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Tuesday, November 7, 2006

### Music / Post No Bills Malachi Ritscher's apparent suicide

Posted by [Peter Margasak](#) on Tue, Nov 7, 2006 at 4:06 PM

On Saturday the *Sun-Times* ran a [small item](#) about a man who had set himself on fire during rush hour Friday morning near the Ohio Street exit on the Kennedy. His identity has still not been officially determined, but members of the local jazz and improvised music community say they are certain it was Malachi Ritscher, a longtime supporter of the scene. Bruno Johnson, who owns the free-jazz label [Okka Disk](#), received a package yesterday from Ritscher that included a will, keys to his home, and instructions about what should be done with his belongings. Johnson, a former Chicagoan who now lives in Milwaukee, began making calls. Police are still awaiting the results of dental tests, but Johnson says an officer told one of Ritscher's sisters that all evidence pointed to the body being his; his car was found nearby and he hadn't shown up for work since Thursday.

Buried on Ritscher's web site [Chicago Rash Audio Potential](#), a compendium of invaluable show postings, artwork, and photography, are a [suicide note](#) and an [obituary](#). Both indicate that he was deeply troubled by the war in Iraq and pinpoint it as a motive for suicide (no method is specified), though there are indications that he may have had other issues as well. "He had a son, from whom he was estranged (at the son's request), and two grandchildren," reads the obit. "He had many acquaintances, but few friends; and wrote his own obituary, because no one else really knew him." Ritscher was a familiar face at antiwar protests, and he was arrested more than once for his involvement, including [this time](#) this past May. A note found at the scene of the immolation reportedly read "Thou Shalt Not Kill."

Although Ritscher, who was in his early 50s, had played music off and on over the years, he was best known for his devotion to documenting other people's shows. Several nights a week for at least the last decade he could be found at places like the Empty Bottle, the Velvet Lounge, and the Hungry Brain; by his own count he recorded more than 2,000 concerts. Over the years he invested more money in equipment and as his skills improved, many of his recordings went to be used on commercial releases--by Paul Rutherford, Gold Sparkle Band, Isotope 217, Irene Schweizer, and Ken Vandermark among others. Ritscher was fiercely modest about these pursuits--I once tried to do a piece on him for the *Reader* but he declined, saying he didn't want publicity.

Feel free to contribute your own comments or memories below.

*Photos courtesy of Joeff Davis*

Tags: [Okka Disk](#), [Malachi Ritscher](#), [Chicago Free Jazz](#)

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