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April 29, 2003

**MUSIC REVIEW****Microtonal guitarists open ears**

By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times

The normally underground world of microtonal music goes public for the next month courtesy of the annual MicroFest, launched Sunday at Venice's Electric Lodge with a program called "MicroGuitars."

Microtonality is all about the pursuit of music created by deviating from the prevailing Western tuning of 12 notes to the octave. Guitar is particularly malleable, given the flexible tuning keys and possibilities of customizing the fretboard.

Rod Poole, a British avant-folk-jazzier, played a steel-string acoustic guitar with a super-sized order of tightly spaced frets. Mixing traditional pure roots and fifths with stowaway microtones, Poole played an improvised suite in a hypnotically precise finger-picking style reminiscent of John Fahey, but further out.

The evening's highlight came from the Duo — Eric Benzant-Feldra and Michael Kubirka, music grad students at USC — using standard classical guitars "detuned" by a quarter-tone. The fascinating result, as heard on James Tenney's rippling "Harmonium #2" and Jeffrey Holmes' captivating "Five Microtonal Studies," has the effect of creating a jumbo classical guitar, with expanded tonal vocabulary. The haunting and slightly disorienting sound disrupts and engages the open ear.

This year's fest pays homage to one of the better-known champions of microtonality, composer Lou Harrison, who died this year. Festival organizer and guitarist John Schneider did his part, performing Harrison's "Scenes from Nek Chand." Its lithe, exotic lines rang from his custom dobro, with its visually striking constellation of fretting. He then played an almost-conventional classical guitar — with detachable fingerboard — for a first performance of Harrison's 1978 "Ditone Set," recently retooled. Renaissance echoes and Middle East sonorities somehow blended beautifully.

The electric guitar corner was represented by David Beardsley's atmospheric "Around D" — operative word "around." Beardsley played his maxi-fretted guitar through a volume pedal, a looping device and other effects to create swirling layers of meditative droning. Throbbing close tones made it a vibration-oriented experience.

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