

Europe and U.S.A.

i moved to berlin in february 1990. this came after several years of touring back and forth across the united states in a van, playing at small clubs, bars, non-places and getting in the process of all this movement very very tired. hence the move to berlin. europe was not something new to me at that time and, in fact, right before moving to berlin i had just finished a 50-date tour of europe. it was just great to get out of the united states, the reagan era and all that: total repression on a subtly psychological level and, well, in general, bad vibes all around. berlin was like a breath of fresh air. i moved to east berlin and immediately got involved with the east german improvisers as well as checking out the burgeoning techno scene, which was really kicking at that time: there were clubs popping up everywhere; and not just mega raves, also small storefronts where not more than fifty people fit. it was a great time, a real sense of joy and urgency in the air--like something new and different was finally happening.

i didn't get back to the united states for a few years, but when i did i realised that i liked it again--especially los angeles, which when i left, i absolutely loathed. i'm at the point now where i could easily imagine living in the united states again--which may now be bad timing in light of current political developments.

last summer i had a small tour in the united states, playing at a couple of festivals and also some small clubs. i felt like the music scenes in the cities i played in--chicago, san francisco, los angeles--were really open, lots of cross-pollination between different factions (jazz, electro, improvisers, etc). i miss this in europe, sometimes. in fact, the only city in europe where i've recently experienced a similar approach is vienna, though i'm sure this exists elsewhere and i'm just not aware of it.

in general, i would like to play more in the southern and eastern regions of europe: italy, spain, portugal, greece, hungary, poland, etc. i feel that the organisational structures in these regions are more flexible than in central and northern europe, where everything is so regimentally organised down to the last detail. chaos and uncertainty are also good things (in the right doses, of course).

a few years back i played in istanbul with arnold dreyblatt's group 'the orchestra of excited strings.'^a it was so refreshing to play to an audience which had no pre-conceived notions of what we were going to do; and to see them react on a level which, as far as i could tell, was nearly devoid of much of the intellectual excess baggage so often cluttering up peoples' imaginations in western europe. david moss also played on the festival and it was the first time seeing him perform--and i've seen david perform many times--where no one clapped after he finished a piece: nothing against david here! it was just that the people were maybe a bit startled...but hey: he was great. and so i clapped and then everyone else clapped. it took a small spark.

well, i like living in europe. there is a lot happening here for the kind of work i am doing--my music, installations, etc--but i miss the warmth and friendliness of americans, which may sound like a stupid thing to say in light of the current war in afghanistan; but on a personal, face-to-face level i would have to say for me that it's definitely more groovy in america. it's all a matter of reference, i guess. like a friend of mine from berlin said, who was recently visiting the united states for the first time: that continent is not for me!

Technology

the use of emerging technology has become a bigger and bigger part of my work over the years. what is important for me, though, is that the technology does not become the focus of my work. what i am interested in is sound--organised and non-organised; not in the use of technology to accomplish this. with what i do, i want the technology to be transparent. i'm not interested in people getting distracted by the technology i am using; i want them to concentrate on the sound,

which may or may not be determined by a certain software, hardware, etc. people often come up to me after a concert and ask what software i am using, etc.--i can understand their interest but, on the other hand, i think these sorts of questions are totally irrelevant. technology is just a tool and in and of itself does not determine for me what i do.

this also holds true in the realm of acoustic playing. i am a drummer and for me what is important is not to dazzle people with fantastic playing technique, but to do something which moves them emotionally, which maybe transports them to another place--if only for a moment. all the years of practicing on the drums seems so foreign to me now, though i can't say that this was a waste of time--it wasn't--nor do i regret it. i am only happy to say that all this practicing never became the focus of my aesthetic as a musician. i was always more interested in the sound of the drums and how their sound could transform the music which they were being played in. one of the first times when i really "heard" the drums, really thought, "wow, what a great sound" was ed blackwell's playing on an eric dolphy record, live at the five spot (volume 1, i think)--because here i could actually hear the person on the drums, their warmth and presence; and this lifted the music on the record to another level for me. i was obsessed with blackwell's sound, and not merely because of his sound, per se, but because of the musical joy it contained. years later i had the great pleasure to meet blackwell and he was, as a human being, exactly as the sound of his playing had led me to believe he would be: warm and happy and kind.

Personal Sound Grammar

this is an unendingly interesting topic for me because i have often asked myself, "where does my own musical syntax come from?" one critic pointed out to me that one of my solo cds marked a certain influence from my years (1994-99) playing in arnold dreyblatt's group--a music often labeled "minimal." i thought about this a while and then one day i came across an un-released solo recording of mine from 1990, which was aesthetically very similar to the later solo cd this critic was referring to. and then i began to think about how, as flannery o'connor once wrote, everything which rises must converge--which is to say, at some point, sooner or later, like minds meet, similar sound grammars, approaches--whatever you want to call it--eventually come together. and still, i couldn't answer for myself, or anyone else for that matter, where and how my aesthetic has come about; especially when i think about the scattered and disparate influences which have contributed to my sound approach. i've never consciously worked on this--often i've come across a recording or heard a concert where i've thought, "ah ha, that sounds like something i would do..." and, of course, there is nothing else to say about this because ideas are floating in the air, whether one believes in synchronicity or not. and it is in fact a shock when you stumble across someone else doing something which seems so familiar to you--as if you could have done that yourself. the first time i heard a recording by z'ev i felt this way--not jealous or robbed, as if to say, "oh i could've done that" or "he's copying me" (how ludicrous to think that!) but more like "yeah!" and then come the goose bumps up and down your spine because that sound is just so familiar, like a ghost kicking around somewhere in your house calling out your name in your own voice...

Teenage Heroes

i can say for a fact that as a teenager i only had one hero--actually, i am not big on heroes but i am big on inspiration and this one friend of mine, who i went to high school with, was very inspiring. one day he just vanished. this was around 1975 or so. i didn't see him for around six months and then he just re-appeared, as suddenly as he had vanished. his hair was cut really short and he had some pomade in it to make it spikey--this is a point to mention because, like i said, it was 1975 and i was living in the san fernando valley, going to north hollywood high school: popular teenager styles entailed long hair and interest in bands like queen, peter frampton, steve miller and, at the better end of the spectrum, led zeppelin (who i still like to hear! john bonham was one of my favorite drummers), as well as large american cars with big tires and engines, trips to the beach and drag racing--so, with short hair and an earring! now, an earring may not sound so radical these days but let me just say, this friend of mine, whose name i have in fact long ago forgot-

ten, was the only person i knew back then, and certainly the only person in my school, with an earring. and he suffered for it, believe me.

so, where had he been? to london! and what had he done there? he'd played bass in a band and hung out in the nascent punk scene. i just thought this was the absolute coolest! there i was, some alienated kid stuck in the flatlands of the san fernando valley: sun-baked, brutally monotonous. and he'd been to london...! wow...the world had become a different place.

Education

my education is a bit strange and, as i am wont to do, i have to laugh at myself about it. after finishing high school i went to the university of california at los angeles where i studied african history and music. i spent three years at u.c.l.a. and then went to the university of london for one year where i basically hung around in clubs and started playing the drums. here too my formal musical education began with john taylor, my first drum instructor and a very kind man. i went to him once a week and spent the rest of the time playing in an abandoned basement kitchen of the school cafeteria. this room's walls were completely covered in tile and the sound was horrendous--really loud and brutal reverb. everything always sounded like the big beat, like the ventures trapped in an echo chamber.

my informal musical education started a few years earlier and came to me via radio. radio has as far back as i can remember been one of the main conduits for musical information and revelation in my life. as a child, i basically got introduced to music riding around los angeles in my mother's car and listening to am radio--the radio was always tuned to khj, which played the top 40 charts. sitting in the car and listening to music always brought the sounds into the context of the space we were moving through: the light, the smell of the air, the sound of the tires rolling across the ground. music became something which had a place for me, ushered in an ambience. even today, some songs are irrevocably linked to certain spatial memories for me--and this all comes from growing up with pop radio in a car city.

later, the radio brought me as a teenager my first big lessons in non-formal musical education: punk. the first time i heard this music was on rodney bingenheimer's show on station kroq. i had a similar feeling to when my friend returned from london. it was like a revelation and the world seemed to open up before me.

more non-formal musical education ensued in the clubs of los angeles, where i started to go around 1978. there was so much happening and such a wide variety of different groups to see that i found myself three or four times a week going to a different show, and then when not going to hear live music i hit the record stores. in london, too, i was primarily sopping up musical resources in the form of club hopping and fanatical record collecting.

back in los angeles, my history degree finished, i continued studying the drums with billy moore, who had been something of an all-around, and very successful (his gold rolls royce attested to this...) session drummer in los angeles. two things i remember him saying: "there's a method to my madness" and "stevie wonder will kick your ass on the drums" (which is, of course, absolutely true...having recently heard 'inner visions' again). billy moore gave me more of what john taylor had started in london, which is to say technique. i was interested in jazz and improvisation but was mostly playing in rock bands, which was also great. basically, i was just happy to be playing! i soon found that the best education, the most to be learned, was not when i had a lesson but when i just hung out with someone i found interesting, be it a musician, an artist, writer, auto mechanic, whatever. i have learned more about music from certain musicians without even once talking about music with them--just hanging out. to feel how they approached life gave me more insight into their music than if i'd read a whole book-length interview with them.

i once published a short-lived (one issue!) literary journal in los angeles and through this fell into correspondence with one of the writers who i had published. his name was jesse bernstein. he often called me on the phone and we talked about everything but literature--and from these calls i learned so much more about his approach to writing than if i had read all his books (which i think i had).

still, despite this knowledge i kept on furthering my formal musical education. in berlin i studied

arabic percussion for one year with syrien oud player fahran sabbagh; and later i had a grant from the city of berlin to study iranian percussion in paris with madjid khalaj. after this my formal musical education had come to an end and since then i haven't had any more music lessons--at least nothing taught to me in a course or by a teacher.

Roots

well, i assume here this means "musical" roots--which would have to be pop music. i was born in new york city in 1960 and one of my first musical memories is seeing the beatles perform on television. as a toddler "i wanna hold your hand" was definitely on my hit list and i had a girlfriend name "michelle," which, of course, was another beatles song.

my family moved to los angeles when i was four. i grew up with the california sound, which for me means light and airy music, thinly veiling some very dark and foreboding emotions--i realised the latter only much later when i developed a consciousness about what i was hearing (and was finally able to understand the lyrics!), but in the beginning when the beach boys sang about good vibrations or the mamas and poppas about mondays or dionne warwick about san jose or glen campbell about galveston or or or or...well those are my early roots. and to this day i still love this music and listen to it sometimes.

my first big musical revelation after this came with punk and i guess i could say that it was during these years (1976-1979) that i realised what live music could be. what really impressed me about punk was the negation of heroes--which, of course, became a farce when one looks back now at all the heroes there actually were--and the dissolution of barriers between performer and audience. let's face it, at the first concert i ever went to as a kid--yes touring on their 'roundabout^a album--there was a distance between the group and the audience greater than the grand canyon. i was sitting about a million light years away in the back of the auditorium watching some ants move around on a garishly lit roger dean stage--talk about alienating!

so punk was cool. i mean. anyone could get up on stage. and anyone could play. even if they couldn't play, per se. which made it even better because this meant playing music was suddenly in reach of everyone. the stadiums collapsed--well, not really, but for a short time it seemed like they didn't matter anymore.

the last of my roots, took root, so to speak, during my stay in berlin: techno. for most people, i suppose, techno was about dancing and having a party. well, i like to go dancing too, but what i also found when i went to these clubs, and especially the smaller clubs like elektro, friseur, panasonic, etc was that the music was in and of itself just great to listen to. i have always been a great fan of american minimal music--steve reich, tony conrad, la monte young, terry riley, charlemagne palestine, just to name a few--and for me techno had a lot of the same qualities. what i particularly found great was the repetition--a loop could go on forever and there was nothing strange about it; in fact, often the longer it went on the groovier things became and the more tension there was in the music. for me it just seemed like the perfect blend of many elements which i had really only encountered before in some ethnic musics and american minimalists. plus it rocked!

Visual Art

i'd have to say that sound and literature have always been more determining factors in my life than visual art, though there is one experience which stands out and which for me was a real turning point in how i perceived visual art.

i was living in london and one day went to the tate gallery. i don't know how it is now there, but at that time they had one room where only paintings from mark rothko were hanging. i went into this room and i instantly entered another state of consciousness. ok, ok, i know this sounds very romantic and probably exaggerated, but in truth i immediately felt so calm and so sad, to the point that i started to cry. and this was for me a strange experience, because normally sadness is not paired with being calm. but there i was, feeling really soothed but crying all the same. these were the big works of rothko where fields of color appear to hover in front of the canvas. i sat down on a bench in the middle of the room. the paintings seemed to wash over me and i felt swept away in the dark hues he had used. i don't know how long i sat there, but when i got up i

had to leave the gallery. i couldn't imagine looking at any more 'art^a for that day, and, in fact, for a long time after this i didn't go to any more galleries or museums. i guess, in a way i didn't want to corrupt this experience, this memory...

An Enlightening Piece of Music

well, this is certainly a tough one, and i picked it...i will have to choose the first experiences which come to mind, for if i sit here and sift through all my memories i will never write anything...

there is a live album of the velvet underground, 'live 1969^a where mo tucker is still the drummer. on the song "rock and roll" tucker does something very simple at the end, switching from ride cymbal to cow bell. the cow bell is high pitched and much more percussive than the ride cymbal, which naturally tends to wash out a bit acoustically in the midst of all the guitars chugging away. playing the cowbell seems to pull everyone in the group together and give the music a focus which it hadn't achieved through the rest of the song. her gesture is so simple, just changing from one playing surface to another, but in doing this she transforms the whole sound of the group and, as steve lacy puts it, 'raises the bandstand.'^a it may seem mundane to say this here, but in this song mo tucker vividly showed me how even the simplest alteration in one's playing can affect great changes in the music.

another piece of music, or rather here, piece of experience in music, would have to be an al green concert i saw in 1987. i am a huge al green fan, even if i haven't heard much of his music now for many years; but even taking this into consideration, i would never have been prepared for what transpired at this concert. this was his 'comeback^a tour and he had--ostensibly--renounced secular music and was devoting his concert program to gospel pieces. well, after his set he came back to the stage for an encore. and what did he sing? 'let's stay together.'^a the effect was tremendous. i have never experienced such a wave of goose bumps move across my body. it was as if i had become one giant goose bump. something akin to a surge of electricity moved through the auditorium--around 1000 people were there--and i literally felt my hair stand on end. women rushed to the stage and began throwing all manner of clothing at green: bras, panties, blouses...and flowers. loads of flowers. body guards in front of the stage had to push the women back. it was like a riot. never before had i experienced the power of music, of sound so strongly, so clearly and so beautifully.

in 1989 i was on tour in europe and playing a concert in zürich. there was nothing special about the evening up to the point our concert began, and even as we played there seemed nothing out of the ordinary going on: just another concert, not bad, groovey...but nothing ground breaking either. a good time. there was one piece in our set where, in james brown's words, 'they gave the drummer some,'^a which meant i had a solo. actually, i am not one for drum solos, unless, of course, the solos are pieces (like the solo cd of acoustic drumming i did), but in the context of the group i was playing with, a drum solo seemed to fit in and so i was playing solos, night after night. this night was something different, though. as i went into the solo i blacked out, which is to say i disappeared from my own consciousness--i had the feeling that i was floating above my drumset, looking down on myself. and then, as suddenly as i went away, i was there again, leading the band back into the song. after the concert everyone in the group was coming up to me, saying how great the solo was, how they hadn't heard me play anything like that before, etc. and i couldn't remember any of it--not one bit of what i played. i know that otomo yoshihide talks about music without memory; and i'm sure he is referring to something else. but for me, this was my music without memory; and it demonstrated to me that what lies in the unconsciousness, what is devoid of our bag of tricks and clichés is so much richer and truer to ourselves and what we really want to express as musicians (or artists, whatever). i felt sad, in a way, because i had tapped into something and i had no way of knowing how to return. it was like i went through a portal and now that portal was gone. memory of what i did was also gone (or was never there), but what remained was something more akin to a residue of memory--the recollection of a feeling, of an event which resides not in our consciousness but perhaps only in our dreams.

the last enlightenment or, maybe better stated, epiphany was the first time i played a concert with the orchestra of excited strings. this was in prague in 1994. up till the time we actually went on

stage for this concert we had only been rehearsing, and not with a very good p.a., either. the sound check before the concert was like our rehearsals--good but not exactly rocking. everyone was trying to save their energy for the concert that evening. with the first piece of the performance i was absolutely thunder struck: the power of the music was immense; this had nothing to do with volume--though we didn't exactly play softly--but more, i think, with the tuning system arnold was using (just intonation) and the confluence of all the upper partials and different timbres. sounds appeared which weren't being played: sirens, wind, bells, high whistling--all from the mixing of different tones, incidental to the actual notes being played. it was truly psychedelic and really moving. i felt like i was spinning around in a tornado of sound, rising higher and higher above a dense cloud of surging overtones. unforgettable!

Error

what can i say about it? error. what could be more important? i mean, getting it "right" is certainly an issue, something to be considered and not a bad thing in and of itself. but often getting it right is built upon a road of errors. not to say that i seek errors--this would be beside the point; and, anyways, the more one seeks the less one finds. when an error arises, especially in the context of music and sound investigation, i am more often than not pleased that it has happened: and this encompasses everything from malfunctioning software to being injured and trying to play despite of it. the latter is actually a good case in point, which, strictly speaking, isn't necessarily an error but it is certainly something unexpected happening (and it certainly was an error which led to me injuring my ankle).

i was in tokyo recording with toshimaru nakamura for the second repeat cd. one week before i had had an accident and completely ripped up the ligaments in my left ankle. the end result was i couldn't play the hi-hat. i was lopsided, so to speak. my balance as a drummer has a lot to do with having two active feet on the ground--and in this case it was just one. it has been said that necessity is the mother of invention and on this day truer words had never been spoken. i ended up playing in a much simpler, refined fashion than i otherwise would have. the strange thing was, at the time of recording i wasn't really pleased with my playing. i felt compromised by my perceived limitations.

it wasn't until a couple of months later, when i received a mix of the session from toshi, that i heard the music for what it was: great! at the time of our recording, disappointment clouded my perception of the music. in fact, i had relegated the session to write-off status. but when i heard the mix months later...wow! it really opened me up to thinking about my playing in a new way. and to this day repeat's second cd ('temporary contemporary^a) is one of my all-time favorites. but what a price to pay...it took over a year for my ankle to fully heal.