

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'Ray Manzarek, Doors keyboardist, dead at 74,' by Andy Greene, Rolling Stone }

Touching obituary of Manzarek whose keyboard solos helped define the band's sound. 'We knew we'd be unstoppable,' he said, and for a brief period, they were }



Slow fuse

A recently released album of minimalist classical music that took 50 years to produce, makes its way into the public gaze in time for Dennis Johnson's startling work to fall neatly into the current trend for long-duration art, Andy Battaglia writes

Time in music seems to move in only one direction – forward – but can it speed up, slow down, venture sideways, maybe even stop? Of course it can. That much seems clear. It's worth taking a moment to remember, however, just how stirring and strange that simple fact remains.

Pauses for thought are easy to come by while listening to *November*, a work of classical minimalism that takes time as its subject. It's a five-hour composition for piano, and it has a way of making musical time seem like only one of many kinds of time. There's chronological time, mathematical time, metaphysical time, impressionistic time; time that tests the patience and time that rewards poise. All of them

are individual and unique.

November spent a lot of time as an unknown work – more than 50 years, in fact.

The only way it existed was on a hissy old tape, filled to its limit with remnants of a live performance by composer Dennis Johnson thought to have taken place in 1962. Nobody can be sure, because Johnson vanished from the world of making music shortly afterwards, but the tape belonged to the minimalist composer La Monte Young, so there was reason to believe.

When Young, himself a hero of extended piano technique, gave the tape to the critic and musician Kyle Gann around a decade ago, the clock on the mystery began to tick. The studios and scholarly Gann

became enamoured with *November*'s glacial, patient, pleasantly portentous sound, and he vowed to figure out the lineage of a composition that radically reconfigures a prominent part of 20th-century musical history.

Minimalism, the thinking goes, owes its development to the early experiments of Young and the slightly later advances of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, both of whom rank among the most celebrated and well-known artists of our age. But Dennis Johnson's *November*, with roots back to 1959, proffers similar ideas from a point in time before. So why has it escaped any serious attention until now?

It's not really fair to expect fanfare for a work that could barely be said

to exist, so Gann went to work transcribing notes from that lone tape and eventually coaxed plans for the original piece from Johnson himself, found old and ailing in California, decades after his opus was first conceived. The resulting score, sourced from a mix of historical ingenuity and contemporary conjecture, led to a full form of *November* emerging for release for the first time.

It stretches over four CDs released in a box-set by the American label Irritable Hedgehog. Aside from its historical importance, significant to be sure, *November* is notable for the effect it extends to listeners in the present, no matter their awareness of the finer points of minimalist history or music theory beyond.

As played by the pianist R Andrew Lee, *November* could not be more stark. A simple beginning of lone piano notes hangs in resonant space, with a suggestion of chords to come on a horizon that is hardly hearable. It's quiet, contemplative, resigned to being no more than what it is, which is next to nothing. "Despite the title," one of the box-set's producers writes in the liner notes, "it seems to work in any month, during any season, in any mood, and at any time of day."

Indeed, *November* manages to make "time of day" seem like much too short a temporal frame to even consider. At stake are ages, epochs, aeons – intervals that rush forward and backward in a manner that makes the ever-patient present

seem all the more active. It's sedentary music that moves with a subtle sense of drama; every note or carefully arranged chord comes across as a special occurrence in the world. It rewards absent-minded attention and close devotion both.

It also plays into a vogue for long-duration art in the present day. Recently in New York, The National, an enterprising indie-rock band known for comparatively short bursts of intensity and emotion, performed one of its songs in a special extended fashion — for six hours in a single spell.

News of the performance, organised as a conceptual installation by the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson and presented at the contemporary art museum MoMA PS1,



The National (left), the indie-rock band, recently performed a single-song, six-hour session. The pianist R Andrew Lee, above, who plays on Dennis Johnson's *November*. Stephen Lovekin / Getty Images and BRS Photography



November
Dennis Johnson
Penultimate Press
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garnered reactions "split between frenzied embrace and repulsion," noted the music publication *Pitchfork*. A commenter on the website Brooklyn Vegan wryly posted a set list consisting of the title of just one song, *Sorrow*, repeated 105 times. Another correspondent on the same site wrote, "Björk was there. That must mean it was legit art. Haha."

Though it's easy to be glib about such things, it's just as easy to fall into a trance when time stretches past a point where preconceived notions of beginning, middle, and end fade away.

The performance-artist Marina Abramovic knows this more than most, as evidenced in work of her own that can take months to transpire as well as a new plan she has concocted: she is plotting a stately new museum and performance space devoted solely to "time-based and immaterial art".

To be built in the countryside a couple of hours outside New York City, the Marina Abramovic Institute will feature art from a variety of different disciplines including dance, theatre, film, video, music, and "any other performative forms of art which might develop in the future" – as long as it long.

The artist herself, whose work was a big hit at last year's Abu Dhabi Art, has spoken of wanting attendees to sign a contract to stay for no fewer than six hours at a time, and ideally even longer.

Music, more than any other form, has a storied tradition of expanded time fit for revisiting. *Many Many Women*, a piece conceived in the 1970s by Petr Kotik and featuring texts by Gertrude Stein and Buckminster Fuller, will be performed in America soon by the SEM Ensemble, with an allotment of five or six hours of uninterrupted playing time.

In the English music magazine *The Wire*, a recent review of a record by the Greek trio Mohammad bemoans the constraints of a release confined to a single album's running time. "Mohammad start to get really good after about an hour of listening," the review reads, "when it all blurs together and you start to forget what any other non-Mohammad music has ever sounded like."

And then there's *November*, which took 50-plus years and nearly five hours of real-time listening in the present to come to full fruition.

It's a novelty, in a sense, but the novelty is more nuanced than the initial shock of it can withstand. It blurs together, stretches out, suggests prospective states of mind and modes of existence that make time subservient to more profound purposes. *November* can't escape time, nor does it seem to want to. But it can erase questions about how much time is too much time to spend listening to music that makes time itself immaterial.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

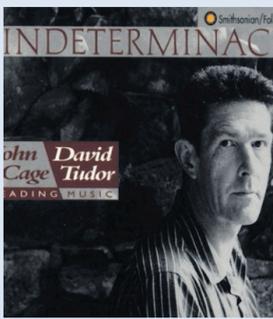
review

The long and the short of it – songs that last from a minute to infinity

John Cage

Indeterminacy

This masterwork by the high-concept composer John Cage features spoken-word stories told in the span of one-minute increments, with the speed of Cage's voice adjusted for the number of words in need of speaking for each.



Napalm Death

Scum

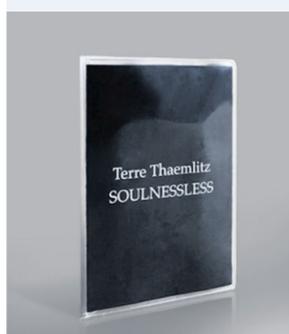
This seminal 1987 album by the grindcore metal band Napalm Death features an unusual hit of sorts in *You Suffer*, a record-setting song said to be "precisely 1.316 seconds long." The band even made a video for it, viewable for all posterity on YouTube.

Christian Marclay

Records: 1981-1989

This compilation of early work by the polymathic collage artist Christian Marclay includes *Groove*, a piece originally configured for a "locked groove" on a vinyl record that plays on and on, potentially in perpetuity. A limited-edition vinyl re-release came out again this month, giving *Groove* even more play.

christian marclay records



Terre Thaemlitz

Soulnessless

A 2012 release conceived to test the limits of time as circumscribed by the form of the MP3, this digital curio features a solo piano piece that spans more than 29 hours. That's long, to be sure—but when will the future bring us formats allowing for 30-plus?