



IN CONVERSATION: JASON KAHN

WITH AGSM CURATOR LUCIE LEDERHENDLER, MAY 2022

Lucie Lederhendler: Can you give me your artistic background? How do you find yourself now as an electronic musician?

Jason Kahn: Well, in the context of music, a lot of it is about working with the ideas of chaos and mistakes, and trying to get outside of what I know, what I might do consciously or unconsciously. To push myself into areas where I'm confronted with situations where I don't know what to do. So it's really a lot about creating a system that's very unstable that I try to navigate. Of course it's not like it's a complete black box where I don't know what's coming, but certain parameters make it more unstable than maybe playing with a guitar or something where you have complete control, you know?

LL: I've been really interested in chaos lately because it contradicts itself. It's either predictable in the short term and unpredictable in the long term, or it's unpredictable within a very predictable system, but it has to have its opposite in there in order to exist, right?

JK: I guess if you want to really talk about chaos you have to look to mathematics, and maybe think in terms of absolute chaos, which would be something to do with infinity. But that's not [viable] for what I'm doing. It's kind of a quixotic notion, it's just kind of a vague way of

describing the work, but like you say, it's not really chaos, and it's not really unpredictable. It's less predictable than using an instrument where we have a muscle memory and know what we're going to do—especially when I'm playing alone. When I play with people and I'm improvising with people, then I'm reacting to them and it's even more unpredictable.

LL: I was reading your liner notes about *Things Fall Apart*, and I realized that I was much more drawn to the idea of erosion than entropy. Because there's kind of a rebirth in what you're talking about, right? So it's not just degradation, it's also generative.

JK: That's right. It's more like an ebb and flow, it's not like everything falls apart and then it's gone. It's rebuilding from the fragments again, and maybe while you're rebuilding you discover new structures, or new ways of navigating the material. But the way it falls apart could be gradually, or it could be suddenly. That's also what I'm interested in, in terms of working with structure—that there's different ways of approaching how you structure a piece, or you might think about structure so that it could just completely implode, suddenly, or it could explode, or it could slowly erode, like you say. That's also one of the things I think about when I play.



LL: Yeah. I have a two part question now: What do you listen for when you listen to electronic music or modular synthetic music, or music of this genre? And, is that even a valid question?

JK: I listen to a lot of electronic music. I guess I'm drawn to things that I do myself. Of course I've listened to many things that don't have anything to do with what I do, but really I'm drawn to work that's working with some sort of unpredictability, or some sort of open system, where the outcome is unknown. In a lot of process music, which means music that is built around a certain process of development, it's pretty clear how it's going to go—maybe a drone structure or building up certain elements through repetition. Things like that I tend not to be too interested in. I'm more interested in things that that, at least to my ears when I'm listening, seem sort of unpredictable, or maybe random? Aleatoric? There's different ways of talking about it but, historically speaking, people like, maybe David Tudor, or Gordon Mumma, or things that [John] Cage did, not just with electronics but in terms of thinking about structure. Then people from San Francisco like John Bishop. Well, there's a long list, but then people like Phill Niblock who does electronic music and I like it but it's—it's very different and it's very long form and continuous. It's not what personally interests me, but I enjoy listening to it. So, it's like two levels, it's like things I enjoy listening to that might not really inspire any kind of intellectual curiosity, and there's things I enjoy listening to that inspire me for my own work. Things that inspire me are closer to what I do for my own [work].

LL: So what you're listening for? If you wanted to, say, give somebody instructions on how to share in that experience? I also

noticed that you linked a dissertation [on your website] to non-narrative music? This idea of maybe revelling in the lack of footing that you can get—revelling in that frustration? Is this what the experience is for you?

JK: You know, I'd have to say consciously, in terms of the experience, I might not have reflected so much about that, but I definitely think in terms of listening to this kind of music, that a lot happens on the intuitive level? Maybe I feel like comfort in, like you say, revelling in that dissolution. You could draw some grand metaphor and say, "Ah, that reflects the society of today, and blah blah blah," but I wouldn't go that far. I would just say that when I listen, personally, it's very just very intuitive. Maybe afterwards I might think about it and draw some more concrete conclusions, or conceptual connections, but I think for people who come in and listen to my concert, I would say don't think too much. Just listen like you're listening outside to the sound of the wind blowing through trees. Because my sound could very much be something like a machine malfunctioning, or data getting clogged online somewhere. But I don't want to draw parallels between technology and nature, or anything like that. In general, when I think in terms of listening it's just kind of focusing on what's happening in that moment. And of course you can't avoid thinking about what you're hearing or what you're seeing. But maybe try not to get too hung up on that or, just try to enjoy the moment. You know?

LL: So it's a meditative kind of a zone?

JK: Perhaps. Yeah I think there is something to that for the performer. At least myself, I do get into a kind of space. There's no way



to avoid complete conscious decision in my opinion, but I think I'm working on a different level than when I'm driving the car or talking with you on the phone. So yeah, it's some zone beyond conscious recognition of what I'm doing? It's very intuitive. But when something happens, or I might get surprised, or I might find zone which is more cognitive. It's probably difficult for people who maybe haven't heard this kind of music before, and they're wondering how does the machine work, and how is he doing that. I mean it's kind of a tall order to say, just listen. But that would be the basic premise, at the very least.

LL: A tall order implies, you know, a challenge.

JK: Yeah it, I mean it should be. I mean, it doesn't have to be challenging or difficult to make it "good," but I think de facto it is going to be challenging for a lot of people because they've never heard this kind of work before. That's a lot to take in the first time. Not to say what I'm doing is so extreme or radical.

LL: I want to go back really quickly to what you said about not wanting to compare this electronic stuff to nature. But I was listening to this forty minute track by uh Jacob Kirkegaard, and suddenly had this thought, that we think "synthesizer" has built into its name this idea that it's somehow fake, and electronic music is somehow less natural than analog music, but something about this genre actually reverts electronic into electricity, like the natural phenomenon of electricity. Like it's almost graduated from its artifice right? Back to nature. And when I watch you perform, you're touring and you're using your own flesh as the circuit connector.

JK: That's true, I actually never thought of that—that electricity does stem from the atmosphere originally. On the other hand, my instrument is called a synthesizer but I don't really use it to synthesize any sounds. I don't mean to be pedantic, but the idea with a synthesizer originally was to be able to synthesize sounds with this machine. Like synthesize the sound of water, or the sound of birds, and maybe on the way to doing that, discovering new sounds, new kinds of birds or something. I was never interested in that, so I'm kind of using it more just in terms of— not a kind of delineated, designated sound—more just like what people might just call noise. It might remind you of certain sounds but I didn't intend it that way, you know, it could remind you of something like something being torn, or glass breaking, or water, but it's not. I'm not trying to synthesize any other sounds per se. It would be just kind of a coincidence. I never really drew the distinction, to tell you the truth, between, natural sounds, and, any sounds. There's organized sound, which some people would call music. People could do it with stones, or they could do it with the guitar, or synthesizer, there's that kind of sound. But then there's unorganized sound, which is what we might hear in nature. But as soon as we hear it, it's already organized because we're already delineating what we're hearing, and interpreting it. So it's hard to get away from the concept of organized sound because we're thinking beings. At the level of organized sound where we're consciously organizing it, maybe with what we hear in nature, we're unconsciously organizing it. But I think even if you're playing guitar you could reach the same effect I'm getting with electronics. It might take a different shape and form, it might sound different, but the processes could be similar.



LL: I think that—that comes back to that idea of the non-narrative, and-and relishing the lack of footing that you can get when you were talking about disorganized sound, and you really want to find these patterns, and if you're denied that, there's a deep frustration, right? An inability to gain focus.

JK: Yeah I think so, and for a lot of people, it's comforting—in a movie, or a landscape painting, or a symphony—it's comforting that it has a structure. It's like a road map: you know vaguely where you're going, and how it's going to turn out. It might still raise a lot of questions about why did they paint that landscape, or why did they use those colours. It might be different for people, or challenging for people, to encounter something that doesn't have that kind of narrative, or even a vague narrative, or something hinting at a narrative. It's not really anything. I'm not against narrative work. It's more just how I prefer to do things, you know?

LL: Yeah. Well it's like when you do those magic eye posters? All of the work that you put into it is refusing to let yourself focus, making sure that you stay out of focus. It's exhausting, and it's work. It's labour.

JK: Yeah, that's right. But I don't want it to be, I don't want to imply that I want to exhaust people or, like, annoy them. Or that I don't have any program at all. Some people might think oh this is, he's trying to be provocative, or he's trying to annoy or, he's trying to communicate something through the way he's doing this, but I don't have any agenda in that sense. So I think it is good that after the show we'll have a question and answer because I enjoy that. [There are] a lot of things I take for granted, obviously, because I've been doing this a while. When I have to explicitly explain those things then sometimes it makes me realize more about what I'm doing.



Images courtesy of the artist.

LL: Is there anything you want to add as far as something crucial to prepare people for your performance?

JK: I think just have an open mind you know? Have an open mind. I don't want to create any huge list of instructions for them. Obviously, some people will walk out, and some people might find it boring. That's how it always is, so.

LL: So just to prepare yourself for a unique experience.

JK: But I think that if they stay and they have some questions at the end that would be good.

**JASON KAHN'S JUNE 8 PERFORMANCE AT THE
AGSM IS PRODUCED BY PRAIRIES WIRES
FOR THE 2022 SPRING SOUND SERIES.
PRAIRIEWIRES.CA**