

# GUIDE TO CHRIS CORSANO

For the better part of the 00s, some of the most staggering work to come out of the realm of percussion-based music has been laid down by Chris Corsano. His solo albums and performances are utterly ferocious, a mixture of visceral energy, extreme virtuosity, and a keen sense of musicality, and his work as a collaborator is no less remarkable. The Flaherty-Corsano Duo, the Flower-Corsano Duo, Vampire Belt, Jailbreak, and Rangda are groups which have appeared with some regularity over the years. His more occasional work with groups such as MV + EE, Sunburned Hand of the Man (among their many releases, *Rare Wood* is a relatively easy-to-find slice), Jandek (see the *Manhattan Tuesday* and *Brooklyn Wednesday* albums, on Corwood Industries), Six Organs of Admittance (appearing on the A side of *School of the Flower*, released by Drag City in 2004), and Bjork (contributing to the album *Volta*, as well as playing on the tour for that album) also speak to his ability to collaborate with artists outside of the realm of strictly free improvising.

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## Flaherty-Corsano Duo

When Corsano first started making the scene in the early 00s, he was frequently seen alongside an older, long-bearded, white-haired man, playing, with fantastic intensity, the alto and tenor saxophones. This is Connecticut-based Paul Flaherty, an elder statesman of that particular strain of American free jazz that operates outside of the major centres (New York, Chicago, etc), but boasts its own rich history. His work with other old-school underground players such as Randall Colbourne, Richard Downs, Stephen Scholz, and Mike Murray has been documented on numerous releases, including albums on Flaherty's own imprints (Wet Paint, Zaabway), and he's more recently been cutting sides with the likes of Greg Kelley, Thurston Moore, C. Spencer Yeh, Laurence Cook, and Bill Nace.

The duo was most definitively documented on *The Hated Music*, which was released on Ecstatic Yod records in 2000. While that album is a fairly prime slab of their work together, the improved sound and increased focus of *The Beloved Music* (CD, Family Vineyard, 2006), along with the fact that it is much easier to find, makes it the best choice for the neophyte. For more of this duo, check out sister releases *Last Eyes* (LP, Records Records) and *Steel Sleet* (LP, Tyfus Records), both from 2005.

Flaherty-Corsano have also been embedded within other groups during their time together. They have two companion albums on Important records from 2006 with C. Spencer Yeh (aka Burning Star Core), which add the latter's violin and strangled-alien vocals. Thurston Moore's Dream/Aktion Unit has also benefited from their particular brand of energy, appearing with Moore, Heather Leigh Murray, and Matt Heyner on the *Blood Shadow Rampage* CD, released in 2006 by Volcanic Tongue. The group Cold Bleak Heat, adding bassist Matt Heyner (of No Neck Blues Band) and trumpeter Greg Kelley, also released two CDs on Family Vineyard (*It's Magnificent, But It Isn't War* in 2005 and *Simitu* two years later). Finally, in 2007, the pair joined Seattle-based Wally Shoup (one of Flaherty's contemporaries in old-school American free jazz saxophone playing) for another pair of LPs *Bounced Check* (Records Records) and *Blank Check* (Tyfus).

## Flower-Corsano

Corsano's previous collaborations with the Vibracathedral Orchestra (check his contribution to their *Wisdom Thunderbolt* album on VHF, 2007) set the stage for this duo with guitarist Mick Flower, here playing the *shaaji baaaja* ("japan banjo"). The music is drone-oriented, but the drone, as is often the case with Corsano's denser playing, is built of a pointillist-style wash of notes and constantly shifting rhythms, rather than a single sound source. Flower's playing is similarly ornate, and the electric aspect of his instrument, along with the presence of an electronic tampura adds an extra layer of activity.

Their first release, *Radiant Mirror*, was released on CD by French label Textile in 2007. It provides a good-sounding document of the band, focusing on a few long workouts, which tend to move between long, intense sections of furious playing, and slower, more expansive passages. *The Four Aims*, released in 2009 on VHF, breaks it up in smaller chunks, flowing over four sides of the LP release. The pieces contain more varied instrumentation, with Corsano adding cello and melodica to his setup, and there is a greater sense of experimentation in the pieces. Since those two more "official" releases, the rest of the duo's output has appeared on self-released CDR (including the excellent *Chocolate Cities* album) and a DVD-R (a fantastic-looking document of a raging set from Belgium, *Live at Scheld'apen*).

## Solo Albums

More so than any of his other pursuits, Corsano's solo albums do the most to further the style in which they appear to exist. The history of solo drumset albums has featured some remarkable re-thinks of the possibilities of the instrument (the solo sides of Paul Lytton, Sven-Ake Johansson, Han Bennink, and Paal Nilssen-Love come to mind), but as usual, Corsano approaches it with his own scorching style.

*The Young Cricketer* was originally released on Corsano's own imprint, Hot Cars Warp Records, as a CDR in 2006, and has since been reissued as an LP on Family Vineyard. The record is hotly-recorded overview of Corsano's percussion world, including relatively straight-up kit workouts (executed with unbelievable technical aplomb), circular-breathing segments on homemade 'horns' (various saxophone mouthpieces jammed into PVC tubing and other objects), and object-based percussion playing. The momentum of the record is relentless, and overall, it's one of the more breathtaking recent examples of solo album (aside from the music, the album itself is wonderfully sequenced and thematically presented) artistry. The follow-up *Another Dull Dawn* (a limited LP on the Belgian label Ultra Eczema) continues along the lines traced on *Cricketer*, but has a more scatter-shot feel on the whole, and is also much more difficult to obtain.

The other albums in Corsano's solo oeuvre are different affairs altogether. *Blood Pressure* (Hot Cars Warp, CDR, 2006) was released right around the same time as *The Young Cricketer*, but instead of the percussion-centric activities on that album, here Corsano explores the possibilities of blown-out keyboards and vocals. The album is concise, aggressively psychedelic, and unlike anything else in his discography. Apparently the title refers to Corsano's difficulty in finding health-conscious cuisine upon his arrival in Manchester, where he was briefly based in 2006. *High and Dry* (Hot Cars Warp, CDR, 2010), which is credited to the Chris Corsano Band, features our hero in the triumvirate role of drummer, bassist, and guitarist, playing nervy instrumental rock jams, with apparent relish. There's even a Sun City Girls cover!

## **Jailbreak**

For those who first read of Corsano in the August 2003 issue of *The Wire* magazine and wondered what the reported pairing of the Flaherty-Corsano duo and Scorces sounded like, this might be the closest thing available. Jailbreak is Corsano paired with Heather Leigh Murray, who plays the pedal steel. Originally from Houston, Texas (where she played with, among others, Charalambides and Scorces), Murray moved to the UK a number of years ago, and currently co-runs the Volcanic Tongue mailorder/shop. The music of this duo is not a million miles away from the Flower-Corsano duo, but the difference lies in the lack of a distinct drone element, and a more overtly pugilistic approach to the feel. That duo's blissed-out, careening aspect is here replaced by a more visceral, cathartic mood. Some of this is due to the presence of Murray's vocals, which appear as a pained howl amid the chaos, but the playing itself also opts for a less refined bent. Their two albums are *The Rocker* (2009, LP, Family Vineyard) and *Colour Them Gone* (CDR, 2010, Nyali). The LP suffers from a slightly soft sound, leaving the tangling a tad blurry and round, while the CDR manages to find the right amount of presence in the mix.

## **Other Notable Entries**

### *Evan Parker/John Edwards/Chris Corsano - A Glancing Blow*

During Corsano's stay in the UK (from around 2006 to 2010) he made the rounds of the key contemporary underground players over there, forming groups and hitting one-offs all over the place (including an additional duo LP with John Edwards, *Tsk Tsk-ing*, on Dancing Wayang Records), but this meeting stood out. Saxophonist (tenor, on this date) Evan Parker is, along with figures such as Derek Bailey, Paul Rutherford, and Tony Oxley, part of the first generation of British improvisors, whose early activities centered around the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Incus Records (an early independent label which Parker and Bailey co-ran for a stretch), Bailey's Company Weeks, and the shared goal of developing idiosyncratic approaches to their instruments. Edwards has, over the last decade-plus, established himself as one of the most in-demand upright bassists in contemporary free improvisation, playing with a ridiculously long list of artists, and killing it seemingly every time.

This disc (CD, Clean Feed Records, 2007) places Corsano into the purest "free-improv" context of his recordings up to that point. It begins with Edwards' mangling of his instrument's strings, and continues in a fairly twitchy, fast-paced mode, lots of scraping and clatter, but the mood remains relatively cool, never achieving the ecstatic heights attained in other groups. This is not a problem, however, as the flow of strong ideas from all three is consistently impressive, and it provides an excellent glimpse of Corsano's workings in more well-defined context.

### *Rangda - False Flag*

Rangda is the trio of Corsano, alongside the dual guitars of Ben Chasny (aka Six Organs of Admittance) and Sir Richard Bishop (of the Sun City Girls, among other things). They play widely structured tunes that serve as starting points for the players to take turns ripping over the form, amounting to something of a free rock blowing session. The musicianship is of an extremely high order, the guitar playing often attaining slightly absurd moments of virtuosity, so it's a pleasure to listen to. Also, being released on Drag City (2010), it's relatively cheap and easy track down.

*Osorezan – Mimidokodesuka*

What was once an extremely obscure CD on a Japanese label (Polystar, 2006) has now been reissued domestically as an LP on Drag City. This album captures the tantalizing trio of Jim O'Rourke on guitar (offering some of the straightest playing of his career in an improvising scenario - his duo albums with Loren Mazzacane Connors come close, but there is more timbral variety here), Darin Gray on double bass, and Corsano at the kit. The music is characterized by a sort of sweeping momentum, the product of a group of players who share a wealth of instrumental ability and stylistic breadth. The amount of ground it covers prevents it from having a clear group sound, but it's a great listen, and one of the only places to hear O'Rourke play so eclectically.

**For a complete listing of Corsano's discography, see:**

[www.cor-sano.com/hateddiscog.html](http://www.cor-sano.com/hateddiscog.html)

**For an excellent series of videos of his solo performance, circa 2006, see:**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1\\_UFLuqvK8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1_UFLuqvK8)

**Labels:**

[www.family-vineyard.com](http://www.family-vineyard.com)

[www.tyrfus.com/](http://www.tyrfus.com/)

[www.dragcity.com/](http://www.dragcity.com/)

[www.myspace.com/nyalirecordings](http://www.myspace.com/nyalirecordings)

[www.cleanfeed-records.com](http://www.cleanfeed-records.com)

[www.mimaroglumusicsales.com/labels/hot+cars+warp.html](http://www.mimaroglumusicsales.com/labels/hot+cars+warp.html)

[www.textilerecords.com/](http://www.textilerecords.com/)

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**(Chris Dadge, 2011)**