Interview:
Nicolas Collins
by Robert Poss
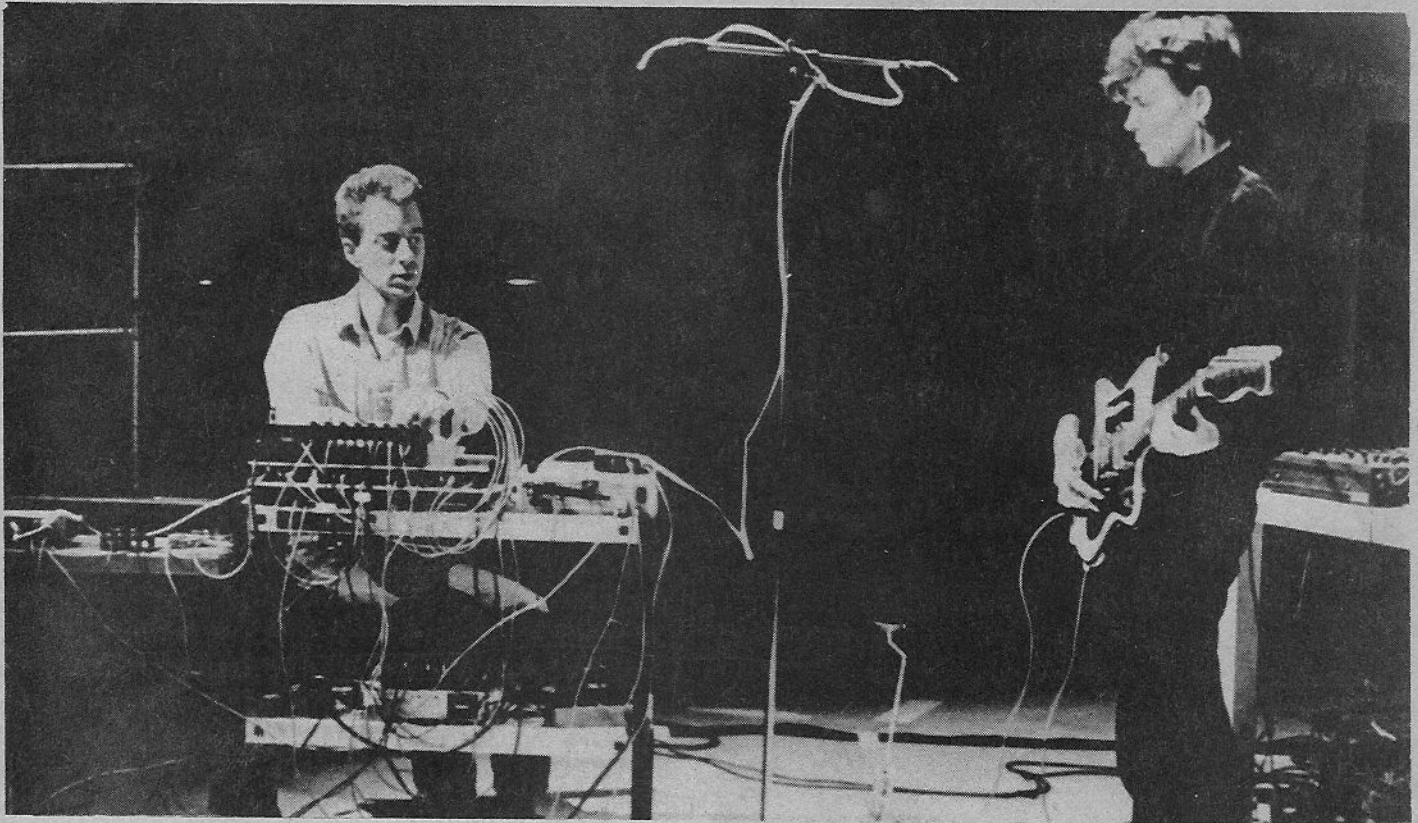
Nicolas Collins performing with Susan Tallman on guitar.   (Gerda van der Veen photo)

POSS: In the past, many of your pieces have utilized found musical material. In *Devil's Music* **the musical piracy seems much more overt in that you make no attempt to conceal the origins of stuff you've pulled off the radio. Some people will probably recognize some of the music fragments on Side A of the record [Trace Elements Records TE-1013], even from a single snare beat. Are you worried that people will think that you're just ripping off pop music?**

COLLINS: Of course I'm "ripping off" pop music in the sense that I am pulling music off the radio and using to to my own ends. But like you said, I'm not trying to hide this in any way. I'm not sampling some Arthur Baker snare drum and passing it off as my own sound. And I'm not interested in having *Devil's Music* be some sort of guessing game--"Name That Sample" or whatever--and I've kept the samples fairly short, but not so short that they're just blips and bleeps.

POSS: I can picture going to some dance club and hearing 20 seconds of *Devil's Music*--**a DJ cutting into it as a weird rhythm break.**

COLLINS: Sure. That would complete the cycle, since in a sense wehat I did when I recorded the piece was to digitally "scratch" dance records. I'd love to hear that. But I think that DJs cutting two songs together on the dance

floor are looking for a seamless break, the perfect matching of beat-per-minute, or a programmed change in tempo. I'm interested in sounds that are the opposite of that. When I set out to make the A side of *Devil's Music*, I didn't intend to make a dance record per se. I wanted to work with those sounds and those rhythm patterns in my own way. I wanted to see what the circuit I built would do to that music, those sounds.

So you're a sound-scavenger.
You could say that. It's very much part of the way I choose to work sound. I take a sort of ecological approach: I find it very difficult to justify making a sound. I would infinitely prefer to find something and modify it to my own ends. It's recycling. A lot of my pieces have tried to make maximum use out of a very limited amount of material.

When I listen to the B side of the record, I'm reminded of classic avant garde pieces like Steve Reich's "Violin Phase" or Terry Riley's "In C."
Right. The very nature of the electronics used for *Devil's Music* tends to produce the kind of phase patterns that one associates with those classic late-1960's pieces. But it goes back much further than that. [John] Cage's "Imaginary Landscape" used radios in live performance. And there's [Karlheinz] Stockhausen's "Kurzwellen" and of course there's the kind of superimposition of different musical fragments that [Charles] Ives worked with. That's all history.

What's more important to me is that I can take elevator music and turn it into something musically interesting. I'm making real music out of musical wallpaper. That's what still interests me about the circuitry of *Devil's Music* after dozens of performances.

What exactly is the circuitry that makes the stuttering and looping effects?
The record uses this rather strange combination of high and low tech. On the one hand I'm sampling these gorgeous $100,000 studio snare drum sounds, or the smooth, compressed sound of a radio news announcer's voice. Of course not all the stuff on the radio is of equal quality. The announcer on the Ukranian radio station I sample may be talking through a $50 microphone, and some of the other sounds may be "state of the art." But when it comes to my own end of things, I rely on inexpenseive cheezy digital delays, an 8-track tape machine, and devices that are generally available that I modify. I don't use things like the Synclavier or the Fairlight. The mechanical core of *Devil's Music* is a little circuit that I built that does the retriggering of the system. That's what makes the actual rhythms: one little chip and two dollars worth of parts.

So what are you working on now?
An unlikely combination of a rather sophisticated piece of recording studio equipment and an old trombone.

I've done extensive modifications on an Ursa Major digital reverb, turning it into a very flexible machine for sampling and transforming sounds. I wanted a controller for it that would lift me off the "table of electronics" I'm normally tied to when I perform. So I took an old trombone I bought for $12, and wired it so that the slide acts like the "mouse" on a home computer. When I press a small keypad on the trombone and move the slide in and out, the computer directs the Ursa Major to change som aspect of the sound passing through it. The coup de gras was that I put a small loudspeaker on the mouthpiece, so the sound actually comes out of the trombone I never blow into. It's a self-contained instrument for transforming sounds instead of making them.

I've also been collaborating with some improvisational musicians like Robert James and Peter Cusack. I like the vitality of the current improvisational music scene, and I'm beginning to get interested in approaching some of the technology I work with more as instruments and less tied to specific compositions. And I plan to keep performing *Devil's Music*. Doing the sampling from live radio--the unpredictability of it all, in that the radio I pick up depends on where and when the piece is being performed--is the really exciting part.

Robert Poss founded the groups Tot Rocket and Western Eyes, and is a member of Rhys Chatham's guitar ensemble and Band of Susans. He has been performing the music of Nicolas Collins for almost ten years.