

15 Questions to Aaron Ximm

Aaron Ximm is his "real" name, but most people will know him under his Quiet American pseudonym (a term derived from a Graham Greene novel). Since 1998, Aaron has (among a few others) brought back excitement to the field recording scene and shifted the boundaries of that genre into a realm, where ambient and musique concrete meet. To him probably, these terms don't matter anyway. As he put it: "The world makes its own music, but we rarely listen with naive ears."



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Hi! How are you? Where are you?

Hi, my name's Aaron Ximm (aka Quiet American); I'm in San Francisco, CA. I'm good, thanks, but I am freaking out since my wife and I must either find a way to buy our warehouse (where I run a regular experimental music/sound series) or move out of it, and this must be figured out very quickly, maybe even before the festival!

The so.cal.sonic is right ahead. What can you tell us about your performance?

I believe I will be live mixing a combination of very quiet sine waves from analog signal generators and a collection of my own stereo field recordings. If there are ambient sounds in the environment I will attempt to incorporate them. I typically work not with a laptop but with a small mixer and numerous discrete tone generators and MD players. I use MD decks since I tend to "perform" using my original recordings, just as I made them; any filtering is done live. Though the source materials are the same, my performances tends to be different from my composition because of the tools that I use. My composed work is almost always constructed in the studio with a DAW, but I find the processes and techniques I have favored lately do not translate easily into a live performance context – and I have never found using elaborately- prepared precomposed material very appealing.

On a more general level: What constitutes a good live show in your opinion? What's your approach to performing on stage?

A good live show for me is a shared social experience of listening (to ear-opening sound).

A tape-music presentation can be an excellent "live show" because of the shared experience the audience has. I believe a "show" is defined by the audience inhabiting the same psychic space, not by seeing someone sweat or sway. My personal approach is to de-emphasize what I call "performance rhetoric" in favor of the sound in the room itself.

Another way of saying that is that I am not interested in "putting on a show," I reject the conceit of sound art being "performed" like pop, punk, or turntable music – I find that performances that recreate those genre experiences are usually a result not of the natural process of its creation, but of the shared assumptions by audience and artist about what "belongs" in the spaces work is presented in: clubs and bars and concert halls.

There are exceptions of course (Daniel Menche come immediately to mind) but not, so far, for me.

Which of the concerts of the other artists will you definitely attend?

I am actually in an unusual position, I'm going to be arriving on Saturday or very early Sunday directly from a week-long trip with a group of friends to Utah and Death Valley. So I don't know if I will be able to see much of the festival. It was only organizer Glenn Bach's cheerful flexibility that is allowing me to participate in the festival at all; and I'm grateful that it worked out.

What or who was your biggest influence as an artist?

When young, moving from place to place; now, travel. Changing places means reawakening; another way to say that is, changing places reminds you what you have forgotten to question.

What's your view on the experimental music scene at present? Is there a crisis?

There is always a crisis, the focus just changes as the pendulum swings. But boredom and fear and anger can lead to evolution and breakthrough. For me the crisis is that that there are so many possibilities to explore that we will never touch them all. At least, I won't.

Multimedia: A solution to all problems or a curse?

Neither, of course!

Unique and successful new work is possible of course but there are plenty of ways multimedia can go awry. My experience is that multi-medium art is difficult for our generation to pull off. Generally I think it is hard to find the right balance of expressiveness and constraint in in any single medium – let alone several at once. Also, for a single person, it is rare to have technical expertise and craft across more than one domain; and for a collaboration, it is rare to communicate easily and execute a coherent shared goal.

Of course, when something works, the results can be magic; an example that comes to mind is the Visuallistening collaboration by Scott Pagano and Christopher Willits.

Some feel there is no need to record albums any more, that there is no such thing as genuinely "new" music. What do you tell them?

Poppycock.

Anyone saying such things should worry less about formulating absolutist philosophical propositions – and worry more about making the time to listen! The problem is never a lack of new sound or new music to be made or heard, it's old (by which I mean closed) ears.

How do you see the relationship between sound and composition?

The best definition of "composition" I've heard is "organizing sound." The best footnote I've been able to add to that is that "organization" sometimes means simply directing (or just encouraging) a listener's attention.

True or false: It is the duty of an artist to put his personal emotions into the music he plays.

Utterly false. The artist has no duties, she only has opportunities. Finding the right constraints and the right gestures are the usual path but not the only one. Often the artist is interested in the likely emotional reaction her audience will have to a given gesture, but not always.

True or false: "Music is my first love"

False. Sound is what I love.

True or false: People need to be educated about music, before they can really appreciate it.

This is not really a good question; the furor this kind of proposition causes is often a side effect of the way language is being used. In philophy I would say these are

"language games." The problem is the set of assumptions people make (and often do not recognize that they are making) about the way they use words like "need," "music," "education," "really," and "appreciate" – any one of which can be legitimately debated philosophically, aesthetically, politically, etc. I think it is fair to say that people more familiar with the traditional idioms (internal structures) or context (external allusions) of a work's creation will respond to it a more nuanced way; but I would never say that someone without that familiarity does not "appreciate" the work, or appreciate it "as much."
Incidentally I am always afraid of the phrase "people need..."

You are given the position of artistic director of a festival yourself. What would be on your program for this season?

I have no idea, I tend to be a very passive curator: I see my role as one of creating a compelling opportunity and then filtering what comes back to me. I don't have enough time or energy to actively search for what I like, that's the bad news. The good news is there's so much good work being done that if you create a persistent and rewarding opening, good work comes to you freely.
(These comments are based on my experience running the Field Effects concert series here in San Francisco; my One-Minute Vacation project (now a weekly podcast); and the "Quiet, Please" radio documentary on field recording.)

What's your favourite CD at the moment?

The last few nights I've been listening to a disk called "Sounds of our Planet Volume 1: the Birds of Verona," a single long field recording from 1972. Other recent favorites are the new Alog album "Miniatures"; another Rune Grammofon release, Arve Henriksen's "Chiaroscuro"; the Rachel's "Systems/Layers" which just seems to get better over time; Eliane Radigue's "Adnos" on Table of the Elements; a Lionel Marchetti 3" called "La Grande Vallée"...
Last year my favorite CD was Oren Ambarchi's "Grapes from the State."

What's up for you after the festival?

I don't know. I have a long list of projects I would like to complete, and some that I must complete (a pair of commissions and a long-overdue compilation I collected contributions for); but my living situation is so uncertain right now I don't know where I'll be or what will receive attention first.

Homepage:

[Aaron Ximm/ Quiet American \(http://www.quietamerican.org/\)](http://www.quietamerican.org/)

Discography:

vox americana (1999) echolocations volume 1
maritime suite (1999) echolocations volume 2
moorish idol (2000) echolocations volume 3
s3 (2000)
moments in burma (2001) tessellation 1
plumbing and irrigation of south asia (2003)
rockets of the mekong (2003)
kagbeni variations (2004)

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