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# Give It All, Zero For Rules!

ByMattin

On the 13-14th of December 2004 Mute hosted a Pure Data workshop in East London. Musician and PD abuser Mattin gives a breakdown of the themes of the workshop, surveys some artists and artists groups using PD, and scrutinises the relationship of free software to 'free', experimental and improvised music.

## [IMAGE] Why free software in free music?

Arriving from the position of playing improvised music, I am interested in trying to question how a musician is supposed to interact with his instrument; in my case a computer. In other words, what I want to do is to play the instrument against the grain and to expose the way a computer constructs you as a user.

In order do this I use various rudimentary tactics such as playing just the hardrive, bowing the case of the computer or using the plastic box as a resonance box. I direct my attention towards the things the computer demands from the user as much as the things it can do for you; the need for constant attention to the screen, the need to turn the machine on, etc. For me it is important not to make hierarchies between the sounds that the materiality of the computer would produce, over the ones that could be produced with software. Playing this way makes the computer an electroacoustic device in itself, interrupting the ideologies behind music software. Improvisation makes implicit a constant search of making sounds or reusing found sounds always with an emphasis on that very process in production. What you find, you have to give a use, and to use this to serve your own needs without having to change your own approach to music making. As we will see later on, much of music software does exactly the opposite, that is, allows the musician to produce easily a genre of music.

The machine that I was hitting was a G3 Powerbook, the same machine that musicians like Kaffe Mathews, Tujiko Noriko, Merzbow, Pita, Fennesz, Hiaz (farmersmanual), Zguiniew Karkoski and many more use, or have used, in the past. At a point in the late nineties it became the new icon of electronic music. Artiness, coolness, glitchiness and Mac were all in the same pack. As with rock music, all seemed all to be a matter of style. The Mac, an icon signifying artistic production could become a substitution for the lack of performance that usually computer players offer. Now, there are emerging artists like Jason Forrest who are showing us the possibility of hyper performance in front of the computer. His performances do not produce anything new, but instead, import an image from another genre of music (i.e. disco & rock). The spectacle keeps making you produce cultural overdose. The more obviously you give, the more obviously you get recognition.

*'I smashed a G4 laptop computer one time.'* Jason Forrest (aka Donna Summer)

The destruction of iconic musical hardware feeds into two processes of myth making, that of both the performer and the commodity-instrument. It is an intensification of the moment that diverts our attention from the performance of music production, a diversion elsewhere into the image of the intense rockstar giving you all possible clichés at once for just the price of an one-man-computer-band. In staging the brand, does the performer want to demonstrate the value of the computer? Does it really matter whether it was a PC or a Mac? Or is it just a case of: 'think different' pay the same?

Things are developing very fast in the world of free software, and what in the past would have been a PC running windows can now be a powerful sound tool running GNU/Linux. The development of software has been decisive in the way computer music has been developed. A classic question among

computer musicians is, what software do you use? In some cases there would not be the need to ask, as the sounds would be easily identifiable with certain software, just the same as a guitar pedal or an amplifier. Although there were many computer musicians who would just press the space bar to play a soundfile (and I have nothing against this), new software would bring the possibility of processing sound in real time, not just soundfiles but instruments, environment sounds, even errors (the already mentioned pasted glitches). This means now that musicians using computers have more possibilities at their disposal to improvise in live performances. The computer musician finds herself not in the studio, but in a situation.

Much music software is still proprietary, made by companies whose primary concern is to increase their sales. Making the software appear as close to hardware as possible can momentarily distract the user from its virtual quality, making him pay for his weightless gear. Regardless of this commercial relationship, my key question here would be: how does this software condition the user?

*'I used a lot of cracked commercial software for a lot of years when doing sound and I always got a couple of feelings out of it. One feeling was that you get these fancy programs with these fancy user interfaces, but at the end the more they have created this environment that's very easy for you to use, the more they've actually determined the kind of work you can make with it. If you look at a program like Ableton Live which is used by probably about eighty percent of people making sound and performing out live these days, it seems like It's good for a very few things, it's good for working with loops, putting effects on these loops and sequencing them, but it pushes you in one creative direction, it pushes you into making a certain kind of music, really it pushes you towards German techno more than anything else.'* Derek Holzer

There is free software available that can do the job of very expensive proprietary software, like Ardour (a multichannel digital audio workstation), Jack (audio server), Jackrack (effects), Ladspa (plugins), Rezound (graphical audio file editor), but for performing live, the most useful is likely to be PD (aka Pure Data), a 'real-time graphical programming environment for audio, video, and graphical processing'. PD gives you the freedom to construct your own instruments and give them any parameters you want. It can also do much more than that, but you would have to develop your programming and mathematical skills, as numbers are extremely important. If you want to get into the theory see Miller Puckette's Theory and Techniques of Electronic Music.

There have been a lot of interesting new situations developing from people using free software that question the whole idea of presentation of a performance. During a tour in USA in 2003, Dion Workman and Julien Ottavi produced long performances in which they would arrive at the venue to soundcheck, start playing straight from the soundcheck during the arrival of the audience and continue for as long as the people from the venue would let them (sometimes performances lasted six hours). They played using PD patches programmed with the possibility of doing random automatism. Julien Ottavi is part of the Apo 33 collective in Nantes. They organise many events and workshops that range from teaching Pure Data, to philosophy, political activism and art but always with a relation to audio and its social connotations. CIA, an installation that I have seen by them consisted of many wires attached to computers running PD. The audience would go into the space, would hit any of these wires, and this would provoke a reaction in the computers from which they would start to generate lots of sounds and combinations of sounds. Thanks to complex mechanisms of automatism from PD patches the audience would improvise with the space but not in such a clear way as call and response.

[IMAGE]

Openmute organised a Pure Data workshop in London on the 13th and 14th of Dec. 2004. The workshop was run by Aymeric Mansoux and Derek Holzer. It was an introduction of how to use PD, along with externals such as GEM, PDP and PiDiP for a more visual orientation. It introduced briefly

the many and various possibilities that PD offers. The audience was diverse, coming from the visual arts, as well as music production and the free software movement. One example of a group combining all three of these approaches is the recently formed London-based group OpenLab (see below). The poster advertising the PD workshop had an emphasis on VJing. This might have been the reason why it was difficult to focus in on the most interesting aspects of what PD offers from my point of view (sound production and live performance), but as an introduction this was helpful.

PD is a program in which lets you do pretty much everything and it is up to you what direction to take. It is true that at the beginning it is an intimidating interface to work with, but this kind of introduction helps you to get a clear picture on how to start your first steps. In free software as in improvisation the restrictions are not as clearly defined as in other genres of music or proprietary software in which you are supposed to follow and obey certain histories, certain codes, certain legal rights. Free software activates you as a user as you are often confronted with an immense amount of possibilities. What I am wondering is whether the new opportunities that free software offers could represent in the music the same radical effect that they have on the user, and extend this through its presentation. Free software is helping to bring into question how the producer wishes to distribute their work. With the availability of licences from Creative-commons greater than that of frozen items in Western supermarkets, a question of conflict emerges: anti-copyright or pro-copyleft?

This text is anti-copyright

### **Some groups working with Pure Data**

#### *OpenLab*

This project provides a meeting place for London based artists who use and develop open source software as their creative tool. As a result, the project will attempt to organize performances, events, meetings in London for the participants to share and exchange ideas. Furthermore, the project will also promote and demonstrate the use of open source software through the performances/events. OpenLab currently is preparing its first performance event, which will take place on the 1st of April at the Foundry. Since the start of OpenLab at the end of 2004, many members have quickly become friends and meets regularly. OpenLab was also very happy to take part in the PureData Bigband event in Koln in February 2005. We hope to have many friends and all share our resources to make great things happen.

<http://www.pawfal.org/openlab/>

#### *Goto10*

Goto10 has been founded in 2003 by Aymeric Mansoux and Thomas Vriet in Poitiers, France. At this time the primary goal of this non-profit organization was to support and produce local live alternative electronic music events. It was a gamble to see if there was an audience for such events in Poitiers. It turned out that not only was there a large enough audience, they were asking for more. Thus goto10 quickly started to setup workshops and exhibitions and started looking for partners in some of the rare local institutions that try to support digital art and media hacktivism. Today the goto10 team is formed by people living in different places around Europe and is part of a network of similar young non profit organizations sharing the same vision about free software and arts. While the original structure is still based in France, and prepares at least one event each month, goto10 is now most of all a collective name under which highly skilled artists and hackers work together in numerous places in Europe. You may see them in workshops, performances, software credits or as producer of unusual events. The current projects of goto10 rank from linux live cdroms to a series of connected performances. The new website (online in april) is meant to provide documentation on alternative free software and new-media-whatever cookbooks. Last but not least, in June goto10 will launch gosub, its free media

weblabel.

<http://www.goto10.org/>

*Umatic.nl*

Umatic.nl is an arts group based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Derek Holzer and Sara Kolster represent the Free Open Source Software area of this group by giving lectures, performances and workshops involving the use of FOSS tools for audiovisual synthesis. In their "resonanCITY" performance, Holzer and Kolster employ Pure Data, PDP and GEM to manipulate field recordings, photographic or video images and found objects gathered in the various locations where they have travelled, creating an improvisational audiovisual journey. Both are also active in educating artists about the importance of free software, and in developing end-user audiovisual applications within the Pure Data environment.

[http://www.umatic.nl/info\\_derek.html](http://www.umatic.nl/info_derek.html)

[http://www.umatic.nl/info\\_sara.html](http://www.umatic.nl/info_sara.html)

Dion Workman: [http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma\\_dion\\_workman.html](http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma_dion_workman.html)

Julien Ottavi: [http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma\\_julien%20ottavi.html](http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma_julien%20ottavi.html)

Apo33: <http://apo33.org>

For a good explanation of PD and the use of free software in music and sound production:

\*Stay Free\* Martin Howse [http://www.yourmachines.org/stay\\_free.html](http://www.yourmachines.org/stay_free.html)

Pure Data Community Site

<http://pure-data.iem.at/>

Miller Puckette own page Pure Data download

<http://crca.ucsd.edu/~msp/>