

MALACHI RITSCHER



If you attended a free jazz, experimental, or improvised music concert in Chicago from the early-1990s until October of 2006, at some point you were probably in the room with Malachi Ritscher and he was making an audio recording of the event. Ritscher recorded several thousand concerts in Chicago from the 1980s until 2006.

In the early 1990s, historian and archivist Agnieszka Czeblakow, then a student who got hooked on going to jazz shows, remembers Ritscher as a fixture at the old Hot House on Milwaukee Avenue where the Vandermark Quartet played every Tuesday, often to less than ten people. Czeblakow recalls:

Malachi was one of them, and since it was the same ‘crowd’ every week, soon we were sharing a table and talking. I went religiously and so did he for about five years or so, every week, even on those nights when the wind-chill was -60F and there would be the two or three of us. Malachi always with his DAT recorder and mics.¹

Bruce Finkelman, the owner of the Empty Bottle, a bar and live music venue on 1035 N. Western Avenue in Chicago’s Ukrainian Village, has similar memories of Ritscher, "Five feet

of snow on the ground, and no one showing up, and he was there."²

Five to seven nights a week Malachi Ritscher went to live music venues around Chicago and many of those nights he recorded the bands. He continually documented culture that few others had the time, energy or motivation to record, and he recorded over a long expanse of time, as the music changed. Ritscher provided copies of his recordings to the artists—sometimes not just one musician in a band, but every player, week after week. Some of his recordings were used for albums released by record labels like Atavistic, Okka Disk, Squealer, and Thrill Jockey.

I remember briefly speaking to Ritscher only once or twice but I attended about fifty concerts that he recorded. In 1993, the year I moved to Chicago, I saw Elvin Jones at the Jazz Showcase in the Blackstone Hotel. Ritscher recorded it. In 1994 I saw the Dutch band The Ex with cellist Tom Cora at Lounge Ax. Ritscher recorded their performance too. I can hear myself laugh in between songs during Ritscher’s recording of a rare Milford Graves appearance from 1999. I can hear myself yelling enthusiastically on a 2004 recording of the Tokyo-based instrumental trio Nisennenmondai. I can see the back of my head in a 2006



like he was there right from the beginning of my performances in Chicago after I moved here from Boston in September of 1989. And this is probably true because the first shows I did were with Hal Russell's NRG Ensemble, during a half-year period when I "replaced" Mars Williams in the band from late 1989 to early 1990. Malachi was a huge Hal Russell and NRG Ensemble fan and he would have definitely been at most of those shows I played, if not all of them. I remember him more specifically when I started playing at the original Hot House in Wicker Park with the Vandermark Quartet.

photo of a Wolf Eyes show at the Empty Bottle on Malachi's website, and again in a 2004 photo of the band Sunn O))),).

Malachi Ritscher's archive of recordings is stored at Creative Audio Archive (CAA) at Experimental Sound Studio in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood. It occupies approximately forty linear feet of space in a series of shelved metal cabinets: neat stacks of audio cassettes, often stored in the cardboard boxes that bulk tapes were sold in, piles of DAT tapes, and spindles of CDRs—many labeled with a printed circular saw blade logo for Malachi's personal Savage Sound Syndicate imprint—along with other information about each show. A row of briefcases that Ritscher used to store some of his tapes lines the top of the cabinets.

An archival box holds Malachi Ritscher's fastidious concert recording notes, primarily written in Mead composition books. From 1997 until 2006, in a fine point black pen, Ritscher wrote down the band or musicians and venue, the date, an inventory number, information on who recordings were given to, and the duration of each song, as well as the total recording length. Sometimes the placement of the microphone is detailed, as with a Melvins show at the Double Door from September 9, 2004: "4D61 clipped to fire curtain by right side riser." Or, from a March 16, 1999 show by the Vandermark 5 at the Empty Bottle: "Clipped to front corners of bag on floor 17" apart." In the back of some of these journals there are long lists of mailing and email addresses for the various artists, some in the artist's handwriting, making these pages feel like a guest book. In a November 30, 2000 letter folded into one of his recording journals, Ritscher wrote, "What I do is a favor to the artists I respect, in order for them to further their process."

Recording concerts impacts one's attendance of an event. If you're standing with your equipment, it means that you don't dance, jump, clap or shout enthusiastically. If a friend approaches you, you don't talk to them any more than is necessary, if at all. Malachi created a laminated sign that he used to request "restraint" near the microphones.

One of the most documented people in Malachi's archives is the Chicago-based improviser and composer Ken Vandermark. Ken describes when he first started seeing Malachi:

I don't remember exactly when I met Malachi, [but] it feels

I'd been going to shows with my father since I was a little kid, well before I began playing gigs myself, and I was used to seeing people at concerts recording the shows on small cassette decks. So, when Malachi asked to record the shows, it wasn't such an unusual thing to me. What was unusual was the frequency with which he taped the performances—it was basically all of them.³

Writer, promoter, gallerist and musician John Corbett moved back to Chicago in 1987 and started organizing concerts at South End Music Works. Later, starting in 1996, Corbett co-organized a concert series at the Empty Bottle with Vandermark. He remembers meeting Ritscher:

I first started seeing Malachi as a guest with the Hal Russell NRG Ensemble. He made cameos with the NRG Ensemble playing didgeridoo. He had long hair and was this guy who Hal would haltingly announce from the stage and invite up... and it was sort of funny and weird and not particularly virtuosic in any way; it's hard to be a virtuoso didgeridoo player.

Then I started noticing him recording things. At that point early on, they weren't necessarily things he asked to record; he'd just be standing there recording them.

Then when I started doing independent productions after South End stopped, in the early '90s, Malachi was on the scene. For sure when Ken [Vandermark] and I started the series at the Empty Bottle in 1996, he was already a very active part of the ecosystem, and not covert and not underground. He would ask the musicians if he could record them and tell them he would get them a recording right away. That settled in and became a fairly regular thing. With him recording both the Vandermark sessions on Tuesday nights, and more or less all of the things we did on Wednesday nights, he became a fixture on the scene. He was recording music all over the city, but he always had those two gigs he was documenting more or less every week. I saw him two, three, or four times a week for a decade.⁴

John Corbett didn't have to ask Malachi to record the shows

that he organized; by the end of the first year of Empty Bottle shows in 1996, Ritscher simply did it. Corbett recalls, “Malachi had this regular job that was a day gig, and it left him evenings to do his thing, but the crazy aspect is that he didn’t seem to sleep at all, because he would be up all night getting the recording prepared so he could give it to the musicians as soon as possible.”⁵

Chicago journalist Bill Meyer shared this remembrance:

Malachi Ritscher was a working man and an idealist. A union member and a Licensed Stationary Engineer, he worked hard at his vocation, which involved keeping the power plants running and the lights on at places like the University of Chicago; he worked even harder at his avocations, which were to advocate for musicians and for justice. When vocation and avocation conflicted, he found a way to do both; I remember one year that he worked a night shift at the Water Tower Place, yet I knew that I could see him recording first sets at the Empty Bottle before he went to work.⁶

Fred Lonberg-Holm, a Chicago-based musician who primarily plays cello, moved to Chicago in 1995 and met Malachi almost immediately, “Probably from about the first gig that I played at an improvised music venue in Chicago, Malachi was there recording it. He always would come up and talk to you and say “Is it okay if I record?” and then he’d give you a copy of it later.”⁷ Bill Meyer writes, “He came out night after night, getting microphones set up right, shushing talkers with his eyes, and freezing the music into zeros and ones. If he recorded your concert, you could expect him to hand you a CDR of it, and no, he didn’t want your money.”⁸

Chicago-based percussionist Michael Zerang played in the Vandermark Quartet and is another heavily recorded musician in Malachi Ritscher’s archives. I asked Zerang and Vandermark if they studied Malachi’s recordings after shows, and if having access to that documentation might have impacted their playing, or the evolution of the music. Zerang: “It was a working group, a progressing group, so for me it was really important to hear how we were approaching the material, how we were developing

the material, and just a tool for growth.”⁹ Ken Vandermark writes:

I also came to depend on many of the recordings Malachi made, using them as references to see how new pieces were developing, and in some cases using his documents as source material for albums that were released, particularly those by the Vandermark 5. There is no question that having access to this material had a profound and positive impact on the music I was developing in Chicago. Being able to reference a performance of a composition to see how it worked or failed, then being able to perform it again the next week after making adjustments, listening to it again to see if it improved—this direct cause and effect experience was a crucial learning tool.

I'd like to point out that Malachi worked with the musicians with complete respect. He always made sure that musicians, whether from Chicago or visiting, got copies of their shows for free. I think he saw getting to hear and record the music as a privilege, and "paid the musicians back" by giving them documents of their music whenever he could.¹⁰

Scene fixtures like Malachi Ritscher store the memories of people, bands, and concerts past. They are the walking, breathing, listening history of a city’s cultural community. Their committed and serious presence sometimes lends a tone of respect to an event that can positively impact how others experience it. At a recent concert, Ken Vandermark joked, “I think he held the musicians in higher esteem than they held themselves, which really says a lot if you know musicians.”¹¹ I asked Vandermark about Malachi’s dedication and attendance:

After a short while I did expect to see Malachi at every show, it was highly unusual if he ever missed a gig, whether mine or anybody else's. In a large way, I came to depend on him being there—he really respected and understood the music, and his support was crucial, especially during the early years when the audiences were small. Having him there meant we were performing for someone who truly appreciated what we were doing; on some nights we were essentially playing for him.¹²

Michael Zerang recalls:

He had the function of a documentarian, and he was very clear that that was his intention. You know we’re playing pretty marginal music, quite frankly. Definitely the stuff I was involved in, and I’m still involved in, is pretty much on the fringes. And the fact that there was someone there all the time, taking it seriously enough to record it and document it... it gave it a sense of: okay, this is worth something. I’m not the only one—me and the ten people in the audience—that there’s someone that looks at this stuff as important. It’s important that it happens and it’s important that it’s documented, and maybe even especially because the stuff is on the fringe and especially because there’s only ten or twelve



people in the audience sometimes. It makes it even that much more important to have it documented.¹³

In Ken Vandermark's observation, "He has the whole evolution of the improvised music scene in Chicago on tape."¹⁴ Vandermark couldn't think of a single other scene that had been documented so thoroughly and with such care. David Grant played in the band Service Anxiety when he lived in Chicago. When his band played at the Empty Bottle, Malachi was there with his gear. David wrote, "I finally felt like I was really part of the scene when I played a show that Malachi recorded."¹⁵

As recordings made, most often with just a pair of microphones, there were some limitations—particularly when Ritscher set the mics up on stage and recorded larger groups. Fred Lonberg-Holm:

It's great that he was documenting the music, and it's nice to have some kind of audio artifact... [but] He'd almost always set the mics up pretty close to the horns, and then if you play an amplified instrument, unless the amplifier has its own mic, or is in proximity to the mic, it loses a lot of presence... so a lot of the recordings, the mix is really hot on the saxophone, the clarinets, the trombones, the trumpets and then the piano, the cello, the drums, the bass kind of sometimes disappear into a blur, to be honest.¹⁶

Other recordings I have listened to, particularly when the mics were further from the stage and Ritscher was recording rock bands, don't seem to have these problems. Bill Meyer remembers an occasion where Ritscher was able to create an exceptional document from an adverse situation:

One such feat was his registration of the concert that became Joe McPhee and Hamid Drake's Emancipation Proclamation (Okka Disk COD 12036D). By chance, the duo played as the opening act for the Vandermark 5's first hometown gig after Ken Vandermark was awarded the MacArthur Grant. The room was full of reporters, cameramen, and talkers, all contributing to a racket that threatened to drown out McPhee and Drake's music. Somehow Malachi plucked the music out of the cacophony so completely that you can't even hear the chatters on the record.¹⁷

Malachi Ritscher's dedication to recording was strong but his commitment to the scene had limits. John Corbett recalls:

He had a pretty extensive drum battery at his house and he told us about different equipment he was buying and this and that. And there were a couple of times where we ended up short a drum kit and he was not eager to lend one of his. He might have actually lent us his kit once but under protest. On the one hand you want to cast him as the guy who was there to do anything for the music but he had his role. And for other things it was like, 'That's on you.' He had a very specific assignment and he took that assignment really seriously and he bought more and more elaborate recording equipment. At a certain point it got too elaborate and he stripped it back down

again and it became more of a portable thing.¹⁸

The opportunity to record didn't always work out. In a post on his website from June 5, 2004, Malachi remembered the late saxophonist and composer Steve Lacy on the day after his death:

My favorite memory of Steve Lacy is when he and his wife Irene Aebi performed at Fassbender Gallery here in Chicago. I think it was a Sunday afternoon—anyway I had come down with all my equipment, and then Steve decided he didn't want the show recorded. Hardly anyone showed up, there were only about a dozen people in the audience. The starting time was delayed as long as possible, hoping for stragglers. Steve reminisced about a matinee show he had attended years ago, with Charlie Parker playing, and hardly anyone there.

As if attending and recording concerts nearly every night of the week while holding down a job wasn't enough, Malachi also maintained a website that hosted a cultural calendar of jazz, experimental music, and other concerts worth noting. The list was called Chicago Rash Audio Potential with the front-page subtitle: "listing selected creative music events without regard to categories." It's still online at Savagesound.com. It was an endeavor that Ritscher picked up after Seth Tisue stopped doing his website Chicago Now, a concert calendar for experimental and improvised music that ran from 1995-2002.

Ritscher wrote casually about the shows he attended as a series of Overnight Music Reviews on his website. These informal write-ups also contain perspectives on Chicago music culture, and the workings of the city and its intersection with the music scene, under the authority of Mayor Richard M. Daley. In a June 16, 2005 post, Ritscher addressed the difficulty that many live music venues have operating in Chicago:

This city needs to wake up and realize that culture exists on a smaller scale than Grant Park, and some small degree of nurture is necessary. Nightclubs are treated like drug dealers or gang bangers—every possible obstacle is put in their way, as a matter of policy. It's shameful, considering Chicago's role in shaping music in the 20th century. The decline since the destruction of Maxwell Street¹⁹ has been unwavering—if it ain't part of the business machine, it will be eradicated.

Another post, from July 25, 2004:

Well, I guess it's been a while since I've been down to the Velvet Lounge. I didn't think it had been that long, but everything is changed. There are so many new condos I almost didn't recognize the neighborhood—I had to go almost to 18th St. to find a parking spot on the street. It should be required of new construction to provide parking for every new unit. Next thing you know, it will be permit parking only, in effect turning a public street into private parking spaces for yuppies. Valet parking should be limited to one space at the corner for drop-off and pick-up, but where is the profit in that? For the mayor I mean...



The next difference you notice is all the flowers—I've never seen so many fucking flowers in my life! Who is paying for all these flowers? Oh that's right, I forgot, I am...

If you're a property owner, or tenant, or homeless person, and the city comes in and starts planting flowers, you gotta think, uh-oh, the end is near, time to start packing.

Thus the subliminal economic undercurrent works its subtle changes—at the Velvet they had to turn people away well before the club got full—it must be the old fire-marshall ploy, which the city uses when the value of the real-estate goes up. If that doesn't work, then they start planting underage people in the audience; or inventing complaints from unidentified neighbors. Yessir, the handwriting is on the wall...

Few people knew Malachi in a social way outside of music events. John Corbett told me, "He was a little bit of a hermit-like guy. Barely anyone had ever seen his place. He didn't socialize with people at all, for the most part, except when he was out at the gigs. He told me a lot about his job... but nobody really knew too much about him personally."²⁰ Angeline and Mark Evans were two exceptions. Angeline:

I believe most folks saw Malachi in his "professional" realm, i.e. recording engineer, archivist etc., but we might have been

the only ones that reached out to him on a personal level. I always hated just meeting folks at shows, because to me, while those are social, they are far from intimate. I felt that in order to reach the next level of friendship, someone has to reach out to do more. We asked Malachi out to dinners, at places that we knew he liked, such as Spacca Napoli, The Bite, or Amitabul.

It's tough to say why he felt comfortable with us, other than we are not musicians, concert promoters or record label producers. We reached out, and he warmed up to us in the end. This is not to say others didn't try, just perhaps as musicians with busy schedules, socializing outside of gigs is not easy.²¹

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On March 20, 2003, the U.S. launched an invasion of Iraq. That night, an estimated 15,000 people marched peacefully through downtown Chicago. Eventually the protestors reached Lake Shore Drive and snarled traffic in both directions before the police intervened, arresting over 800 protesters without giving them a chance to disperse. Malachi was among the demonstrators and those arrested. While still immersed in the world of improvised music, anti-war activism began to occupy more of Ritscher's attention. He talked about the war with Fred Longberg-Holm. Fred explains:

I grew up in a pretty far left family with a strong anti-war, pacifist and progressive set of values and we discovered that about each other early on and the conversation would often be about what was going on politically in the world—not just about the war but about the whole structure.

He was less and less out documenting things and less on the scene and more and more involved in politics and protest and anti-war movement stuff, and I think he was a little frustrated with how a lot of improvised musicians weren't as dedicated to that and interested in that as he was, or as he would have liked them to be or he thought that they should be.²²

Politics often seeped into Malachi Ritscher's Savage-sound.com concert listings. In the last listing for 2003, Ritscher wrote, "I resolve to work for change in 2004, enough wishing for change." From October, 2004, "Cost of War in Iraq \$141,647,586,913 as of 10/24/04—money which could have been spent replacing the bullshit Electoral College with a real democratic election process." Ritscher began adding the civilian death count in Iraq and the war's cost in dollars to the front end of many concert calendars. For the first post of 2005, Ritscher wrote "What a crappy year that was! Oddly, I'm optimistic—maybe in 2005 Rumsfeld really will poison himself..." The July 3, 2005 listing includes the sentiment, "Happy Independence Day everyone, if you eat enough hotdogs you can forget about the future of America for a minute or two! Who needs a Supreme Court when you have NASCAR?" From October, 2005, "How many more innocent people have to die before we get rid of those smirking idiots?"

Jason Guthartz, another fixture of Chicago's jazz and improvised music scene, was a friend of Malachi's and sympathetic to his political concerns:

My political consciousness was evolving in the late '90s / early '00s, and by the time of the invasion of Iraq, I was on the same page with Malachi regarding most political issues. We'd share our frustrations while chatting at shows or via e-mail, and we'd see each other at rallies and protests. I remember him telling me the story about how he was somewhere downtown where Donald Rumsfeld showed up, and that he was close enough to "attack" him. When he told me this, I probably laughed and said something like "yeah, right - next time", thinking he was being facetious. Little did I know how heavily the world's illnesses were weighing on him.²³

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I spent Saturday, November 4, 2006 in Greencastle, Indiana. The collaborative group I'm part of, Temporary Services, was doing a project at DePauw University with three other artists. During the drive down from Chicago, one of our collaborators, Melinda Fries, picked up a copy of the *Chicago Sun Times* at a rest stop. Buried four pages in she found the headline: "Man sets himself on fire on Kennedy." The article described horrified commuters watching a man douse his body with gasoline and immolate himself. The man was burned beyond recognition and

his identity had not yet been released. The incident happened on November 3rd, shortly before 7 AM during morning rush hour traffic at the base of Leonardo Nierman's "Flame of the Millennium" sculpture. The 25-foot-high stainless steel sculpture suggests "a flame curling back on itself"²⁴ and is sited between the Kennedy Expressway and the Ohio Street feeder ramp, near downtown Chicago. Fries recalls, "We discussed how difficult it was to get to the spot that he chose and that it was a well thought out and frightening location choice. Both for the visibility and the difficulty of stopping it."²⁵ We talked about the story in the car and felt the power and horror of this action. Next to that article, a similar amount of space was devoted to the story of a Tinley Park dentist, who happily recovered the gold and diamond wedding band that slipped off his finger and into the trick-or-treat bag of a neighbor boy on Halloween.

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On November 6th, Bruno Johnson of the record label Okka Disk received a letter in the mail from Malachi Ritscher at his address in Milwaukee:

I remember this package coming, a little envelope stuffed... just regular postage on it. Which is one of the things that shocked me; it could have gotten lost. It had keys in it, it had some other miscellaneous things, and a lot of paperwork... it could have easily gotten destroyed in the mail. But it showed up, I opened it, I started reading it, I got very concerned. I showed it to my wife, she got concerned. I immediately called Malachi's house but didn't get an answer. I called some friends to see if anybody had seen him recently, because although he didn't say he killed himself, it definitely read as a... here's my will, here's my two pages of things I want you to do, and sort of an apology at the end.²⁶

Later on November 6th, I received an email from my friend Anthony Elms, a forwarded message from Fred Lonberg-Holm, pointing to Malachi Ritscher as possibly the man who committed suicide in front of the sculpture. Fred remembers:

We were just getting ready for a rehearsal with the Vandermark 5 I believe, and Ken got a call from Bruno saying "Hey has anybody seen Malachi?" And I said "Yeah, I saw him Thursday night or Tuesday night, I forget." And Bruno said "That's weird because I just got this package with documents and a key to his house." As I had contacts at the University of Chicago who knew Malachi, I called to see if he was there. He wasn't, but the police had already come to interview his boss and the general consensus was that Malachi had died.²⁷

On November 7th, the *Chicago Reader* published an article by Peter Margasak titled "Malachi Ritscher's apparent suicide." *The Nation* later reported: "With an American flag draped over his head, and a sign that read "Thou Shalt Not Kill. As Ye Sow So Shall Ye Reap. Your Taxes Buy Bombs and Bullets," he lit



himself on fire.”²⁸ A video camera on a tripod was found at the scene. Ritscher documented his own suicide.

In gallery 22 on his website, Malachi included a photo of the sculpture by Leonardo Nierman with the caption: “Drove by this every day for 3 yrs. I call it 'copter crash' (it has another name).” Kevin Drumm, a Chicago-based musician who was a friend of Ritscher’s, believes that Malachi often went to the sculpture site to watch traffic.²⁹

Gallery 99 of Savagesound.com contains a “Mission Statement,” written by Malachi Ritscher and posted for people to find after his death. Two excerpts:

The violent turmoil initiated by the United States military invasion of Iraq will beget future centuries of slaughter, if the human race lasts that long. First we spit on the United Nations, then we expect them to clean up our mess. Our elected representatives are supposed to find diplomatic and benevolent solutions to these situations. Anyone can lash out and retaliate, that is not leadership or vision. Where is the wisdom and honor of the people we delegate our trust to?

What is one more life thrown away in this sad and useless national tragedy? If one death can atone for anything, in any small way, to say to the world: I apologize for what we have done to you, I am ashamed for the mayhem and turmoil caused by my country.³⁰

Malachi Ritscher also wrote his own obituary, titled “Out of Time” and it appears on his website. Some passages:

Chicago resident Malachi Ritscher passed away last (day of week), a (tragic, baffling, mundane) death at the age of

(subtract 1954 from current year). He was the modern day version of a 'renaissance man', except instead of attaining success in several fields, he consistently failed, and didn't really worry too much about it. For example, his boxing record in Golden Gloves. The eldest son of Richard C. Ritscher, a music educator, he collected and played many exotic instruments, without mastering any. Most recently, he had been playing a vintage Conn C-Melody saxophone that once belonged to free-spirit Hal Russell. Malachi was best known for his live concert recordings, mostly of local jazz groups who couldn't afford expensive studios. His license plates said AKG C 414, after his favorite microphones. Upwards of fifty recordings were eventually released commercially, with some acclaim for their natural sound. His archive of live recordings he had documented exceeded 2000 shows. Mostly he was just a big fan.

Also he was a film photographer, with a picture of a peregrine falcon chick published in a local Audubon magazine, and related video footage shown on local television news. He wrote poetry that was not published, painted watercolors in a quirky naive style, and participated passionately in the anti-war and free speech movement. He was arrested at a protest on March 20, 2003 and spent the night in jail, then became a member of the pending class-action suit against the City of Chicago. Arrested again two years later, he successfully sued the City of Chicago for false arrest on 1st Amendment/free speech grounds. One of his proudest achievements was an ultra-searing hot sauce recipe, which he registered under the name 'Undead Sauce - re-animate yourself!' It was a blend of tropical peppers, which he grew indoors in 5-gallon buckets, and a few secret ingredients that gave it a unique flavor (pomegranate, pistachio, and cinnamon). ...

The metaphor for his life was winning the lottery, but losing the ticket. In the end, the loneliness was overwhelming. He was deeply appreciative for everything that had been given to him, but acutely aware that the greater the present, the higher the price. He was a member of Mensa, and Alcoholics Anonymous since 1990. For him, sobriety was virtually getting a second chance at life. He practiced a personal and private spirituality, seeking to connect across the illusion that separates us from each other. Reportedly, his last words were "rosebud... oops".

Near his end, he was purchasing real estate in Vancouver with the intention of eventual emigration, unable to reconcile his conscience with his tax dollars financing an unjust war. ...He had many acquaintances, but few friends and wrote his own obituary, because no one else really knew him. He has a plot at Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois; and the epitaph he chose is "I Dreamt That I Was Dreaming".³¹

A photo on his website from October 2006, captioned “one last shot”, shows Malachi standing in front of a sculptural wall relief. On the left side of the image, an angel’s wing appears to



grow out of his back. Malachi's youngest sister Ellen Sackett told me that her brother "didn't do much by accident."³² After his death, while the family was busy removing his belongings from his house, one of Malachi's neighbors pointed out something that no one had realized: November 3rd is the date of Saint Malachi's Feast.

Fred Lonberg-Holm recalls the week before Malachi's death:

The last time I saw him, one of the questions was, 'Are we good? Are we settled? Did I give you [everything] that I recorded of you?' and he and I were thinking. He just wanted to make sure and I didn't know why. That last week he didn't record shows that I know of but he went to a show every night, sort of in a way saying goodbye. Up until the end he was actively recording, but not as frequently.³³

Malachi Ritscher also gave Lonberg-Holm a gift: a small translucent plastic 'rattleback' that Ritscher was thinking of getting screen-printed as a kind of business card for Savage Sound. Fred placed the oblong object on a table and spun it. "Malachi said, 'I knew you would do that.'"³⁴ Near the end of its rotation, rather than coming to a stop in the expected way, the object started to spin backwards. Ritscher took satisfaction in seeing that Lonberg-Holm had intuitively figured out what was unusual about the object, and confirmed that that was why he wanted to give it to him.

John Corbett observed the impact politics was having on Malachi toward the end of his life:

He was getting more and more distraught about the direction that the government was going and the direction that the country was going—for good reason. Of course I sympathize with that. The sad thing is that two years later he would have lived to see the first black president, and I think that he would have found that to be a source of more hope than he'd had in a long time. Whether he would have ultimately been disgruntled with what that black president has done [laughs]—I suspect he would have! I don't think he would have ever

been happy; I just think that the direction that the country went under Bush in particular, he couldn't believe. He couldn't imagine that people were that stupid. But I don't think that the paranoid situation with the government explains all that was going on. I think there was a lot more going on than that and I don't want to speculate about exactly what it was, but I think that when someone does something that extreme and that calculated, there's something else going on.³⁵

Malachi Ritscher also missed Donald Rumsfeld's resignation, on November 6th, by just a few days. It's impossible to know if that would have made any difference in his decision, but given Ritscher's hatred of the former Secretary of Defense, this news surely would have made him happy. And, for what it's worth—because it is not known if Malachi timed his death around this date or what it might have meant to him—there were elections on November 7, 2006 and they brought big wins for the Democratic Party which captured the House of Representatives, the Senate, and a majority of governorships and state legislatures from the Republican Party.

Ritscher's actions resemble the self-immolation of another activist with an interest in music: Kathy Change (1950-1996). Change (born Katherine Chang) was an American performance artist and activist living in Philadelphia. On October 22, 1996, she committed suicide, publicly, on the campus of University of Pennsylvania. Like Ritscher, she chose the site of a sculpture—a metal peace symbol. Journalist Lin Zheng:

Designed in a 1967 collaborative project between Penn fine arts students and former sculpture professor Robert Engman, the simple but evocative sculpture served as a base camp in the late 60s and early 70s for students to unite and hold anti-war demonstrations and petition drives. They were furiously determined to change the mind of the University administration, who had refrained from taking an official stance on America's military involvement in the conflict.³⁶

Again, like Ritscher, Kathy Change delivered a written message on the morning of her death. A packet of writings was delivered to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, and to several friends and acquaintances. She explained the motivation for her suicide:

I want to protest the present government and economic system and the cynicism and passivity of the people...as emphatically as I can. But primarily, I want to get publicity in order to draw attention to my proposal for immediate social transformation. To do this I plan to end my own life. The attention of the media is only caught by acts of violence. My moral principles prevent me from doing harm to anyone else or their property, so I must perform this act of violence

against myself. ... It is a waste of energy to get angry and gripe at the government. The government must be replaced with a truly democratic self-government of, for and by the people. Those working in industries essential to maintaining life should democratically take over their workplaces and organize an emergency economy to supply the needs of the people. The rest of the people should meet in their communities to organize a new directly democratic community-based self-government.³⁷



Ritscher's death was felt deeply by people in the Chicago music scene and beyond. Michael Zerang:

First off it was very difficult for a lot of us when he died and the way he died. On the one hand, we were all kind of traumatized and not necessarily individually but collectively—the whole scene. It was a really dark time after he passed and it came to light what had happened. So in those days following, I think there was a lot of soul searching on a lot of people's parts about how there's this person around all the time, and a lot of us considered him our friend, and that something like this would happen and that none of us had a clue that it was gonna happen.³⁸

Mark Solotroff is another Chicago-based musician that knew Malachi. The men were neighbors for some years and saw each other at shows all the time. Solotroff fronts the group Bloody-minded, whose lyrics often address difficult subjects. Just weeks after Ritscher's death Bloody-minded performed at the Empty Bottle, delivering short blasts of harsh electronic noise with Solotroff's vocals riding overtop. At the close of their set, in sharp contrast to the high volume electrified sounds that preceded, Solotroff cut all of the power to the stage including the lights, set aside his microphone, and dedicated "Ten Suicides" to Malachi Ritscher. It is a harrowing song written before Ritscher's death about others that Mark has lost. Solotroff screamed his words across a silent room:

WHAT WAS THE BEST DAY OF YOUR LIFE? – DECISIONS
– IN-CHARGE – TRANSFORMATIONS – DEEPER CUTS –
AT CLOSE RANGE – HOT SHOTS – BOUNDARIES – RE-
SOLVE – HANDS ON – WORKED THE BLADES – SHOT
THE GUNS – WATCHED THE NODS – DREW PATTERNS –
TARGET PRACTICE – VICARIOUS – SURROGATE –
DOWN IN THE PARK – IN THE BEDROOM – IN FULL
VIEW – AND ALONE – RESULTS – WHAT WAS THE BEST
DAY OF YOUR LIFE?



Malachi Ritscher's death is often compared to the Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc who, on June 11, 1963, burned himself to death at a busy Saigon road intersection.³⁹ Quang Duc was protesting against the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government led by Ngo

Dinh Diem. His self-immolation was photographed by Malcolm Browne—an image that quickly spread around the world and is an enduring symbol of political conviction and personal sacrifice. In the comments that follow Peter Margasak's article in the *Chicago Reader*, percussionist Michael Zerang considered Ritscher's death in this Buddhist context with this quote from Thich Nhat Hnah:

The press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, that is, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide.⁴⁰

Thich Nhat Hanh goes on to explain why Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation was not a suicide, which is contrary to Buddhist teachings:

Suicide is an act of self-destruction, having as causes the following: (1) lack of courage to live and to cope with difficulties; (2) defeat by life and loss of all hope; (3) desire for nonexistence. The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire nonexistence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of their oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred, and discrimination which lie within the heart of man.⁴¹

The discussion and debate around Ritscher's death following Peter Margasak's article runs to over 660 comments and includes speculation of mental illness. Fred Longberg-Holm dismisses that charge as a "disinformation campaign."⁴² Lonberg-Holm:

Sure, he was understandably frustrated and depressed and I feel the same way quite often but I don't think that he killed himself because of mental illness, or at least not the clinical sense of the thing as much as 'I'm going to go out and make a stand, make a statement, and try to have an impact.' Or else why would he do it on the side of the highway at rush hour with a big sign and have made this pretty massive webpage about the whole thing right before he did it? And I think he wanted that image [of his death] to be disseminated widely and of course the police confiscated all of the equipment and so the documentation was never released. Finally it was

released to his parents ... supposedly months after.⁴³

Michael Zerang and I discussed the charges that some have made about Malachi's mental state⁴⁴ as well as the video documentation that Ritscher made of his own death:

He explained his position. He did what he did, and I was just of the mind that, okay, I'll take it at face value. This is what he meant, this is what he did, it's pretty serious. A lot of people didn't see it that way and I think that's a much bigger debate about how we as artists, or just we as citizens of this country deal with our politics. How we resist, how we make a statement. It seems that over the years, this country—from the 60s on, after the 60s into this newer day, from the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War... how do we protest these things? We've become numb to it. A lot of people don't know how to protest these things. They'll march and that's an overt display of their displeasure, but then you have the commercial media that's sort of complicit in all of this and the message doesn't get out. So how do you get above the noise? Well, you do something like Malachi did. Now, I'm not advocating it, I wish he didn't do it, but to this day, I'm still ticked off at his family. They didn't release his tape. Now as much as I wouldn't want to see something like that... the guy is the premiere documentarian of the scene, he does this act, he films it, and they throw it in a drawer, or destroy it.

I understand on a personal level; it's awful, it's terrible... I get it. On the other hand, four years later, a guy does the same thing in Tunisia and it causes a revolution.⁴⁵

Zerang is referring to Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian vendor whose self-immolation touched off the Arab Spring. Many Americans seem to feel better about honoring sacrifices made for protest, and do not raise the spectre of mental illness, when those people are from other countries or their gesture is not uncomfortably contemporary. An example of this is President Obama's description, from a 2011 speech honoring Bouazizi:

On December 17th, a young vendor, named Mohamed Bouazizi, was devastated when a police officer confiscated his cart.

This was not unique. It was the same kind of humiliation that takes place every day in many parts of the world, the relentless tyranny of governments that deny their citizens dignity.

Only this time, something different happened: After local officials refused to hear his complaints, this young man, who had never been particularly active in politics, went to the headquarters of the provincial government, doused himself in fuel and lit himself on fire.

There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movement for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up

for years.

In America think of the defiance of those patriots in Boston who refused to pay taxes to a king, or the dignity of Rosa Parks as she sat courageously in her seat.⁴⁶

Self-immolation remains a common practice in Chinese-governed Tibet as a protest gesture against the occupation of Tibet and the repression of Tibetans. Since 2009, one hundred Tibetan protesters have committed this act, of which 82 have died.⁴⁷

Perhaps the failing of Ritscher's political suicide was not the lack of circulation of his filmed document, but that for all of Ritscher's planning, his act was carried out alone and by surprise.⁴⁸ There was a quick outcry on Indymedia sites and in the alternative press to make sure the mainstream media recognized that his act was intended as an anti-Iraq War protest—which was left out of the initial story in the *Chicago Sun Times*. An Associated Press story did make it out internationally by the end of November, but by then the focus had already shifted to critiquing the media coverage and recognizing Ritscher's gesture, rather than acting on his stance against the war in a forceful and dramatic way. John Corbett:

I feel like the calculations for political efficacy that he tried to make in terms of his website and in terms of trying to do it in front of television cameras and all of that kind of crap—didn't really work very well at the time, because he ended up doing it in a place that was so out of the way, and he did it at a time that I think was very poorly calculated in terms of anything except freaking a lot of people on the highway out and a lot of people who had basically no sense of what it was that he was doing. He didn't do it in a way that clued them in on the fact that he was doing it for a political purpose. The kinds of allies that he had were allies within the music world mostly. He wasn't a political figure in terms of having assembled people to back up a particular point of view. He just basically tried to rope a few of his friends from the music world into seeing that the government was fucked up which was a position with which certainly not too many of them would have disagreed [laughs].⁴⁹

Bruno Johnson, with help from Ken Vandermark as well as John Corbett, knew to rush in and save Malachi Ritscher's archive of recordings from ending up in a dumpster but anti-war activists were not on the ground waiting to react to his action because Malachi had not alerted anyone about what he was going to do. Saddest of all, the anti-war movement itself probably wasn't strong enough in Chicago to react on a scale that might have had greater resonance, as it had with the dramatic March 20, 2003 anti-war protest where over 800 people, including Ritscher, were detained or arrested after shutting down Lake Shore Drive. Those charges were eventually dropped and settled nine years later in a massive class action lawsuit for wrongful arrest and the city paid out \$6.2 million to those who were arrested or detained. Maybe Ritscher's gesture could have shut down the city in some way again, or perhaps inspired a different kind of large scale uprising against the war, but we'll never know. And

Ritscher's own words still cast uncertainty. As he wrote in his self-authored obituary, "In the end, the loneliness was overwhelming."⁵⁰ He also wrote:

A lover of literature, even more than music, he had always dreamed of being a writer. The handwritten manuscript of his 'fictional autobiography', titled "Farewell Tour", was under consideration by publishers. It had a general theme of shared universal aloneness, and was controversial for seeming to endorse suicide after the age of fifty.⁵¹

Malachi Ritscher took his own life at the age of 52. Do with that what you want, but with or without a consensus on why he committed suicide, artists and activists were still inspired by Ritscher. Jean Smith and David Lester of the Vancouver-based band Mecca Normal met Malachi in Chicago in 2002 when he recorded one of their shows at the Empty Bottle. They kept in touch with him after that show and wrote a song titled "Malachi" that was released as a 7" on K Records in 2010. Additionally, David Lester created a tribute to Ritscher for his "Inspired Agitators" portrait poster series that has used illustrations and text to outline the ideas and accomplishments of over twenty-five political and cultural activists to date. Smith writes:

It was Malachi's intention for the video of his protest, his death, to reach people through mainstream media, to jar them from complacency, to have them raise their voices to end the war. But that wasn't what happened. The video was not released in that way. When we added our song—and the poster—to our performances and classroom events, we regarded them as extensions of Malachi's intention. We had created documents about the documentarian whose final statement on war was not heard. We created art and music because Malachi's voice was not heard.⁵²

Others paid tribute as well. There was a play ("The Silence of Malachi Ritscher") written by Kevin Kilroy and directed by Lewis Lain (the scripts were burned at the end of its run), a blog for remembering and for challenging the mainstream media's story, titled "I Heard You, Malachi" created by a graduate student of communication named Jennifer Diaz, some small demonstrations, other songs such as one by the band Less Than Jake, and dramatic readings of Ritscher's Mission Statement. The demanding and powerful album "Sheer Hellish Miasma" by Kevin Drumm, whose infrequent concerts were often recorded by Ritscher, includes a dedication on the back cover of the 2010 vinyl release. Drumm's reasons for the dedication were not political, but because of how helpful Malachi was:

He had an extremely powerful sound system/stereo and he wasn't afraid to push it and annoy the neighbors. He extended the invitation to come over and listen to anything I had recorded at any time. I made regular appointments with him on this. "Sheer Hellish Miasma" made the 'cut' when I went over and listened to it at full volume at Malachi's place.⁵³

Metal Rouge, whose members were based in both the U.S.

and New Zealand, had no contact with Malachi when he was alive, but released an instrumental CD in tribute titled "Three for Malachi Ritscher" in 2008. Around that time, band member Andrew Scott sent this email to Malachi's father:

What really led to the creation of the album were our readings of Malachi's self-penned obituary (and to a lesser extent his Mission Statement) many months later. There were many phrases that struck me, such as: "He was the modern day version of a 'renaissance man', except instead of attaining success in several fields, he consistently failed, and didn't really worry too much about it", or when he talks about his own art: "Mostly he was just a big fan" and "He wrote poetry that was not published, painted watercolors in a quirky naive style". Given the nature of Malachi's story these phrases may appear inconsequential, but to us they said everything. When, like Malachi, like us, like so many of friends and peers, you choose the path of art (especially the path of the kind of art that is seen as a marginal activity at best in a society that equates the worth of an activity only with the financial rewards it brings), you are willingly entering on what is seen by many to be a path of innate failure. Contrary to popular image of bohemian decadence or abandon, it is actually a life path of constant struggle. It requires a commitment and determination that in some ways is in opposition to some of the prevailing trends in social organisation of affluent societies. Out of this struggle strong communities are born, especially in the music world. Malachi was a member of these communities. So there was a shock of recognition when I read his obituary; the hope, the self-deprecation, the idealism, music as life-blood, art in the face of indifference, the rage at a system that cares so little about the fate of so many. The shock of recognition was this: That this letter could have been written by so many of the people I know, maybe even by myself.

I think many of us get involved in art, music, writing because we feel too acutely the senseless violence of this world and know not what else to do. The sharing generosity in the creative community can sometimes even heighten this sensitivity to inhumanity: here are many people coming together to for a common goal—why can this not be done politically, implemented globally? This is our frustration—experiencing the edge of utopia through art—knowing it can be another way. It's the kind of hopeless optimism that can destroy you. It is a savage irony that cynicism shields you from the pain of disappointment. Malachi died because he knew it could be another way. Malachi died because he knew we could be better than this.

These are the kind of thoughts and emotions that Malachi and his actions gave birth to. People were throwing the word 'martyr' around, but I don't think that's right. A martyr is someone elevated, someone holy, above the average man. Malachi wasn't a martyr—he was one of us. A brother in a community that stretches the globe, linked in hopeful hopeless frustration and belief. This is what makes the loss so

much greater, the tragedy so much deeper, the implications so much heavier to behold.

On the front page of his website, Malachi Ritscher wrote, “art and music can express outrage, inspire action, or soothe and distract; please think about priorities and be involved in things that matter.” Feel Tank, a Chicago-based group of artists, activists and academics that began their work not long after the start of the Iraq war, printed a t-shirt that reads: “Depressed? It Might Be Political.” The Pagan Science Monitor observes, “There are a number of activists who have committed suicide in the context of despairing over both their personal demons and the hopeless state of the world as they saw it: Abbie Hoffman and Phil Ochs both come to mind.”⁵⁴

We need to find ways to talk about depression as a serious, politically-influenced reality. The suicide rates of returning veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are off the charts. It’s too easy to rush in and conduct amateur, web-based, forensic expeditions, looking for evidence of mental illness whenever a U.S. citizen reaches their breaking point. We should be more open to consider and discuss the impacts that endless war, mass incarceration, epic poverty and impossible levels of debt, systemic and institutionalized racism, gender violence, and the daily brutality that living in America, and competing for basic human resources and dignity, exert on the psyche of this country’s people.

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Malachi Ritscher’s outrage is missed and his efforts for the artistic community that he held in such high regard haven’t been easy to replace. Ken Vandermark writes, “If the mass media overlooked Malachi’s contributions and death, the people closer to him did not, and the musicians and fans of the music I know in Chicago (and outside of Chicago) admired him while he was alive and since then—he is frequently remembered and discussed.”⁵⁵

In a December 12, 2006 post from the archives of bric-brac.blogspot.com, the curator, writer and organizer Jamillah James remembered Ritscher:

Malachi was the number one fan of my two former space in Chicago, Pink Section and Texas Ballroom. He was the first person through the door at the first Pink Section show back in December 2002. He appeared out of nowhere, and then kept appearing for two years afterwards. He was an invaluable source of support and knowledge for my endeavors. I would often run into him at shows, and we would chat, and it was always a pleasure speaking with him and picking his brain. I had a crush on him. I greatly admired the work he did in the music community, and wished that more people put as much as he did into it—and he never, ever took back.

In writing this essay, I combed the inventory of shows that Ritscher recorded and it made me feel tired and inadequate. How could one person take in and record so much? Jason Guthartz shared an email that Malachi sent him in April 2006 about a trip to New York City. In just five days, Ritscher saw seven concerts,

visited four museums or exhibitions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, sampled the cheesecake at seven different restaurants and the pizza from five (including two trips to Una Pizza Napoletana) picked up a pastrami sandwich at Katz’s deli, walked for miles, and found new eyeglass frames after stopping in about ten different stores.

The many things Ritscher collected are mostly gone—lost to the chaos of a family that lived out of state and had to rapidly deal with all of his things and sell his home. Other items were dispersed at a November 12, 2006 memorial event at The Elastic Arts Foundation where attendees were invited to take posters that Ritscher collected from shows he attended, as well as hot peppers he grew. Malachi’s youngest sister Ellen Sackett told me about Malachi’s glass eyeball collection and how he used to carry a couple of them around in his pocket with his loose change. When he had to pay for something at a store or café, he liked to pick up a couple eyeballs with the coins just to wig out the cashier and have some fun.⁵⁶

After moving to Chicago in 1981, Ritscher played bass in the bands Wantnot, Arsenal, and Book of Holy Lies. Arsenal, whose first EP was released on Touch and Go Records in 1988, was a collaboration with Santiago Durango of the band Big Black. This is another footnote that Ritscher occupies in Chicago’s music history.

Malachi Ritscher did eccentric creative things like place a pair of red and blue plastic Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em Robots on the dashboard of his car that he would photograph with the Sears Tower appearing in the background, never looking through the viewfinder. His sister Ellen spotted the severed head of Ernie from the TV show Sesame Street mounted like taxidermy over a door in his home. He was obsessed with pastries and had strong opinions about which bakeries made the best. During the George W. Bush years he made anti-Bush paintings, stencils and t-shirts. Most of these are fairly straightforward and while spirited, they don’t hold much power as protest works.

Ritscher was given to unexpected acts of generosity. Thymme Jones, who plays drums in the band Cheer Accident, recalls:

I was fumbling around a lot with my defective hi-hat clutch at this one show we played at Schuba’s. I thought that this fumbling had been “subtle,” that the show had gone smoothly, that no one had noticed. Three days later I received a brand new hi-hat clutch in the mail. Malachi had sent it.⁵⁷

Jodi Gilbert remembers that when Malachi visited her and her husband Michael Moore in Amsterdam, he gave their son Reuben—then about 10 years old—a meteorite. She believes Ritscher found it in Arizona and kept it as a good luck charm. Angeline Evans also remembers Ritscher’s gifts:

Malachi found and refurbished this amazing light table and gave it to me because he knew I worked with negatives. He at one time worked the night shift in the Four Seasons Hotel and was able to eat the “leftovers” from the restaurant. He brought me a beautiful porcelain china teapot from the banquet room.⁵⁸

MALACHI

"If I am required to pay for your barbaric war, I choose not to live in your world. I refuse to finance the mass murder of innocent civilians, who did nothing to threaten our country. I will not participate in your charade—my conscience will not allow me to be a part of your crusade."



Malachi Ritscher (1954-2006), American musician, free speech and anti-war activist who for many years made high quality recordings of other musicians (often jazz and experimental) performing live in Chicago. He would give a copy to the performers and sometimes these would become official releases. After the U.S. invaded Iraq, he became a vocal opponent of the war at demonstrations and was twice arrested. Like monks opposing the Vietnam war, his final act of protest culminated in an act of self-immolation.

INSPIRED AGITATORS

Ritscher was obsessed with Pi and the symbol for Pi is carved into the gravestone he designed for himself at Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois. Angeline Evans recalls how, as a kind of meditation, Malachi would write out declensions of Pi during concerts and give them to friends. Jodi Gilbert has similar memories of Ritscher doing this for her family during his visit.

Malachi also collected fossils, made drawings of fossils in his collection, and gave those away too. One that he drew was a Tully Monster—a soft-bodied animal that lived in the ocean that covered much of Illinois about 300 million years ago.⁵⁹ Angeline and Mark Evans have one of those drawings, as does Agnieszka Czeblakow.

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Chicago remains a vital place for music and there are people who are recording this, but no one in the jazz and improvised music scene has picked this up with Malachi's intensity and commitment.

Ritscher sometimes took photos at shows and posted them on his website under the name "Tim Ershot" (timer shot, natch). As with his audio recording practice, there was an ethos of

respect that Ritscher observed and imparted to others:

.... If you like taking pictures of bands, remember that every shot intrudes on somebody's space—taking a lot of shots is a distraction for the people in the audience who are trying to get inside the mood, especially if you're using flash. Maybe just take a few good shots during the first two songs and then put your camera away. Camping out in front of the stage and relentlessly clicking away is very obnoxious, and probably not going to be productive anyway in terms of good results. It's great that you have a chance to sell a few photos, but not at the cost of ruining someone else's experience. It's common courtesy.⁶⁰

People attend concerts with newer and smarter phones, making mostly poor quality videos to post on social media sites and taking snapshots throughout concerts. It's enthusiastic, but it's not a substitute for the dedication and professionalism that Malachi exhibited.

John Corbett talked about what it means to lose Malachi:

If you measure it [Ritscher's suicide] against what it deprived everyone of in terms of his presence, even if he had stopped recording and he had just been there as a person who was a repository for all that information. ...He had a presence. He was somebody we all looked forward to seeing every week. Absolutely. He was smarter than your average bear. He was politically engaged, and could have an interesting conversation.

He treated men and women with absolute equanimity—if anything he might have been more inclined to be respectful of women and that is not the case in that scene. And it was amazing to meet somebody there who would go out of his way to talk to them—not in a lascivious way, not in any kind of a come on way, ever. I'm not at all objective about it. I still feel sad about it, and I'm sad because I feel he was an ally we all had.⁶¹

Malachi Ritscher's recording journal ends on October 27, 2006 with his notes for a concert by Gang Gang Dance at the Empty Bottle. The previous night he recorded Daniele Cavallanti and Tiziano Tononi with various guests at the Velvet Lounge, and the night before that it was Exploding Star Orchestra at the Velvet Lounge. There's nothing unusual or special in the notes for the show on October 27th. The track lengths and total set time are noted as usual. The details are not on the last page of the notebook; there are plenty of blank pages remaining. The log simply stops.

In December 2006, Tushar Samant started a new Chicago concert calendar website with a similar focus on jazz and improvised music: <http://now-is.org>. It picks up where Malachi Ritscher's Savagesound.com left off. Malachi's website remains online. The last update is listed as November 3, 2006, the day of his suicide.

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We can take some lessons from Malachi Ritscher's archives and approach to documentation. One is that even if this is mostly solitary work, try to find a way to engage with a community. Malachi didn't record shows in secret and he shared his recordings with the artists along the way. Even if Bruno Johnson and Ken Vandermark weren't able to get into his house after his death to retrieve the many boxes and briefcases filled with recordings, most of the artists Malachi recorded would already have those recordings anyway—there just wouldn't be an archive of all of Ritscher's personal copies.

Come up with clear labeling systems that will make sense to someone else later on. While there are recordings in the collection at Creative Audio Archive (CAA) that were not labeled and have yet to be identified, most of Ritscher's recordings contain plenty of notes that are usually further supported by duplicate or additional information in the recording journals that he kept. Allison Schein, the Archivist at CAA, has remarked that Ritscher had pretty good handwriting, which she and others had to transcribe.

When possible, save ephemera from the shows you record. This deepens the material interest of the documentation. Digging through Malachi's cassettes, there are some visual treats to discover—an autograph on the back of a business card, or a ticket stub from the concert inside the tape case. For some concerts there are handwritten set lists, lifted off the stage at the end of a show. Ritscher also collected silkscreened concert posters when those were created for special gigs or festivals and had the musicians sign them.

Document whatever you are passionate about, but it also helps to have a focus. Malachi Ritscher focused on particular artists, a time period, a city, and certain venues. This gives his archive a more specific value as a collection than if he just tried to go to a little of everything in many different places.

Leave the work to people that have financial resources or know where to find them. Bruno Johnson of Okka Disc records passed along Malachi's recordings to the Creative Audio Archive at Experimental Sound Studio. They have access to technology and people with the knowledge to transfer audio files to digital storage, an understanding of archival preservation for audio materials, and they know how to write grants, promote the collection, and do fundraising.

It's one thing to start a collection, but it's a whole other problem to make it accessible for others to experience. CAA has cataloged every recording and created a searchable online inventory that people can add comments to. For a collection of thousands of recordings, this is tedious work. Another challenge they've been contending with is getting permission from each artist in the collection. Can their recording be played at public events, can it be turned into an album, should people be able to listen to it online, or broadcast it on the radio? Everyone in the collection is being contacted. Fortunately Malachi provided many email and mailing addresses for the artists in the collection and a number of the people that work at Experimental Sound Studio are musicians or people who know a lot of musicians. His work is being cared for by the right people.

Leaving your collection to others doesn't have to wait until you are gone. You can donate things to an archive any time. His-

torian and archivist Agnieszka Czeblakow points out, "Archives are filled with collections that are "living" and receive additions over the lifetime of the donor."⁶² Had Malachi Ritscher handed over some of his recordings during his lifetime, he might have been able to speed up the process of preserving them, cataloging, seeking permissions, and other necessary tasks that must now be completed in his absence.

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On November 3, 2013, the day after my birthday and the seventh anniversary of Malachi Ritscher's death, I visited his grave for the first time. In place of flowers or a small stone, I brought four Habanero peppers—a gesture borrowed from Angeline and Mark Evans who placed a Jalapeno on his grave one year.

This essay was written in response to an invitation by Anthony Elms to Public Collectors to produce a project for the 2014 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. It feels strange to have taken on a project about a person that is not alive. The last fifteen years of my creative work have been mostly dedicated to collaborating with Brett Bloom and Salem Collo-Julien in the group Temporary Services. We often share opportunities with others, but they are people who are alive to share those opportunities with. Part of the motivation for starting Public Collectors in 2007 was to engage in collaborations with others who are dedicated to preserving the kind of cultural materials that museums and other institutions often disregard. Public Collectors exists to explore objects and histories that often reside in private hands but deserve larger consideration and attention, as well as to celebrate collecting and archiving as a valid creative practice.

Malachi Ritscher's creativity was not easy to categorize neatly and could be found as much in the placement of a microphone used to record a concert as in the combination of ingredients in a recipe or the design of a skateboard deck. This is some of what I told the people that loaned objects and shared their words for this exhibition and essay:

The Biennial is an unusual invitation for Public Collectors as I am normally uninterested in working with museums for this initiative. Public Collectors is concerned with pulling things from the margins and giving them a thoughtful context and public presentation. For me to participate in the Whitney Biennial, I want that participation to give focus to someone who would have never been asked, and who has never been collected or exhibited by the Whitney Museum of American Art. I want to share something that the public may not know exists and to see the museum lend authority and importance to a life and a creative practice that probably would not receive museum consideration under normal circumstances. I want my participation to draw on a network of individuals or smaller institutions to show the kind of extraordinary things that museums often don't care about. I want to consider what happens to the creative work of people who are not collected by museums when they are gone—people whose life's work has not been accorded the same desirability as collectible art or all of the resources that are often

expended for valuable art objects.

I went to Calvary Cemetery to visit a space that Malachi Ritscher chose for himself—a plot that he purchased shortly before his death—to pay my respects and be present for a while, and to say that I hope he would be okay with all of this. I don't believe in the afterlife, I don't visit cemeteries often, I don't pray, and I don't normally try to communicate with the dead. When I arrived, the light was dull and I tried taking a photo of Malachi's gravestone without much success. So I stuck around a while, speaking quietly to a modest carved block, pushing some grass away from the corners, taking in the Fall air, and looking around at the orange leaves. Gradually, the longer I stayed, the brighter the sun shined across Malachi's grave. I was able to record a clear document.

Marc Fischer
2014

Notes:

- ¹ Agnieszka Czeblakow, email to the author, July 18, 2013.
- ² "Malachi Ritscher, 1954-2006", Nitsuh Abebe, Pitchfork, November 14, 2006, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/6483-malachi-ritscher-1954-2006/>.
- ³ Ken Vandermark, email to the author, August 22, 2013.
- ⁴ John Corbett, interview by the author, September 25, 2013.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Bill Meyer, email to the author, December 15, 2013.
- ⁷ Fred Lonberg-Holm, interview by the author, September 2, 2013.
- ⁸ Bill Meyer, email to the author, December 15, 2013.
- ⁹ Michael Zerang, interview with the author, August 21, 2013.
- ¹⁰ Ken Vandermark, email to the author, August 22, 2013.
- ¹¹ Ken Vandermark, remark made at Experimental Sound Studios during a solo performance on July 27, 2013.
- ¹² Ken Vandermark, email to the author, August 22, 2013.
- ¹³ Michael Zerang, interview with the author, August 21, 2013.
- ¹⁴ Ken Vandermark, remark made at Experimental Sound Studios during a solo performance on July 27, 2013.
- ¹⁵ David Grant, Facebook post, November 5, 2013.
- ¹⁶ Fred Lonberg-Holm, interview with the author, September 2, 2013.
- ¹⁷ Bill Meyer, email to the author, December 15, 2013.
- ¹⁸ John Corbett, interview with the author, September 25, 2013.
- ¹⁹ Maxwell Street was home to the Maxwell Street Market, which has been relocated to allow for the expansion of University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and private housing developments funded by UIC. The Market was an incubator of early Blues music in Chicago and many artists performed there.
- ²⁰ John Corbett, interview with the author, September 25, 2013.
- ²¹ Angeline Evans, email to the author, October 29, 2013.
- ²² Fred Longberg-Holm, interview with the author, September 2, 2013.
- ²³ Jason Guthartz, email to the author, September 5, 2013.
- ²⁴ "Massive sculpture from Mexico to adorn Kennedy Expressway interchange", Alan G. Artner, *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 2002.
- ²⁵ Melinda Fries, email to the author, December 3, 2013.
- ²⁶ "Out of Time", a film by Circa 1 Media, undated. www.youtube.com/watch?v=popsAPIJZvs
- ²⁷ Fred Lonberg-Holm, interview with the author, September 2, 2013.
- ²⁸ "Malachi Ritscher R.I.P.", *The Nation*, December 1, 2006. *The Nation* is the only source I've seen that lists this sign's message in full. Other articles write only that it read: "Thou Shalt Not Kill."
- ²⁹ Kevin Drumm, email to the author, December, 20, 2013.
- ³⁰ Malachi Ritscher, "Mission Statement," 2006, <http://www.savagesound.com/gallery99.htm>.
- ³¹ Malachi Ritscher, "Out of Time," 2006, <http://www.savagesound.com/gallery100.htm>.
- ³² Ellen Sackett, phone conversation with the author, August 2, 2013.
- ³³ Fred Lonberg-Holm, interview with the author, September 2, 2013.
- ³⁴ Email to the author, December 25, 2013.
- ³⁵ John Corbett, interview with the author, September 25, 2013.
- ³⁶ "Campus Gems: Peace Symbol (1967)", by Zheng, Lin, 34th Street, April 12, 2012, <http://34st.com/2012/04/campus-gems-peace-symbol-1967/>
- ³⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathy_Change
- ³⁸ Michael Zerang, interview with the author, August 21, 2013.
- ³⁹ Some of the writers that have made this comparison include Peter Margasak, Nitsuh Abebe, and Michael Alton Gottlieb.
- ⁴⁰ Thich Nhat Nanh. "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King)." In Nhat Nanh, Ho Huu Tuong, Tam Ich, Bui Giang, Pham Cong Thien. Dialogue. Saigon: La Boi, 1965.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Fred Lonberg-Holm, interview with the author, September 2, 2013.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ritscher's family has written that while Malachi may have occasionally battled depression, they had no awareness of a clinical diagnosis of mental illness. See: "Family Statement", November 18, 2006. <http://iheardyoumalachi.wordpress.com/family-statement/>.
- ⁴⁵ Michael Zerang, interview with the author, August 21, 2013.
- ⁴⁶ "President Obama Speaks at State Department About Vision for Middle East, North Africa", Aired May 19, 2011, CNN. <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/110519/se.01.html>.
- ⁴⁷ "100th Self-Immolation Reported inside Tibet", *New York Times*, February 14, 2013.
- ⁴⁸ In working on this project, multiple people have asked me if I have seen the video of Malachi Ritscher's suicide. I have not and I do not know the tape's location or status.
- ⁴⁹ John Corbett, interview with the author, September 25, 2013.
- ⁵⁰ Malachi Ritscher, "Out of Time," 2006, www.savagesound.com/gallery100.htm.
- ⁵¹ Ibid
- ⁵² Jean Smith, email to the author, September 6, 2013.
- ⁵³ Kevin Drumm, email to the author, December 18, 2013.
- ⁵⁴ "Was Malachi Ritscher Crazy? (part 3)", The Pagan Science Monitor, December 16, 2006, <http://pagansciencemonitor.typepad.com>.
- ⁵⁵ Ken Vandermark, email to the author, September 15, 2013.
- ⁵⁶ Ellen Sackett, phone conversation with the author, July 21, 2013.
- ⁵⁷ Thymme Jones, comment on the discussion forum at Electrical-audio.com, November 10, 2006.
- ⁵⁸ Angeline Evans, email to the author, October 29, 2013.
- ⁵⁹ <http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/symbols/fossil.html>.
- ⁶⁰ Undated text by Malachi Ritscher writing as Tim Ershot, <http://www.savagesound.com/gallery01.htm>.
- ⁶¹ John Corbett, interview with the author, September 25, 2013.
- ⁶² Agnieszka Czeblakow, email to the author, December 30, 2013.



Illustrations:

Cover: Malachi at the Empty Bottle (Pool Table Series), 2003. Photograph by Angeline Evans.

P. 2: Malachi Ritscher's Portable DAT Recorder. Photograph by Marc Fischer.

P. 3: Cassettes of master recordings by Malachi Ritscher housed at Creative Audio Archive at Experimental Sound Studio. Photograph by Marc Fischer.

P. 5: Malachi Ritscher, Iraq War Protest, Chicago, 2003. Photograph by Joeff Davis.

P. 6: *Chicago Sun Times*, November 4, 2006 article on Malachi Ritscher's death (detail), scanned from thermal print.

P. 7: "Flame of the Millennium" by Leonardo Neirman, January 2014. Photograph by Marc Fischer.

P. 13: "Inspired Agitators: Malachi Ritscher", 18" X 24" Digital print, 2008, by David Lester.

P. 16: Malachi Ritscher's Gravestone, Calvary Cemetery, Evanston, Illinois, November 3, 2013. Photograph by Marc Fischer.

Public Collectors, Lenders, and Direct Contributors:

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