

INTERVIEW

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Multi-channel Diffusion: an interview with Robert Hampson

Loop emerged as a psychedelic postpunk guitar band in the 1980s, with layered guitars turned up loud and enigmatic vocals muffled in the mix. They stretched and distorted songs into intricate guitar workouts, weaving effects and fuzz between bass and drum propulsion, sounding like a weird hybrid of Television, Chrome and Hawkwind. Along with their three studio albums there were a series of amazing 12" singles and some astonishing Peel sessions, which were later collected together as the album *Wolf Flow* (Loop, 1991). 1990's *A Gilded Eternity* – initially released as two 12" singles in an album sleeve – saw Loop experimenting with more abstract dub and soundscape elements before the original band broke up.

Robert Hampson went on to form Main with Loop guitarist Scott Dowson, who continued to experiment with guitars and noise, but later became a solo and guitarless project following Dowson's exit. Hampson eventually moved to Paris and into more minimalist soundscapes, releasing work broadly within the area of musique concrète and acousmatic music, arranging sound into intriguingly textured compositions. And then in 2013 Hampson picked up his guitar again and created a new version of Loop, who released the *Array 1* EP in 2015, played some gigs – including the 2018 Meltdown Festival, and then seemed to disappear again.

The 2022 album, *Sonancy*, however, finds Loop in fine fettle and ready to rock. Hampson may be the only original member, but the rhythm department here sound crisper and more urgent than the original band, allowing more guitar interplay and layering over the top. Most tracks seem quite short, and I must say I'd have liked even more extended guitar solos and explorations, but the 6 minute 'Isochrone' allows for some experiment, as does the closing moments of 'Fermion' and the wonderful intro to 'Penumbra II', where sustained and overdriven guitars soar and drone above a muscular drum riff. 'Penumbra I' meanwhile, serves as a miniature interlude, a quiet moment in which to draw breath, before the music returns to more hypnotic regions.

Sonically, *Sonancy* is superbly recorded, with clear layering and definition; musically, it builds on both Loop's back catalogue but also Hampson's work with Main and as a solo artist. There's an engaging energy and drive here that soon gets you shaking your head, but also a subtle and clever sonic palette that uses foreground, background and its stereo mix to full effect. It's good to have Loop back and it seemed the time was right to interview Robert Hampson about his intriguing and various music.[1]

Rupert Loydell: *Loop formed in 1986. Where did the mix of psychedelic drones and layers, rhythmic noise and motorik rhythms come from? What was your musical background? Could you talk about your formative musical influences, ones that informed the original Loop? I'm assuming Krautrock is in the mix because of your cover of Can's 'Mother Sky' (on Black Sun,*

Loop, 1988a), and you covered The Pop Group's 'Thief of Fire' on the Collision EP (1988b). How did punk – or perhaps more likely, postpunk – influence the band? Was there any sense of musical legacy or 'permission granted' (by punk) in the mid-80s?

RH: Prior to forming Loop, I had been in plenty of bands right from my days at school. All of them short lived, as they often are when everyone is finding their musical feet. Nothing of note to be honest. One minute I was a bass player, the next a singer; or a little later, making more experimental stuff with a Tascam 4 track machine and an old beat box with two inputs at the back.

I would say I had very eclectic tastes , ranging from 60s bands like The Velvet Underground, The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield etc, thru to the more primal psych and garbage punk of that time, which led me to bands like The Stooges, Suicide and MC5 of course. But I also loved Punk and especially Post Punk, from bands like Wire, Fire Engines, Josef K etc, but also the more experimental, like Cabaret Voltaire, 23 Skidoo and TG. Old blues and soul and a lot of Dub were also a great love of mine.

John Peel was the instigator for people like myself, such an incredible period for music. Punk was a year zero, but it quickly also blossomed to a much more open field of play. So, I was all over the shop to be honest, and obviously along the way, you pick up stuff like Can, Faust, Neu! through to Stockhausen because the bands you like, in turn namecheck those artists.

Too many to mention, let's face it. But all of it solidified in me a great need to make music, and I would agree that all of the legacy bands mentioned, would make a sonic soup to me in the way I thought of producing music down the line, and are certainly very much part of Loop.

RL: *Simon Reynolds' Blissed Out (1990) places Loop's music central in his argument that new music was still important, mind-changing and could affect listeners emotionally and – for want of a better term – spiritually, inducing heightened states. He called your music 'transcendental collapse' and 'seized up mantras'.(136) Did you buy into that?*

RH: Erm, perhaps? I've always maintained that critical thinking along those lines is a job for someone else. I can say that I put a lot of thought into what I do musically, but you have to let it go once it has been completed.

I don't ever make music for such critical thought. It's not a motivation, it's simply someone else joining dots so to speak. So much of that is after the fact and with a benefit of hindsight on the writer's behalf a lot of the time. In describing it as such, you can make people think differently, but it's not something I always personally ascribe to.

RL: *How did you feel about Loop keeping company in with the Young Gods, Ultra Vivid Scene and The Pixies in Reynolds' chapter 'Heaven's End'? (1990, 136-150) In many ways your work seemed more akin to albums like Seefeel's Quique (1993), Ice's Under the Skin (1993) and Scorn's Colossus (1993) and to some of the bands' music anthologised on Kevin Martin's Isolationism (Various Artists, 1994), all of which were released after Loop had disbanded. Did you feel you were ahead of the curve or akin to other bands like these? You were always*

compared to My Bloody Valentine and Spacemen 3, which seemed very superficial to me! (Especially as I don't 'get' either of those bands.)

RH: I have to be honest and say that I've never read any of Mr Reynolds' books. So I can't really answer you in a way that you'd hope, because I don't know much about that, sorry.

It's always left me a little cold when labels are attached to groupings of bands or 'scenes'. Main was obviously grouped into the Isolationism tag and we took part in the compilation that came from that which Kevin put together, but I'll never really know if that was a good or bad thing to do, given how I do feel normally. But I liked Kevin a lot – his band GOD played with Loop many times and I was a fan – so it was nice to be asked.

RL: *Simon Reynolds, of course, abandoned rock music for most of the 1990s, and got into rave culture and the developing genres and mutations of electronic dance music (house, techno, jungle etc), a journey he documented in Energy Flash (1998). It seemed a logical progression for someone who had written in relation to your music that 'where apocalypse and repetition join up is that both are different routes to oblivion' (1990, 135) and that 'one of the effects of repetition in music [is] a heightened awareness of the Moment, a complete immersion in NOW, which is both alluring and threatening'. (1990, 138) Did you engage with dance culture at all in the 90s? Can you see similarities between the immersive 'heaviness' of Loop and dance music? How does that physicality compare with your idea that '[r]epetition is very much a form of psychological music'. (Reynolds, 1990, 137)*

RH: It's on record that I didn't care for that rave scene, it didn't connect with me. It perhaps became that a little further down the line, but I found the initial stuff I had heard as bloody awful. It didn't appear to me that the music had any effect outside of the listener being chemically enhanced. I found it quite soulless and trite, even if it was repetitive.

I was and remain a dinosaur I suppose in my feelings about that movement. I still blame it now for killing the live music scene. Even now, we face early curfews at venues because there is a club on afterwards and that still appears to hold preference for most promoters or venues of making money.

But I'm a lot older now, so apart from finding it frustrating at times as a performer to have the gear packed up by 9.30pm and hurried out of the venue, the younger audience wouldn't give a shit because they don't know any better – as in, they have no real experience of anything different. It's become pretty much the norm a lot of the time, and I should shut up and drink my cocoa.

Ranting aside, as I truly did not involve myself, it would be hard to again ascribe to that thinking purely because maybe I didn't experience it the way others did. That said, I absolutely adored Drum and Bass, which one could say was perhaps a bastard child, but D'n'B seemed to have a lot more going on in the artistic sense that my ears were attracted to.

RL: *A Gilded Eternity (Loop, 1989c) seemed a very different album to what had gone before, with more elements of dub and deconstruction. Did it appear that way to the band at the time?*

RH: It was always, and will always be, important to me to feel there is movement in the creative process to literally doing or making something that can be seen or heard to be a shift; hopefully always a forward movement.

I didn't want to keep making the same record over and over again, or with very slight differences. Obviously, you maintain an identity, but whether your audience appreciate it or not, you have to strive to challenge yourself in that creation. Never rest on laurels I say.

RL: *Your next musical project, Main, started out as what might be described as an abstract version of Loop, exploring what layered, treated and looped guitars could do, but very quickly moved to ambient experiment and textural drone, ditching the guitars in favour of what exactly?*

RH: I felt that the guitar still had possibilities for me in Main at the beginning, but after a while, it became so abstracted, it could have been anything. But it's identity in its form was the hardest thing to shift away from.

I became much more interested in creating sound from found objects in the way that Musique Concrete or Acousmatic music was structured and made: exploring sound made by close miked objects or using contact mics became the new obsession for me. I was happy to leave the guitar in its case, it became redundant.

RL: *Main's CD releases often contained ongoing parts of named compositions, for instance the series of Firmament CDs (1993, 1994, 1996a, 1998) and the six EPs (1995a-f) which each contained musical parts of the EP titles but were also themselves part of Hertz and were later compiled as a CD with that (abbreviated) title. (Hz, 1996b) Are these variations on a theme, parts of extended compositions or just conceptually or thematically linked? Or do you just like EPs?*

RH: Haha... all of that! Seriously, it could be for any of those reasons or motivations. I do love a good EP and they sadly don't seem to exist anymore in this climate, or they are frowned upon by labels as being not cost effective. As said before, I can be a bit of a dinosaur or stuck in time. But its a shame that these things are not so much an option anymore. The same way a 'single' isn't really a single anymore. Online digital needs have killed off a lot of that made things exciting to me, playing with formats. Such a shame.

RL: *The music press continued to write about Main in relation to guitars, which was one reason you called time on the project. You felt that your music was critically misunderstood? Wrongly contextualised?*

RH: Yes, to a point. It sounds like griping, which I suppose it is. The guitar thing was a drag, but also it was written a lot that I used synths on those records. I can absolutely assure everyone, that there wasn't a synth to be found anywhere on those records: it was pure

sound manipulation of objects.

So, it was frustration on my behalf, of course it was. I won't deny that. But I will also attest that not everything needs to be explained. Things that leave a sense of mystery or of not knowing behind, appeal to me greatly. So it would have been hypocritical of me to get on my soap box and accuse people of being so wrong. You have to let things go.

RL: *What might you say to those who regarded Main as a cold, cerebral and conceptual band?*

RH: It's a shame that is how some felt. I would say there is a lot of warmth in there. It's again a structure for critical thinking I suppose and critics... You can't spend your entire time telling them how wrong they are... or drowning them.

RL: *Comae is an overlooked project. Can you tell me about this collaboration with Janek Schaefer? My understanding is that you toured in 2000 but only produced one album (Comae, 2001), although the website suggests that the band still exists.*

RH: Yes, we met at a concert and obviously had mutual interests in our sound creation. Another record I was involved in that just took forever to be released. We did some shows as Comae and also toured together as solo artists, but it's a long time ago now, and I think our moment has passed.

RL: *Your solo work has been called both electro-acoustic and acousmatic. Could you explain those terms?*

RH: Technically, they're pretty much both of the same meaning. In the sense of the practice of manipulating timbres of acoustic sounds. Very much the practice of a lot of experimental music and it's compositional nature of sound design, in creating sound that doesn't always necessarily come wholly from a traditional source, or if it does, then the very nature of that source is manipulated beyond its normal recognised construct.

RL: *You worked with GRM (Groupe de Recherches Musicales) in Paris.[2] What did that actually entail? Did they simply commission music and performances, or do they offer studios and engineers? Are they anything to do with IRCAM (Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique; or in English, Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music)?[3]*

RH: Both. I was originally invited to perform at a festival of theirs by Christian Zanesi, GRM's artistic director at the time. When they commission, they offer you a short residency in their studio to compose and prepare for a multi-channel diffusion. It must have made a good impression, as I was invited for many more commissions after. Before I moved to Paris, I would obviously have 85% of the piece prepared and use the few days in the studio to fine tune. But living in Paris, and close to the GRM, gave me more time to use their studios for more of the composition element.

As for kinship with IRCAM, apart from the nature of the musical stylings, I don't think they had a close relationship to speak of. Both were very much treated as separate entities and I presume they still are.

RL: *How do multi-channel systems translate into stereo recordings?*

RH: A lot of the original recordings from the original artists of the GRM we simply stereo recordings to begin with. The diffusion was filtered by the Acousmonium speaker system. Its original concept was that it was a speaker orchestra, and that very different nature of all the different speakers, some custom made, would lend itself to the spatialisation of sound within the auditorium with only a relatively limited multi-channel mixing desk. As technology became better, the speakers became more 'hi-fi' in nature and the complexity of the mixer channels, going from maybe 4 or 8 to 16 and 24 channels lent itself more to actually making the movement of sounds more extreme.

I've gone down the traditional path at times and simply diffused a stereo piece or at other times, I have a 16 or 24 channel piece, with very complex movements. I love diffusing, on the Acousmonium it is very special, but even a quad set-up in a venue gives the piece so much more depth. At the end of the day, you can make it as simple or as complicated as you wish.

RL: *Is there a different kind of physical presence in your acousmatic work? Would you agree with John Cage when he suggests that:*

as contemporary music goes on changing in the way that I'm changing it what will be done is to more and more completely liberate sounds from abstract ideas about them and more and more exactly to let them be physically uniquely themselves. This means for me: knowing more and more not what I think a sound is but what it actually is in all of its acoustical details and then letting this sound exist, itself, changing in a changing sonorous environment. (Cage, 1957)

RH: Absolutely. Obviously most often, the environment you are performing in helps to define the intricate detail. I would say for that work, a seated and quiet audience and a multi-channel system naturally lend themselves to any nuances your piece will have.

It is music that pretty much dictates that its best environment is one that allows the listener to focus on the sound. I don't even like a visual element to accompany it, I'm very much of the mind it has to have a certain element of audience participation in the sense of actually listening intently. With that, the physicality of the sound is very much the focus and feel tangible, almost tactile for want of a better word.

RL: *You've mentioned musique concrète. (Hampson, 2022) Is Cage right when he states that '[t]he material of music is sound and silence. Integrating this is composing'? (Nattiez, 1995, 38) Do you consider music something you can sculpt?*

RH: Of course. The work that goes into sculpting the sound is composition in itself. To then arrange and layer those sounds to become a piece is pure composition. Just because it's not technically always musical, doesn't lesson the fact that it is still composition. Obviously, a lot

of my pieces are not for improvised performance as such. If there is an improvisation, then that is in the multi-channel mixing and diffusion at that given time. It will never be the same twice. But, the actual structure and dimension of the sound I would have created very much is compositional and also time sensitive. Most commissioned pieces are normally around the 20/25 minute mark.

In that sense, you can have a lot to say in the density of the piece, or the other way, in it's minimalism. My pieces generally are very active. There is intense density, a lot of layers of disparate sounds that will fly off at angles against each other. But I very much embrace silence too. I like to often let 30 seconds or a 1 minute of silence to appear in a piece after a very active piece. To calm the ear so to speak. It can confuse the audience at times, they might think the piece is finished. But composing in movements is very much of interest to me, so silence is incredibly important.

RL: *Cage also says that 'The composer (organizer of sound) will be faced not only with the entire field of sound but also with the entire field of time.' (Cage, 1937, 5) I'm particularly interested in the idea of organizing sound but also that 'entire field of time'. How important are organisation and duration in your music?*

RH: I would absolutely concur with that idea and thought. It sounds arrogant to say oneself is a composer, because of its very nature and how its is understood generally. I like to call my work Compositional Sound.

RL: *Organizing sound is not a new idea of course. In 1966, Varèse noted that*

as far back as the twenties, I decided to call my music 'organized sound' and myself, not a musician, but 'a worker in rhythms, frequencies and intensities.' Indeed, to stubbornly conditioned ears, anything new in music has always been called noise. But after all what is music but organized noise? And a composer, like all artists, is an organizer of disparate elements. Subjectively, noise is any sound one doesn't like.

Does music differ from noise? Or does music include noise? How does the noise Loop makes – in some ways in an established rock form – differ from the noises and sounds you use to construct and compose your solo works? Do Loop fans struggle with Robert Hampson's solo work, or can it be dealt with by calling it 'ambient'? Or perhaps the way music is disseminated now has got rid of some tribal listening boundaries?

RH: I always embrace noise and would say that all music is noise to someone. The difference between Loop and my work away from that form, is that I would become much more involved with the microsound elements, the subtlety and the space to breathe in my solo work. For Loop, I wish it to be much more enveloping: there's not a lot of room for subtlety. Embracing silence is pretty much lost with Loop, where my other work does so.

As for fans, all I can say is some like both, some don't so much. But it's not an issue for me. The one thing I would like to say is that for the casual listener, there are details in both forms that require perhaps repeated listening. The layers I like to use in all the music I make has a lot of detail and its not always instantly apparent until perhaps the listener has gotten more

involved with what's going on. So a good few listens are often in order to find it all.

I don't like the ambient word to be honest. I think it suits a structure of sound that perhaps now is somewhat dated, very much of a time. I'm perfectly at home with it in the sense that Eno tried to create narratives that actually didn't particularly exist, but were informed of notions or feelings he wanted to create in the listener. It's too easy to now describe a function of music that is often not as interesting and can be quite bland.

RL: *You chose to reform Loop a few years back, playing several festivals and issuing an EP, Array 1, in 2015, but the band then seemed to disappear until 2018's Meltdown Festival, curated by Robert Smith of The Cure. The band line-up also changed during this time. Did you have doubts? Need time out to think? Creative space?*

RH: Sadly, it is not as complicated as that, it's just happenstance for the most part. We would build up a creative energy and it would dissipate because of simply a case of bad timing. All bands can claim an element of Spinal Tapesque bad luck or misfortune, but we have our own that follows us around like a lost dog. It even has its own name: LOOP LAW. It's like Sod's Law, but far worse. It could have its own guide book, given its intricacies. It's handy for me to always check that, so I can never take anything for granted

RL: *You found time to remaster and reissue the three Loop studio albums in 2020. Was this a chance to reconsider the music and ensure your legacy? A financial strategy or a chance to reassert Loop's presence in the 21st Century? What do you feel the expanded versions offer the listener?*

RH: It was simply a desire in me to make the music sound better, nothing more. Mastering and technology had vastly improved and to have the ability to go right back to all of the analogue master tapes to bring out the lost nuances before the tapes were beyond repair. I also wanted to offer literally everything that was committed to tape from those days, and there wasn't a wealth of outages or different versions because in those times we didn't have the budget to expand so much on ideas. It was very much a case of get it done because we don't have the budget to fuck around.

So that's it. No other reason to be honest. Just to get everything that had been deleted or rare and date it approximately to a time frame and hope that the fans appreciated the time, energy and love that the project entailed... and to sound better of course!

RL: *Loop have just released Sonancy. (2022) In the press release for the album online at Soundheads you write*

I'm influenced by J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick to a certain degree. Lyrically, if you listen to it intently, there's this dystopian outlook. There's a lot of anger in there. I don't like seeing the wanton abuse of power, which is what we're seeing right now and I'm disgusted by it. I wouldn't say Sonancy is bleak though because I'm one of those people who believes there's a chance for change. (Hampson, 2022)

Can you talk about this dystopian outlook and how it relates to the 'abuse of power' around us? How does literature inform your ideas and work? Are Ballard and Dick favourite authors of yours? And how does Loop's music, indeed any music, change anything?

RH: Well, we've been fighting for our very own existence with something far more challenging than a sniffle and a cold. Which I might add, I still feel is not being dealt with as much seriousness I believe is needed. That feeling of 'it's ok, its just a cold now and it's gone' is severely misdirected in my eyes, and it will come back to savage us again.

The abuse of power? Where do I start on that? It's apparently endemic to the whole political structure of the world now. You can say it has always been there, and perhaps it has. But never with such wanton glee by the perpetrators. Of course, here in the UK its main protagonist is the Tory party and their golden boy, whose name I cannot even mention. The one who is a literal liar on so many levels, not one day can pass without a new one poisoning our lives. How there's not rioting in the streets and heads on pikes now, I shall never know. I don't understand the serf-like attitude the population now seems to have. But some say Briton has always been a nation of serfs.

So, that will enrage me and that anger is more prevalent than ever before. I was around during Thatcher and her henchmen. They are positively benign to what this bunch of shitheads are doing. Thatcher and her ilk actually knew what they were doing, of good and bad. This lot have not got one idea except to rape the country, it's thievery pure and simple. They abuse their positions every minute of the day and don't even try to hide it anymore.

So, from where I stand, we just about could not get much more dystopian without the absolute breakdown of society or warfare and it's resulting aftermath. It appears we are skating on very thin ice, and that is not even counting our decimation of the planet.

Of course, amplify that tenfold with everything that is going on right now. It beggars belief that in this 21st century, we seem to be teetering on a lifestyle again that is well in the past. And it should remain there. How long before it really is too late, I wonder?

As for Ballard and Dick, yes they are some of my favourite authors and it's still astounding how their work is almost seer-like. Scary to be honest.

Can music change anything? Well, I can't speak of my own in those terms, because I guess you could say it can be abstract. It does not profess to say anything so strongly political and some of it's influences could easily sail past some listeners. That is not a bad thing at all, so people must not look to me to answer that question.

But, of course you have singers and songwriters that have changed peoples ideas, their opinions and their minds. To think and to act from being told something is dangerous these days, and most often, it does appear fro all the wrong reasons. But thankfully, most of it doesn't come from an artists influence. That is not to say that hasn't happened before – I think of the spate of extreme right wing bands that have way too much influence on their listeners and their ideology. With hope, they will always belong in a small minority where they fucking well deserve to stay. Who knows anymore? Not one day goes by where my

heart or will doesn't get a chink in it's armour over the way people can behave these days. The reason I withdrew from social media was because of this. The poison that spews from it in so many ways, terrifies me.

I have gone on for too long on this... can we move to something lighter?

RL: *I noted in my review how short the majority of the tracks on Sonancy are. Do you feel less of a need for guitar wigouts these days or can you say all you want to in less time these days? Might the music extend more when the band plays live?*

RH: Everything was deliberate. I said all along this album would contain no guitar leads, tracks would be immediate for the most part and short. It needed a new energy to drive it, and that was my reason to even make it. It still has many signatures of what people associated with us in the past, but you have to move on, you have to change a gear and move forward. I don't want to remake an old album, and I never have. I don't think these tracks demand any more live, they'll be alongside older tracks, but they need to stand up on their own right. The very nature of playing live can change a song from it's studio life, which is a good thing. But for these at least, there is no reason at all to extend them. They have to remain immediate in their energy.

RL: Thank you for your time and, indeed, all the music.

NOTES

[1] This interview includes material that appeared as a review of *Sonancy* in *International Times* (Loydell, 2022)

[2] 'Founded by Pierre Schaeffer in 1958, Paris-based Groupe de recherches musicales was one of several theoretical and experimental groups operating under the umbrella of the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française. Devoted to production and creation, the GRM remained based on practice, and could be summed up in the catch phrase "do and listen". Exploring Schaeffer's ideas of musique concrète, acousmatic music, as well as other audible phenomena and music in general (including non-Western music), the GRM remains active today as a leading laboratory of sound experimentation that successfully connects to a younger generation of contemporary artists.' (Unknown author, 2014)

[3] 'IRCAM is an acronym that stands for Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique. Roughly translated, it's the Institute for Musical and Acoustic Research and Coordination. Since it first opened its doors in Paris in 1977, IRCAM has been a mecca for classical composers looking for ways to bridge music and technology.' (Unknown author, 2008)

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