

## Off the Charts: The Tone Road Ramblers at Work

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People who don't know them often assume that the Tone Road Ramblers must be strumming, boot-wearing, good ole country boys. The Ramblers get a kick out of that, like kids do when they urge someone to catch a running refrigerator.

If I didn't know them, I'd conclude that the Ramblers are a rock band. There's that ironic wink in the punning, smart-aleck name. Rockers are smart; they are verbal magpies: "Mothers of Invention," "Rolling Stones." Why wouldn't a super group co-opt Charles Ives's *Tone Roads*?

But John Fonville, Eric Mandat, Ray Sasaki, Morgan Powell, Jim Staley, and Steve Butters constitute a unique contemporary chamber sextet; they are unlikely to take up country or rock music. Were they to dig into either, it would be because their ears led them to some potential fans had never discerned. The Ramblers would launch themselves from an open secret and create something never heard before because the keys to their extraordinary music are their gift for listening, and their ability to hear with many ears and one burning, antic mind.

In score order: The flutist is John Fonville, a professor at the University of California, San Diego's fabled music department; Eric Mandat, the clarinetist, is a professor at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, who tours internationally and plays in the Chicago Symphony's MusicNOW series. Trumpeter Ray Sasaki is the Frank C. Erwin University Professor of Humanities at the University of Texas, Austin, member of the St. Louis Brass Quintet, former president of the International Trumpet Guild. (Ray's brother, David Sasaki, was the clarinetist until 1989, when he gave up music. He had been the first-call session player for several major studios and orchestras in Los Angeles. He is now a raisin farmer.)

The Ramblers have two trombonists: Jim Staley is a regular performer on New York's avant-garde scene. He is also co-founder and director of thirty-year-old Roulette Intermedium, a New York City experimental music and performance non-profit. The other trombonist, Morgan Powell, is an internationally known composer and professor *emeritus* at the University of Illinois. The percussionist is Steve Butters, who replaced Michael Udow in 1993. (Udow is *emeritus* from the University of Michigan and the Santa Fe Opera.) Butters is a composer and freelance musician in Chicago with part-time teaching positions at Elgin Community College and Chicago State University.

In early 2010, the Ramblers spent a week in residence at the University of California, San Diego where clarinetist Anthony Burr delighted them with his insight into their music and extraordinary ensemble work, "You're a *band!*" he declared admiringly. This was indeed music to the ears of musicians so deeply connected by time and musical instincts, for whom the technically correct label, "contemporary chamber ensemble," is out of tune—as if "interpreter of contemporary guitar literature" described Jimi Hendrix. Mandat sums it up as, "Most chamber ensembles come together to play *music*: Bartók

string quartets, for example. But we play *ourselves*.” Even the idea of “style” doesn’t suit the Ramblers. One cannot speak of range or limitation of style for music that is *sui generis*.

The statement TRR has used for years conveys their musical methods and the high value they place on friendship in their creative process:

Our musical materials are inclusive and diverse: from extended techniques, the use of toys and unusual sound sources, microtonality, from diverse traditions: Jazz and world music and the western avant-garde...The motivation to form and develop this unique ensemble was and remains to find a collaborative music that reaches for a broad range of human experiences and ideas. It includes rehearsing notated scores, improvising, eating, drinking, laughing, hanging out, and sharing stories and personal histories. The final result is a music of respect, love and exploration.

This statement emphasizes how the warmth, openness, and trust generated by their enduring friendship powers their music. But the statement doesn’t address the Ramblers’ musical voraciousness, virtuosity, and innovation. This is an ensemble so independent of performance traditions that it approaches the utopian. Every sound they make is an experiment, free of the expectations created by musical genres. “The final result is a music of respect, love,” and exhilarating rocket rides into the deep space of your listening galaxy.

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The Ramblers are organized as a collective of composer-musicians with no musical director. In this way they are comparable to the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the most famous of contemporary collaboratives, and even longer-lived than the Ramblers who, at thirty years now, formed fifteen years after the AEC. While both of these groups have strong roots in the practice of improvisation, the AEC is based in African musical traditions while the Ramblers’ music (all members are white) is as grounded in the twentieth century classical avant-garde as in jazz.

The Kronos Quartet and eighth blackbird, a New Music sextet, are sometimes cited as comparisons for the Tone Road Ramblers. In fact, they are very different. Kronos and eighth blackbird reinterpret classical and world music, surprising audiences with new renderings of music they thought they knew. Both commission new work as well.

The Ramblers, however, play only what they write for themselves. With the exception of three commissions (from composers Salvatore Martirano, James Lewis, and Erik Lund) they do not play works by other composers.

What’s more, the Ramblers do not repeat what they have once perfected, so they have no repertory. For them, music making is about being in process, in the moment. Morgan Powell says of his own composition something that applies equally to the Ramblers as a group: “When I’m finished with a piece, I’m finished with it. It’s like snakes. They have their babies; they’re through with their babies. They don’t stick around.”

Though Powell, Fonville, and Mandat are the Ramblers' chief composers on paper, Sasaki, Staley, and Butters are spontaneous co-composers. Eric Mandat calls their performance-driven composition process one that "moves off the page." When he was new to the group in 1989, he says, "It became clear that this was a lot more about listening to the other guys than worrying about individual intricacies of my own part."

There's been a tongue-in-cheek joke among the Ramblers since the days of Volkswagen's *Fahrvergnügen* advertising campaign: They call their process "*Loosentighten*." Powell writes "loose," literally leaving a lot of blank space in his scores that the musicians will fill, either as soloists or as a group. These ultimately shape the piece. However, Fonville writes "tight," specifying every note and nuance. The individual players have to breathe their own ideas into his work, turning it into music that belongs to the collective.

So were they to play a work from the same printed score, no other sextet's performance would ever sound like the Ramblers'. "There's just that dichotomy between permanence and change in the realization of something that's on a score," says Mandat. "We absolutely lean toward the side of change. We want things to be exploratory, fresh, to challenge even our own views."

Common in the Ramblers' music are strangely specific atmospheres and colorations—shimmering or ominous—lent by the use of microtones (the ranges of intervals between the half-tones of the Western scale). This is Fonville's influence. As scientists understand color—not as a banded rainbow, but as a spectrum of infinite gradations—so Fonville's ear distinguishes tones. He is enthusiastic in his approach to acoustics, reveling in the moment his graduate tuning students perceive the enormous palette available to them. "The idea of having instead of one type of minor second, six or so; having seven types of E-flat: It's like being handed a color box and brushes."

Each Rambler brings to the group's sound his individual mastery of extended techniques. Together they employ multiphonics, in which they produce overtones by singing and playing simultaneously. They growl or speak through their horns, play disassembled sections of their instruments, use keys percussively—whatever will create just the right sound in the moment. None of these techniques is new; all are extensively used in modern and contemporary music, but the Ramblers use them authoritatively for effects that are powerful—and often playful.

Each Rambler wind player has immense dynamic range, and "iron chops"—highly conditioned musculature for blowing. Mandat and Staley have mastered circular breathing, the technique of inhaling through the nose while blowing through the mouth to maintain uninterrupted tone. (Composer Shulamit Ran, the winner of the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for Music, a poetic writer for the clarinet, says that her compositions never require any extended techniques. But Mandat's circular breathing is a tremendous asset to his performance of her works because of the "amazing continuity" of line he achieves.) Extended techniques magnify the Ramblers' sound into the size of an orchestra's.

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Urbana, Illinois, specifically the University of Illinois School of Music, is home to the Ramblers. Powell arrived in 1965, as a twenty-six year old graduate student who graduated quickly into a professorship. Sasaki was hired in 1975, straight out of his master's degree at North Texas State University, a specialist in both jazz and classical

trumpet performance. Staley and Fonville lived in the same house as graduate students; both took their degrees (Masters of Music, Doctor of Musical Arts) in 1978. Michael Udow overlapped with this cast during both his undergraduate and graduate careers at Illinois.

All of these men taught and learned from one another, played together in ensembles formal (the Contemporary Chamber Players under Edwin London) and informal (jazz groups gigging in Urbana; experimental performances produced locally by the enterprising Staley). They all enjoyed drinking, talking and music through the night, waking up on a friend's floor to breakfast on leftovers and scrambled eggs. They have continued to refine to a high art their competitive punning, begun in those days.

Fonville's fellows call him the "intellectual." A great reader, he speaks with the fluent ease of a man reading good prose aloud. He forms sentences so thoughtfully that his observations and statements have the quality of a fragrant dish passed back and forth between leisurely diners.

Fonville's study of tuning systems requires an acute degree of discrimination. Discrimination is a principle of his character and the basis for most of his pleasures. With amused self-deprecation, he refers to himself as a "hedonist." In fact he is a sensualist who grants his palate particular respect. Fonville cultivates a garden to serve a table abundant with beautiful, seasonal foods that he loves to prepare. (He and his wife recently put up six-hundred pounds of apricots from their own tree.) He is not so cultivated, though, that his latent quicksilver quality will fail to deploy at any invitation for gang hilarity. He is not so fine that he doesn't play the flute with the impact of a brass player.

While his eminence as a flutist, composer, and scholar would justify a considerably lesser man's pride, Fonville lacks vanity in the extreme. It's true that he once cultivated a dandyish handlebar mustache that appeared to lie perfectly straight above his lip, like a further flourish to his flute. But in summer '09, even the mustache was reduced to an efficient brush.

Eric Mandat is "always up for anything." Amiable and energetic, he wears his gray-streaked dark hair in a ponytail that reinforces his ageless boyishness. It's not that Mandat, in his fifties, promotes a feigned youthfulness. His enthusiasm for the clarinet; his mind boundlessly absorbing new ideas and joyfully juggling those he encounters; his metabolism allowing him enviably little sleep; all this defies any conceivable reason for him to age. There's too much going on to grow older.

Mandat decided to be a clarinetist when he was a preschooler who listened to an LP demonstrating the orchestral instruments. He understood exactly when the narrator asserted that, "The clarinet is the Queen of the Woodwinds."

Mandat is deeply involved with his university and department even as he schedules solo tours that have taken him to Latvia, Belgium, Sweden, Japan, and Taiwan. On his egalitarian curriculum vitae, his performance at the Puka Preschool in Carbondale is given the same visual weight as his appearances with the Chicago Symphony's contemporary chamber ensemble under the baton of Pierre Boulez.

Butters appears to take up more space than he does. The athletic physique—enhanced by a Che Guevara or Rage Against the Machine tee shirt—may help account for the fact that everything about him feels direct and definitive.

When he tells me that his first instrument was trumpet, it's hard to imagine that Butters could channel all the energy he brings to percussion through mere half-inch tubing for release out a five-inch bell. The constant aggression and appeasement, augmentation and abatement of percussion seem natural for him. By virtue of his fearless questioning and his firm convictions, he is a person with impact (This could read as: "potentially explosive.") How to explode without bringing everything down? *That's art.*

Butters doesn't mince words, and he is the only Rambler I've heard use profanity. He deploys it effectively. "Fuck," "shit," and "damn" are intensifiers for occasions when he needs to register passionate feeling but keep moving. In Butters, I feel the struggle between adamancy and the need for restraint: a vital conflict. The Ramblers' music is shot through with this conflict. Butters emanates an urgency central to the spirit of the group. The others withhold the potential for violence that runs through their work. Butters is the least prone to this pretense.

But Jim Staley isn't given to it either. Staley is tall, but even more than his height, his taciturnity makes space around him. He seems to speak only when addressed directly. His facial expression can be disconcertingly blank—even when he's looking straight at you. Wearing inartistically rumpled clothing, he's a guy you'd turn to if you needed someone to patch your tire.

And maybe he could. When Staley moved to New York City thirty years ago, he worked construction to pay for staging Roulette's experimental music concerts in his own loft. Later, he plowed his paternal inheritance into the non-profit. These days, he directs Roulette with a \$500,000 budget of soft money. His failure to raise those funds would mean the loss of his own income. His minimalist personal presentation might stem from the habitual efficiencies necessary for a life crowded with donors, performers, and applicants. He's always in touch; his personal life and his organization are one. With everything at risk, no wonder Staley conserves whatever he can, even his presence.

Staley is straightforward, thoughtful, and efficient. But when his trombone is at his lips in solo improvisation, his range of expression contradicts the muted affect he otherwise presents. Then he is as fast and committed as a dervish dancer.

Morgan Powell is usually considered the founder and the heart of the Ramblers. He will scowl at this proposition, as he will mutter objections to any suggestion that would distinguish him for any reason from any fellow creature. Socially, Powell is the family dog. He listens and watches, taking in everything around him with senses others don't seem even to have. You'll see him off to the side, perched on a stool with a beer and a vacant look. He could be taking a break, but that would be misconstruing a man at work.

Still, Powell has a talent for bringing people together. He is amiably ready to become the butt of a joke, or to flatter some shy person with the favor of gentle teasing. His relentlessly democratic posture exemplifies his wish to promote a harmonious world. But it also conceals an active, strategic perspicacity that allows him to create the peerless music for which he is known. The best ensembles his friends say they have ever played in are the ones he formed. Powell is said to enhance the playing of everyone around him by his own instrumental mastery, comprehension of the ensemble, and fertility of ideas. Musicians are the music: Powell gathers around himself people whose skill and ideas make it fun for *him*. So when he asks you out to play, it's not like the world's nicest man is just being nice. When it comes to music, the egalitarian good old boy is a patrician.

Ray Sasaki and Morgan Powell have been best friends for thirty-five years. Powell recalls their meeting as “love at first sight.” The two are foils, a comedy duo, with Sasaki the straight man who sets up Powell’s opportunities for wordplay and killer strings of tumbling puns. But simplicity is a Powell persona that betrays nostalgia for the beautiful unattainable. Simplicity is the most telling characteristic of the artless Sasaki. He is a lucid, deeply centered person. He is not overly serious—he is animated and funny—but his air of self-containment creates a palpable quiet zone—a park—that it is refreshing to enter. In his presence, you feel that you too will not wonder what to do next, not find right and wrong difficult to distinguish, nor wonder where your loyalties should lie. The immediacy of Japanese culture and values imbibed in Sasaki’s youth lend him mental and spiritual traits most Americans lack. He believes in and practices rigorous discipline, sacrifice, and hard work. His good nature is housed in a mind created by these honorable habits.

Despite their vivid differences, though, these six men share one important trait: Each wears a mask or acts a role he’s devised for easy passage in society. Through all the interviews, I ran across those closed doors as a blind person does, examining a room. Of course the doors lead to the private, interior room where the ensemble forms, out of sight, behind their screen of public claims and stories. The Ramblers’ music—adventurous, antic, full of heart, often strange—isn’t the result only of evenings spent reminiscing over cigars and beers. It’s not accessible, nice-guy music. Great art does not always come from the nice places of experience and the soul, the ones that are socially endorsed. Most artists get nothing done without being selfish and disengaged from normal life.

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In 1993, the Ramblers began meeting annually for two weeks at the Ragdale Foundation, the artists’ colony, in Lake Forest, Illinois. This has long been where they improvise and rehearse for any recordings or concerts that are in the works.

Many find it hard to imagine a group of musicians improvising all at once: It’s a rare practice. In classic jazz, the soloist improvises on a chorus within a song structure from which (s)he does not depart. The solo is spontaneous, yet guided by the musician’s knowledge of the tune’s chord progression and chorus structure. The improvisation occurs within boundaries well known to the musicians and the audience members.

Free, group improvisation doesn’t refer to pre-existing structures or chord structures. Each instrumentalist joins or leaves the ensemble as his ear and ideas guide him. Chaotic it is not. Every tune on the Ramblers’ CD, *The Ragdale Years*, was spontaneously composed by the group. The tunes are tunes, recognizable as such, coherent, and witty. Without confirmation that they are improvisations, few would even accept the fact that there are no scores behind them, despite the big hint that no composer credits are given on the liner notes.

Ray Sasaki likens the practice of group improvisation to conversation. Butters agrees. “It’s the best analogy that I’ve heard. It *could* be a conversation: talking to yourself, talking to someone else—arguing, interrupting, overriding.” Mandat illustrates when he describes the group’s first session after a year apart, when they sit to improvise: “We’ll recognize that one or the other of us has something to ‘say,’ and will just have to get it out. And another won’t feel quite ready to play out on a first session in quite the same way as they will a little later.”

Reed master Howie Smith is one of the longtime friends and “voices” through whom Powell’s work is known. Based in Cleveland, Smith has been a headliner for both the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra. His admiration for the Ramblers’ improvisational art is explained by the rarity and difficulty of their undertaking. “The thing that a lot of people don’t understand is that playing music like that is *the most difficult thing to do*. Everybody’s responding to everybody else and putting together a composition as opposed to being a featured soloist in a group. You may be the person who has the focus and attention for a given moment, but really, what everybody is doing is composing this piece.”

In jazz groups, Smith points out, the players usually have defined roles, playing melody or rhythm. Group improvisation has none. Each person can solo, accompany, or provide the rhythmic coating. What each does at any moment depends on what the others are doing. One’s listening skill must be as acute as one’s executive skill. So the more intimately the participants know one another, the easier it is to speak up and to understand the others’ intentions when they make themselves heard.

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If fame blossomed from skill, idea, and daring, this article would be a slight addition to a large literature about the Tone Road Ramblers. But beyond their small, close circle of friends, the Ramblers are little known. Who would a wider audience include?

Under the best of circumstances, the audience for experimental contemporary art music in America is small. In Europe, contemporary music is routinely presented on nationalized radio and television. In our system of commercially funded media, airtime goes to music sponsors will pay for. Even public media, dependent on fundraising, is conservative about arts programming. “Experimental” represents experiments that have long since gained mainstream approval, like Steve Reich’s minimalist music, now forty years old.

On the face of it, then, it’s no wonder that the Ramblers have given concerts to empty houses. The surprise is that they’ve played those programs anyway, listening to themselves as they always do. Fonville admits that, “I always love listening to the group. I’m amazed at what we do. It gives me enormous pleasure. I listen for the beauty of my place in the group and what we achieve as a collective; it just constantly amazes me.”

Among the Ramblers, opinions differ on the importance of even playing concerts for live audiences at all. The split arises from their improvisational motive and from the great complexity of their scored compositions.

Concertgoers believe that live performances beat recorded music because the sound is true, and because watching the performers both enhances the sound and suggests interpretations of the music. The Ramblers’ music, though, upsets some concertgoers, because of its density and difficulty. Listeners are rarely prepared for what they hear, and so they feel overwhelmed.

Eric Mandat confesses that as a solo performer, he loves the approval and applause he receives from audiences. However, when he’s performing live with the Ramblers, he gets more excited about what they offer the audience than about what they’ll get back. Their music arises from process and the interconnectedness of the performers, so he hopes that they can give audiences the gift of a unique, intense, unmediated musical experience. Admitting that their music cannot be understood,

digested, or even entirely taken in all at one sitting, Mandat doesn't believe that deep understanding needs to be the audience's goal. He wants them to open up and experience what they hear and see right before them, rather than evaluating it and making comparisons. His ideal is, "experience without the burden of memory." This is, after all, similar to the musicians' experience in making it.

Mandat recognizes, however, that the state of being entirely present, open, and actively listening is difficult for most of us. We are trained to orient ourselves in music by referring to our critical knowledge and memories; we don't practice concentrating on what is happening *right now*, in the moment. "It's a challenge for listeners to come away having said, '*I just experienced something*. I don't know what it is, but I was really *there!*'"

One long-time Rambler fan proposes addressing the difficulty of the music by having Ramblers make a pre-concert verbal connection that will relax their audience and make their music more accessible. After all, they are great guys, with easy manners. But Staley is leery of confusing the "accessibility" and "likeability" of the Rambler personnel and the qualities of their music. When the Ramblers are live, yes, their humor and friendly personalities are apparent but, "it may keep people from really hearing" the music.

Fonville is recognized by his colleagues to be a magnificent (even "flamboyant") performer, yet he is much happier in recording sessions than performing live anymore. When he plays solo flute for live audiences, he has to block out their responses anyway, he says. They get in the way of his concentration on the music.

The ephemeral quality of performance that Mandat celebrates is a thorn in Fonville's side. He agrees that an ideal audience is fully engaged in the experience of the music, but they will further have "personal questions, responses, answers, points of view. That's really the perfect audience—one that thinks and mulls things over for a period." A live performance is "an ephemeral thing that dissipates over time." Recordings are perfectible for the performers, repeatable and enduring for audiences. He's happy for the Ramblers to put their energy into rehearsal and recording, so they can create the "definitive moment."

In fact, TRR has produced nine CDs, most recently *Dancing with the Ramblers* in 2009. All their CDs are in print and easily available from Einstein Records, a branch of Roulette ([http://www.roulette.org/noisy/new\\_store\\_cds.html](http://www.roulette.org/noisy/new_store_cds.html)). With Rambler downloads sold through the iTunes Store, their music is not at all difficult to come by.

The recordings—those definitive moments—are essentially historical. Since their music is process, the CDs are in some sense the snake babies, left behind as tokens of where the Ramblers have been and what they've accomplished. They are not issued to market the group, to persuade people to love them, nor to provide explanatory notes. The group would love to have a bigger audience, but it's outside their mission (not to mention available time and skill set) to prioritize audience development or CD sales.

Butters' attitude toward the group's musical process captures the very practical essence of what might otherwise seem like an elitist practice. Of all the Ramblers, Butters has the smallest guaranteed income. He sometimes plays "Under the Boardwalk" in a pirate suit to earn a living, but he has no doubt that this beats wearing a jacket and tie working in a bank as he once did: Making music is better than not making it.



Yet the musical life that supports him rarely has anything to do with making art, so the Ramblers are crucial to him. As a member of this ensemble, he is integrated into intimate creative relationships with equal, experimental musical minds. There is no audience response that can increase for him the satisfaction of playing in this group of like-minded talents and friends.

Playing improvised music with the Ramblers is as good as it gets for Butters. *Listening* to improvised music? He admits that he can take it or leave it.

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“It’s the rare relationship in which you can spend days and days never being away from someone’s side, and not even wish you had some time on your own; that you’re constantly free to be who you are, unconditionally open. That’s what I feel with this group. I don’t feel like my will is being manipulated or put down. I feel that anything I express is going to be responded to respectfully, or amplified.” This is Fonville’s assessment of two weeks spent as a Rambler.

The Ramblers are full of fond, funny stories about the non-musical rites of friendship: the summers of the softball games and the croquet summers; the drinking and talking until the wee hours. They enjoy a guy-only zone, their own versions of traditional American, masculine friendship.

Powell points out, though: “You talk about the Ramblers’ leisure time. It isn’t what everybody thinks. These guys come to Ragdale. They smoke cigarettes (they don’t do that at home); they drink (they don’t do that at home); they hang. It’s a very important part. But when we sit down to rehearse, it’s different. It is *very* focused.”

Their friendship informs the music as much as playing together fortifies the friendship. The dancer and the dance are inseparable.

Remarkable for their virtuosity, discipline, and daring, and for their refusal to play it safe artistically, the Ramblers are indifferent to the mainstream when they gather as a collaborative of working artists. They have to be selfish, reckless, and fiercely focused in order to make their non-negotiable music. Their process requires amounts of raw energy, concentration, patience and endurance comparable only to an infant’s, struggling in the birth canal, single-minded and ferocious, fighting for life.

Most of the year, the individual Ramblers appear in the world as citizens, workers, family men, and friends in their particular social networks—as the likeable, congenial people they are. The artists disappear into roles of well-socialized men, similar to everyone around them. Once the world thought of artists as heroes or madmen, isolated from the mundane. In these days of the teaching degree, artists are just as likely to be middle class chameleons. How can you tell the dancer from the dance? Out of the studio, the two are quickly separated.

Most artists have day jobs. The lucky ones have jobs somehow related to their talents—being a tenured professor; playing “Yellow Bird” with a steel band at a corporate party; running an arts organization—but these jobs are not necessarily related to the qualities of their creativity. Because artists enjoy no enhanced status in a wealth- and celebrity- focused culture, two weeks “off” to make art may be understood by the people around them as a vacation, when they don’t work at their “real” jobs.

Of course each Rambler is always performing music, in concerts at his university, gigging on the Roulette stage or at Chicago clubs. But each never ceases being a creative

artist whose time is nearly all spent at occupations that don't demand an artist's full capacity, insight or will. Those two weeks "off" as Ramblers are a guaranteed time in the year when they get to be genuinely "on."

When the Ramblers meet, they can drop their outside social roles. They can unblinker visions suspended in the day-to-day and make experiments in thought and sound that are beyond external judgment. That the six continue to survive *as artists* has to be the most important part of the group mission.

The Ramblers have created in themselves the source of an exceptional, self-renewing cycle of music and friendship. What can be more intimate or more liberating for artists than to find others who reaffirm their own artistic processes, sensibilities, and goals, and by doing that, realize their own? After twenty years, Eric Mandat still shakes his head over his good luck to find himself a member of this group. "The concept of people connecting who have such strongly developed individual artistic personalities; to have a relationship that informs and transcends the individuality to become the driving force; I just can't see that anywhere else."

However remarkable the Ramblers' accomplishment in remaining productive and fresh for thirty years, I'm not sure their longevity is the most remarkable thing about them. It's not only that their music is unique, strange, or characterized by any other quality as much as by its being overwhelmingly personal—as in warm. As in full of individuality and character.

The Tone Road Ramblers are artists whose love for each other is inseparable from love of self. Created selflessly, their music is alive because there is, by definition, no way for any one of them to make it without a commitment of the whole self. It's impossible to be absent.

As a listener, too, it's impossible to be absent for this music. For those of us who know their music, it's an unmapped rocket ride: The destination is every point along the way. For those who haven't heard them yet, any of their recordings makes them vivid and present to the listener. Tune in and find them far out there, off the charts, just where they've been for thirty years.

The end.