

Rik Rue: notes on an audio collagist

Google Translate Japanese reviews of Rue's CD releases:

... a specific sound and scenery to the material, special musicians of Australia to raise create a sound object mysterious Rik Rue. It is a person who emerged with Jon Rose and others from the underground music scene of Sydney in the 1970s, but it is a genius skin that he was already building a soundscape using environmental sounds when he was 15 years old...

With analog handicrafts, the noisy work which stuck the borrowed music and the ethnic landscape of unknown origin to stubbornly.

... Specific sounds, natural sounds, borrowed music, broadcast waves such as television and radio, movies, and others, large miscellaneous misuse misuse abuse strong tangible tape collage work. Imaginable mystery A total of twelve songs, including acoustic scenery and tangled noise breakbeats.

This AI induced cut-up logic of Japanese to English Google translation, full of errors and jump cuts, cuts to the core of Rue's body of work. His work is global and local; his titles producing a poetic lexicon: *Other Voices, Let all Men be Borders, A Matter of Indifference, A Raise of an Eyebrow*.

Born in Sydney to parents of mixed Polish and Native American background, like many, his family are officially 'displaced persons' thrown together in the wasteland of the European war, then sent to Australia to work. During school holidays his now single mother sends Rue from Petersham to the cinemas in the city with just enough money to buy a single movie ticket. He uses it well, spending whole days in the cinema, with its hourly repeating programs of cartoons and newsreels, while she sews fabrics and vinyl in a 'sweatshop' typical of the post-war boom.

With its non-narrative language of glottal, cuts, jumps and nonsense words he found the sound of these cartoons open and improvisatory, like the improvised music he later came into contact with London in the early 70s. Having escaped to London to avoid the Vietnam War draft he sees guitarist Derek Bailey, the band Henry Cow and Scottish storyteller and poet Ivor Cutler¹. Bailey coins the term 'non-idiomatic improvisation' to distinguish it subtly from Free Jazz and from the jazz roots of this form. In purist form it is a language of abstract sound that does not refer to anything else, no melody, no representational or programmatic idea. It is the sonic equivalent to abstract expressionism and tachism in painting. Conversely as abstract art aims for the status of music, this music aims for the status of Abstract Expressionism (and in this he was influenced by earlier contact with abstract artist Carl Plate). Rue extended non-idiomatic improvisation to include the quote, the stolen. Rue corresponds with Canadian musician John Oswald who calls this new form of 'stolen' sound 'Plunderphonics'. Non-idiomatic improvisation's preference for a-rhythm carries over into much of Rue's work, which uses glitched, or stuttering rhythms that highlights the presence of an edit or cut. These stuttering rhythms are integral to the audio cassette format, where editing it done by releasing the pause button to record.

¹ Rue closed the loop when he appeared together with Cutler (1923-2006) in Geneva and appeared on one of Cutler's late recordings. He also collaborated extensively with Australian poet Amanda Stewart and Australian-US poet Chris Mann.

In London Rue also experiences the power of the Jamaican sound systems, German-Argentinian composer Mauricio Kagel who he later quotes, and does movement classes with the Lindsay Kemp Company. Working at the Royal Academy in London as an exhibition installer he meets many artists. Back in Australia in the late 1970s he is a physical performer in Kai Tai Chan's experimental dance company and takes to performing saxophone as part of the improvised music scene in Sydney, then swapping from saxophone to cassette recorder.

The connection with contemporary performance and dance from Lindsay Kemp onwards is important to Rue's work. In a latter period he became a founding member of the influential mostly all male performance group Gravity Feed, contributing sound collages and mixes to all their major works. In this context audio collage and live mixing is part of a group devised Gesamtkunstwerk, not just bought in as a soundtrack, but an equal element in the performance. Gravity Feed's body of work, both sculptural and performative, was built on a base of the Eastern European and Jewish diasporaic experience of many of its members.

Rue's great innovation in the early 1980s was to take the cassette recorder and turn it into a musical instrument. Great innovation in Australian sound art and music is little known, its histories written in other places: for Percy Grainger the aleatoric (*Random Round* 1913), 'Free Music' and the music of nature; for Jack Elliot the ability to loop, cut, splice, layer and reverse recorded (concrete) sounds in the 1930s; later to be called Musique Concrète in France; techniques that are commonplace in music and sound production today. Rue was part of a zeitgeist, in New York Christian Marclay (later video artist extraordinaire) was taking to vinyl records, Grandmaster Flash was DJing extending beats by segueing copies of the same record thus turning popular music upon itself, and Rue was taking a commonplace object, the cassette recorder, and turning it into a virtuosic music production and reproduction instrument.

Alongside these collage works of pre-recorded sound and music, Rue begins a long running series of recordings of natural environments. Where Rue's work differs from many nature recordists is that there is little romanticism in these recordings, as though through the undergrowth may come the crash of an intruder, and the sound of crickets and frogs in Australia and Indonesia are almost an electronic music 'found sound'. It's as if these animal groups are musicians, just as much as any of the human produced music that Rue copies and edits into his collages. These field recording works later combined with a collage aesthetic to produce masterpieces such as *Things Change, Things Remain the Same* commissioned by Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1999.

While Rue has appeared under the designation 'sound artist' (Ars Electronica, Linz 1989; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1995, 1997) he prefers the moniker 'audio collagist' to describe his work.

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Many of Rik Rue's cassette works are now re-mastered and available from Shame Film Music.

Things Change, Things Remain the Same 1999 streams on the ABC Radio National program website: From the Vault.

John Gillies 2019