

GOOD
NIGHT
THE
PLEASURE
DAVID / WAS
GRUBBS / OURS



Praise for *The Voice in the Headphones*

“David Grubbs’s books are at once bravado poetic performances and incisive works of performance theory. He combines a deep knowing with a willingness to smash everything. I will follow him into any medium.”—BEN LERNER

“It’s decades now that David Grubbs has kept my head spinning with ideas about the creation, performance, and understanding of music. To hear or read his work is to be invited into collaboration. We are all audience, all of the time, and every creator worth her salt knows this. Grubbs turns this tenet into poetry.”
—WILL OLDHAM, music maker

“‘Enmesh yourself in a music where it’s impossible to take a wrong step.’ In that single line, one is reminded of the varied experiments that Grubbs has been part of throughout his career; we see how the studio has been the source of much inspiration, and that deep immersion is what breeds fearlessness.”
—JOSHUA MINSOO KIM, *The Wire*

“[*The Voice in the Headphones*] is an experience encapsulated in the space-time of the recording process of isolation booths, mixing boards, the room that not only floats acoustically but also is free from the flow of real time in the outside world. . . . This is an insider’s inside book about an inside experience, but Grubbs’ warmth will appeal to anyone who’s wondered just what goes on in those sequestered rooms.”—GEORGE GRELLA, *New York City Jazz Record*

“Grubbs uses the set-up to extrapolate many philosophical questions surrounding the materiality of technology, the motivations of the performer, the collapsing of distinctions between different media and musing on the economics of entertainment—all within the crucible of the noble ruin of the recording studio, once the promised land for an aspiring musician and now an expensive obsolescence. . . . A kind of torrent of ideas and anxieties in the form of a visual score pouring forth from his three decades of recording in grungy studios and gilded arts academies all over the world.”—ALEX NEILSON, *Record Collector*

Praise for *Now that the audience is assembled*

“David Grubbs’s tone poem on the vibratory consciousness betwixt performer and listener rings with an intellect both spiritual and Earth-activist. A sublime sense of provocation is at dance with the O-mind bliss of Kenneth Koch’s *The Pleasures of Peace*, Pauline Oliveros’s ‘The Collective Intelligence of Improvisation,’ and Albert Ayler’s *Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe*. David’s meditation joins hands with these critical, artful signals of love, mercy, hope, and beauty in an enlightened and welcome vision.”—THURSTON MOORE

“The three claps are sounded, and all hell breaks loose. In the band, in the orchestra, in the performer, in the gong bath, in the lifting piano, in the audience, in the concert hall, in the venue of the mind. David Grubbs’s piece is a noisy page-turning hallucinatory rush.”—CAROLINE BERGVALL, author of *Drift*

“*Now that the audience is assembled* . . . reminds us that listening can feel stranger than dreaming.”—CHRIS RICHARDS, *Washington Post*

“Primarily, in the beginning, this is a discourse on—and through—rhythm, on what it means to pause and to repeat, on all the many shades of the same and its other, of noise and silence. That the book is able to make you pause and think about all these things while being itself rhythmically (and musically) interesting is no small feat. On top of that, it also manages to be very funny.”
—ROBERT BARRY, *The Wire*

“Grubbs’s writing does triple duty as a poem, a book, and a score for live performance—like almost all of Cage’s writings. . . . The best thing about this book, for me, is that it demonstrates that great scholarship can be great art and that scholarly inquiry on the nature of experimentalism can itself be experimental.”
—SARA HAEFELI, *American Music*

“This long form poem is as much a reflection on the contemporary music audience and their responses to an unnamed musician’s experimentation as it is a commentary on the act of spontaneous creation. Grubbs’s writing style—ephemeral

and esoteric, with patches of lucidity and remarkable wit—is highly engaging and entertaining, offering a thoughtful experiment in music writing that invites the reader in to participate themselves, performing as one of the assembled audience.”—TOBY YOUNG, *Twentieth-Century Music*

Praise for *Records Ruin the Landscape*

“One of the chief joys of this book is that [it] seeks to rediscover the avant-gardes of the 1960s in all their spontaneity, in their present-ness, as if unfolding these mavericks from their own perspectives, without benefit of current hindsight. We learn, reading this book, what the future looked like to the past. *Records Ruin the Landscape* seeks to prestidigitate the landscape of the 1960s back to life. For this, one should be thankful—including for the recordings that allow David Grubbs’ act of imagination and scholarship to have taken place.”

—DANIEL HERWITZ, *Critical Inquiry*

“For compositions whose whole raison d’être is to generate a drastically different realization with every performance . . . no recording of any one performance could be said to ‘be’ the piece. . . . David Grubbs’s exhaustively researched *Records Ruin the Landscape* explores this dilemma specifically as it affected the generation of avant-garde composers who hit their stride in the sixties, John Cage being the most prominent and outspoken among them.”

—DAVE MANDL, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“The risk writers run, of course, with the big questions approach, is universalizing their personal narrative in order to present the big answer. Grubbs is too skilled and self-aware to run into this problem. His breadth of research in musicology and aesthetic theory is balanced in this short and engaging book with candid writing about his own experiences of recordings of experimental music. . . . It is testament to Grubbs’s sensitivity as a writer that a sympathetic picture emerges of these musicians, who seem often to be railing against hierarchies they can’t quite help being part of.”—FRANCES MORGAN, *The Wire*

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The child persists in speaking a language the adults don't understand. The adults persist in responding in a language the child rejects as gibberish. What this unaccompanied kid is doing at sound check is on her dad, who's out scaring

up catering. It dawns on the child that the musicians don't communicate using words, the three of them flummoxed by the most basic questions. They don't laugh at jokes, they laugh between jokes, they fake-laugh at nothing and nowhere. She starts again and delivers it differently, cascading impatient tones accelerating toward birdsong, still to no effect other than the blankly expectant faces of adults. All of this flickers hilarious and exasperating to the child—she's not giving up—and jibes with her experience of the steady influx of mute visitors carting musical instruments, clinging to, futzing with, sheltering behind.

The daily flow of ridiculous strangers.

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Every stage its own stickiness. Stu Sutcliffe

trod these perilously gapped planks of wood, Pete Best did his very when he bashed his kit night after night on this exact spot. Here at the center of medieval St. Pauli pilgrims still alight and descend the narrow wooden staircase to amble onstage and inspect the damage wrought by boots and bass drum spurs. This celebrated stage could pass for a thousand years old; it gives unpredictably with each step during the load-in, each uncertain stagger step beneath an amplifier to be positioned just so, an awesome decades-old pilsner

lacquer postponing inevitable collapse.

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After sound check a stroll down one of the narrower streets off Reeperbahn delivers the jet-lagged trio to a bar devoid of graffiti or mosaic

of touring bands' stickers. Sepulchral barroom oxygen. It's hard to picture who favors this abandoned locale and what time they arrive. There's a back room, more like someone's living room, but quieter, darker, uninhabited. Someone's grandparents' or great aunt and uncle's windowless subterranean rec room with stained wood paneling, dusty desiccated couches, and overstuffed armchairs accented by a half dozen framed prints of Prussian military uniforms from 1870. The sole element that suggests late twentieth century is a coin-operated pool table—the trio thankfully provisioned with D-mark coins—and a wall-mounted rack of translucent, bile-colored fiberglass cues. Kill an hour, train yourself

to fix the spot in memory, confirm its existence

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down the line with musicians slotted along a similar circuit. Several hours later, in one of the smallest venues of the tour, one of the most deliriously crowded and vilely pitlike pungent, musicians and audience surge back and forth in wavelike motions across a fugitive gap, a lop-sided tug-of-war of three versus one hundred with each side blithe to the other's backstory, pleasurable seething siege, smudgeable history painting commemorating Thursday or Friday or Tuesday and whoever rolls into town

whichever town, just a band

just a crowd, but over three-quarters of an hour—some nights it happens within ten seconds—the two sides wake and warm to the excellence of the other. Plumb the mystery of the first encounter with both sides partaking in, demanding volume and group churn. Mandatory eye contact means it's everyone's churn. Overwhelming ricochet

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superimposes reflection upon reflection

agglomerates, laminates

embosses

sph-

ere bi-

sected by cymbal

shimmer. Amplify everything.

It's easy to learn the thing that makes the audience howl: the pulling up quick, potent milliseconds of silence, tinnitus pre-echo, tremor

graduating to temblor, ominous absence

of impact. Don't leave me bewildered, there's only one thing I can do there's only one thing I can say. We're still waiting, zoomed in disorientingly close, helplessly inhabiting a moment between, a rapidly unspooling string of moments before the next beat arrives. Electricity spreads silently through the atria, through every dramatically stilled chest in the joint. The sharpshooter's calm between beats. Screenshot the trough of a wave

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take aim, take care to aim with redoubled care amidst abandon and the abandonment of downbeat. In the halted progress of chaos a flying fish seizes midair

Bull's-eye. There's still time to squeeze off a second shot between beats, in the stillness after the catch of a crash cymbal between thumb and forefinger, energy transferred from bronze alloy to drummer's throbbing golden arm. In the multiform stillness that follows the muting of strings, amplifiers at the ready, amplifiers humming, amplifiers pawing and pleading to do what amplifiers do best, always at the behest. Everyone, don't breathe

not yet

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continue to hold this call may be, come on this is nothing, the time it takes for eyes to widen comically or batten down in advance of a plunge, a fork in the audience's road of self-preservation. The horizon of the event curves with an abrupt raising of drumsticks and three musicians' telepathic twitch, gravity torques, and down we go. Everyone hold that breath

then scream like we rehearsed

just kidding there was no rehearsal, there's never a rehearsal, just scream everybody because that's how we sound the missing chord, the multiple-octave cluster of however many forearms across the keyboard, knocking the wind out of, disabusing disused pipes. Some go high and some below and bray as low as they can, to each their own scream

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the chord voiced as the occasion demands, and impossible

to improve upon. It's the scream this audience instinctively feels it was
convened to make, the scream this audience was destined to and damn
right deserves to make, the house

screams its collective authority, finds its unifying aesthetic

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then in a flash is cruelly overmatched.

The musicians see an opening and pounce. They produce a jagged deafening sound, the most lacerating attack of which they're collectively capable. All the howling voices in the room are enveloped, voices recast as unheard music

lungs strain and throats burn to no audible effect, blood vessels in the brain narrowed, silhouettes pitched forward in forceful completion of exhale. The audience ministers to its dizziness with a synchronized slug of Flensburger Pils. Then they take a shared deep breath and scream again. Maybe a hundred against three doesn't seem such a fair fight, not with the band's amplification, the sound caroming like mad and attacking from all sides. The musicians flatter themselves

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that they're in command of the situation. Over the course of the tour each of the three band members will come to regard this gesture and its response differently, whether as manifestation of daily or nightly improvised community, as physical release, as bulletproof joke

stupider and more profound with each telling, as musicianship, as showmanship, as diagnostic stimulus, as difficult-to-shake habit, as gesture, as empty gesture, as placeholder, as void, as vacuum, as ventriloquy, as puppetry, as political theater, as incoherent political theater, as violence, as carte blanche, as cashed-in chips, as blanket disrespect.

The audience won't lose sleep over it

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instead confident that they're the ones who make it happen. The trick is in the timing in which the audience takes understandable pride; the lacerating et cetera roar doesn't arrive until they give the sign, and it's in their power

to leave the band hanging through what could devolve into the unending pickup. The audience might turn tail and march up the steps and out of the venue in protest, past the merch table with neither glance

nor purchase, the bartender and sound engineer and promoter as well, everyone could choose to pack it in and leave the trio alone to end the standoff—the night their bluff was called—and break down their gear and let themselves out. The audience decides when not to scream.

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A splinter of the true stage
lodges itself in the heel of the bare-
foot drummer. It nests there for decades,
always. One explanation of how a life unfolds.

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In the breather before the next song, the tall bass player who's in it for the hell of it—the childhood friend who three months from now will return to libraries and lecture halls, a mensch among music lifers in the making—takes the opportunity to fetch his smokes from a corduroy shearling jacket, shakes the pack, and up jumps a square. He lifts pack to mouth and flicks a brass Zippo up the side of a pant leg, victoriously

lights, sucks. After a lag of scant seconds, a closed-circuit television delay, everyone reaches for their own smokes. The inchoate collective thought bubble of gratification is punctured by a pointillistic sound field of flicks and match strikes, and a great exhaled tobacco cloud drifts

toward the stage. The bassist screws the lit cigarette upright between headstock and dropped D string and recommits to not cracking his skull on the low-hanging speakers. Looks to the drummer to count us back in.

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For the encore the trio swells to a sextet with unanticipated special guests dropping in and having a bash, the welcome interlopers' gig down the street ending early and thus providing a second rhythm section and roadie moonlighting

as shouty improvising singer—we call this one “Trash Compactor Blues,” einzweidreivier!—none of whom the trio had previously met, rather encountering these Midwestern demi-legends through anecdote, firsthand testimony, live tapes, xeroxed photos, flyers, speculative fanzine interviews, and owlish singles and EPs. The cross-generational double trio sprawls four-on-the-floor and succeeds through still more punishing volume and runaway momentum, six bodies bouncing off one another on this smallest and most ancient of stages, the living biblical landscape.

Being six men, conversation is limited to onstage thrusting

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with the dissident members of the band from down the street hoofing it back to their own gig before the applause dies, before the trio summon the courage to introduce themselves other than through onstage jousting and playacting. The end of the gig coincides with a procession

of DJs and record crates down the stairs of the venue; there's a line out the door that extends into the street and down the block as audiences for the back-to-back events overlap. Businesslike hands snap folding tables into place onstage, and before the first amp has been moved the needle drops on a freshly unsheathed twelve-inch. The trio's post-show elation

sometimes dissipates in the changeover, sometimes continues to bloom. The group mood is unpredictable and hinges on the slightest of details: the perceived temperature of greetings, body language prized for charming opacity, screwball mistranslation

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and how quickly the DJ gets people onto the dance floor in these moments of maximum confusion, of simultaneous entrances and exits. An urgent question relates to settings on the time machine

are we entering retro mode or can we all agree to hell with this decade, to hell with what preceded it, will the DJ set the controls so that we can abandon this exasperating decade, the sclerotic century, the abdicating millennium? Don't forget that somewhere at this moment the Arkestra is chanting and marching and beating the drums, unison-singing

ten more years 'til the year two thousand.

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Tonight the group packs its gear without delay

piles it in the venue's office to be snagged the following noon, and together with the driver who doubles as tour manager—the one who holds the cash—exits the claustrophobic venue, shuffling past sidewalk currywurst vendors on the way to a club known for raging until 8 a.m., 10 a.m., lunchtime, always tunneling into the next day. The identical twin sisters who organize parties there are beloved by the driver for from time to time throwing a bag of speed his way. This comparatively upscale club is several times the size of the venue of the just-completed gig, a cruciform shape with a large black rubberized dance floor in the center, pillars for peering around at the corners, and steep raked seating on one side with rows of bleachers disappearing into the murk.

To the trio's surprise the dance floor clears

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after every song; there are at least three different crowds, three different scenes present in roughly equal numbers, and each group takes its turn in a three-song rotation. It starts with a techno or acid house track that's blowing up everywhere this spring, nonstop arm and upper-body movement, footsteps circumscribed and knees pressed together in athletic corkscrewing, energy pulsing within erect bodies, sweat and flesh and scissored tops, chemical drive for nights and days, arms upward and fingers scraping

the beyond. The final beat of the track cues a Shibuya Crossing in miniature, the skillful brushing-past of opposing squads of pedestrians. This next set of dancers making its way to the floor favors a rockish glam getting down, scarves and curls and swoons like Bolan or Bowie on *Top of the Pops*, air-guitar gestures soundtracked by vinyl surface noise signifying well-loved copies of LPs inherited from an older sibling, aunt, or uncle.

Caveman kick drum floor tom shuffle beat

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with voluptuous stereo delay on the voices, at times slathered on the entire mix, football chants ponging from pillar to pole. Two choruses in and everyone on the dance floor is singing along, can't help it, the trio and the driver can't help it, everyone succumbs to Sam

got to be Sam, suave-maned man with telegram

of self-evident significance. The vampires on the bleachers sing along with understatement, the intoning black mass of them. Take a walk in the park at dusk and you might spy a bat, several, then you notice there are dozens, the trees full of them, not a vacant branch, hundreds of silently ripened creatures, patient goths

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until they're playing their song, at which point hell-bent they rush the dance floor, a wild impatient scramble to replace the glam rockers with capes flying and the odd bared fang. They sprint to the dance floor like Mickey Rivers squeezing out a bunt, the fastest man in the history of Major League Baseball, safe at first and having overrun it by some distance lumbers back to the bag with a beautiful deadpan gait

the slowest walk in the sport. After flying to the dance floor, vampires downshift into lowest gear or idle in neutral, fish out a cigarette and light it to catch their breath, using the glowing tip to draw broken-hearted circles in the air. Three steps forward, a long pause, three steps back, a longer and more grave pause, another wave of the cigarette, smoke because your life

depends on it. Chess pieces agitate for stalemate.

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How do the hours pass? With vodkas and bitter lemon, with Cuba libres sweetened by Afri-Cola, with intervening large beers. By avoiding the persistent offer of a lunatic at the bar to join him in a Drecksack—borsa di merda, shitbag—a streaky brown concoction of cola and pastis. The trio chafe congenially

against the three-act rotation on the dance floor, overstaying their welcome and providing unwelcome continuity, feigning ignorance; they're treated as if invisible, especially by vampires whose only acknowledgment of the interlopers is a lowered shoulder and demonstrative low-speed collision. Three steps forward, three steps back, wave cigarette. Who moves

to leave? Anyone except the driver slash tour manager. Never during these six weeks of shows does he mention the lateness or earliness of the hour, the following day's drive, the fact of an early sound check

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it's unimaginable he'd counsel prudence or be the first to quail. Drink tabs soberingly totaled and by now acclimated to the club's ecosystem of techno, glam, and goth, the trio plus driver ascend the several stairways that bring them to the earth's surface

ambushed by daylight, and how could they have fallen

for it again? Amateurs. This same cataclysmic reveal happened the night before and the night before that, hip-checking or body-blocking panic devices on industrial doors, anticipating darkness and stillness in the dead center of night when instead the city cranked awake hours ago on a Saturday or Sunday or Wednesday. Morning unforgivably bright.

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Breakfast coincides with the end of a nearby factory's overnight shift, the only open seats at the counter. Talking means twisting your neck, happens sporadically, then less and less. Eggs, potatoes, toast, sausage, and coffee or beer. Conversation buzzes around them in a language the three musicians understand poorly or not at all, only gleanings from vocabulary words one of them diligently compiles and shares in afternoon puzzlings

across the newspaper's front page, a plan to school oneself in the van. This list of disarticulated parts of speech privileges nouns, doesn't yet meaningfully contribute to conversation, jokes, anything requiring subtlety—only the comedy of arbitrary collection. The growing list of words begs to be reshuffled and drafted for song-lyric duty

poetry crystallized in failed language study

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