



## **Making Waves: An Interview with Charlie Morrow**

Jerome Rothenberg; Charlie Morrow; Richard Schechner

*TDR* (1988-), Vol. 34, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), 148-158.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1054-2043%28199023%2934%3A3%3C148%3AMWAIWC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

*TDR* (1988-) is currently published by The MIT Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/mitpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Making Waves

## An Interview with Charlie Morrow

---

### *Jerome Rothenberg*

*Editor's Note: Charlie Morrow and Jerome Rothenberg have long been collaborators. They met in 1964 when Rothenberg was teaching at the Mannes College of Music and Morrow was a recent graduate. Over the years Morrow has composed music and sound for many Rothenberg poems as well as for materials in Rothenberg's anthologies—among them, *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968, 1985), *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972, 1986), and *A Big Jewish Book* (1978). Rothenberg says Morrow's music works for his poetry because "the musical idea is carrying it rather than the music being used as a commentary." Morrow returns the compliment: "The music's based on your own reading—a simple translation of your speaking tone." Together they founded the New Wilderness Foundation.*

#### CHARLES MORROW VERSUS CHARLIE MORROW

MORROW: I self-consciously created "Charlie Morrow" as an antidote to Charles Geoffrey Morrow, the contemporary composer. I wanted not so much to be de-dignified but more one-to-one with the audience. I wanted to address my audience as equals rather than from above. Since becoming "Charlie" I've had very little concert hall performance—with the change of name came a real commitment to change of venue.

#### HIGH-TECH LOW-TECH SHAMANISM

ROTHENBERG: Is there a tension between high-tech work and shamanistic art? The work you do as a re-creative artist, as a celebrant, calls up an image of a low-tech "other" culture.

MORROW: I am unavoidably a technology man, a Columbia College premed in chemistry—into electronics. I come out of a family of physicians where science is highly regarded. My movement toward a "technology of the self" was a struggle. I kept the science head and lived with the duality.

ROTHENBERG: How does shamanism fit into all that? When you speak of yourself as a "modern medicine man" are you being literal?

*The Drama Review* 34, no. 3 (T127), Fall 1990

MORROW: I used to see myself on a journey of self-discovery. I hungered to remember my birth and womblife. I used breath and voice as tools of self-discovery, finding connections between myself and the human and nonhuman, living and nonliving worlds. It was an active metaphysical pursuit. I saw myself as a self-appointed shaman in New York City. . . . But things change.

I now see myself as a performer informed by shamanism. I see my skill as an organizer of mass events and a person who can use public charisma and shamanlike techniques. I am like other art world ritualists and media artists—similar to performers and media artists from native worlds. In this respect, I have found common ground with the Lapps and native mediamakers worldwide, who live with the old technologies and the new technologies at the same time. We swap computer software, but they also consult their elders about their productions.

ROTHENBERG: You say they consult their elders. Do they, the high-tech younger people, practice traditional shamanism themselves?

MORROW: They see radio, television, filmmaking, computers as being tools of their traditional cultures. They are high-tech shamans with a new bricolage.

ROTHENBERG: They're modern shamans in the same way you are, except maybe tapping closer to the culture of those who still practice the old ways. I'm not comfortable with the "shaman" designation. I think that whatever you've been involved with the key term has been "musician" or "artist" and not "shaman" in any sense.

MORROW: OK. And the New Age stuff has brought around a variety of shamans and healers I don't want to be associated with. And I agree that shamanism, even in traditional cultures, can have enormous problems. For example, the Christianization of northern peoples in the western hemisphere was possible partly because many of the powerful old shamans were difficult characters. People were ready for a change. Also shamanism is a traditional skill. It has its magic but, like many traditional things, is tied up with a reactionary mind-set. I'm not interested in a cultural zoo where traditions are artificially maintained in wild West shows of the mind.

#### CHANTING

ROTHENBERG: You describe personal chanting as being "a dialog between my several selves"—is that a way of trying to hold on to the term "dialog" even though you're performing an elaborate monolog?

MORROW: That may be, but it leads to group rituals. And it's a useful way of viewing my own personality—inventing different vocal characters, recognizing them as different selves, suggesting an un-unified personality theory. This is the way theology works in multigod societies; there isn't one way to look at the universe, one way to view cultures.

Chanting also helped me recontact an animistic view I held as a child. I was raised in a home with two analyzed psychiatrists with no particular religious framework. I saw things in terms of my own active imagination stirred by my mother talking about the voice of the high tension wires, the voice of the railroad train.

ROTHENBERG: Did your pieces have a chantlike quality to them from the start?



1. Charlie Morrow. (Photo by Jeff Day)



2. Jerome Rothenberg. (Photo by John W. Alley)

MORROW: Yes, along with an interactive quality. I started with a sense of signalling and that turned into chant.

ROTHENBERG: How do you distinguish signalling from chant?

MORROW: Signalling is a call that requires a response. For me first it came out of ham radio and bugling. Also out of the standard two-part structure of musical phrases. Chant is dialogical too but often between many aspects of myself. I'd make pieces in which the loud and soft voice or the high and low voice or the whisper and full voice would come in contact with each other. This led me to music around the world that took advantage of these "characters" in dialog with each other.

ROTHENBERG: For you chanting is both a private exercise and something you bring into the public arena. What's the difference?

MORROW: Utter privateness makes it hot. Take the "Traveler's Meditation." I close my eyes and visualize until everything becomes blank, the mind calm. I open both eyes ever so briefly and take a snapshot, a visual impression, and close my eyes and let it dissolve in the brain. Usually there's a series of visual developments. The dream chant is similar but interactive, I never do it alone.

ROTHENBERG: I've seen you do dream chanting. Using a sounding instrument you set up a series of vibrations to which voice is added. You go into a chanting mode and give over to a process of visualization. Then, having finished chanting, you recount for the audience what you've seen.

If you are chanting for just one other person is there an invitation to enter with you into the visualization?

MORROW: To dream and sing. My first real close time with my wife was a shared dream in which we both sang. Usually with family I'm low key about ritual performance except at events like family funerals. I've sung dream chants there.

ROTHENBERG: It's difficult to bring our art back into our own families. That's one of the reasons we're less traditional.

#### APPROPRIATING OR COLLABORATING?

ROTHENBERG: What I see in your work is a very deliberate exploration of the possibilities of ritual in our own time and our own culture. You've put yourself into situations of collaboration with "world music" sources either through direct contact with traditional performers or on the high-tech side through adding your voice to prerecorded native musics from wherever. You've pursued collage or appropriation in a serious, ongoing way.

MORROW: But to speak to the issue of appropriation—musicians are thieves. We have a long tradition of that. In our own generation rock 'n' roll has swept the world. Native musicians play American rock and blues and country music—even to the exclusion of their own traditional music. It's often the outsiders like me who venerate "the old stuff." You've been part of the same process—anthologizing works from around the world. Wasn't it a shock to find yourself considered as a kind of inspirer to native people from the very cultures in which the sources reside, to discover that you are now a source for that source?

ROTHENBERG: Have you ever been accused of stealing for your own benefit?

MORROW: Only in the white community years ago. Some said I'd found a niche for myself in primitivism—a primitivist patina placed on otherwise Western ideas. Since that was also my fear, I now say I'm Charlie Morrow from the Jewish tribe in New York City. I identify myself, who I am, where I'm from. I didn't do that at first. I've run into more anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism than accusation of theft or exoticism.

ROTHENBERG: When you say that nobody has been critical of native groups in the arctic or elsewhere playing rock 'n' roll and so on, I think there have been criticisms and negative responses both from inside those cultures and outside, tying that into the ways Western media transmits popular culture by sweeping away large parts of long-standing traditions.

MORROW: I'm aware of these arguments. What I meant was that mainly the younger generation in the native world accepts this world culture.

ROTHENBERG: Charlie, I'm thinking of people like the younger Islamic fundamentalists. The rock 'n' roll world may think it's just being greeted with enthusiasm by young people everywhere, but even within that younger generation there are places where—whether we like it or not—there's a tremendous and even violent resistance.

MORROW: I agree. But local musicians regionalize or tribalize the rock or jazz influence, or the symphonic literature, or lately the Western music technology. Once people are using a lot of the same instruments and tuning them in the same way there's a fusion and then a local personalization. It's a relocalization after an intrusion.

ROTHENBERG: If your experience is never to have come up against criticism from Native Americans about works that in any sense incorporate Indian materials, you've been missing out on part of the last two and a half decades. There's been a strong resistance to what in the parlance of native intellectuals is sometimes called "white shamanism." I've come across it many times. A piece like *66 Songs for a Blackfoot Bundle* that we did with the Theatre of Sound might still be criticized on the ground of appropriating native cultural materials.

MORROW: You're right. But my work is a little less vulnerable because I normally do collaborations with native colleagues. For example, recently I invited people from the New York Native American community to meet touring Siberian native performers in a gathering at the Asia Society. We discussed what it all means. The Native Americans recounted how a white woman artist came to the American Indian Community House with her own shamanic piece ten years ago and deeply offended people there. To them she was uninformed about the meanings of her ritual and how she was using ritual objects. She was intuitively making up her own personal ceremonies. That experience led them to co-plan any doings minute by minute.

ROTHENBERG: Nevertheless, it would be interesting to take our early work, *66 Songs* for example, to a Blackfoot reservation and see what the response is there.

What's the range of your non-Western sources?

MORROW: I've sources from the Middle East, Africa, aboriginal Aus-

tralia, the Pacific, the Arctic—especially Lapp and Inuit, native America including Iroquois, Lakota, Aztec, and Maya.

ROTHENBERG: How do you use these?

MORROW: Most importantly, I relate my voice in ways that are different from using the voice in Western music. Also the ways the body functions, especially respiration and dreams. Also cross-species communication, being in tune with the environment. And communality.

There's a politics in each musical style in each culture. I make event designs. For example, organizing in 1989 a concert of Tibetan monks plus a jam with a cross-cultural band setting the whole thing out in New York harbor so that the monks' horns are echoed by harbor horns. I see this as a composition even though what the Tibetans are playing is very much their own music. The monks said it was for them a spiritual moment which expanded their own view of their work in the world.

#### IN TUNE WITH THE ENVIRONMENT?

ROTHENBERG: There's a problem when you talk about "getting in tune with the environment." As we sit here looking out of your window facing 77th Street and West End Avenue, the environment that immediately confronts us is the concrete of New York City. I don't know whether it's that you want to get in tune with or, by turning inwards, some kind of body music, or some relation to a more natural, more organic world.

MORROW: Both. Public gatherings in park space, worshipping the sky through sky songs require audiences to be musical with the city's land and



3. In this 1989 concert in New York harbor, Tibetan monks' horns were echoed by boat and harbor horns. (Photo by Lou Hamlin)

sky environment. Also by opening the window of media I've been bringing in live sounds from around the world to interactively celebrate moments in nature. I try to create a personal and redefined natural world.

ROTHENBERG: My question is whether living in NYC you're getting in touch with what you see out the window or escaping from it.

MORROW: I can't make the city go away. But beyond pieces that are concerned for good city parks and public gathering places, many of my environments are not urban. Rural settings like *The New Wilderness Sullivan Country Fair*, wilderness like *Arctic*, under the sea like *The Event for Fish*, interplanetary like *Mars Doppler Shift Echo Event*. By environment I mean the natural world—a world that's everywhere. Here in New York the sky and water are in an urban context and that means focusing on parklands, shorelines, buried landscapes, and the sky above—and also the ecological conditions associated with these things.

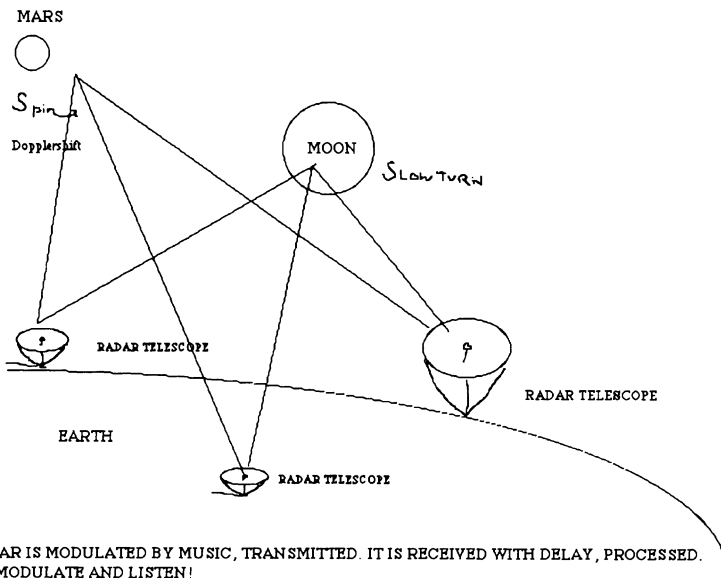
PARKS

MORROW: Many professionals in the parks world favor eco-art. They see parks as the last bastion of wilderness—to be filled with activities that make people conscious of nature and of human nature at its best. Parks now try to preserve waterfront space, wildlife, breeding grounds, and safe places for people to congregate. Of the people who control various spaces, I find park people to be the least cynical.

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHICS

MORROW: I want to be local, site specific. In *Citywave Copenhagen*, I had the participation of musicians from all sectors of Danish music life.

ROTHENBERG: A kind of urban ethnographics.



4. Diagram for Mars Doppler Shift Echo Event set in a nonurban, interplanetary, space. (Graphic by Charlie Morrow)



5. & 6. A driving force behind the decision to take his work into public spaces was the wish to work with the entire spectrum of ages, sexes, and races. Pictured are Morrow and his Ocarina Orchestra at their Attack of the Empire State Building, New York, 1980. (Photo by Lisa Kahane)

MORROW: Absolutely. In *Solstice '87* we hired folklorists to record existing ethnic activity around NYC at solstice. We published that in the program.

#### MULTIPLES AND MASSES

MORROW: A driving force behind the decision to take my work into public spaces and onto the airwaves was the wish to work for the entire spectrum of ages, sexes, races, the maximum range of cultural, religious, political, and social milieus. Collaborations with individuals, groups, and institutions from these sectors naturally followed. My work with multiples also grew out of my interest in the language of animals, fish, birds. Groups of them. I wanted to see what would happen with a herd of instruments—an orchestra of brass or ocarinas. The most formal of these are collected in the series called *Wave Music*, written mostly for outdoor performances at summer solstice: *Wave* for 40 cellos, *Wave* for 100 musicians with lights,





7. Whether megalomania or love of crowds, Morrow's pieces have encompassed ever larger arenas. *Citywave* Copenhagen, 1985, involved a city and 2,000 performers. (Photo by Jan Rusz)

*Wave* for 60 clarinets and a boat, and eventually *Toot 'n' Blink* for a harbor of boats working their lights and horns. And there were conch orchestras marching in parades. The conch is such an extraordinary outdoor instrument. It became associated with peace events. I got interested in conches and ocarinas because they were easily learned by nonmusicians and they worked well outdoors. As a public eventmaker I wanted instruments that could be played in a sophisticated way by people with little musical chops.

ROTHENBERG: How much formal composition went into those pieces?

MORROW: *Wave* music for cellos is totally composed; *wave* music for clarinets is controlled improvisation. It has six different tempo levels. It's a 60-part canon, 10 parts in each of 6 different octaves, with 6 different prolongations of the notes. For the ocarinas there were so many occasions that there are ocarina works from totally composed to totally unprepared.

Over the past decade I've worked more in public spaces. I've been fortunate to do things such as *Citywave* for all of Copenhagen using 2,000 performers, boats, and a helicopter. The mass aspect has taken on its own dimension and whether it's megalomania or just sheer love of crowds, I've moved into larger and larger arenas.

ROTHENBERG: What were the 2,000 performers doing?

MORROW: There were singers, folk musicians, marching bands, church-bell ringers, a big stage band, five rock 'n' roll groups, clowns on bikes, and one character who was "The Fool." It started out in five outskirts. We generated a series of crisscrossing processions, boats, bikes. It was costumed and choreographed to lead up to a finale. The brass band and bell tower music was composed—a concerto for three brass instruments, two brass bands, and several bell towers. The woodwinds was a bunch of improvised modules. The other brass music was an adaptation of existing stuff. I've devised a variety of sound games that use existing choir and marching music, that really change it a lot. Such things as stuck notes, stuck chords, tempo changes, montage of works, numerical repetitions. All these techniques made *Citywave* fresh, familiar, unpredictable, and controlled, building to a huge noise event followed by a rock 'n' roll song everybody joined in on.

ROTHENBERG: How did you train and rehearse so many people?

MORROW: The organization of singers was based around the vocal professionals and directors of the many amateur choir societies—choirmasters networked and many choirs came from outside Copenhagen. Unfortunately, the final rehearsal with everyone in place coincided with a championship soccer match. The performance was the rehearsal. One of the problems of mass events is that you never can gather so many people for rehearsals.

ROTHENBERG: What other mass city works of this kind do you know of except for the famous reenactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg?

MORROW: There have been very few city-size gatherings. Alvin Curran has done large works for harbors and big masses of people.

ROTHENBERG: About ten years ago Pauline Oliveros did something in Bonn with events throughout the city. But the crowds took the form of audiences—not the kind of mass performance we’re talking about.

MORROW: Mostly this kind of thing is part of church or patriotic celebrations. I want to move fine art into the realm of public artmaking. I am amazed at the technical facilities, the media focus, the joy of the public, the opportunity to enter the public consciousness. Finally, the sense of creating ritual.

ROTHENBERG: Yeah, that’s where the term “eventmaker” as a kind of substitute for composer or even artist comes into the picture. Eventmaking is a larger category. It encompasses work that’s as much related to fine arts, dance, theatre, and happenings as it is to music.

You use the word “wave” often.

MORROW: Wave started out being based on images from fluid mechanics and the kinetic qualities of sound. One of the reasons I work outdoors is so that sound can be heard coming from distinct locations. I want the musicians to move, I want the sound to move.

#### RADIO SOLSTICE

ROTHENBERG: Most of your solstice events have been international via radio. You reach out from your local situation to bring together a number of local situations, both traditional and experimental from around the world.

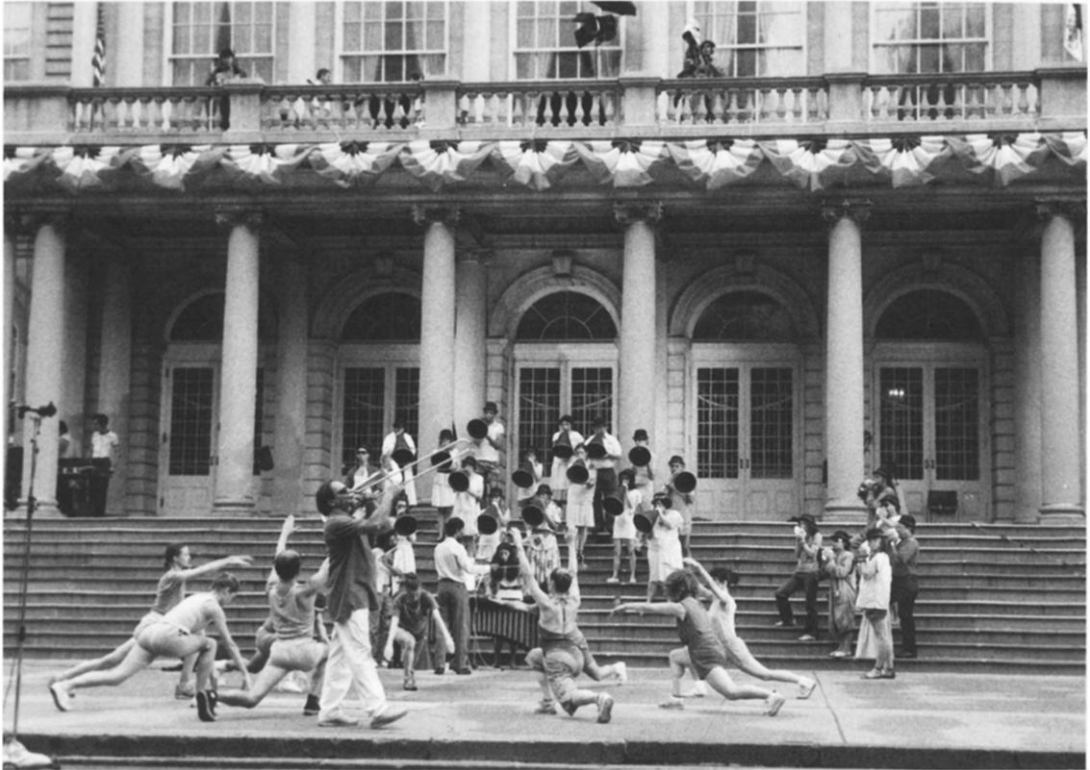
MORROW: Originally the “Solstice” broadcasts were live and interactive. Now they’re totally preproduced because of the rising costs of international communications and the sad, unfortunate reality of decreasing availability of air time.

ROTHENBERG: How much variation has there been in its dissemination?

MORROW: It was totally different year to year.

ROTHENBERG: How widely broadcast were they?

MORROW: Parts of it got onto shortwave so they were heard around the globe. There were direct broadcasts in Europe, the Middle East, the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. The broadcasts were



8. Moving fine art into the realm of public artmaking—Morrow's *Solstice '87* in front of New York's City Hall. (Photo by Jeff Day)

a montage. You can combine on radio more cheaply than on television. The content was a mixture between the new and old. Traditional performers such as Pueblo Indians performing on the same air with European sound poets or American experimental musicians. A newsy announcer presented *Solstice* as cultural news. Not news that is fully explained but news with heat to it—this is happening now. You are present for this cultural event just as you would be on the spot via radio for a disaster.

ROTHENBERG: Clear up “on the same air.” Does that mean that the experimental poets and traditional musicians were interacting or that their segments were on the air at the same time?

MORROW: Sometimes there was interaction. Otherwise the finale, the big *Solstice*, was a mix, a montage of all the performers mixed live by our New York-based studio engineer. We lacked the money to make interactivity possible for everybody on the show. That ideal show hasn't happened yet.

ROTHENBERG: I was involved in a moving sequence during the '84 *Solstice*. A series of live performances in a range of clubs in New York City was hooked up by telephone to performers in other parts of the world—Bob Cobbing from England, Octavio Paz from Mexico, Ernesto Cardenal from Nicaragua, and so on. It created the sense of a real-time simultaneous event—an international festival with everyone at home.

MORROW: Technology makes it possible to do more of this kind of thing. And the need for artists to articulate their own cultures internation-

ally is growing. Our community is like a family distributed around the world. We become more available to each other by co-performing.

ROTHENBERG: Is *Radio Solstice* continuing?

MORROW: It's continuing on a when-we-are, production-by-production basis, not on a once-every-year basis. I'm working on circumpolar solstice shows. When they're done we'll broadcast them on the nearest solstice, possibly with a small live component. Most of the best broadcast work now is preproduced. It's a pity because I enjoy air that drifts. I like keeping things hot. In regard to the solstice shows, I want to find some balance between what's finished and what's on the spot.

*Edited by Richard Schechner*

---

*Jerome Rothenberg is the author of over 40 books of poetry and of 6 anthologies of experimental and traditional poetry and performance. A staged version of his Poland/1931 was produced by the Living Theatre in 1988. He is now working with Pierre Joris on a translation of the selected poetry and writings of Kurt Schwitters and on a global anthology of 20th-century experimental poetry.*