

# WIRE

## Adventures In Modern Music

October 2007

### **Gustavo Aguilar**

#### **Unsettled On An Old Sense Of Place**

HENCEFORTH CD

Gustavo Aguilar is a brilliant percussionist who grew up in Brownsville, where Texas meets Mexico. He now lives in New York, runs an ensemble called soNu and has located himself in music at a point where composition and improvising feed into one another in extraordinary ways. Getting there, he has collaborated closely with defiantly heterodox musicians including Ianu Dumitrescu, Annea Lockwood, Anthony Braxton and Wadada Leo Smith. *Unsettled On An Old Sense Of Place* features six of his own pieces, and it's a fabulously vivid experience.

*Xochicalco*, dedicated to Mexican composer Julio Estrada, might be the soundtrack to a fever dream, its hallucinatory electroacoustics conjured up spontaneously by soNu, plus harpist Anne LeBaron and viola player Mary Oliver, in response to Aguilar's verbal cues and after preparatory listening to selections of Mexican music. *Contrafactum For Scelsi* is Aguilar solo, playing electric guitar as hand percussion – popping harmonics and pummelled clusters, his memory of Mexican serenades conflated with awareness of Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi's guitar piece *Ko-Tha*. *RoKaMaYoHa* is a stunning dramatic imagining of Japanese kabuki theatre, centred in kabuki's recurrent theme of revelation through sudden, unexpected noise. It's shrill and strange, with Nina Eidsheim's penetrating voice embedded in processed whistles and woodwinds.

*Dirac's Theory* is an intimate dialogue with snare drum: the percussion and percussionist drawing out all kinds of unexpected nuance between themselves. With *Suprachiasmatic Nuclei*, Aguilar's declared intention is to address our neurological pacemakers; in practice this means 15 minutes of steady descent from well-defined articulation into ragged yet compulsive white noise. *Wendell's History* concludes the programme, setting text by poet Wendell Berry against a glistening glockenspiel backdrop. Gustavo Aguilar is himself a defiantly unorthodox musician – the kind we need – and this is a wonderful CD.

JULIAN COWLEY

**REVIEW: JOHN GILL (PARIS, FRANCE)**

**Gustavo Aguilar**  
**UNSETTLED ON AN OLD SENSE OF PLACE**  
**Henceforth Records 103**

Composer and multi-instrumental percussionist Aguilar will be known to more eagle-eyed PT readers from his appearance alongside George Lewis and Anthony Davis on David Borgo's *Reverence for Uncertainty*, reviewed here in March 2005. Like those improvising demons, he straddles electroacoustic and free music, and has collaborated with the likes of Wadada Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Charlie Haden, and electroacoustic composer and bassist Lisle Ellis. This new studio recording finds Texan Aguilar brimming with ideas and imagination in pieces performed with the Californian electroacoustic group soNu, or in audacious solo settings. Braxton has described soNu's work as "music for the third millennium". Aguilar in fact travels back and forth in time and space, to pre-Hispanic central America, and to modern-day Japan, for sources and inspiration. His music has burnt its passport while in transit.

"Xochicalco (for Julio)" is dedicated to the Mexican composer Julio Estrada, after a sojourn with Estrada in Cuernavaca, which produced sound sources of wind and percussion, plucked instruments, rainsticks or dropped objects, with the members of soNu given enigmatic (and secret) instructions on how to approach the piece, with an elegiac lilt to it that could almost be, incongruously, Oregon.

Exposure to Giacinto Scelsi's "Ko-Tha" triggered "Contrafactum for Scelsi", which approaches the guitar as a hand percussion instrument, recalling the darker moods of Harold Budd or Ludovico Einaudi. "RoCaMaYoHa" sounds like a shakuhachi (in fact Aguilar on plucked dulcimer) put through John Cage's kitchen blender. This ten-minute epic then develops into a full-blown sonic storm recalling the mischief that Cathy Berberian and Luciano Berio used to get up to.

The winningly-titled "Suprachiasmatic Nuclei", after the retinal nerve-cells that help regulate biological rhythm, is a meditation on periodicity in sound work, in response to Reich's "Pendulum Music", although this builds from a squeak to a scream, with submarine explosions, shards of voice and percussion, and much unneighbourly interference with the sound sources. In cool (any sense) contrast, "Dirac's Theory" is a solo for Aguilar, a 'brand new snare drum' and hand weapons, and while not Max Roach's majestic solo for single cymbal still alarms with the noise one man can coax out of a humble single drum.

The globetrotting Aguilar's music is stateless but also, as the convoluted title might eventually imply, about the complicated notion of belonging anywhere. The last piece, "Wendell's History", is a reading of a poem by poet Wendell Berry, a modern-day Thoreau (via Whitman and perhaps William Carlos Williams) who abandoned literary New York for a Kentucky farm. His poem "History", backed by Aguilar's fraudulent gamelan on glockenspiel, will strike a chord with any latterday nomad trying to fathom the "art of being here". A glib tag would be to call it post-global, but this is the freshest new music I've heard since modest Norwegian legends Jokleba, fully deserving of Whitney Balliett's near perfect description of intelligent music as "the sound of surprise".

JG



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*Unsettled on An Old Sense of Place*  
**Gustavo Aguilar (Henceforth)**  
by Donald Elfman

The title is nearly perfect - this music is truly unsettled on - really - any place or sense of it. You can't nail it down other than as a series of sound portraits about the relationship between composer and listener. It does invoke a sense of somewhere that feels familiar and very new at the same time.

Aguilar hails from Brownsville, Tex. and one might find something of the kind of Texas/Mexican colors of the composer's background, but you won't be there for long because the music is a reflection on change and impermanence. It's that old Eric Dolphy talk about the fact that once the music is out it's gone. Aguilar has composed these six pieces but it feels as if they're being born every second. "Xochicalco" is dedicated to the Mexican composer Julio Estrada whose music finds new forms in Aztec culture and language; Aguilar has also found "the new" out of a sense of spontaneous creation. He uses live electronics and also plays the flute and the teponaztl, a type of slit drum used in central Mexico by the Aztecs and related cultures. It's about memories and places but it's also about something more abstract.

Much of this music is about the transformation of particulars into less identifiable quantities and then back into something large and expansive - like our

planet. Steve Reich, Giacinto Scelsi and other cultural personalities like the poet Wendell Berry are the sources of Aguilar's transformations and every moment is rich with the wonder of creation. It's as if the real world were being seen through the lens of science fiction with the goal of deepening an understanding of our own being. Annotator Steven Schick sums it up perfectly when, in speaking of "Dirac's Theory" says, "This is playing at its very best - a 'what-would happen-if' approach - that you wish would go on forever."

*For more information, visit [www.henceforthrecords.com](http://www.henceforthrecords.com).  
Aguilar is at Roulette Nov. 5th, 19th and 26th with Adam Rudolph. See calendar.*