



R Millis

Relief

Helen Scarsdale Agency DL/LP

Relief begins with a quick burst of surface noise and an announcer proclaiming in tones fit for the golden age of radio: "And now, listen to the entire secret sentence being typed out. Listen to the entire secret sentence on the talking typewriter." The keys clatter but the typewriter says nothing. Robert Millis would rather show just a little bit than tell all.

The track, "Secret Sentence", nonetheless exemplifies priorities that have guided him across the 20 years he has spent as one of Climax Golden Twins. He has also been an ethnographic videographer, a 78 rpm record collector and solo recording artist. The chatter of a bygone America gives way to a brief, bobbing figure played on what sounds like a South East Asian mouth organ, more likely sampled than played by Millis. The phrase repeats; its high frequencies shimmer and then pan between speakers, soon to be swept up by a big synth wash that could have been lifted from an early Popol Vuh record. Within moments, an act of affectionate cultural theft initiates a classic psychedelic experience, which in turn gives way to some blissful tone-float. But the current of multikulti ambient drift gets diverted around the six minute mark when an orchestra rolls in like a storm front, full of Hollywood melodrama. In a little over eight minutes Millis has demonstrated his use of found music as plastic material, his appreciation for anachronism, and his readiness to both revel in and subvert music's capacity to generate sensual pleasure and emotional experience.

The immaculately constructed collages of Climax Golden Twins' R Millis sidestep ethical questions of plundering the world's sounds.
By Bill Meyer

When Millis and Jeffrey Taylor formed Climax Golden Twins in Seattle in 1993, the Pacific North West was in thrall to K Records tweezeness and Sub Pop stoner-core. Their uneasy collages of tape trickery, hillbilly guitar picking, requisitioned East Asian music and the occasional attempt to rock out like a hardcore unit ensured that they were either roundly ignored or confused with fellow outcasts Sun City Girls. But while SCG generally performed either music or dialogue-driven faux radio plays, Climax Golden Twins (who have occasionally numbered three or four) played with sound. Birdsong, street sounds, movie dialogue, sound effects, tape hiss, shellac crackle and their own instrumental bashing: it was all the same to them.

If they were out of touch with the time and place in which they first convened Climax Golden Twins, Millis's and Taylor's affection for the music of distant places and days gone by has made them prophets for the currently vogueish practice of record collectors turning into album compilers. In 1997, The Twins' Firebreathing Turtle imprint issued the first of ten *Victrola Favorites* cassettes, made by playing their finds on a Victrola VV-210 phonograph and recording them straight onto tape. That celebration of 78s puts Millis at the head of a line that includes Jonathan Ward (Excavated Shellac, *Dust-To-Digital*), Ian Nagoski (Canary Records, Tompkins Square), David Murray (*Dust-To-Digital*), and Pat Conte (*The Secret Museum Of Mankind*).

But while Ward, Nagoski and Murray all have bones to pick with the historical record, wrongs that they want to set right or ignored facts they want to bring into the

light, the *Victrola Favorites* series aimed no higher than to proclaim that the compilers have gotten some awesome records and want other listeners to hear them, too. When The Twins finally got around to cherry-picking the *Victrola Favorites* cassettes for a CD set for *Dust-To-Digital*, they packaged them with a hardcover book full of label illustrations, and record player advertisements from around the world. The set unabashedly celebrates their exotic qualities, but also acknowledges the way the advent of music recording irrevocably changed what it recorded – it includes an image of a Buddha breaking his meditative pose to cock an ear to a phonograph's horn.

If you want exotica, however, Millis delivers. "Awaj Arepo" opens the second side of *Relief* with decadently lush layers of gamelan tones, organ surges and wistful piano. But unlike Mike Cooper's recent *White Shadows In The South Seas*, which critiqued the exotica it mined while foreshadowing the passing of the white shadow of European dominance over the Pacific, Millis simply makes the best tropical curio he's capable of. Whether showing us an old record or making a new one, he appears more concerned with displaying his love for the object and the act of listening than he is with interrogating it about the ethics of its existence.

Millis has also made three films that *Sublime Frequencies* has released on DVD. Like *Victrola Favorites*, they isolate and lovingly display exotic objects of fascination. One DVD, *My Friend Rain*, comes with a CD including cannibalisations of The Bee Gees' "How Can You Mend A Broken Heart" and Henry Dacre's "Daisy Bell" by Burmese pop musicians who saddled these

familiar melodies with lyrics in their own tongue, suggesting that gazing at the Other and grabbing what you like can even work both ways.

If it means one thing for the folks on the short end of the sociocultural-economic stick to arrogate The Man's songs, it's something else altogether for a US citizen to appropriate the sounds of other cultures. Yet there's more explicit creativity in Millis's reworking of the khaen on "Secret Sentence" than there is in Zaw Win Shein's rewrite of The Bee Gees' tune. He didn't just write something on top of the existing structure; he singled out a sound and transformed it into something different and new.

The history-laden grime of the *Victrola Favorites* coexists with the high res sheen of *Relief*. While the title track opens with a squeaky door, some sullen guitar chords that sound like they fell out of a Gastr Del Sol song, and a Babel of Slavic voices, they usher the listener into quite another sonic space; an airy synthesizer fantasia that would sound right at home on Can's *Unlimited Edition*. "Enjoyment Machine" layers bubbly, ersatz Eastern keyboard melodies one over another, like a sequence of sunrises snapped from an airliner and overlaid in Photoshop. But then the voices of a preacher and a gospel singer, both liberated from 78s, rise up in the mix. Sonically and historically, they should have nothing to do with the rest of the piece. But their combination makes sense to Millis the collector, who has been forging such juxtapositions in his listening room for at least 20 years. He has taken sounds and moulded them together with skill, imagination and affection. □