might have sounded like if they'd used little machines instead of little instruments, and Fontaine had spent more time woodshedding with Patty Waters. Ace & Duck (Dennis Duck plus Ace's Artificial Art Ensemble) is rather different to Ace & Duce, with more wind, drum and string clattering around the rim of a musette. Extended Organ serve up a mess of Mike Kelley's prerecorded vocals on top of keyboard antics and sheets of sound that are dented and scorched beyond recognition.

There are also excellent smaller unit and solo sets by Recchion (clouds of keyboard drones and drizzles), Rick Potts (processed voices with electronic bleeps), Vetza & Joe Potts (extended glossolalic inventions), Tenses (Smegma's Jackie and Ju Suk mixing free sax with cinematic textures and vocals) and plenty more. Even the slighter, later combos like Dolphin Explosion (a reunited kiddie music duo whose drummer was Mike Kelley) provide real bang for buck. Figuring out how all the pieces of the latter-day bands and connections fit together is a head boggler, but the very nature of this project necessarily requires a lot of boggling.

If you have the time and the money to spend, this box will reward you with a lot to think about. Having just played it three times in a row, I'm struck by how little of the music evidences any prog damage (apart, perhaps, from some borrowed from the French free rock wing of the genre), but that makes sense. Just like the punks who came along after them, these people really felt like music should be free, and that anyone should be able to make a record. It's a majestic impulse. Fuck chops. □