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ANTIETAM – *OPUS MIXTUM* Out February 2008 on Carrot Top

Flying just below the radar for more than 20 years, but always making uncompromising music and maintaining a deeply devoted fan base throughout the world, Antietam play raw rock and roll that is nearly impossible to define.

Antietam was born from the ashes of Louisville, Kentucky's original punk band, the Babylon Dance Band (1978-1983), powered by guitarist Tara Key and bassist Tim Harris. That band released only one seven-inch single in its time, but they toured extensively throughout the Midwest and East Coast and quickly made a name for themselves. The *Village Voice* called Key "the best female guitarist this side of the Atlantic." (Twenty-five years later a writer in that same paper, unconcerned with gender or geography, asked, "Did I mention that Tara Key is the best guitarist in the world?") And Mark Jacobson of *Esquire* wrote, "Tara Key is my fave guitar hero." That sort of hyperbole has continuously followed Key and her playing throughout her career.

The Babylon Dance Band disintegrated in the early 80's, although Matador Records revived them in 1994 with the *Four on One* album, and Harris and Key relocated to New York in 1984 to form Antietam. *Bold Beginnings: A History of Louisville Punk*, a recent compilation of Louisville bands from this era on Noise Pollution Records (2007), documents some of the BDB's blistering early demo recordings.

The early version of Antietam (named for the battle of Antietam, the bloodiest day in American history) was a sprawling and intense musical experiment, with two full-time bassists and a jazz drummer pitching a rhythmic miasma against Key's six-string howl. The band released two albums on Homestead Records in the classic period of that label alongside legendary groups like Sonic Youth and Dinosaur Jr.

In the late 80's, the group repurposed themselves as a power trio, and in 1990, released *Burgoo* on LA imprint Triple X Records (the house that Jane's Addiction built). It was produced by Georgia and Ira of Yo La Tengo and focused on the new vision of the band, built around the songwriting partnership of Key and Harris. The trio Antietam's sound was still unique, but channeled a more direct rock and roll vibe, now drawing on the duo's punk rock history as well as diverse influences like Neil Young, David Bowie, Dead Moon, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Funkadelic and Eno's ambient albums. Drummer Josh Madell joined the group in 1991 and thus we enter the modern era of Antietam. *Opus Mixtum* on Carrot Top Records is the fifth full-length released by this trio. With each album they have gotten closer to the essence of what keeps the band vibrant and inspired so many years after most have fallen by the wayside.

Part of their ongoing inspiration may lie in the variety of side-projects that these musicians have undertaken, from Key's two well-received "solo" albums released on Homestead in the mid-90's (neither album was solo by any stretch of the imagination, and both Harris and Madell figured prominently, but these records allowed Key to explore a more acoustic, songwriterly approach to her craft, with a coterie of sidemen on strings and keys and horns), to her instrumental collaboration with Rick Rizzo of Chicago stalwarts Eleventh Dream Day (resulting in the *Dark Edson Tiger* album released in 2000 on Thrill Jockey), to Harris's "lead cello" work with local psychedelic pop band The Special Pillow, to Madell's songwriting (and drumming) for pop-punk girl group Tralala.

All these experiences and more went into the new Antietam album. Seventeen years on in the current trio's collaboration, the group decided to throw all of their passions and experiences into the mix and see what happened. Over the years they have made fierce live recordings (and their stage show has always been their calling card), and quiet acoustic recordings, they have crafted focused three-minute pristine pop and sprawling instrumental ambience, but never before has the group chosen simply *not* to choose, and let the music find its own way.

Originally, the double-CD, triple-LP *Opus Mixtum* was supposed to be two separate, distinct releases: one a powerful rock record tracked at the band's new home-away-from-home, Brooklyn's Seaside Lounge, with producer (and now auxiliary live band member) Josh Clark, tracked on two-inch tape in a beautiful live room and finally allowing the band to truly capture the fire of their live performances; and the other a sprawling, loopy and diverse instrumental album constructed piece by piece in Tara and Tim's digital home studio. Somewhere along the way the albums became tangled together.

The title *Opus Mixtum* comes from a method of laying brick in ancient Rome that combined rectangular and diagonal patterns, but the band uses it to connote the mix of three styles -- Antietam rock, the acoustic pop of Tara Key solo releases, and the instrumental soundtracks of their lives. Piece in Mark Howell's horns, Katie Gentile's violins, and Rick Rizzo on stunt guitar and the album flows effortlessly through its varying moods -- instrumental passages disappear into hooky pop, Tara's defining guitar is enveloped by Hammond organ or a lush string passage, and then the pounding rock and roll of the classic trio punches through. So you get pop with "Turn It on Me," rock with "Pennants and Flags," and just pure melody with "March Echo" and "Steel G." As they say in Louisville, if you don't like the weather, wait ten minutes.



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Selected Discography/Credits:

Antietam

Antietam (Homestead, 1985), *Music From Elba* (Homestead, 1986), *Burgoo* (Triple X, 1990), *Everywhere Outside* (Triple X, 1991), *Comes Alive!* (Triple X, 1992), *Rope-a-Dope* (Homestead, 1994) and *Victory Park* (Carrot Top, 2004)

Tara Key

Babylon Dance Band - *Four on One* (Matador, 1994) and 3 tracks on *Bold Beginnings: A History of Louisville Punk* (Noise Pollution, 2007)

Tara Key - *Bourbon County* (Homestead, 1994) and *Ear and Echo* (Homestead, 1995)

Drag City Supersession - *Tramps, Traitors and Little Devils* (Drag City, 2001)

Eleventh Dream Day – guitar – “*The Raft*” on *El Moodio* (Atlantic, 1992)

Retsin - guitar - *Egg Fusion* (Simple Machines, 1996)

Rick Rizzo and Tara Key - *Dark Edson Tiger* (Thrill Jockey, 2000)

Yo La Tengo - guitar - “*Demons*” on *Genius + Love=Yo La Tengo* (Matador, 1996)

Tim Harris

Babylon Dance Band - *Four on One* (Matador, 1994) and 3 tracks on *Bold Beginnings: A History of Louisville Punk* (Noise Pollution, 2007)

The Special Pillow - cello - *Inside the Special Pillow* (Zofko, 2004)

Yo La Tengo – cello - “*Tiny Birds*” on *Summer Sun* (Matador, 2003) and “*From Black to Blue*” on *And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside-Out* (Matador, 2000)

Josh Madell

Codeine – drums - *Peel Sessions* (Recorded: 1992-12-22)

Retsin - drums - *Salt Lick* (Simple Machines, 1995) and *Egg Fusion* (Simple Machines, 1996)

Tralala - *Tralala* (Audika, 2005) and *Is That the Tralala?* (Audika, 2006)

Yo La Tengo - percussion on “*Nuclear War*”, version two on *Nuclear War* (Matador, 2002)

Select Press Quotations:

“Tara Key is the feeling person’s guitar hero – capable of tearing fist-sized chunks from your soul with every ecstatic rush of notes.” -- David Sprague, *Village Voice*

“Key surfs dark waves of rolling rhythm with her guitar, biding her time as she waits for the perfect breaker to come along and then hanging on for dear life.” -- Greg Kot, *Chicago Tribune*

“But what’s also great about this veteran band is the interplay between Ms. Key, her husband, Tim Harris, on bass and Josh Madell on drums. This is one of those bands that become single-cell organisms in concert, always moving forward to feed on the next chord.” -- Ann Powers, *The New York Times*

“Part of Antietam’s live reputation is clearly the power and visceral energy that Key exhibits every time she plugs in and shreds at will, but just as important is the almost intuitive communication between Key, her bassist/husband Tim Harris and drummer Josh Madell.” -- Brian Baker, *City Beat* (Cincinnati)

For more information on Antietam contact Jessica Linker at Pitch Perfect PR.
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[Can't Stop The Bleeding](#)

03.18.06

[SXSW Vs. What's Left Of My Skull](#)

Posted in [Rock Und Roll](#), [Internal Affairs](#) at 2:37 pm by [GC](#)



With all due respect to the participants and organizers of the No Fun Fest in Red Hook (will Taz be there?), there's "extreme" and then there's the transcendent guitar playing of Antietam's Tara Key (above center). Antietam's performance last night in front of a small-yet-savvy crowd at Club De Ville served as a not-so-subtle reminder that 20+ years in, the trio remain one of the planet's finest.



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<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A348008>

SXSW Picks & Sleepers

Friday

ANTIETAM

1:15am, Club de Ville Ending their decade-long recording hiatus with 2004's *Victory Park* (Carrot Top), Antietam's hypnotically woven blend of Southern jangle and East Coast indie rock still retains its place-out-of-time allure. Perhaps that's why the New York by-way-of Louisville, Ky. trio gets compared to the Feelies and Jefferson Airplane in the same breath. – *Greg Beets*

The joys of Antietam are intense, dynamic

By Greg Kot

http://metromix.chicagotribune.com/search/mmx-040428-musickot_1_3474488.story

From *Metromix.com* April 28 2004

Antietam's Tara Key once defined her guitar playing as "aerobics for the short and nonmuscular." Key turns solos into wrestling matches, smashing the strings until her fingers bleed and welts rise on her knees, hips and elbows as she tosses her diminutive body around the stage.

The guitarist and her longtime bandmates, drummer Josh Madell and husband and bassist Tim Harris, are a three-headed hurricane in concert, and seeing the band perform live has always made their albums sound somewhat inferior. But on "Victory Park" (Carrot Top), its seventh album in 20 years, the New York trio sounds as comfortable and convincing as it ever has in the studio.

Key surfs dark waves of rolling rhythm with her guitar, biding her time as she waits for the perfect breaker to come along and then hanging on for dear life. This is surf music as reimagined by a bunch of landlocked former art students, and it's a beautiful, mesmerizing and occasionally overwhelming journey.

Actually, the ocean was in close enough proximity during the recording to influence the album's sound. The band retreated to a beach house in New Jersey with producer Tara Jane O'Neil during the off-season for a week of recording, and the relaxed atmosphere was liberating for all involved. After releasing its sixth studio album, "Ear and Echo," in 1995, Antietam tried and failed twice to record a follow-up. During that period, Key recorded "Dark Edson Tiger," a guitar duet album with Rick Rizzo of Eleventh Dream Day, with whom Antietam will share the stage May 16 at the Empty Bottle.

"People assumed that we'd broken up, but we were working the whole time," Key says. "We'd always face restrictions of time and money working in other people's studios, and so we started working on learning how to make a record ourselves."

A wave of sobering events also washed over the band. Parents and friends died, and the World Trade Center towers crumbled only a few blocks from the apartment that Key and Harris share. "I've been humbled by a lot of things that have nothing to do with music," Key says. "It made me appreciate what a gift it was just to be alive and be able to play a guitar."

And to be able to write songs like the ones that ended up on "Victory Park."

"The songs on this record became like a hymnal for me, in a secular sense," she says. "They were a joyous expression of some things that were really challenging in our personal lives. Tim and I traveled a lot to Italy in recent years, and it reinforced the notion that we're just specks on a timeline. To me it became more than just about breaking guitars to show passion and energy. It meant channeling some of that intensity into making more coherent songs."

Armed with knowledge and time, the "Victory Park" sessions felt like a fresh start. "There weren't many people around, and it became like a cocoon where we could create without any restrictions," Key says. "I was able to sit there at 3 in the morning and come up with a guitar solo

that was an emotional reaction to an event that occurred, instead of being in a studio six months later trying to call upon the energy that made me write the song in the first place."

Key's voice--whether she's echoing a trumpet (and vice-versa) on "New Parade," howling at fate on "Stowaway," or drifting like a lost angel from a My Bloody Valentine album on "Skying"--displays a new strength and confidence. Once her vocals were mixed so low they functioned as simply another instrument in the mix, but now they're just prominent enough to highlight the melodies lurking within the trio's instrumental workouts.

"We've been a wild, untamable animal, and I don't think we're tamed now, per se, but I think we're a little more focused and confident about what we do," she says. "You can put us in the race without blinders on and not have to worry that we're going to jump out of the gate."

All bets are off when Key, Harris and Madell hit the stage, though.

"Playing guitar is still the best exercise I get," Key says when she's reminded of the quote about six-string aerobics for the "short and nonmuscular."

"The other night, before we got on stage, I was so wired I thought I'd implode," she says. "It surprised me in a way; we'd been away for a while, and I didn't know how I'd react. It felt like somebody had hit the 'pause' button for a few years, and it's finally back on. I couldn't stand still and play guitar. I only wonder how it'll work when I'm 80."

Greg Kot is the Chicago Tribune rock critic.

Originally published April 28, 2004.

I'm embarrassed to admit that my first real exposure to this veteran band was this year (2004) when we saw them 2 consecutive nights on tour with our beloved **Yo La Tengo**. I guess I can be somewhat excused, since their last album was released 10 years ago! Anyway, **Antietam** rocked with more energy than 90% of bands half their age and just blew me away with their intensity and joy for performing, not to mention **Tara Key's** enormous guitar work.

<http://www.copacetic-zine.com/music/antietam.php>

<http://www.avguide.com/film-music/music/musicreviews/tas149/149-popularcaps.new.php>

Tara Key doesn't appear on many best guitar-player lists and wasn't one of the two women named by *Rolling Stone* as among the 100 Best Guitarists of All-Time. But Key is a tremendous force on what's traditionally a male instrument, an instinctive slinger who brings as much sexuality to her playing as members of the opposite sex who view the six-string as an extension of a particular appendage....Key's guitar effortlessly fills the room. With a wash-over style reminiscent of Eleventh Dream Day's Rick Rizzo, she needs little in the way of volume or distortion to make her presence known. When she does employ these devices ("Stowaway"), she can make her instrument sound alternately like trumpets, emory boards, chain-rattling attic ghosts, and sparking power lines. The results are therapeutic—not brutal or unsettling. And when Key gets busy with the other musicians, she creates an illusion of several guitars engaged in a swirling dialogue. - **Bob Gendron**

LOST AT SEA

Antietam
Victory Park
Carrot Top Records

Rating: 8/10

Antietam hasn't entirely lost its Southern accent. It's been years since they moved from their old Kentucky home of Louisville to New York City, but every so often their boho indie rock sound lapses into a Dixie drawl so thick with Southern-fried reverb it should come with a side of grits.

Take "Attract Mode" off Victory Park, Antietam's latest blue-plate special. Echoing through the empty halls of a decaying plantation mansion Tara Key's electric guitar has a gauzy, muted twang to it that's got kin back in the Louisville farm country where My Morning Jacket keeps its still. A cool acoustic guitar breeze of Throwing Muses-style pop blows through, with cooing background vocals blowing soap bubbles into air thick with pollen. The distant blare of Memphis-style horns in "New Parade" sounds triumphant and welcoming, as if heralding Antietam's return to its Southern roots. It sounds like Antietam's come home, if only for a short visit. They've been away long enough.

When we last heard from Antietam as a full band, it was 1994 and they had released Rope-A-Dope, arguably their best record. Everybody just kind of went their separate ways after that. Key was in a movie you may have heard of called I Shot Andy Warhol, appearing with members of Yo La Tengo as sort of a wax figure museum version of Velvet Underground. Bassist Tim Harris, Key's husband, played cello on the last two Yo La Tengo records. Meanwhile, Key released two solo albums, did an instrumental record with friend Rick Rizzo and moonlighted with Eleventh Dream Day, while drummer Josh Madell toured with Codeine; both played on Retsin's Egg Fusion record. Retsin's Tara Jane O'Neill returned the favor by recording Victory Park.

Amidst all that good will and indie rock brotherhood, the Antietam family lost five close loved ones, including two fathers. One friend died in the 9-11 tragedy, and another was viciously murdered. Victory Park is Antietam's eulogy, and it's a damn lovely one. The somber "Richochet" reaches for answers; finding none, Key rips off soaring solos that fly over the kind of emotionally charged acoustic strumming that put Britpop acts like Coldplay and Travis on the charts. "The Hold" has a dark and bobbing bass line imbued with Joy Division's suicidal despondency, the mood made even more desperate by Key's wrist-slashing razor guitar strokes. "Skying" sees Antietam lifting its bowed head and squinting at the sun through a coastal morning fog - appropriate since Victory Park was recorded in a beach house near the Atlantic Ocean - burnt off by Key's breathy vocals and keyboard drifts, and Madell's rolling bongos. Fuzz-toned, ramshackle rockers like "Stowaway" and "Coldwater Pride" wash up further down shore, along with shells of fragile, wispy power-pop reminiscent of Consonant's self-titled 2002 release or Small Factory in "Blue Rose Melancholy" and the album's zenith, the violin-stained beauty "Walk Away."

Supposedly, there are five stages of grief. Anger is one of them, and Antietam lets it out on "Stowaway", the bitterness evident in Key's acidic delivery of lines like "Push to shove the dominoes will fall down." Needing a shoulder to cry on, Antietam turns to an old friend, Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan, who offers the comfort of an extra guitar on the desert sky soundscape "Chronicle Of A Gift Horse." Yo La Tengo and Antietam go way back, and it's impossible not to notice the Hoboken indie legends' influence here, especially in the softly distorted guitars of "I Swear" and "Wish Factor" and the light conga rumba of "Chronicle Of A Gift Horse."

Like Kaplan, Key is a deceptively clever guitarist. Her languid, fluid phrasing is so unassuming she makes it sound like playing guitar is as simple as shuffling cards. Feedback-laced notes and chords fly off creosote blackness of a mechanic's garage like sparks from a welder's torch, especially in the delicious chorus of "I Swear." With Antietam, there's little in the way of instant gratification. There's a lazy river current running through Victory Park that doesn't seem at first to have much pull. Before you know it, though, you're miles downstream. Victory Park is an elegant return to glory for Antietam, even if Key's vocals sometimes fall flat in the lower registers and you can't seem to find a hook in the record's cloudy production waters. You will, eventually. And when you do, Victory Park will seem like an unknown hand reaching into the brackish flow and grabbing you by the shirt collar to drag you to safety.

Reviewed by Peter Lindblad

<http://www.lostatsea.net/review.phtml?id=1158080095417996eccf860>

COPACETIC

antietam

victory park • carrot top records • 2004

I'm embarrassed to admit that my first real exposure to this veteran band was this year (2004) when we saw them 2 consecutive nights on tour with our beloved Yo La Tengo. I guess I can be somewhat excused, since their last album was released 10 years ago! Anyway, Antietam rocked with more energy than 90% of bands half their age and just blew me away with their intensity and joy for performing, not to mention Tara Key's enormous guitar work. They had this new CD for sale at the shows and I eagerly bought a copy.

The production of these recordings, courtesy of Retsin-er Tara Jane O'Neil, is muted and midrangy, giving the album a consistent feel of hushed intensity. With a different touch, these songs could feel big and heavy, but instead they occupy an intimate, airy space. Tara Key has the most gorgeous guitar tone, rich with distortion and delay, and she plays the best solos west of J. Mascis. Key's spouse Tim Harris provides basslines which double as melodic leads, which is something I always love, and plays a lovely cello as well. There are also flourishes of keyboard and trumpet and a guest appearance by old pal and collaborator Ira Kaplan of Yo La Tengo, among others. Drummer Josh Madell contributes the poppiest track on the album, the lovely "Walk Away".

I'll definitely be seeking out more of Antietam's back catalog. Don't let this phenomenal band slip under your radar the way I did, and if they play in your town, run, do not walk! (mike.08.04)

<http://www.copacetic-zine.com/music/antietam.php>

NEW YORK TIMES 3/31/2001

A selective listing by critics of The Times of noteworthy pop and jazz concerts in the New York metropolitan region this weekend. ★ denotes a highly recommended concert.

ANTIETAM, Brownies, 169 Avenue A, between 10th and 11th Streets, East Village, (212) 420-8392. There's no doubt that the centerpiece of Antietam is Tara Key, the guitar goddess whose expressive playing and electrified stage presence can't be topped by any local rival, male, female or otherwise. But what's also great about this veteran band is the interplay between Ms. Key, her husband, Tim Harris, on bass and Josh Madell on drums. This is one of those bands that become single-cell organisms in concert, always moving forward to feed on the next chord. Tonight at midnight; admission is \$8 (Ann Powers).

3/31/2001 NEW YORK TIMES

ANTIETAM Tara Key is the feeling person's guitar hero—capable of tearing fist-sized chunks from your soul with every ecstatic rush of notes—and it's utterly baffling that her face doesn't adorn the backs of denim jackets around the land. It's been a while since she and breath-stealing partners Tim Harris and Josh Madell hit a stage in these parts, so you can bet the pent-up energy alone will blow the doors off their home stage. **With Dream Lovers, Secret Machines, and Porfirio. Brownies, at 9. (Sprague) ¢**

MUSIC: MARK JACOBSON

If Looks Could Rock

PJ HARVEY's great, but Tara Key is my fave guitar heroine. Air guitar is supposed to be this masturbatory, neohomosexual bond between the boy rock star and the boy rock fan, but nobody gets me up and thrashing like Tara, who's been making records both with her band, Antietam, and under her

own name for fifteen years.

Tara is a good sport. She didn't hang up when I said I wanted to write what a tremendous musician she is, even if she doesn't look as hot in leather pants as Alanis Morissette.

"Is that like saying I have a good personality?" asked Tara, who was a tomboy growing up in Louisville.

My favorite guitar heroine: *Tara Key is no Alanis Morissette.*



"It's a representational issue," I said sheepishly. "You know, the tyranny of female rock beauty as dictated by pimply MTV dudes. Maybe you have some thoughts?"

Tara said she had some thoughts, all right, so soon we were sitting in a Lower East Side café. Onstage, Tara has this electro-tigress, slightly-chunkier-Patti-Smith deal going. Up close, she reveals a shy, canny charm befitting the fortyish university librarian and painter that, by day, she is.

We examined the photo that appears on the back of her CD master-piece of offhand passion—*Bourbon County* (Homestead). More of a mug shot than a head shot, the picture is not what you would call flattering. It has a shadowy, alcoholic choke to it. Tara says, "My mother hated that picture because she thought I looked unhappy. Maybe she was right. But I wanted it on there because it was me and it was honest."

Therein, Tara said, was her basic position on the tyranny of the female image in rock 'n' roll. For rock girls, looks matter. It is the difference between making it and not. There just isn't anything Tara feels obligated to do about it. "When I grew up, I had scoliosis. I was in casts all the time: a really weepy teenager. Then rock 'n' roll came along, and it was like a big hug. It was like this huge thing was saying, 'Come here, I choose you.' I had to play, so if I didn't look exactly perfect, if I looked stupid, that's just what happened, you understand?"

I did, because Tara Key looks beautiful when she's honest.

that there are no accidents. Even if one rejects Freud, as I now do, Freud has

NEW FACES

TARA KEY



dress as monks – and came together during a two-week stay in northern Vermont, where she recorded five songs in a rural eight-track studio. Key describes her northwoods sojourn – which inspired songs like “Long Trail” and “Northern Star” – in almost mystical terms. “It was a revelation, having come from Kentucky and thinking the only place possible that I could live a happy life was New York,” she says. “I got up to Vermont, and I heard a similar density of sound, but they’re different sounds. They’re easier on the ear.” Key gathered a group of friends with whom she jammed into the night in discordant harmony with the surrounding nature. “It was like a perfect summer camp,” she recalls.

The collaborative spirit spilled over to the New York sessions last fall, where guest artists included such Key friends as members of Eleventh Dream Day, the Shams and Yo la Tengo.

The resulting music is more laid-back than the powerful pop that Key first forged in Louisville, Ky., with the Babylon Dance Band or the fierce mood studies she developed more recently in New York with Antietam. (The Babylons have a posthumous album, *Four on One*, coming out this spring, and Antietam have recorded some tracks for their sixth album.) Most of the songs are acoustic based, and on “Northern Star” and “One Spark” (written with the Shams’ Sue Garner), Key got to indulge her melodic side. “Pop, in my own twisted way, is at the soul of everything I do,” she says. “This record was a chance to take that a little farther.” Still, her much-admired textural fretwork is *Bourbon County*’s calling card. “The first person that showed me how a guitar could speak was Neil Young,” Key says. “It made me want to live my whole life teetering on the edge of feedback.” — EVELYN McDONNELL

A LONG THE BOTTOM OF THE CD jacket of *Bourbon County*, the debut solo album from Tara Key – lauded guitarist for the veteran indie-rock outfits Babylon Dance Band and Antietam – runs an unlikely endorsement: “Tara Key plays Williams and Bally machines.” And it’s true: While Key may choose to strangle her rhythmic squalls out of the necks of Les Pauls, she credits pinball as her album’s true inspiration. *Bourbon County* was, in fact, born with her hands at the flippers. “It was an entirely unpremeditated thing,” Key says. “Actually, it was kind of a joke.”

Nevertheless, *Bourbon County* became a serious venture, written for the most part while Key was separated for several months last year from her husband, band mate and *Bourbon* producer Tim Harris. The album’s meditative confessions and lyrical instrumentals document a journey of self-discovery. “It was a really enriching time in a weird way,” Key says, “because I was forced into thinking about extremes and limits. It’s adulthood, you know. It’s tough.”

Bourbon took shape on a pub crawl through Manhattan’s Lower East Side – “Three-quarters of the songs were written at one table at Burp Castle,” she says, referring to a local bar where the help



Songs in the Key of Life

Meet New York's Queen of the Flipper, the Microbrew and the Stompbox

by Evelyn McDonnell

This article originally appeared in the July 5th, 1995, issue of The Village Voice

Tara Key moves her whole body into the machine. Bent over a pinball game at the Broadway Arcade near Times Square, her hips swing into each flick of the flippers, pushing torque into the ball's trajectory as much with karma as with gravity. Key handles the ball deftly, catching and cradling it then shooting it up a ramp and into a hole, jerking the machine with small, rapid movements that keep the orb bouncing between bumpers. Demolition Man has her favorite features: multiball ("That's my ideal: balancing eight things at one time") and ramps ("It's like being on a straightaway at 100 miles per hour - that feeling you get of no impediments"). The machine tilts just often enough that Key knows she's pushing it to its limits. "The longer you keep the ball in play," she notes philosophically as the counter adds up her bonus points, "the better the world is."

Then we're approaching Nirvana. Weekly practice - Key's in training for a January tournament - is paying off. The previous night, she'd scored her career high on Demolition Man; this night she racks up 2,792,606,740 on World Cup, three times her old record and about, oh, 1000 times this journalist's tops. Earlier, during her customary pregame visit to Beefsteak Charlie's for a lubricating shot of Jack Daniel's, Key had described her new "isometric approach" to pinball. Planting both feet firmly on the ground, she'd hugged a bowl of chips as if it were a machine, controlling it with "a strong, contained movement... I'm feeling powerful in caressing it," she'd explained in her Kentucky drawl. "I used to play pinball like I play guitar. Now I've stopped reacting so wildly."

With her long dirt-brown hair, owl-shaped glasses and plain, makeupless features, baggy jeans and a T-shirt draped over her small, pear-shaped body, Key looks more like a librarian - which she is, at Columbia's Butler Library, by day - than a pinball wizard and guitar hero, which she is by night. Even when she's onstage with her band Antietam wrestling electric soliloquies out of her Les Paul, her style is more homespun than flashy - like she's some hillbilly's old lady gone mad on moonshine, or Louisa May Alcott with an axe. And yet for a decade and a half, Key's been developing a playing style - a stop-start strum that erupts into crescendos of distortion - that's made her one of the most acclaimed players in indie rock. She's among a mere handful of women in pop history who've mastered lead guitar. Even at a time when female singers, bassists, and drummers are proliferating, Key remains a rare presence on stage.

And at age 37, with a career that spans punk's heartland infiltration via art-school basement bands in the late '70s, the formal experiments of Downtown New York groups in the '80s, and the surge of "alternative" in the '90s, Key's just now hitting her stride. In the last two years she's appeared on a grand slam of records: two solo albums, Bourbon County and Ear and Echo (both on Homestead), that showcase her soulful, meditative side; the Babylon Dance Band's long-awaited first album, Four on One (Matador); and rope-a-dope (Homestead), her sixth album with her main group, the New York power trio Antietam. She's also played with Syd Straw, Cobalt, and Eleventh Dream Day, and she guests with Yo La Tengo as the Velvet Underground-style band in the forthcoming film I Shot Andy Warhol. "Activity breeds activity," she says as she downs a Guinness ("good breakfast beer," she explains) at three on a Sunday afternoon at Vazac's, the Tompkins Square bar also called 7B. "I'm in the last half of my fourth decade on earth," she says, "and I feel like I'm developing at a rapidly-increasing rate."

As we hang out in various NYC haunts and explore a few of Key's favorite things (pinball, microbrews, a jukebox with Neil Young), her confidence is palpable. She complements her particularized knowledge of traditional nerdboy subjects with a sense of physical connection, not weirdo alienation. On stage as well, her tantrum style of playing has lost its occasional awkwardness: Key rages now as if in a sublime state of grace. Her conversation is sprinkled with down-to-earth bon mots, a sort of Zen-punk satisfaction. She attributes it all to pinball. "I've been trying to subtract the bad parts of my personality from my game - all the impediments you throw in front of yourself to keep from achieving things," she says. "I'm trying to change my attitude, and then apply what I do in pinball to the rest of my life."

Stomping in the '90s

Ed is right: the 808 sounds incredible. Tara and I are at Rogue Music on West 30th Street trying out a selection of guitars, effects pedals and amplifiers. When Key had asked for the early-'80s Ibanez stompbox out of the counter-case, the store manager, whose name, he swears, really is Ed Sullivan, warned that it would make us unable to listen to anything else. Plugging in and turning up, I feel an intense rush at the visceral power of distortion - the punk-ugly thrill of making noise. Key shakes her head happily and says, "Oh, man." She'd had a pedal like this once but demolished it somewhere along the line. Key goes through a lot of pedals, losing them to "a mixture of problems that come from stomping and throwing. Sometimes when I break stuff it feels good, it feels inevitable," she says. "And sometimes when I break stuff it feels like a really stupid, bonehead thing to do."

Instrument stores are infamous for making customers, particularly females, feel like idiots. Rogue, today at least, isn't like that. But if it were, Key could handle it. "I didn't come from this tasty licks school of guitar playing," she says. "But now I can go into a guitar store and talk to guys that way. I kind of enjoy it, it's really perverse." She rifles through a box of old magazines, pulls out the April 1995 Guitar Player, and shows Sullivan the full page feature on her. He rips the story out and has Tara autograph it.

That article, by Joe Gore (a journalist who doubles as guitarist for Tom Waits and PJ Harvey), is a point of pride for Key; in it, she finally got to explain her axology: "an early-'80s sunburst Les Paul through a Mesa Boogie Mark III and a Roland JC-120, with both amps running

simultaneously," FYI. By contrast, when Guitar World interviewed her a couple of years ago, they treated her as a novelty, not a musician. Key's happy to be identified as a feminist role model and admits that like many women, she didn't learn to play the same way boys did: "I acquired my macho later, I didn't start with macho." Still, she's anxious to disprove clichés about female musicianship: that girls can't play (word to Juliana Hatfield), that girls can't play the same way boys do, that girls don't know their chops and tools because they play by feel. She also likes to be taken as a good player. Gender aside.

A lifetime tomboy, Key's always rebelled against limitations. "When I was between eight and 14, I was the gang leader of the neighbourhood," she says. "I was the only girl, bossing around five or six guys: that was a good primer for being in a band." She was born in the working-class west end of Louisville and moved to the middle-class east end when she was 11. Her dad, now retired, was a tile setter. Her mother waitressed when Tara was young, then devoted her time to raising three kids and doing volunteer work. Her work with the PTA led to employment within the school board; Key remembers the household being threatened with cross-burnings when the Louisville schools desegregated in the mid '70s.

Tara was active in sports, wanted to be an astronaut, and beat up guys bigger than her, until she was 15 and diagnosed with scoliosis (curvature of the spine). She spent 16 months with a plaster cast wrapped around her torso from chin to hips, and her senior year in a brace - goodbye homecoming, hello homework. The gruesome experience, while undoubtedly shaping Key's inwardness, seems to have also fueled her determination - she became a geek with grit. "With my back I had to spend a lot of time being different," she says. "When I should have been dating I was wearing a walking brace. I spent a lot of time alone painting and playing guitar and really developing a concept of who I was going to be. Then when I started venturing out, I'm sure it was taken as snobbishness or having a huge ego, but I just continued to be who I was."

Like many a teenage Joni Mitchell fan, Key mostly wrote folk songs in her room; to this day, Antietam tunes often begin on Key's acoustic and are thus grounded in simple melodies and pastoral themes (until the band grinds them up). But it was the experience of playing electric guitar in a group jam that convinced her to pursue music. "When I picked up a guitar, it's the only thing I did in my life where there was no question it was the right thing for me to be doing," she says. At the time she was a student at the University of Louisville (later switching to the Louisville School of Art), listening to punk. Her first band, No Fun, was a quintet which played "three-minute, really tight songs with suocer aggressive guitars." In the fall of '78, she joined the Babylon Dance Band, a raucous party outfit which was featured in a 1980 Voice cover story. She also began a relationship with the band's bassist, Tim Harris. In '83, Key and Harris moved to New York and formed Antietam (the couple married in 1984). That group has gone through a number of permutations, arriving at the current lineup - Key, Harris, and youthful drumming enthusiast Josh Madell - in 1991.

Key's dense, textured style is the polar opposite of Eddie Van Halen/Pat Metheny-style noodling. "The way I learned to play had as much to do with hearing jackhammers as with hearing the Rolling Stones," she says. Her playing is visceral and athletic: Key literally grapples with her guitar, choking sounds out of it. She has small fingers, but plays with unusually thick strings, 12 to 52 gauge, "for sustain and separation in sound. I need some level of resistance between the object and me to make it work." Her Les Paul, made of two-inch-thick solid maple, is a heavy, heavy instrument. Sullivan, easily twice Key's size, feels her neck and shoulder muscles admiringly, then admits he strained his back playing a Les Paul and had to give up. And he's never seen Key play: the way she whips the guitar around her body as if it were weightless, or throws her head up and down, her long hair flying.

Feeling connected to a material object is often the hardest hurdle for people who spend a lot of time living in their heads - especially for women who've been raised to believe they have no sovereignty over the world, who feel every moment like a watched object, not an active subject. Key seems to have immediately grabbed that self-conscious demon by the throat and never loosed her hold in the sometimes violent dance since. "I really get off on the physical thing. That's a lot of the pleasure for me, to run around, to feel the electric vibration of my guitar through my body. Lately playing is becoming more and more trancelike. I feel it's the ultimate celebration of everything around me, and at the same time it's the ultimate celebration of me."

Control Freakouts

There's a danger to Key's wildness. She's legendary for her tantrums; thrown objects are a running motif in her life story. For example: While recording "Burn" for Ear and Echo at Vortex Studio in Vermont last fall, she became so involved in the emotion of one guitar part - a solo that winds through the track like a wordless elegy - that at the end of the overdub she hurled the instrument and started punching walls. Producers Harris and Jon Williams tried calming her down, but she took off in the middle of the night shouting, "I suck, I suck, I suck."

"It was a new moon, so there was no moonlight, and I was just running down the road in my bare feet, running and screaming and running," Key remembers.

The intensity comes through in Key's music, but unlike much lionized emotional work by female artists - whether Anne Sexton or Courtney Love - the songs bring us through a catharsis without leaving us rubbernecking at the car wreck of the artist's life. On record and in person, Key comes across as neither damaged, self-destructive, nor dysfunctional. "I'm not saying the best thing for an artist to do is to puke out everything - some mystery is good," she says. "I'm not interested in being the kind of public figure where everybody knows exactly what happens with me at any given moment. For all my whining about losing my mind sometimes, I do have some kind of lasso on it. One way of having a lasso on it is being able to translate it, to play it, to put it in a song."

Key's also fortunate to have a partner who keeps her from falling over the edge. "Tim's been a balance for me," she says. "He has an awareness of my history; he can tell me when I'm doing something stupid."

Harris is Key's number one fan. "I don't think Tara's gotten as much attention as she deserves," he tells me over a Southern-style brunch - cheese, grits, and hickory-smoked bacon that he and Tara have prepared at their East 24th Street one-bedroom apartment. On stage the couple lean against each other back to back - Tim, a head taller than Tara, carefully stooped - and play their hearts out.

Gentle and thoughtful, the proverbial mellow bass player, Harris is a good foil for Key's self-described control freak tendencies. Like her propensity to spaz out, bossiness is a part of her personality Key says she's learning to harness. Harris concurs: "Ironically, on her solo records, she was more into not making all the decisions than on an Antietam record," he says.

"Having made that first record changed the way we all relate to each other in the studio," Key says. "It's always been a democracy, but I've been capable of having tunnel vision."

"On Ear and Echo, all of us in the band were able to look at an idea and develop what went into it, and then it wasn't important if you played on it, or what you played," Harris says. "We weren't caught up in any role, it was a lot more fun."

Departing from fixed roles has been crucial to Key's recent productivity. Over the last few years the members of Antietam have branched out into numerous side projects. Madell toured with Codeine a couple of years ago; Key and Harris played with Syd Straw. "That was the break in the gate," Key says, "that blew up the usual expectations, instead of being focused on the corporation, the holy concept, of Antietam." She brought this new openness to her solo debut, recorded with a cast of players including members of Yo La Tengo, Eleventh Dream Day, Cobalt, Run On, and Speedball Baby. "An important thing I learned making these records was that I spent a lot of my life being really telescope-focused on Antietam, or the Babylon Dance Band - like almost a circle-the-wagons mentality. That's so obviously bogus to me now, I feel like someone should have hit me over the head with a hammer 10 years ago and told me to jam with people more."

The other catalyst for Key's solo work was her separation from Harris for several months in 1993. Not wanting to turn her private life into public fodder, we carefully avoid discussing the messy details of their split, but she says it was a painful, important period in her life. Bourbon County, for one, was conceived and written during that time. Perhaps the most moving musical evidence of the experience is "Silver Solace," a 10-minute epic about independence and interdependence that winds up rope-a-dope. The song opens with Key strumming an acoustic and singing in her affectless alto, "Go look around, see something else." Drums and an electric guitar break in, and eventually Key abandons verbal explanations and lets her guitar do the talking: declaiming, feeding back, screaming, exploding. "I had this real epiphany with 'Silver Solace,'" Key says. "That was written and performed live for the first time during the absolute implosion moment of that summer. There was a show at Wetlands where I knew I wasn't coming home... and I really thought every molecule just might dissipate. What ended up happening was I got strangely calm and really eventually happy in a way, because I felt that was the first time in my life that I said absolutely what was on my mind, I didn't censor myself, and it might have been the truest song I'd ever written at that point. That made me promise that that was the way it was going to be, no beating around the bush from now on."

"Silver Solace" ends with an acoustic coda and Tara singing, "I've got to have you." Now, Key and Harris' partnership seems stonger and more fruitful than ever. They play and write songs together, brew their own beers (aided by Ear and Echo player (and early member of Antietam - Jim) Wolff Knapp), read a lot, and make plans for the information service/brew pub/ambient record, et cetera, they would like to do together. "Our relationship is really good in that we're understanding how complex human beings are," Key says. "[With Bourbon County] Tim was producing a record that has some songs on it that might have been upsetting to him. But we both admire each other so much that we give each other permission to be truthful and just run with it." Having opened the floodgates of self-expression, Key and Harris are careful not to censor each other. "We celebrate being able to have impulses and not feel guilty or bad about them. We both know that you can have an emotion and pass through a prism of responses, and the act of creating this artifact, which is a song or a line or a word or something, is just freezing those. And we both accept that the freezing isn't the total truth. We could be singing about these things, but on another level we're connecting, playing with each other, in a way that's primal and true."

Dream Painting

The cover of Ear and Echo is the first painting Key has finished in a decade. It's a Jasper Johns-ish collage of magazine images, fabrics, and thick layers of brightly coloured paint, with several images of faces. "It started with a dream," Key says. "I saw the basic premise as being a real obvious portrayal of me being my own worst enemy, an inner war type of trip." The painting took several years. "It's a slice of my life, it's my journal. There have been a lot of me's from beginning to ending it."

The title, taken from a poem by Marina Tsvetayeva, the Russian poet of the 1930s, refers to the delay between action and reaction that has often characterised Key's response to life. "I'm trying to get to where the crisis is no longer overwhelming to me," she says. "As I get older, I do see life more as rings around a tree. I'm trying to move to this point where the time shrinks between when I'm doing something and when I realise what I'm doing. I am often hearing echoes of my behaviour."

Profile: Tara Key

by Joe Gore

This article originally appeared in the April 1995 issue of Guitar Player.

"I like getting physical with the guitar," chuckles Tara Key, the 38-year-old guitarist/vocalist for the New York City rock trio Antietam. "I fall down, knock people over, get knocked over. I like to forget where I am."

Key can make listeners forget where they are too. While she sometimes colors within the lines of the group's punk-edged pop tunes, Tara frequently veers off into rivetting improvisations propelled by strong, simple melodies and an authoritative high-gain tone. Her solos skitter across the map without losing their sense of direction, while masterful feedback manipulations lend an eerie timeless quality. "I do like to play with time," she affirms, "I hate it when something I love is over, so I experiment with ways to make that never happen."

While Key doesn't sound like Neil Young or Keith Richards, she shares their knack for walking the wire between lead and rhythm. "Neil was super-important to me," nods Key, "Another striking moment was seeing the Stones from the third row in 1975. I was good at getting up front - I was athletic and I wanted to learn. After that I started writing songs and experimenting with two tape recorders, overdubbing back and forth. Playing with No Fun, the first punk band in Louisville, Kentucky, got me out of my bedroom, though the first group I had an identity in was the Babylon Dance Band, who are still around. I'd play chuggy rhythms and throw in a few leads, but eventually that evolved into a more jamming, exploratory style."

Key migrated to Manhattan in 1983, where she, bassist/drummer Tim Harris, and various drummers have generated ten Antietam releases in as many years. The new Rope-a-dope album [Homestead, 150 W. 28th St., Ste. 501, New York, NY 10001] may be their best yet; after 15 years of trio playing, Key excels at both anchoring the rhythms and providing most of the band's pulsating color.

"My solos are never that mapped out," she states. "I just trust myself to have a strong reaction for a certain period of time. I like creating arenas of sounds, an arc around the listener's head. I try to throw him or her into an ocean and wash them with sounds, but more in the sense of a hug, as opposed to an assault. That can be really cathartic." Particularly seductive are Key's extraordinary distorted tones; they bristle with enough gain to erupt into feedback at any moment, yet retain precise, razor-edged definition, properties Tara attributes to her current setup: an early-80's sunburst Les Paul through a Mesa Boogie Mark IIB and a Roland JC-120, with both amps running simultaneously.

"I was never really satisfied with a Les Paul through a Marshall, because it seemed really cushy and was hard to project," she explains. "I would never use the Roland by itself, but it's a total 'translator' amp. If I have an aggressive/distorted impulse, it clarifies what I'm trying to do. When the two amps are mixed equally live, I have something that fuzzes out and something that clarifies. I tried Fender amps, which also have that combination of clarity on top and fuzz on the bottom, but I prefer doing it with two different amps and having that visceral, spatial relationship to them onstage."

Key's distortion stems from both amp gain and stompboxes. Her signal runs through a Pro-Co Turbo Rat, a DigiTech Echo Plus delay, an old Ibanez Tube Screamer, a Boss EQ pedal, and a DigiTech DS1550 Double Distortion. The latter's dry output goes to the Roland amp; the distorted output feeds the Mesa, Key's main feedback source. The EQ pedal boosts highs and lows with a slight mid-range dip. "That gives me something between a Les Paul and a Telecaster sound," she notes, "especially when I use a switch I had installed on the Les Paul that throws the treble pickup into a faux-single-coil mode."

Key's two solo albums - last year's Bourbon County and the upcoming Ear and Echo, both on Homestead - also boast spectacular feedback washes, with Tara's keening electrics often juxtaposed against a violently strummed Gibson J-200 acoustic. "The second record was a more passionate experience," she reports. "I've got to confess I threw a couple of guitars." After tracking the feedback-drenched "Left-Handed Way," the guitarist and her Gretsch Country Gentleman found themselves wrapped around a chair on the floor, the two of them having rolled their at some point during the take.

"When I make feedback, I'm not thinking about anything else in the world," insists Key. "I'm just surfing. I know which positions will yield which sounds, and how to change them according to how hard I press down on the strings or which strings I damp. I love that feeling. When I listen to Neil play, I hear those specific moments when he starts to get feedback, that millisecond of transformation from one sound to another. I want to live right there. That feels so cool. It's the absolute crest of the wave, the moment of total, open possibility."

GREIL MARCUS' TOP TEN

ARTFORUM 2/94

REAL LIFE ROCK



Janis Joplin.

1 ANDREAS AMMER & FM EINHEIT: *Radio Inferno* (EGO/Rough Trade, Eickeler Str. 25, 44651 Herne, Germany, fax Germany [2325] 697-222). This astonishing radio play was written by Ammer, produced by Herbert Kapfer, and aired last year in Munich on Bayerischer Rundfunk. Here it's a single 34-track CD: Dante's *Inferno*, cantos I through XXXIV, recast in German, English, and Latin, with all time scrambled. Apt musical composition combines with inspired sampling (a bit of the Temptations' "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," gongs and bells in a background so deep the sounds don't seem to be coming from your speakers) and an even more inspired cast: Blixa Bargeld as Dante; Phil Minton as Virgil, his guide; Yvonne

Duckworth as Beatrice ("and characters from hell"); and John Peel, the great BBC dj, as your guide, the voice of authority, the man with the microphone, sardonic, entertaining, professional, surprised by nothing, so cool ice wouldn't melt in his mouth no matter what circle of hell he's covering.

It's an insane conceit, a shadow play with the 20th century plunged into the 14th and then locked up. Peel: "The surrender to sin leads, by degradation, to solitary self-indulgence. Here, beatnik Burroughs has to read his own book, for all eternity." John Cage and Marcel Duchamp call out in their own voices; soon enough all are possessed by the spirit of Bosch, laughing at the tenth circle, which is filled with the Falsifiers, the Modern artists "stricken by

hideous diseases," the Dadaists "covered in ulcers." "Welcome to the Terrordome," Peel announces with utter contempt. "We're coming to the countdown to Hell, our Eternal Hit Parade of Sin and Punishment—" It's funny at first. At the end, to Strange things happen on the way.

2/3 TARA KEY: *Bourbon County* (Homestead),

& **FUNKADELIC:** "Maggot Brain," on *Maggot Brain* (Westbound reissue, 1971). Key has been an effective lead guitarist for well over a decade, first with Louisville's Babylon Dance Band (not a name to leave behind), then with Antietam. Six or seven cuts into her first solo disc she lets loose with a twisting, uncertain exploration of heretofore hidden passages in her music, as if the likes of "V.O.B." were her Mammoth Cave and her guitar both torchlight and pickaxe, as if her terrain didn't exist until she opened it up. It's a thrilling, mysterious kind of tension she creates—the tension of self-discovery, so many years on.

Twenty-three years ago the late Eddie Hazel, guitarist of Funkadelic, went farther without, so to speak, leaving his room, almost without moving. "Maggot Brain" begins where Peter Green's 1967 "Supernatural" left off, meandering slowly, always more slowly, over ten perfect minutes, toward a peace beyond words. Guess that's why the original *Maggot Brain* liner notes, crypto-Nazi cultspeak from the Process Church of the Final Judgment, are included with the new CD—just in case you get too confident, you know?

4 JANIS JOPLIN: "Coo Coo," from *Janis* (Columbia/Legacy 3-CD reissue, 1966). "We Americans are all cuckoos,—we make our homes in the nests of other birds," Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1872, and no one who has recorded this scary Appalachian ballad ever got more homelessness out of it than Joplin did. The leap she takes coming off the second line of each verse—a wail that's part abandonment to desire, half abandonment to death—was the promise her music, and her myth, almost always made, a promise she could almost never keep when tape was running.

5 MUDBOY & THE NEUTRONS: "Land of 1000 Shotguns," from *Negro Streets at Dawn* (New Rose, 99 rue du Cherche midi, 75006 Paris, France). When this tune started life, as "Land of 1000 Dances," the Apache Dance was probably not one of those writer Chris Kenner had in mind. These days, on certain Negro streets, it may be the only one left.

6 KRISTIN HERSH: "Cuckoo," from *Hips and Makers* (4 AD). Wordsworth, 1804: "shall I call thee Bird, Or but a wandering Voice?" Why not a spell?

7 COUP: *Kill My Landlord* (Wild Pitch/EMI). This non-gangsta Oakland rap trio—Boots, E Roc, Pam the Funkstress—is determinedly local. They don't care if when they mention "Moby D." you don't know they're referring to