

# music

## this week's essential reading

{ 'Pussy Riot: The jailhouse interview' by Michael Idov, GQ

'We couldn't even imagine that the authorities would be so dumb that they would legitimise our influence by arresting us ... it removes any lingering illusions about Putin's system'

# The great digital swindle

Releases by Jürgen Müller and Ursula Bogner explore the edges of truth and untruth, fakery and hoax in shape-shifting kaleidoscopes of electronic music, writes Andy Battaglia

Jürgen Müller was a marine biologist who, as might seem likely for a character conditioned to observe by nature, found himself enthralled by the sounds of the sea. Imagine the thrill: the wind, the waves, the whoosh of fish, the long call of whales, the clicking of skittering shrimps. He could have heard them all on a fateful expedition in 1979, when he set off from his houseboat in the north of Germany to research toxicity in the world's oceans. Out on the water, his disposition as a data-collecting scientist turned in time toward a newfound, almost mystical devotion to sound. From Müller's waterborne epiphany sprang *Science of the Sea*, an album made with synthesisers and stray electronic equipment gathered for use in an amateur enthusiast's experiment. Müller made his music with hopes of employing it in documentaries and television programmes on the subject of public aquatic life. Instead, it wound up on a record he pressed himself in a limited run of less than 100 copies. Last year, a lone copy of that 1982 album found its way to the present and extended a project that had long been abandoned. It's a great story. It's also completely untrue.

In reality, or at least in conventional conjecture that has come to rise, Müller is a much younger, much more modern (even post-modern) American artist named Brad Rose, who makes music and runs a record label and webzine in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The truth of the matter, such as it is, presented itself even while the wonder of the story continues on. Is it true? Is it false? Is it a swindle? Might it be an offering of something realer than real? When a "reissue" of *Science of the Sea* first came out on vinyl and in digital form in 2011, it mesmerised aficionados of vintage ambient and new age music, in which atmosphere is made a high priority and a sense of the sublime reigns supreme. That's no less the case now, after the recent release of the album on CD via Digitalis Recordings. Tracks like *Beyond the Tide* cycle through slowly cascading ambient tones, with subtle suggestions of melodies drifting by. *Sea Bed Meditation* glows over a gentle arpeggio that wouldn't sound out of place on a chill-out album by Aphex Twin or, from another era, one of the beguiling 1960s volumes of *Soothing Sounds for Baby* by the early electronic-music pioneer Raymond Scott.

The story of Müller, presented in matter-of-fact biographical notes and still not officially disavowed, might seem like a stunt, and, indeed, it is. At the same time, its plausibility says a lot about the capacity of art to absorb outlandish tales and spin them back out as signs of assimilation. A similar incident greeted the recent archival discovery of Ursula Bogner, a curious woman who juggled a secret passion for early electronic music and "all things esoteric" with a job at a pharmaceutical giant in Germany. She died in 1994, her extracurricular doings unknown to all but her son – who happened, by chance, to meet the well-regarded contemporary German musician Jan Jelinek on an airplane. As Jelinek writes in a book packaged with the recent Bogner retrospective *Sonne = Black Box*, he was shocked to learn of such an intriguing character with no notoriety to her name. In addition to her musical interests, Bogner was a follower of the radical psychoanalytic teachings of Wilhelm Reich and especially his notions about orgone energy, an invisible life force said to have healing qualities and prospects for sexual empowerment. She also



Brad Rose's 'vintage' electronic music album, *Science of the Sea*, sprang, according to its fictional narrative, from a marine biologist's acoustic epiphany while researching ocean toxicity. Anthony Marsland / Getty Images

studied the orbital paths of planets, as evidenced by volumes of drawings and charts reproduced in the *Sonne = Black Box* book. Again, it's a great story and, in all likelihood, also untrue. The tale of Bogner is so fully realised, however, that the question of truth or untruth becomes immaterial. Pictures of Bogner in the 1960s peer out from *Sonne = Black Box*, and copies of her old notes on index cards are represented in all their yellowed-paper glory. And more than merely content to remain coy or to skirt the issue altogether, the book takes on the question of Bogner's identity – whether she's real, whether it matters – as its actual subject. "Whoever is looking for information about the 'true' identity of

Bogner in these opening remarks will be disappointed," Jelinek writes at the beginning. No further certainty is supplied in the text, which comprises an interesting series of meditations on fakery, speculation and authenticity. In an essay in which he suspects that Bogner is in fact Jelinek in drag, the Scottish musician and artist Momus begins by taking what seems like great joy in exposing a hoax but quickly offers a corrective in recognising the map it offers to a no less worthwhile realm of the imagination. Invoking one of his favourite quotes, he writes, in effect: "Every lie creates a parallel world: the world in which it is true." Once settled into that world, the imagined presence of Bogner serves to reflect reality back more than en-

tain a fleeting fantasy. Indeed, the music credited to her – made with old tape machines and vintage electronic gear – invokes very real artists such as Delia Derbyshire, Daphne Oram, Ruth White, Alice Shields, Laurie Spiegel and others, who made historical sounds of the sort in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. As co-presented on CD by Jelinek collaborator and fellow "archivist" Andrew Pekler, the title track *Sonne = Black Box* tinkles through wondrous black-and-white sounds gained by a grainy sample of piano keys run over a tape loop. Others like *Trabant*, named after the communist-era car, play like metal machine music that teeters on the verge of breaking down.

The resonant effect of the fictional truths evoked by Müller and Bogner both echo those handed down, in a different realm, by another great work of purposeful mystery-making: Orson Welles's classic 1974 film *F for Fake*. The stirringly strange last major screen project by the celluloid hero plays as both a documentary and a cinematic essay on the art of forgery and shape-shifting in the world of art and movies both. "I'm a charlatan," Welles says proudly at one point, in the midst of recalling his own famous 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast. Surveyed elsewhere in the film are tales of faked Picasso paintings, an elaborate media hoax involving the reclusive American business tycoon Howard

Hughes, and other instances of untruth proving more resounding than the truth itself. In a sort of mission statement, Welles once again speaks directly to the camera: "On this planet, crowded and computerised, being yourself – whatever that may be – and keeping yourself to yourself, isn't easy." In effect, he says, there is more to the self than just the self we know. So why not spin good yarns, like those surrounding the mysteries of Müller and Bogner, to see how much more of that self we can summon? Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum* and more.

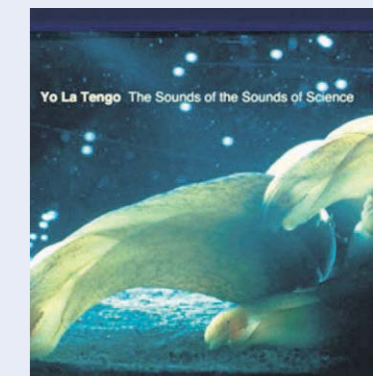
## playlist

Four more adventures into a world where things aren't quite what they seem

### Yo La Tengo

The Sounds of The Sounds of Science (Matador)

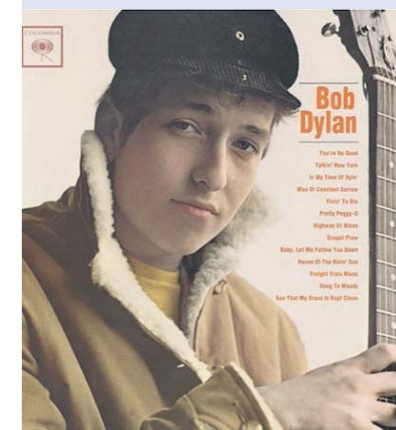
This collection of soundtrack pieces by the storied American indie-rock band Yo La Tengo accompanies educational films made by the real, actual, known French filmmaker and marine biologist Jean Painlevé.



### Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan (Columbia)

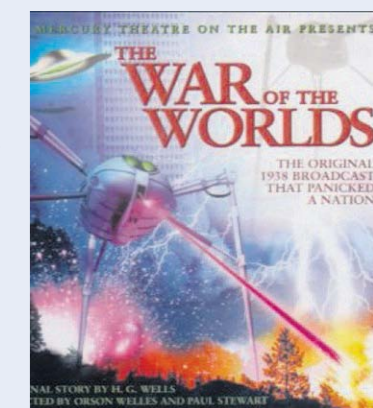
This classic 1962 singer-songwriter album introduced a guy named Robert Zimmerman who fashioned himself as a folkie named "Bob Dylan". It was as fake as fake can be, in a certain way, but who more than Dylan brings truth to bear?



### Orson Welles

The War of the Worlds (Pickwick)

This infamous radio broadcast by the wondrously devious Orson Welles featured real-seeming news bulletins that cut in to programming with increasingly urgent reports of a serious worldwide calamity taking shape.



### Ursula Bogner

Recording 1968-1988 (Faitiche)

Ursula Bogner was prolific enough in her musical work to warrant more than just the latest *Sonne = Black Box*. Marking her "debut", this compilation covers 1968 to 1988 – a period of years that most definitely happened.

