

ruis interview with michael northam (march 2010)

How did you ended up in Europa? Bored with the American culture?

I have often felt as if I was the "foreigner" wherever I have lived. Growing up on the West side of Indianapolis, I felt particularly estranged from the culture and people. Retrospectively, I see that it WAS a priori an alienating social/economic structure. But I thought this feeling was something that might "go away" when I grew up, but never did. It just got worse. When I was maybe 15 I went on a school trip to Europe and somehow I felt more comfortable during that short trip than ever before. Upon returning, I had a growing frustration and even a bitter hatred to the place where I grew up. So – this context of my first 18 years increased the potential energy to get away – and as far "away" as possible.

Later – getting involved with the underground art movements – I felt that I was inspired by a certain social radicalism that I found more active in Europe than America. The radicalism in the States always felt contrived. During the 1990's I began to live a dual life (six months in the states, six months in Europe). I tried out different locations on both continents – Austin, Seattle, Portland – London, Prague, Liege, etc... The shift back and forth started doing my head in.

I felt that I should focus on one continent, but it was difficult to find a good balance between the nature of the western states and the cultural hybrids of Europe. Eventually, I simply went to where I could make a living doing what I loved to do. In the States I always worked temporary jobs and felt crazy for the kind of music I was interested in and making. I was constantly trying to introduce the ideas to people I met, but in the 1990's there were far fewer people interested in new music than today. In Europe, however, I felt I was landing into a tradition of sorts, and was embraced in some kind of huge underground network. I moved around and began easily doing tours and shows, both solo and with John Grzinich as ERG. I felt that simply in Europe I could grow up in a multidimensional network and learn and participate with something larger. Where as in America it felt that it was more about being a big fish in small tanks – that is to say – situating yourself in the "scene" of a particular region or style and then establishing some kind of "kudos" – or moving through some kind of meta tribal stratification. I found that in America one can create a kind of isolated fantasy 'scene' around themselves and their immediate friends. This "American" cultural underground has positive and negative aspects. While wildly fantastic culture can be cultivated seemingly from no where, more frequently, the art scene in America seems built around people with money since there is no social funding network. I come from rather lower level working class family (always worried about money) in the Midwest,

and I felt that I never met people in the underground music scene that could relate with this kind of working-class background (at least not with the new music). But in Europe, I felt that there was a chance to come out of "nowhere" and get funding and therefore I found it more inspiring in the long run.

Sometimes, when I return to America, I just see myself holing up in the woods somewhere and becoming a hermit. Oddly enough, most of the interesting artists I know from the states are doing just that. Whereas in Europe I feel that I can open to social situations and learn more about people from all over the world. Living in Europe gets me out of my solitary tendencies and into new territory that is challenging and deeply inspirational – although the process of finding a way to survive here has been exasperatingly challenging.

What are you mainly working on today?

For several years now I have been bending my approach to increasingly incorporate traditional instruments and live "playing". For nearly 15 years my goal was to create a non-human music (music of molecules, minerals, pure energy), but I began to realize that there are interesting potentials inside of tonal and micro-tonal frequencies that actually trigger and open the perception that I am after. Often times it is far deeper than trying to work with obvious atonal or "inhuman" sound sources. In fact – it becomes more and more clear to me that such abstract approaches are coming from "ideas" about music/sound – rather than the experiential evidence of what the sound "does" to you.

Naturally then I have gravitated to embrace and accept that I have always loved folk and traditional music – as well as obscure and special pop and psychedelic music. Though because I have never participated in bands or traditional music, I realize that it is a long process of transformation and I must have patience with this. Also I realize I must embrace and appreciate aspects of the process that are amorphous and perhaps "uncool". For example, for several years now I have picked up playing different kinds of bamboo flutes (bansuri, shakuhachi) as non-electronic tone generators. I love the idea that I can take such a small object out to locations and make "field recordings" by simply playing and using my body as a kind of receptor to other kinds of signals and perceptions.

During this evolution there is a long learning process of playing an instrument – and often times this "tooting around" is not useful for the music I am known for (and maybe even "shocking" to some people who have followed my music). Since my move to Berlin in March of 2009, it is downright funny as people who

have "expectations" of some kind of absurd industrial/experimental style (which I have never been into) see me playing a flute and just exclaim that I am some kind of "hippy" now. It is laughable as people get ideas set in their head, and think that somehow people are better artists if they stick to one direction for years and years. I am not sure where this kind of monolithic conception of the "reputation" of an artist comes from (i.e. the implication that someone does one thing – then it is automatically respectable), but as this process goes on, I find the right tools to transform my playing into the knowledge I have about acousmatic music and systems. It becomes clear that there are territories to cross...

Anyway, I have been working on creating and crossing a web-like bridge between the perceptual process of making and listening to field-recordings (combined with the years of developing techniques such as my "molecular" music or "composting" procedures), and a growing fascination and amoebic intuitions about musical song-structure.

Luckily, I am situated in a city (Berlin) where there are plenty of others who are exploring things to different degrees, so I am often meeting new musicians & players of different backgrounds. I prefer the ones who are fresh on the scene and who are bringing other sensibilities than the tired known Berlin sound. I've been playing with my Italian friend Francesco Cavaliere, Chilean friend Benjamin Altermatt, and also with one of the founding members of the Jeweled Antler Collective from S.F. Jason Honea – and others are always appearing. We play very often in Berlin in different living rooms and this helps to explore and understand how to contextualize my ideas and my actual abilities in different "modes".

In parallel, I have started a career as a film-sound designer, working with Foley artists, set recording, soundscaping and mastering – all inspired by and based on my personal intuitive techniques. I have had the luck to be involved in a new feature-film project with a Vermont, US based director, John DiGeorge, who appreciates my eccentric techniques. We have been doing the post work now for over a year, carefully constructing rich soundscapes that combine foley into a living, sonic universe that depicts an odd Jungian inspired story that DiGeorge has constructed in rural Vermont. We are also weaving original music and song-material offered from my friends Laura Naukkarinen & Antti Tolvi (Lau Nau). I am slowly doing more work along these lines, and would like to do more work for choreographers for pieces like "IN-BETWEEN" with Benjamin Vandewalle, which I developed at the Monty in Antwerp, 2007. These come slowly – and there are rumors that I will work on a documentary about Turkish folk music this summer for German TV later this year.

What do you think is the best environment to hear your music in?

I feel that my work is always intended to be a kind of "functional" tool for creativity. For several years now, I begin mastering what I do to be something that can be played in every kind of format, and for various occasions. Generally, however, I try to avoid contexts where the music is "used" as entertainment. I am still very much against the contemporary conception of passive entertainment. I prefer to consider my work, and the work that most inspires me, as a kind of perceptual "opportunity" that a listener can choose to engage in. But to do so, they have to set aside preconceptions, and rather be more attentive to what IS – not what should be. Therefore, I still am very suspect about "scenes" as it is a kind of wild growth of expectations. Once some scene or "style" is established and you are identified with it, then there are a whole slew of expectations growing up around you. I would prefer to avoid this, even at the cost of not being so marketable, which anyway I find a lamentable problem. I think that most artists of the genre that I feel a part of should be committed first and foremost at being honest. Then, naturally, the attention might grow – but as an aspect of an audience that "wants" or is "ready" to hear.

In my practical reality, I think that many artists in the same range of work that I am involved with all appreciate a situation that might simulate their homes or any kind of intimate environment where a listener might be able to trust, unwind and deeply listen (or do what ever they feel like within the context of deep-listening – making art, writing, moving – making love!). Sadly, the "formality" of public events often delimitates this and creates a stilted and cold environment where listeners tend to only think about the music, and not feel it. This is why the mediums of CD, vinyl, and mp3 is nice because a person can bring this music into their most intimate environments and "use" it as they like.

Recently, I have been improvising once a week for a group of people during their 'butoh' training. This has often times been an amazing experience! I am there with a group of people having an intense, personal (somatic) experience... there is a very special kind of group listening that is simultaneously functional and internal. I have learned a lot from this and hope to continue developing and possibly creating my own type of sonic-somatic workshops that underline this experience.

Do you think the process of listening to music is different from the process of listening to other things?

Not necessarily, although music offers a kind of sonic rasa, which in Indian music means the concept that certain tonal relations create "flavor" or a "feeling map" of certain times, seasons, etc. More and more I realize this is the case, but without defining it. The "flavor" or "feeling" of the music just IS... and it is nearly impossible to explain in words. After years of making field recordings at specific geographic locations, I begin to realize that tonal relations have a more effective way of opening a listener to possible transportive states than pure sound recordings. Listening to the natural world offers a wonderful experience (albeit mediated) of the 'prima materia' of raw sound and is the "what is" of creation. Tonal "music" or arranged music "played" by a human is something that transmits information very directly to other humans. I once thought non-referential, acousmatic sound music offered up a new perception of reality, but time and again, I realize this "new" is not new at all. The raw sound of nature is the "rasa" of void and always returns to a particular mental state of non-being. Therefore "music" perhaps would be the sonic state of "being". Of course, in-between we have a wonderful and wide field of interpretation. It is in this "in-between" that I would like to work.

Therefore, in answer to your question I don't think the "process" of listening to music is different than the "process" of listening to other things, however I think the result is different.

You mentioned once that you wrote for a sound art magazine. Could you tell us a little more?

Around 1989 or so I moved from Indianapolis to Austin, Texas and found that I was living only a couple blocks from Daniel Plunkett's house. I knew him from a 'zine I ordered while still living in Indianapolis entitled N D. Because of the proximity and the fact that I was working at a photocopy shop, I became involved with this 'zine - which quickly evolved in size to a small magazine that was respected throughout the 1990's for introducing people to new music, mail art, performance and other non-institutional art forms. The motto of the magazine was "contact-exchange-document" as we often were responding to documents (records, tapes, events, etc) with the instinctive need to contact directly the humans involved to discover more, and to eventually exchange in the spirit of "mail-art" as well as other art movements in the past. I worked primarily as the graphic aid to Daniel as well as helping to organize such

performances as Zoviet-France, The Hafler Trio, Phauss, Zbigniew Karkowski, Crash Worship and others. Later in 1991 during my first extensive travels in Europe, I began to research events and artists I met and follow them to their home towns and interview them for the magazine. During that time I interviewed and did reports on people such as "the dead chickens" and CO Caspar from Berlin, Victor Lois from Budapest, Das Synthetische Mischgewebe – at that time based in Bordeaux – and some others.

We also organized an event of cassette culture called UNDERCURRENTS and exhibited over 200 different cassettes from artists all over the world. The work with N D was invaluable for the beginning of my networking and travels in Europe. Without this, I and many other artists at that time would not have been quite as well aware. Several artists who passed through were involved with N D at that time, including John Grzinich, Seth Nehil, Olivia Block, Rob Forman (sedimental records), Chris McBeth (beta-lactam ring records), Rick Reed, and Josh Ronsen to name a few.

You travelled a lot lately to asia. Is there an impact on your work?

My "traveling" to Asia started in 1998 when I spontaneously went to Nepal after a tour in Europe. This time was a crucial moment of realization and a shift in my life. It was my initial first-hand contact with a non-monotheistic culture (Buddhism and Hinduism) and was to be a seed for my future research. This contact with Asia continued through a series of collaborations with Japanese artists such as Seijiro Murayama, my long time collaborator Hitoshi Kojo (Kodama), and more recently with Sachiyo Honda. I felt that such direct relationships in sound as a medium with people from Japan were showing me a side of myself I had not yet come to accept, nor explore. During this time I was invited to participate in the sonic-arts residency at KHOJ in New Delhi. This was 2006 and I suddenly found myself on the way to India without any anticipation or plan of going. I spent four weeks in the city and ten traveling to Khajuraho and Varanasi. The combination was an impressive break to what was becoming a challenging relationship with my art work and my life in Europe. During this residency I collaborated with the south Indian DJ "masta justy" to create the CD release "golden shadow" based on improvisations during the residency combined with field recordings in Delhi. (This Cd was re-released in 2009 on the Russian label – Semperflorens – <http://semperflorens.net/>). I was invited by Shumona Goel to work with her in Mumbai in 2007-08, and I ended up staying five months and presenting a performance/document at the Cortisane festival in 2008. During this second trip to Asia I had the chance to visit the Dhrupad Mela in Varanasi and spend a couple weeks with the Gundecha

Brothers and their students at their school in Bhopal. So far this contact with Asia has been rather minor but is leaving a big impact. I am actively trying to find a way to spend a more extensive period of time in Asia and am looking for projects, films, schools or other opportunities to get back.

The contact with Asia for me has been a re-connection with my deepest roots and inspirations. It helps to clean the palette of the pretense of 'sound-art' and remind me of what "matters". I feel that there is something about the contact between humans that Asians have found that is quite different from western cultures. It is hard to summarize, but essentially it underlines for me an importance to make music/sound that evokes and strengthens relations between myself and "the other" as opposed to underlining isolation – which is sometimes a tendency with this kind of music/sound work. I find that I have also re-tapped into my body as the source of sound (as opposed to my mind), and combining it with a sense of all that is being sound I see then a kind of "wholeness" that helps me find completion in even the most obscure and overlooked places.

I think this contact and transformation runs parallel to my growing interest with traditional instrumentation – and is in flux at the moment. I still feel that the affect is growing and not yet formed. But sometimes I feel that my work will never be "formed" as the source and inspiration is always to get nearer too and in communication with the formless source. That, I would say, is the key impact that my contact with Asia has had on my work so far. An acceptance and celebration of the formless as the mother of all that I do!

Do you think scheming is a big illness of the scene today? is it because there is more money then before?

I would say that it is a kind of "illness" that is in general in humanity, but perhaps especially in the art world / music world as it is often an exaggeration of what society does focus on through the process of an individual's "individualization". I think it is an effect or by-product of the over saturation of commercialism and marketing...a phenomena that has so fully saturated society and culture that even the so-called "underground" is not safe from this social-economic virus. As more and more people become aware of more and more kinds of music, the scrambling for some kind of unique or novel psychic/ cultural territory becomes absurd. Therefore, people try to conceptualize some position from which to gain notoriety, fame, or simple opportunities to carve out some space for themselves. Perhaps it is the institutions at fault and certainly also the over-stimulation and over-the-top documentation in

innumerable medias. Even in the last 20 years of my activity one has shifted from a role of photocopying and home taping to word press and podcasting. The ease at which one can express their activities and record collections through blogs and other networks has, ironically, killed networking. At one time, it was a fascinating and awesome thing to find one person creating some unique sounds that you yourself had come across. One felt they had some kind of soul brother or sister coming to the same conclusions – somewhere across the globe. But it is no longer about connecting oneself to a family-like sharing of discovery in art. It is the carving out ones piece of the pie and establishing a kind of klan structure where one has to pay dues and establish themselves among others.

Perhaps it was always the case, but before the cracks were larger and the refined art of "scheming" was less important. But now it seems necessary to work your way through by presenting yourself in the proper way. The younger generation is brought up increasingly on media saturated lives, so they wish to create "islands" of uniqueness/rarity/obscurity to validate absurd actions. It tends to show itself by the quality of the work, however. But I think these things shift though the ages and who knows what another 20 years might reveal? Ultimately, one can see, hear and feel intention and its sources. Superficiality is not long lived and defaults into trends, fads and waves. Those who are committed are continuing an honest research over a long period. So... time is the gardener.

I see in places, especially Berlin, a scramble to be doing "important" things in increasingly microscopic circles...a perpetual climbing on top of false pyramids to get to no place in particular. One gets an inflated sense of meaning and importance by their vocabulary, or absurdly, their presence on myspace or facebook, or in the this or that festival, gallery or art space. Then extended further there is seems to be a desire to "show" one's rarity or uniqueness. It is an oddly entertaining dilemma because in one sense now is a wonderful creative explosion of many forms of weird music/art. I sometimes wish I was in Berlin of today but 15–20 years ago. However at my age I begin to ask myself what "matters" and finally I see that what matters is friendship, trust, joy, and the ever unfolding delight of discovery. I personally don't feel that I am fighting to be any thing in particular, and don't mind that people might have very odd opinions about me or my friends. Anyway everyone has some opinion it seems – I try more and more to have less. Rather more focusing on simply being present in whatever situation so as to grow more supple and open so that my music/sound activities may respond and grow in whatever wild way they might. In that sense I find it a joy to be around these days and active in many fields at once. There is much more to be done.