

The music of Oswald's mind

> BY ALEXANDER VARTY

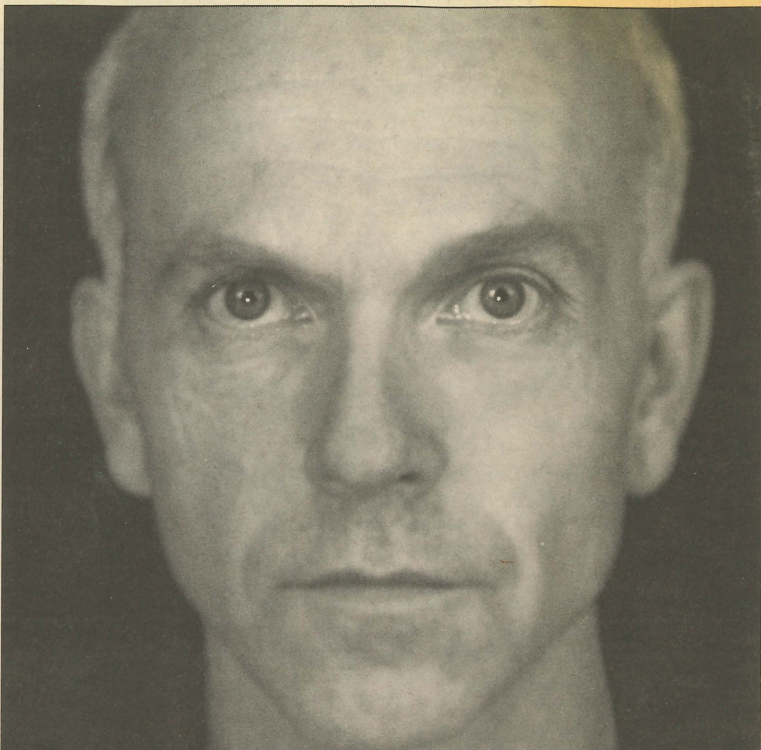
Want to make John Oswald a happy man? Search your junk drawer or instrument cases for unused Macaffery Futurity saxophone reeds, which had a brief vogue during the plastic-happy 1950s.

"I seem to have the world's supply," says the renegade media artist and musician, calling from his Toronto headquarters. "I got my first one for free out of a candy dish at a local music store in Waterloo back in the early '70s, and when I decided I preferred them to cane reeds I bought out their supply, which was several hundred. And then somewhere in the mid- to late-'70s, I tracked down the guy who ran the company, who said 'Oh, yeah, we still make those,' and he sent me a few, but they were of an inferior plastic. They had moved their focus over to making 8-track tapes, which was probably the end of them."

A few of Oswald's Futurities will get a workout when he joins the New Orchestra Workshop at the Scotiabank Dance Centre next Friday (November 24). "Yeah, I managed to get my foot in the door for that," he notes with a hint of amusement. Despite his 30-year history as an improvising saxophonist, he doesn't often share the stage with jazz performers—even ones as open-minded as NOW artistic director Coat Cooke and his accomplices.

Instead, it's Oswald's brain as much as his instrument that will be the draw on Friday. Having essentially invented the remix with his Plunderphonics experiments in the early 1980s—and despite suffering the wrath of Sony as the result—he's continuing to experiment with re-contextualizing other people's music in a variety of provocative ways.

For instance, he's just returned from Glasgow, where the BBC Scottish Orchestra premiered *Oswald's First Vio-*



John Oswald helped invent remixing back in the '80s and since then has opened up new contexts for understanding the familiar and unfamiliar in music.

lin Concerto by Tchaikovsky, with Australian improviser Jon Rose as soloist.

In it, the soloist is not required to play anything that Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky specified in his original concerto score, but the orchestra performs it more or less straight. "It's about the contrast between a very familiar thing coming from the orchestra and a very unfamiliar thing coming from the soloist—which is my way of dealing with concerti in general," says Oswald. "I've always found them kind of annoying; they're just putting the soloist in a straitjacket."

The forum he's arranged for Diane Labrosse, the soloist in his as-yet-untitled commission for NOW, does have certain restrictions, but it's no less unconventional. Essentially, the key-

boardist and conductor's sampler will be loaded with instrumental quotes from the jazz canon, which she'll introduce and mutate based on input from a casino-style roulette wheel.

"It's going to be a little bit like one of those game shows, a *Wheel of Fortune* sort of thing," Oswald allows. "I definitely wanted something where it would be apparent to the audience what's going on. It's not a bunch of hidden operations that are producing a purely abstract piece of music. I wanted it all out in the open."

As with all concerts of experimental music, chance is a factor here—but there's a good possibility Oswald's eccentric intelligence will produce provocative and perhaps even wildly entertaining music. ♦