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Far Afield

With Quiet American, Aaron Ximm transforms the whole world into a recording studio

BY DARREN KEAST

On the introduction to John Cage's 1965 album *Variations IV*, a narrator quotes the composer: "Music is all around us, if only we had ears. There would be no need for concert halls if man could learn to enjoy the sounds that envelop him, for example, at Seventh Street and Broadway at 4 p.m. on a rainy day." Cage's idea was radical then, maybe more so today -- with Walkmans and Muzak, man-made music is more omnipresent than ever. Environmental sound is just interference to be overcome by better headphones or a louder sound system.

Imagine then a genre of music -- or maybe we should say, aural material that people listen to through speakers -- made up entirely of naturally occurring sounds, created by the world itself. An "unproduced" music fashioned from that which we attempt to drown out. The commercial implications are, need we say, less than earth-shattering.

For the most part, the genre's existence is still rather nebulous. The number of well-known found sound artists is next to nil, and only the bravest of record shops maintains a "field recordings" section (Aquarius is one of the few). But San Franciscan Aaron Ximm is convinced of the style's validity. He spends as much time and energy making his songs -- or self-contained movements -- as many studio musicians do. His albums just happen to be composed of sounds created unintentionally. He calls his project Quiet American, and he uses his Web site,



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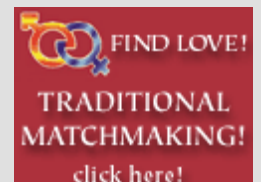
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www.quietamerican.org, to share his work with others and champion the idea that recordings of everyday life merit deep listening, perhaps even as music.

Last December, Ximm opened his SOMA loft for "Field Effects," an entire evening of field recordings presented by Bay Area artists. Even with the significant number of works offered that night and the existence of found sound sites such as www.earthear.com, Ximm stops short of asserting that there's a bona fide scene emerging around these roving recordists.

"It's weird -- I got a cold-call e-mail from these guys in England who were trying to put together a label whose whole mission was to put out people who were doing processing of field recordings without the resources of a full studio," he says via phone the week following the event. "The fact that they thought this was a viable context for a label just blew my mind. But the more I get into it and look around for others who do similar stuff, the more I realize there are actually quite a few artists who work in this area."

It became clear during "Field Effects" that material presented under the field recording umbrella encompasses a wide breadth of forms and compositional styles. Some of the source matter seemed heavily edited and processed with software, while other pieces sounded completely undoctored. If amplified more, many of the works could have come from a noise scene performance, with their unidentifiable sources, nonlinear structures, and call for long attention spans. Ximm's set was different. He used a mixer to fade between two MiniDisc players like a club DJ would, piecing together a vaguely narrative flow out of untreated recordings of a recent trip to Burma. The resulting collage was pretty, elegant, and didn't require hard work to appreciate -- an accessibility he attributes to his teenage years spent listening to Rush, Yes, and King Crimson.

"Without really thinking about it, I have tended to create things that are able to compel people in the manner of a pop song, which I think is a reflection of the way I grew up," he says. "If you listen to rock radio for 15 years, you come away with this idea that tracks are a certain length and you alternate your hard rock and your ballads."

In the way that a prog-rock concept album takes the listener on a journey, Ximm's tracks re-create the places he's visited. His 1999 album, *Vox Americana* (available like all his works on MP3 for free, or on CD-R for barter or \$10), is the story of riding trains, enduring storms, and wandering through the towns of Vietnam. "Looking back on *Vox Americana*, in some weird way if you squinted with your ears enough, it's almost like -- I hate to say it -- a Dokken album or something," he observes with a chuckle. "That's not what I set out to create, but it eventually turned out that way."

By referencing Dokken's heavy metal bombast, Ximm doesn't mean that the sounds on *Vox Americana* resemble electric guitars or power ballads, just that he assembles the material to impart a sense of drama and flow. He keeps the original sounds basically unaltered, so that all the melodies and rhythms come from the bells, chanting voices, hammers, creaking doors, railroad tracks, and dialogue he's recorded. By editing, arranging, and repeating particular snippets, Ximm achieves an ebb and flow, giving a sense of natural space to the listening experience, especially while wearing headphones. "Circumlocution," for example, begins with footsteps echoing down the hall of Ximm's hotel, and then expands into a flurry of street noises, a voice groaning "Oh my God," and a brief snippet from overheard

traditional Vietnamese musicians.

But how exactly does one progress from listening to relatively conventional rock to finding music in the ambient noise of Southeast Asia? Ximm owes his conversion to his stepbrother, Scott Jeneric, who founded the S.F. noise-art collective 23five.

"It was because of his interest in very underground music -- he was always presenting me with these weird mix tapes of stuff like [noise/industrial experimentalist] :zoviet*france: back in the mid to late '80s -- that I began to realize that there were whole communities of people that valued noncommercial music," Ximm recounts. "To me this was quite profound. I remember being completely blown away when I heard :zoviet*france: looping the sound of what I guessed to be a metal fence squeaking in the wind. I remember thinking, "Oh my God, this is an incredibly beautiful musical thing that's been created out of textures made in the world.""

It wasn't until a continent-spanning backpack trip in 1996 that he was inspired to try composing similar pieces. "I spent a lot of time on that trip thinking about sound," he says. "In India and Nepal I found myself immersed in these environments sonically that I had never experienced anything like at home. I kept wishing I had some way of taking a sound back and presenting it to people, because with that more than anything I could convey the realities of what I was experiencing."

On a trip to Vietnam a year and a half later, he brought along his newly purchased mikes and recorder and began capturing his surroundings. He came up with the name for his project from the Graham Greene book *The Quiet American*, which was available in Xeroxed form all over the country. In addition to being the title of one of Ximm's favorite reads, it indicated what it took to make the recordings -- namely, being quiet -- and alluded to "the all-too-accurate stereotype of the American backpacker as someone who is loud and thinks that they know more than they do."

Upon returning to the States, Ximm set about the task of composing tracks out of the raw information he had recorded. He quickly realized that the working process he followed was absolutely crucial for arriving at anything compelling. "In working in any experimental medium, the only life raft you have is self-imposed constraint," he remarks. "If anything is permissible, chances are you're going to end up with a mess. The whole project has been an experiment in coming up with constraints by which I'm able to come up with coherent pieces of sound composition from what is essentially the overwhelming amount of material that is around us all the time."

For the most part, he adhered to the requirement that all the sounds for a given track had to come from a particular location or event. The resulting movements don't come off like travelogues or radio journalism, however. Ximm edits the source material so that its original context is obscured, maintaining a sense of mystery to the tracks. When listening, people can attempt to figure out what the recordist was doing at the time of the event or whether a bell tone actually followed an overheard French conversation or was rearranged that way. Ximm draws art out of the individual noises by not overly contextualizing them, allowing the listener room to imagine his own little stories and meanings.


"What I get out of making and listening to these recordings is a constant return to focus on my own processes of identifying what is musical," he


says. "I think the music is there, and I hope other people hear it. I don't know if that's the single most important thing about making these recordings, but it is an interesting exercise."

So far, Quiet American has been just that -- an exercise, and not a leisurely one at that. The editing and processing demand more time than Ximm can easily find. He used to send out his painstakingly hand-packaged CD-Rs for free, but the cost and effort involved prompted him to ask for art or money in exchange. His next step is to find a tiny label to take the tedious operational details off his hands.


"I just want someone to take care of the manufacturing, so I don't have to paste together the covers and record the CD-Rs," he says. "I don't even expect royalty checks, I just want someone else to stock these things and push them on mom-and-pop shops, so Jane Doe in the Midwest can walk into a store and be able to buy them. It's probably never going to happen, but this kind of music changed my life, and other people might have theirs changed too."

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