

Tin Hat Trio

On their first album, *The Tin Hatters* – accordionist Rob Burger, violinist Carla Kihlstedt and guitarist Mark Orton – combine classical composition, jazz and free improvisation, Eastern European melodies, bluegrass picking, and elements of Brazilian forró, Argentinean tango. The story started more than 20 years ago, when Orton and Burger were attending the same elementary school in Stonybrook, N.Y., and Kihlstedt was growing up in Lancaster, Pa. Orton, 30, boasts impressive classical credentials – his father was a conductor, and he studied composition at the Peabody Conservatory and the Hartt School of Music. But he loves touting the gifts and achievements of his bandmates, both 27, whose academic credits include studies at Juilliard and the University of Massachusetts (Burger) and Peabody and the Oberlin Conservatory (Kihlstedt). "Carla and Rob both have perfect pitch," Orton notes. "When Rob was four, he could sit outside a room and listen to a Mozart concerto and then walk in and be all over it. When Carla won the Oberlin concerto competition, she wrote her own cadenza for it. That's pretty wild by conservatory standards."

Early on, all three musicians felt the tug of sounds from beyond the classical realm. Orton and Burger benefited from a rigorous Long Island junior high composition teacher, Danny Deutsch, who exposed them to Mingus, Monk and Ethiopian pop, as well as Mahler. Kihlstedt, who started playing when she was five, was under slightly more pressure to stick to the classical model. "I pretty much always knew that was not what I wanted to do," she says, "but at the same time, when you're a kid and you have such a network of people, teachers, and family, expecting you to be a certain thing and funneling you in that direction, it is really hard to disappoint them. Even if my heroes were like the Kronos Quartet and Laurie Anderson, being a classical violinist became so much of my identity."

Kihlstedt's and Orton's paths first crossed at Peabody, and the guitarist began turning the violinist on to a wild variety of music. By the time she was in her second year at Oberlin, Kihlstedt found herself probing the library's record collection and hanging out with an avant-garde ensemble that experimented with Ornette Coleman tunes and free improvisation. "I was stretching a little further than they wanted me to stretch," she says with a laugh. "I got away with all sorts of stuff." "All sorts of haircuts," Orton interjects. "Yeah, my first head-shaving experience," Kihlstedt affirms.

In the early '90s, Kihlstedt, Orton and Burger met up in New York City, where Orton was mixing sound at the Knitting Factory. In the winter of 1994-95, they braved ice storms on the East Coast and blizzards in Tennessee and headed west. "That was the first time we played together as a trio," Orton recalls. "Rob and I were coming out for rock, but we had no amps with us, and Rob had recently picked up his first accordion." The trio started "messing around" with acoustic improvisation in motel rooms across the country. "I was just coming out of the classical thing," Kihlstedt says, "so just sitting down and fooling around with people musically was still a little on the new side for me. I had done some improv at school, but it was definitely new territory for me."

After dropping Kihlstedt off in San Francisco, Orton and Burger continued north to Portland. It took only a year for them to realize their mistake, return to the Bay Area, and cement their bond with Kihlstedt. All three have plenty to keep them busy – Orton engineering sound and composing for films and a recently completed radio drama; Burger playing in Oranž Symphonette, the Jim Campilongo Band, Topsy, the Old Joe Clarks (with Orton), and other bands; and Kihlstedt singing with Charming Hostess, writing and performing music for dance, doing the Tin Hat artwork, and gigging on the creative music scene with clarinetist Ben Goldberg, saxophonist Jon Raskin, and others. But a special kind of magical blending

takes place under the Tin Hat.

The spacious, sometimes melancholy, sometimes whimsical music on *Memory Is an Elephant* resonates with what Orton calls an "old world" quality. The instrumentation, sometimes varied with pump organ, viola, Dobro, banjo, and mandolin, owes to and echoes myriad folk cultures.