

Real Life Rock Top 10: December 2019

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By Greil
Marcus

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LARB PRESENTS the December installment of "Real Life Rock Top 10," a monthly column by cultural critic Greil Marcus.

3. Tony Conrad, *Writings*, edited by Constance DeJong and Andrew Lampert (Primary Information). Conrad (1940–2016) was a New York drone musician, a filmmaker, and much more — over the years he moved from the Theater of Eternal Music (a.k.a. the Dream Syndicate) to the Primitives (with Lou Reed and John Cale) to work with Jim O'Rourke, Faust, and Animal Collective. But from the time he was 21 into this decade, he wrote, and what he wrote — collected in a compact, quietly elegant volume, nearly 600 pages that in your hand feels like something much more modest — is unparalleled in postwar arts criticism for its lack of affect, its clarity, and a coolly surprised humor that seems to run beneath every line.

Revelations are everywhere. I went to "Sacred Harp Heterophony" (from 2003, and like much here previously unpublished) almost randomly, and after Conrad's invocation of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "SLAVERY IS FREEDOM / FREEDOM IS SLAVERY" found an account of how Louis XIV invented both the modern state and modern music. The tool was the centralization of administrative power and the nationalization of taxes, thus turning directorates into provinces, which led directly to the erasure of the ancient practice of heterophony, where, as in the Sacred Harp music of the American South in the 19th century, many voices sang their own tunes at the same, and its replacement with homophony, where, in musical ensembles, discipline and a single focus both reflected the new political order and reinforced it, thus instituting an aesthetic order "that was to become the hallmark of genteel Western music, from Moscow to Boston." But in a society with a democratic charter, it didn't quite work:

It is all too easy to transfer one's disciplined attentiveness from one's own feelings and thoughts to the authority of another person — a teacher, maestro, or composer. *Can we be surprised that most black Americans didn't fall for this slavery? — for the classic double bind that is latent within the deepest paradox of composed music: "You are ordered to express yourself!" "Be free!?"*