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provocateur, hector, meta-anarchist;
"Have brain, will use; have pen, will poison."

GEORGE CRUMB: Voice of the Whale (a Robert Mugge Film / DVD) (2016 / MVD Visual)

This is a re-release of film-maker Robert Mugge's first venture (1976), and what better way could one have chosen to set into motion a debut and career than through the venerable Nonesuch label avant-gardist George Crumb? Voice of the Whale, or Vox Balanae as it's more formally known, is as important a work as any of Crumb's earlier masterpieces. I was turned on to the guy through Ancient Voices of Children (1970) and Makrokosmos (1972) after first being brain-whomped by Eric Salzman's Nude Paper Sermon (1969) (<http://www.acousticmusic.com/fame/p08323.htm>), which ignited my ever-burning aestheticus acquisitivus lunaticus to search out every Nonesuch LP I could find. From that, tracking down Iannis Xenakis' work and kindred psycho-active sonics was the logical next step - this was, after all, the 70s - among which Crumb's LPs still stand out like confident beacons, siren songs in a field of scintillating illuminations...albeit sirens from Mars, Procyon, and dimensions yet undiscovered.

This DVD opens straight into one of a set of ongoing slices in a complete performance of Voice/Vox by the Penn Contemporary Players, commencing with an exotic flute solo bearing florid scents of gagaku, Jon Hassell (long before he was brought through the vale by Eno), Pacific Rim essences, whale song emulations, and, of course, pure imagination. The piano steps in Cage-ily, and, though the piece is of terran pensivities, we're off for the Magellanic Cluster in spacily eerie atmospherics not dissimilar to the deeps of this planet's oceans. Don't ask me why, but the performers are masked; perfectly okay with me: we don't question Harry Partch as to his eccentricities, and so we leave Crumb to his (^sides, it makes for a great element of dark cabaret).

Then the composer is serially interviewed by Richard Wernick, and the exercise proves to be one of contrasts: the utter mundanity of the composer's daily self enveloping a core of revelatory insights reaching well beyond his time (and we still haven't caught up, y'all). George looks just like another of his surname, the famous cartoonist Robert Crumb, while sounding like a non-nasally, non-whiny, non-pretentious, non-asshole William F. Buckley; in George's case: quiet, conservative in tone, not at all full of himself, a very pleasant contrast to today's over-the-top rock-n-rolling interviews wherein everything in sight and earshot is predicated upon branding, merchandising, and upsell rather than art. My, how radically things have changed in just a few decades.

Mugge completely eschews MTV consciousness, not branding a damn thing, thank God, and is, in more than one sense, the Errol Morris of music films, not in Morris' work as a journalistic filmographer per se but rather as a documentarian in exposures of different but similar nature: first of portraits of those working outside the mainstream and then of ongoing prolific preservations of sonic Americana, the side of the sphere that doesn't get the sun it should. In the former, among those obscurer creatives you'll find documentations of Sun Ra, Sonny Rollins, and of course George Crumb before veering into the trad-cats 'n kitties with Ruben Blades, Elvin Bishop, Robert Johnson, and Rosie Ledet amid a treasure trove of blues, reggae, zydeco, N'awleans, bluegrass, and other modes celebrated in concerts, modern histories, and tributes.

This DVD of Mr. Crumb is among the more crucial of Mugge's works, as visual imprints of a-v musics being performed are rare and invaluable...n, man o man, I'd love to see the score sheets the pianist is playing from!: they look bizarre as hell, something Wernick correctly cites as "calligraphy". More, Voice of the Whale is an illuminating peek into Crumb's personal life, which was as plain and Levittown as any blue collar workaday despite that famed psychedelic oeuvre: we see him playing Frisbee, in duet with cellist/pianist son David, his wife taking time away from the laundry and lunch preparations to speak about her husband, and so on. Mr. Mugge captured a moment that existed, my friends, in a much different time. Would that more had followed his example, we'd be much richer for the move.