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### Jeff Miers: Sound Check

# Buffalo's Alan Kryzak shows how the weird can be wonderful

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There are several ways to define what it means to be an “independent” musician.

The most common these days shortens the descriptive to “indie,” places it in hyphenated form before the old standby “rock,” and comes up with a blanket term that can be used and abused at will.

“Indie-rock” is most often employed to describe low-budget recordings by bands that sound, to a greater or lesser degree, like the Pixies. Sometimes, these bands are vibrant, exciting and engaged in offering a new slant on the notion of “punk” and “DIY” music. In Buffalo, a few names spring immediately to mind, among them Missing Planes, Johnny Nobody and the more alt-country leaning artists like Roger Bryan & the Orphans and Mark Norris & the Backpeddlers, though there are many others.

At other times, the “indierock” Snuggie can be draped around music that is really just plain poorly recorded and ill-conceived, compositionally. Thus, the cynical suggestion that a suitable definition of “indie-rock” might be “bad songs recorded badly by bad musicians.”

In the post-major record label world, the concept of “independent musician” has broadened considerably, however. It can suggest, in effect, the work of any musician operating outside the mainstream, one who composes, records and distributes those recordings sans middleman. Implied in this is a healthy and unflinching disregard for pop conventions. Though significant, this does not require disdain for pop.

This type of indie artist is far less concerned with making some sort of social statement, or proclaiming solidarity with the punk ethic, i. e.: “Anyone can make music, not just people who have studied the craft and digested at least some of the complexities of the language.” For him — or her — music is the ultimate form of expression, one that transcends the selling of “music as artifact.”

The patron saint of this strain of indie-art thought is Frank Zappa, who spent his entire artistic lifetime thumbing his nose at anyone who didn't care for his idiosyncratic interpretation of the world-as-sound. Zappa posited an “us against them” paradigm, “us” being folks who like adventurous music and those who create it, and “them” being the stiffies who insist on everything being dumbed-down to an easily identifiable, and thus sellable, state.

Alan Kryzak fell beneath Zappa's spell early on in his musical development, and when he began studying music with the likes of experimental composer Morton Feldman, composer/conductor/ pianist Lukas Foss and pianist/composer Yvar Mikhasoff, toward an eventual master's degree in music from the University at Buffalo, he found Zappa's rebellious spirit of independence reflected in the work of modern composers. Even if all of his instructors failed to see it.

“Morton Feldman disliked my music,” Kryzak laughs. “One lesson [with Feldman] started with the sentence ‘Are we ever gonna get outta here?’ But I was always drawn to electric guitars and the orchestra as an unrecognizable, ‘denatured’ voice, so Feldman's amazing transformation of voices into sound masses was a great inspiration. These composers and some of the great rock guitarists often explored music that isn't easily knocked off with a one-word description — mysterious, melancholic, whatever — and my songs and orchestral stuff seem to wander in a twilight zone of mood, also.”

Undeterred by the underlying concept that “serious” music and “rock” should remain on opposite sides of a massive, well-guarded wall, Kryzak went on to find support among the leading lights of music academia.

“Yvar Mikhasoff and [composer/ professor] Bill Kothe were great inspirations, in that piano virtuosity was combined in a living process of new music. I would study piano with Yvar and he'd read through an impossible-to-play work that was just written and mailed to him. Bill Kothe supported my early works as I kept writing ‘alt rock’ tunes along with experimental ‘new music,’ and we also shared a healthy disrespect for overly academic knockoffs of the current teachers.

“Lukas Foss reminded me to ignore any external pressure and write what you believe in. He was moved by a chorus and electric guitar piece I wrote called ‘Men & Women,’ and it meant a lot that he'd respond to every single score I sent him, with notes and suggestions. JoAnn Falletta, the current conductor and the best news to hit the Philharmonic in decades, is also great with new composers, having encouraged new works and engaged in ideas for future projects.”

In addition to his orchestral work — including the new “Having an Atonal Christmas,” a collection comprised of his compositions for string quartet and harp — Kryzak continues to work with Buffalo rock band Rev, a trio comprising Kryzak, drummer Mike Brydalski and bassist/vocalist Rob Mazurkiewicz, formed in 1999.

Kryzak sees no contradiction in the embracing of idioms many would have you believe are nothing if not disparate.

“If you back up and blur your perspective when listening to music, the idea of styles, radio formats, etc., just look like artificial little slums we stick music into,” he says.

“But a rhythm track in Vivaldi is the whole orchestra, and the rhythm track in Led Zeppelin is a scary drunk named John Bonham. It's all about holding the world of sound together, and the iPod generation really has a great advantage in this regard. It's about what's in your personal collection, and most

playlists are way more varied than Billboard magazine demographics.

“Composers like Debussy and Mussorgsky kept working in songwriting throughout all of their work in experimental orchestral forms. It just made sense that I shouldn’t make the songwriting wait outside the wall — even though it’s tough to keep credibility in the strict rock and academic music worlds when you’re equally dedicated to both.”

*Check out Rev and Kryzak’s various orchestral works at [www.myspace.com/alankryzak](http://www.myspace.com/alankryzak).*

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