

last exit by derk richardson

# Custer's next stand

The turtle dance marked the turning point. Last September clarinetist Beth Custer agreed to take part in a show in Seattle in which a performance artist crawled across the stage in a turtle costume.

After the show Custer went out for a drink with Seattle sound sculptor-instrument builder Trimpin. Driving Custer back to her hotel, he told her, "You know, Beth, you really don't have to do these gigs anymore. Get more into the grant world."

Custer took Trimpin's advice, and last July she was named one of only four recipients in Meet the Composer's final round of three-year residency grants. In the past she has collaborated with Trimpin, the Joe Goode Performance Group, and sculptor Billie Lynn and participated in a 1992 tour of the Czech Republic funded by small commissions. She was an artist in residence at Marin's Headlands Center for the Arts in 1991 and 1998, and this past summer she staged her ambitious Vinculum Symphony in Minneapolis-St. Paul on a McKnight Fellowship. But this is the first time she'll actually be living off foundation booty for an extended period of time.

Not that she won't have to sweat for it. Custer's residency is at the Lab in San Francisco, where she will conduct workshops in clarinet and music for dance for teenagers in filmmaker Lisa Swenson's Teaching Intermediary Literacy Tools program, mount a performance series every February for the next three years, and produce a compilation CD from the LAB's performance archives. "It has suddenly amped up my workload," Custer says.

Still, she almost audibly sighs at the prospect of the kind of "financial breathing room" she hasn't experienced since moving here from Michigan State University in 1981. Long respected by her peers for her clarinet virtuosity, her stylistic versatility unbounded by genre, and her free-wheeling imagination in improvisational settings, Custer has had to make ends meet by taking up as much work as she could handle. Now, she says, "For the next three years I get to dream up ideas, and I can say no to other projects, which is hard for me. I like to do everything."

Indeed, Custer's creativity is like some sort of artistic equivalent of free-floating anxiety. Her capacity for inspiration is enormous, but instead of arising from one narrow or consistent source, her muse ranges over a spacious landscape, allowing her to light down in an all-clarinet ensemble (Clarinet Thing), experiment with ethno-ambient techno (Trance Mission) and electronica (Eighty Mile Beach), conduct an orchestra of handmade and peculiar instruments (Vinculum), lead her own idiosyncratic band, and compose for dance, theater, and film. Her new CD, *The Maverick Strain and Other Stories* (BC), includes music written for Joe Goode and performed with the Club Foot Quintet, guitarist Will Bernard, and others. Currently she is expanding and refining her score for *The Grandmother*, a 1926 silent Russian film that parodies the Soviet bureaucracy.

I've been fascinated with Custer's work since I first heard her in Club Foot in the mid 1980s. But I've been stymied in my quest to find a single thread that holds her work together. There's a certain melancholy in the sound of her clarinet that worms its way into my heart but rarely smacks of sentimentality. She can be arch and ironic in her juxtapositions of sounds and ideas, but even her wittiest pieces lack that all-too-common contaminating whiff of postmodern cynicism: On *The Maverick Strain*, the music veers from tangos and laments to country and western, with instruments as varied as violin, banjo, sampler, erhu, and harmonica.

So last week I asked her straight out: What's the abiding intention behind your compositions? The question gave her pause. Then she said, "Really, I just love to spin out my ideas of good music. I wake up sometimes at 5:30 in morning and go to my studio. It's my own love of the process, like a silkworm."

"But also, this whole war thing, it makes you feel this could be it!" she continues. "It makes me bury myself in work because I can't deal with the overwhelming negativity in the press. I can't function if I read the paper every day and watch the news every night. I talked to Gina Leishman [of Kamikaze Ground Crew] a few weeks ago, and she said we just have to make more art! In my very small way, I feel like if I'm creating art, it's like a miniprotest, somehow trying to balance out the actions of these idiots who don't see the beauty in art and life."

And from now on, the turtle can stay in the wings. ❖

**Beth Custer Ensemble** perform *Mon/4, Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland, (510) 238-9200; Nov. 15-16, they perform the soundtrack to My Grandmother, Castro Theatre, 429 Castro, S.F., (415) 621-6120.*

PHOTO OF, FROM LEFT, BETH CUSTER, DAVID JAMES, DAVID P., AND JAN JACKSON BY ANNE HAMERSKY

## Rep picks

◀ **My Grandmother** In the 1929 silent film *My Grandmother*, office loafers devour political education primers, slide backwards down the ballustrade, and toss paper airplanes at cigar-smoking managers. Meanwhile, a Harold Lloyd-inspired bureaucrat (Aleksandre Takashvili) gets pummeled by his wife (Bella Chernova) as puppets gawk and cartoon men caper across the floor. Director Kote Mikaberidze's pinwheeling camera creates a house-of-mirrors effect, providing alchemic illusions of shadows coming to life. The film's live musical accompaniment by the Beth Custer Ensemble mixes guitar thrumming with absurdist Klezmer, creating an effect like Broiges Tanz meets Delta Blues. The score adds to the mood of the film by using violin interjections and slide-whistle glissandos from a clarinet and a muted trumpet. (1:05) *Castro, (Swan)*

**CASTRO** 429 Castro; 621-6120. \$4.50-7. "Let There Be Kino!"; *Derzu Uzala* (Kurusawa, 1975) *Wed, 7:30*; *The Bicycle Thief* (de Sica, 1947) *Mon, 7:10*; *Diary of a Country Priest* (Bresson, 1950) *Mon, 9*; *Time Regained* (Ruiz, 1999) *Tues, 7:30*; "HunderSkaten" 2002 Film Festival, short films and videos about skateboarding *Thurs, 8*; For more information on this event call (415) 970-8964. *My Grandmother* (Mikaberidze, 1929) *Fri-Sat, 8 (512)*. With live accompaniment by the Beth Custer Ensemble. "Film Arts Festival" 18th annual event *Sun*. See *First Runs*.