

Quiet American Speaks

An online interview with Aaron Ximm about Other Music

How do you approach the concept of "other" in your work? Do you feel that "authenticity" figures into how you represent foreign cultures/ soundscapes?

I consider my work based on recordings made in "other" places not to document them (the places or cultures) and not to be sound-portraits of places/cultures themselves -- instead I consider them at best renderings of MY experience in them: as a tourist, as a traveler, as an American.

Hence the title of my first album, Vox Americana -- the American voice, not the Vietnamese one -- the perspective is of the other, yes, but *I* am the other, I have put myself into an unfamiliar situation, and what I offer is documenting not the situation but what *I* attend to within it.

The misunderstanding and alienation is my own, and I do not necessarily presume it will be shared with the listener (even) -- though I think that it usually is; the audience is usually in my same world.

And:

I must admit, one way of attempting to provoke empathy to that position (or at least insight into it) in the listener is to confront/seduce them with sounds or combinations (or mis-hearings and mis-renderings of sounds) that are unfamiliar, or decontextualized enough to create dissociation, or dis-ease, or otherwise alter consciousness... to take the listener on a trip, in many senses.

Also:

I do use the *perceived promise* of exoticism and the fascination with the *other* very intentionally as a *tool*, it's a deceptive package, a garden path, that lures the listener into spending their attention on something they would ignore if it were not so packaged.

E.g. my recent album "Plumbing and Irrigation of South Asia" uses the *tradition* of folkways/smithsonian ethnographic/ethnomusicological documentary recording, and its conceits, as *camouflage* -- but it's a ruse to make people listen to sound that might just as well have been recorded down the street -- the disk is actually recordings of things that are in many (not all) cases a-historical or at least a-cultural, e.g. sprinklers; people shoveling gravel; pipes leaking and hissing; etc. There are genuinely unique soundscapes presented -- but fewer than you would think.

Yes: some sound is unique to a place and context. In some cases then I can only transport that sound and give you an opportunity to hear it, I cannot interpret it. But I can share with you what *I* hear in it, the relationships and resonances (literal and figurative) that I notice; and hopefully thereby encourage attentive listening and cultivate in you a consideration of the soundscape that is around you now, today.

Is it possible to be a tourist within one's own sonic environment? How?

Of course; one must only cultivate attention.

My contention is that attention acts as a lens that can resolve and magnify (bring to scrutiny) the inherent inevitable complexity of soundscape -- ANY soundscape; and that this complexity always provides whatever rewards we want -- aesthetic or otherwise.

In other words, to be a tourist is simply to forget what we know about our environment, to disable the many layers of filtering we automatically evolve from familiarity.

The Situationist strategy of derive is precisely to become a tourist anywhere by noticing what is unnoticed and rejecting what is habitual. A core appeal of travel and being an outsider is having no habit and knowing no ritual.

Do you consider your work ethnographic, a composition of prime sources- or do you believe that the context ultimately transforms its nature? In other words, at what point do you do you feel like you are composing material instead of arranging?

Almost nothing I do/present is ethnographic in the sense that I feel I am providing a service to science or knowledge -- that's for sure! :)

I do not attempt to document the archetypical, to survey, to classify, to construct morphologies -- specifically. Sometimes those instincts or small insights enter into what I've done, but I am more intuitive and visceral than that -- often to my chagrin or shame, btw.

I think I already made it clear that I don't think that I am (re)presenting recordings in a way that in some way captures and conveys some essential truth about the place/culture/moment of their making -- though of course I think it's pretty obvious that recordings may convey the relationships or structures or tokens that are used to pass meaning in a particular culture -- but it is always the listener who has to interpret those things.

My own compositional strategies are subservient to artistic intention, and they range all over the map depending on what I'm interested in (as an artist) at a particular time or for a particular project.

Of course I distinguish between the "mere" presentation of an unedited field recording, and a highly manipulated piece made from it (and possibly other sounds) -- but I could argue that these are merely different degrees along a single metric, the heaviness of my hand -- I'm always "on stage" implicitly as the one who made a recording, transported it, and offered it up in a new context.

Or to answer that a different way, I think my role as an artist is to direct attention, sometimes by mutely pointing, sometimes by juggling and making a song and dense, sometimes by leading you by the hand to a specific perspective and taking you by the chin to tilt your head just so-- etc.

How do you think about space and perspective in your work? How is this different than say...studio music.

Space: I am interested in scale (intimacy), the acoustic properties of spaces, the pre-conscious construction of space our brains perform -- and hence in the intentional capture and use of spatial cues (i.e. binaural microphone technique) to create an illusion of immersion...

If you read my comments on recording technique I discuss some of the ramifications of a stationary vs. moving "perspective" - - movement inserts me/you as a presence in a space, otherwise a stationary mic position provokes an omniscient perspective...

These considerations are unrelated to the creation of an artificial stereo field in conventional music production -- in which there is no perspective, only an isometric-like abstracted pseudoperfection that merely alludes in a well-developed codification to an actual performance.

This one is mostly just for me: How much sound do you manipulate your source material and what sort of tools/software do you use?

I have performed radical manipulation (eg extreme timeshifting, filtering, FFT convolution, etc.) for various reasons, but tend now to move farther from that as an unconsidered tool -- extreme manipulation or overt processing/process still occurs or predominates in specific work, but usually as a *considered* tool -- e.g. often *as the subject* of a given piece. I.e. a given composition has as its subject the process and/or its relationship to a specific source sound -- not the sound itself, and not the thing that the sound is nominally a document of.

Early on I did more unconsidered "cheating" -- ie create explicitly musical qualities in my composition with certain kinds of manipulations -- but I've become increasingly uncomfortable with that in my "serious" work-- though I still enjoy creating *music* too -- I just find there is a growing gap between my "music" and my "sound art" -- even though to my own confusion these are done with the same materials, same tools, and generally released under the same project identity.

In the studio I compose with a multitrack editor (Samplitude), almost always meticulously laying things out on a timeline -- I have not used algorithmic/graphical languages/tools like MSP/PD/supercollider/soundhack etc etc much. But that might be next.

In an installation and performance context I tend to work with different procedures/tools, e.g. my serendipity machines do not use computers at all-- only discrete equipment.