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Some Notes On The History Of *Devil's Music*[1]
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Devil's Music is a performance piece about global media, local culture and individual interference. It developed in 1985 out of the confluence of my fascination with early Hip Hop DJs, a Cagean love of the splendor of radio, the introduction of the first affordable, portable samplers (Electro-Harmonix's *16 Second Digital Delay* and *Super Replay*), and a simple home-made "stuttering circuit" (inspired, perhaps, by my years as a student of Alvin Lucier.) In *Devil's Music* the performer sweeps the radio dial in search of suitable material, which is sampled in snippets of one second or less. These are then looped, layered and de-tuned. The stuttering circuit "re-rhythmitizes" the samples by retriggering and reversing the loops in response to accents in the rhythm of the ongoing (but usually unheard) flow of signal out of the radio – in other words, the radio material you *don't* hear is always governing the phrasing of the sounds you *do* hear, defeating the annoying periodicity of digital loops. The brevity of the samples is disguised by this constant shifting of the start and end points of the loop – a thrifty solution to the high cost of memory[2]. All sounds are taken from transmissions occurring in the AM, FM, shortwave and scanner bands at the time of the performance; no samples are prepared in advance. The result is a jittery mix of shards of music, speech and radio noise -- sometimes phasing languidly, sometimes driving rhythmically, sometimes careening frantically -- a patchwork quilt stitched from scraps of local airwaves.

Performance setup for *Devil's Music*.

I have long assumed the radio to be the world's cheapest, yet most powerful synthesizer: you can find any sound out there; the only question is, can you find the sound you want when you want it? *Devil's Music* became my tool for playing this ethereal synthesizer, and the success of any given performance depended on the number, variety and character of local stations (New York City was easier than Ghent) – as well as, of course, dumb luck. A typical performance might start with a rhythmic loop sampled from a dance station; after a half-minute or so I'd add a wobbly chord lifted from an easy listening station, or a vocal phrase

grabbed from a news bulletin, a taxi dispatcher or a cell phone conversation. The loops could be slowed down or sped up, and their pitch could be adjusted over a wide range -- either with potentiometers built into the boxes, or using a joystick I adapted to coordinate the detuning of two samplers (no piano-style keyboard was used for "playing" the samples.)

While the stuttering circuit drove these loops through their automatic variations, I'd scan the dial searching for the next sample. At first I worked with one *16 Second Delay* and a single *Super Replay*, and was limited accordingly to layering two loops at any time. Later I invested in a second *Replay*, and the additional voice increased the richness of the mix. Even then, however, I preferred to keep the texture clear enough that the individual samples could be distinguished, and was never tempted to add more channels or additional processing.[3]

The piece moves by pseudo-Baroque suspension and resolution, as samples are replaced one after another[4], occasionally punctuated with abrupt multi-voice changes or sudden channel mutes. The introduction of the second *Super Replay* gave me the option of occasionally "re-sampling" and sustaining indefinitely the first two channels of looping textures, thereby freeing up those other circuits for new samples. Some material would be chosen for the sake of sonic continuity, while at other times I would string together a haphazard narrative from spoke words scattered across the dial. The blessing and curse of working in certain foreign countries was the ability to treat speech as "pure sound"; it might be gibberish to me, but I remained dimly aware that it might actually mean something to the audience (after one performance I was told that I had unknowingly transformed a corrupt Swedish politician's economic announcement into the statement "my boots are smelly").

Performances of *Devil's Music* in Amsterdam and France, mid-1980s.

Devil's Music was made for the modern wandering minstrel: every performance was different, topical, extracted from the local airwaves. After a disorderly premiere at the Anti Club in Los Angeles in 1985, I presented the piece some 100 times across North America and Europe over the next three years. During each concert there came a transforming moment when the audience realized what was happening: a word from a local newscaster or the score from that day's football match hinted that this was not off-the-rack electronic noise, but was made-to-measure out of the here-and-now, just for us.

Devil's Music got around. Live performances from Berlin, Chicago and New York were released on Slowscan, Tellus and Trace Elements cassettes. Excerpts from a 7-city tour that stretched from New York to Budapest to Bern[5] were compiled into a limited-edition 50-minute cassette tape for Banned Production in 1987, titled *Real Landscape* (with a nod to *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, John Cage's infamous 1951 composition for 12 radios). Each Banned cassette was lovingly hand-packaged in a road map conned out of offices of the American Automobile Association by the label's producer, AMK.
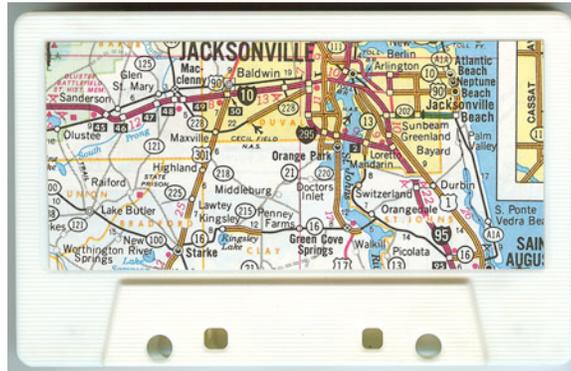
Real Landscape cassette, Banned, 1987.

In 1986 I released an LP of *Devil's Music* on Trace Elements Records. Rather than representing a typical concert performance, I chose to focus two particular regions of the piece's palette: the A-side was an "encyclopedia of break" -- several takes that sampled New York's best dance music stations, with an overlay of vocals grabbed from advertisements[6]; the B-side mashed classical and easy-listening stations into a into a Reich-meets-shattered-Glass lounge music[7]. Aware of the semi-clandestine market in "break beat" discs that collected hot rhythmic grooves from other records, I hoped that DJs everywhere would buy one copy of *Devil's Music* for jolts to the dance floor, and another as a gift for their Mantovani-loving grandparents or their Minimalist moms and dads. These hopes were misplaced at the time, but by the early 90s I was hearing rumors that the LP was being played in House clubs in Berlin and changing hands at record conventions for considerably more than the original list price. I've yet to see anyone dance to it, but one day….who knows?

Devil's Music LP, Trace Elements, 1986.

As recordings of specific performances, the cassettes and the LP constitute sonic snapshots of places and moments – befuddled playlists at play. As with photo albums or vintage TV commercials seen on You Tube, the passage of time not only adds a nostalgic haze but also imbues both the content (the voices and music of another era) and the method (the earliest instances of the sampling technology that is now ubiquitous) with new meaning.

The title, *Devil's Music,* was a nod to the rising paranoia of the Christian right, its pre-occupation with obscene lyrics and masked satanic messages in Pop records. The herky-jerky rhythm of *Devil's Music* seemed to suggest a dance of demonic possession, while the stew of backwards samples could easily have camouflaged the subliminal messages and evil incantations that were rumored to lurk in every distorted vocal line since the Kingsmen's *Louie Louie*. The album cover image was taken from a Con Edison "High Voltage" sign I found in the street, elegantly adapted by a designer friend, Amy Bernstein. I thought the man-struck-by-lightning logo neatly conveyed the St.-Vitus's-Dance-quality of the music. (In 1989 the same image appeared, in an almost identical layout, on an EP by Fidelity Jones on the Dischord label; and when *Wired* magazine started up a few years later it used the same icon to mark its reviews section. But it would be folly to accuse another of plagiarizing one's own plagiarism.)

Even after dropping *Devil's Music* from my concert repertoire I retained a great love of the soundscape of radio, especially in its mistuned, noisy and clandestine states. I carried a small multi-band radio with me as I traveled, and recorded electromagnetic chatter wherever I went. In 1988 I mined these cassettes to produce one of my few tape compositions, *The Spark Heard 'Round The World.* Commissioned by New Radio and Performing Arts, the piece sequences fragments of conversations from cell phones, ship-to-shore radios, CBs, cab dispatchers, and fire and police communication; under this I layered highlights

from my collection of those noises and whistles that shortwave yields so effortlessly. The stuttering rhythm of *Devil's Music* is absent here, the insistent looping replaced by a disjointed found narrative embedded in a more immersive, laid-back radio ear fest.[8]

In 2002 Chicago-based producer John Corbett invited me to revive *Devil's Music* as an antidote to the "Laptronica" that had come to dominate the electronic music scene. My original circuitry lay corroding in an attic in New England, and I thought it was time to trust the piece to fresh hands and ears, so I set about cloning the hardware in software. For me what had made *Devil's Music* a composition, rather than just an instrument or collection of effect boxes, were the limitations intrinsic to the original hardware. Instead of imposing an external musical form, I had let the idiosyncrasies of the circuits determine the microstructure of the piece (a habit I shared with David Tudor and my peers in his "Composers Inside Electronics" ensemble). The automatic re-triggering in response to the streaming radio defined the rhythmic essence of the work; the specific patterns might change as that stream shifted from Techno to Tchaikovsky to Tatum, but the phrasing retained a consistent, identifiable character. Likewise the short sample time, limited range of pitch transposition, small number of voices, and lack of additional effects all served to delineate the boundaries of the piece very clearly.

So I strove to "hardware-ize" my software. I tried to reproduce the quirks and limitations of the original circuits as faithfully as possible, rather than succumbing to the typical programmer's temptation to "improve" upon them: numbers in a program can always be made larger or smaller, but physical sliders and knobs have limits past which they will not move; accurate mimicry respects weaknesses and boundaries as well as strengths. I also sought out peculiarities in the programming language that could color my code in the same way that my circuitry was constrained by physics (one innovation arising from such a software idiosyncrasy causes a sampled phrase to reverse with a pitch slurp reminiscent of back-and-forth turntable scratching -- given the DJ-manqué roots of *Devil's Music* I thought this a not inappropriate addition).
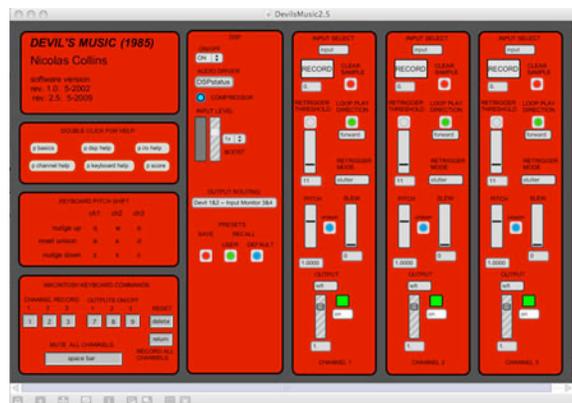
Devil's Music 2.5 software screenshot, 2009.

I wrote the program in Max/MSP and emailed it to ten Chicago DJs, computer musicians, improvisers and re-mixers[9]. It could run on any Macintosh with no additional hardware besides a radio and a pair of headphones. I kept the score to a minimum: you can do anything as long as you only use this program and a radio. The premiere at The Empty Bottle in May 2002 consisted of two hours of overlapping solo and duo sets of 5-10 minutes each. Each set managed to sound simultaneously like my original piece and like the artist's own music, which was exactly what I had hoped for.

Devil's Music 2.0 at Maerz Music, Berlin, 2003

I revised the software several times over the next few years, beta-testing it in concerts with Sicilian Techno DJs at the *Prix Italia* in Palermo, with Berlin Electronica musicians at the *Maerz Musik* festival, with some former students at the *River-to-River* festival in New York City, at a workshop in "Diskless Jockeying" that I gave in Glasgow, and in several solo concerts. The program has begun to spread beyond my direct contacts, so I occasionally hear of far-flung performances that have taken place without any effort on my behalf. For me the most significant software-specific attribute of the new *Devil's Music* is this ability to distribute the program widely, at no cost, so that the piece is no longer dependent on my personal hardware, listening taste, or performance style.

In 2001 Philip Sherburne called *Devil's Music* "an early template for Techno,"[10] but despite the presence of the rhythms, sounds and sampling techniques of Hip Hop, the record didn't cross over into the dance music scene when it came out in 1986. It was *too* early a template for a genre that was still years away. In 1986, as Robert Poss once said, the piece sounded like "an intro that never settles into a groove". Instead of settling, *Devil's Music* remains *un*settled and, as with seasickness, the lack of a stable horizon can induce a queasiness that only dry land and a firm beat can dispel.

At the time, live sampling and the use of computers and radios on stage were limited to the lunatic fringe, but today the technology, techniques and aesthetics of *Devil's Music* are part of the common culture of the DJ and Pop-oriented

electronic musician. Hearing it after so many years, performed by others, makes me realize that *Devil's Music* is the closest I've come to writing a "standard" -- something that can be covered by a broad range of performers and enjoyed by an equally diverse group of listeners. It may or may not be danceable, but *Devil's Music* would appear to have legs.

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[1] An earlier version of this text appeared in *Material Re Material – Remix & Copyright* (Berliner Festspiele, catalog of the *Maerz Musik* Festival, 2003). This version of the notes was written for the CD/LP re-release of *Devil's Music* on EM Records (Japan), 2009.

[2] The *16 Second Digital Delay* was somewhat misleading named: given the high cost of memory chips at the time, the device only achieved its full 16 seconds of delay or looping when the user moved a slider to lower its sampling rate and bandwidth to the point that no frequencies above 1 kHz or so could be heard; the same was true for the *Super Replay* and other affordable delay devices of the era, leading to a proliferation of very muffled drone music during the mid-1980s. When run at maximum, barely "hi-fi" bandwidth the sample time of the Electro Harmonix boxes shrank to about 1 second – a duration that defined the core phrasing of *Devil's Music*. (Despite its limited frequency response, as the first affordable "looper" pedal the *16 Second Delay* acquired quite a cult following at the time – Nels Cline, J. A. Deane, Bill Frisell, Shelley Hirsch, Elliott Sharp and David Weinstein were just a few of the many experimental musicians who owned and loved the box.)

[3] See photos and captions for views of typical performance setups and descriptions of the specific modifications made to the Electro Harmonix boxes.

[4] I returned to this technique of resolved suspension when I began working with similarly stuttering rhythms of skipping CDs in pieces such as *Broken Light* (1991), *Still Lives* (1993) and *Still (After) Lives* (1997).

[5] *Captured Music* festival, Karlsruhe, Germany; Ensemble Theatre, Vienna, Austria; Hirschwart, Erding, Germany; Közgas Jazz Club, Budapest, Hungary; Kulturkarussell Rossli, Stäfa, Switzerland; Oh-8/Jazz Now Bern, Bern, Switzerland; Alternative Museum, New York City.

[6] The mixdown of the A-side was facilitated by a computer-controlled mixer that I had built in 1982 for *Is She/He Really Going Out With Him/Her/Them?* (available on *Going Out With Slow Smoke*, Collins and Ron Kuivila, Lovely Record LP, 1982.) The mixer detected rhythmic accents in its audio inputs, and swapped channels in and out of the mix when their beats coincided, like a many-armed DJ cross-cutting between 16 turntables (in fact it was inspired by my first exposure to turntable virtuosos like Grandmaster Flash.)

[7] For the EM CD I deleted about one minute from the head of the B-side – with the benefit of hindsight I regret my original decision to begin the side with some odd percussive effects produced by the *Super Replay* in a mode that I otherwise seldom utilized. (I sympathize with the Coen brothers, who, when asked to make a "director's cut" of their debut film, *Blood Simple*, bucked the fashion and actually shortened it).

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[8] Anyone familiar with my subsequent records may detect a pre-echo of my "talking pieces" from the 1990s, such as *It Was A Dark And Stormy Night[8]*, which collaged found text material over electronic sounds.
[9] Todd Carter, Chris Clepper, Paul Davis, Robb Drinkwater, Koen Holtkamp, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Julia Miller, Collin Olan, Casey Rice, Gregg Smith.
[10] Philip Sherburne. "Experiments In Sound: I Am Spinning In A Room". Needle Drops. Nov. 2, 2001.
http://www.neumu.net/needledrops/data/00012_needledrops.shtml.