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MUSIC

Vol. 10 No. 33 April 22 - 28, 2005

Perfect Sound forever

Everything in the world is Aaron Ximm's pop song

by CHRIS ZIEGLER

One of Aaron Ximm's best-selling CDs is called *Plumbing and Irrigation in South Asia*. It sounds exactly—probably more exactly—like you'd think: sprinklers, pipes, a hotel-room sink. Unaltered, unglamorized: drip-drip-drip. The and/OAR record label is considering re-pressing it to meet demand. And if that happens, then truly, this is a more beautiful world than anyone has yet thought.

But Ximm laughs about it because his real work is even more straightforwardly beautiful: as the Quiet American, he takes his MiniDisc recorder on trips to South Asia, China, the Himalayas, Fiji and more, taping an hour each day and coming home to sift his sounds—trains and bells and wind and water—into dynamic, recognizable songs. He gets rhythm tracks from a little kid's footsteps over a wooden floor; he lets giant arcs of slowed-down bird calls sweep in for melody.

And it's not just sound effects. The Animal Collective might concentrate their woodsy shtick into something like Ximm's real nature noise. Krautrockers like Neu! could mimic his lock-step locomotive rhythms. Brian Eno would understand it immediately (music FROM airports, maybe). Or, like the Bay Area hip-hop producer Billy Jam, who does the same thing Ximm does with very different source material, thinks: the world is Aaron Ximm's box of records to sample—everything he hears is a pop song.

Which is sort of something Ximm admits he's trying to get away from, since he says his first album under the name Quiet American (he loves the Graham Greene book, by the way, which he bought on the street in Vietnam) was basically King Crimson with Asian street sounds instead of guitar solos: he wants to move beyond pop music disguised as sound art. But it's also something that makes for a welcome inoculant against the experimental music of scowly, black-clad grad students.



Ximm: Swine song

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CONTEST

Ximm—who was a double cognitive science Ph.D. student at 25 until he (smartly) popped a fuse and dropped out first semester, the beginning of several major walkouts on institutional life that eventually led him on the first of many soul-searching trips to South Asia—knows all those scowly guys, and he doesn't want at all to hang out in their scowly scene. At his award-winning Field Effects series (held, until recently, in his San Francisco warehouse home, with the live found-sound mixing he'll be presenting this weekend in Long Beach), show-goers sink into a ring of comfy futons with homemade cookies, so happily relaxed and silent that Ximm says someone crumpling dry leaves into a plate once carried across a hundred people. "By and large, the thing about noise music is that it's easy to make noise," he says. "Nothing is easier than turning something up."

He calls it a sleight of hand: his sublimated pop instincts give listeners something easy at first: like his famous futons, they make everything comfortable so the audience isn't scared to go deeper. It's the same impulse that keeps him heading off on excursions to Asia, even though he finds plenty of beautiful sounds on the streets of his own San Francisco—it's pop bait, the promise of exoticism to lure in an audience. He laughs at the suggestion he's booking a famous continent for street cred—The Quiet American, Featuring S.O.U.T.H. Asia!—but that's show biz. "By any means necessary," he says. "You provoke people with the idea that these are recordings from Burma, and maybe down the road, they realize they have a different relationship to the sound of their neighbor's sprinkler. It doesn't matter that it's Burma or OC—there's no difference in the sprinkler. And who knows? Maybe that sprinkler's rocking out!"

"You basically tempt people with a carrot to get them to walk out in a garden, and then they realize, hey, they got the reward of walking out in a garden."

And now, as Ximm lists his greatest hits—with the subdued and goofy zeal familiar to anyone who's ever talked pop shop to a fellow fan, except with Kinks and Beach Boys albums replaced by hammering in a Vietnamese marketplace—there is none of the mean-spirited look-at-me!-ness that's probably half the reason people get their claws into a song. Instead—like Ximm's music—it's just perfect sound appearing as itself: the sound of a leaf blower under a freeway overpass on Ximm's bike route to work, which mushrooms into a hum that lasts for blocks around; the sound of waves hitting a steep, pebbly beach, with tiny round rocks clinking and clacking as the water rolls them over each other; a hand-cranked printing press chomping a line of blank newsprint; or Ximm's absolute favorite ever, the soundscape of an uninsulated coach-class train car in India, where the telegraph chatter of the wheels on the rails doesn't get stuck in double-paned window glass ("Completely hypnotizing," says Ximm).

Or even the one that got away, the song that he'll never hear again: the time he spent 25 minutes on all fours in a muddy Cuban village street, coaxing snuffling, rooting pigs to come snuffle and root right into his microphones (one licked his face; one got a strand of hair and began experimentally chewing), and when he stood up, he found his MiniDisc player had been knocked open and not a second had been recorded. The pigs he went back and recorded the next day were "pretty damn good," he admits.

But those first pigs? He sighs as he waits for the next question, and you can tell what he's thinking: those original pigs were some of the best music he's ever heard.

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