

Sonic Genealogies

Jim O'Rourke on Phill Niblock

Hello, this is Jim O'Rourke speaking you from Tokyo. I am a person involved with music, film and things like that since the late eighties in Chicago, where I was born to Irish immigrants. I have since not stop.

If I am remembering correctly, the first time I heard Phill Niblock's music was in 1990 when I was in Berkley, California, at Henry Kaiser house (a guitarist and composer from the same generation of John Zorn, coming from that same second generation of American improv group of people). He had brought me out there to organize his record collection, which I did. I was very young, I was twenty-one, and he very kindly had seen something in me or whatever so he decided to bring me out there so I could have the opportunity to play with people, because I hadn't had the opportunity to play with anyone in the States. At that time the only chance you had to play with people was in Europe. He was introducing me to various people's music and he noticed I was already tending towards what people would call dronny music. I was still playing prepared guitar at that time, using bows and stuff. He would point out certain record in the collection and would say you might like this or you should listen to this... One of those records was the Phill Niblock record on India Navigation.

I was immediately drawn to it because it was... dronny. And because it was a name I didn't necessarily know. And kind of soon after that Phill started hi XI CD label because around 1990 / 1991 CDs were still very expensive to produce and it was difficult for people to do an independent label. I believe the first few releases were his "For full flutes" and "The string quartets" and those really caught my attention, especially because in his records there were a lot of explanations about the techniques he was using. I felt he had approached a similar problem that I was interested in and that had been solved in certain ways by Tony Conrad and

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The intention of the Sonic Genealogies series is to listen to the work of some of the most eminent figures in experimental music and sound art in the 20th century. However, it seeks to do so in a unique way: through the ears and voices of those artists who have retaken certain aspects of its sound legacy and melded them in some way into their own creations.

Consequently, the idea is to put into practice this beautiful idea of "sharing listening" which Peter Szendy puts forward in the pages of his book Listen: A History of our Ears.

people like that. But he was taking a different approach that really appealed to the way I was thinking about music because I was very interested in modular synthesis and things like that. He was taking an approach that was both very easy and at the same time very technical. Very easy but very... dense... No, dense is not the right word... It's kind of like this phrase that Arnold Dreyblatt would use a lot: "you use a little movement down here with your hands to make a lot to happen up there". The way he had approached the same problem with an incredibly new and fresh solution really appealed to me.

His music was overwhelming when I finally heard it at his Experimental Intermedia Space. I think the first time I went there was in the early nineties. I didn't really get to go to New York until the early nineties and I believe, if I remember correctly, I had already written to him. I was already somehow in touch with him because he let me stay there, which was very nice. He was one of my first friends in New York. The space is a giant two-story loft that he has had since the late sixties. He lives there but he also has this giant collection of speakers and equipment that he has amassed over the years. He has I don't know how many speakers, but he has this very specific speaker and amp system that he has set up to reproduce his music. Now that he gets to perform more in rock clubs and these kind of festivals that exist now, and that didn't really exist back then, he has much more opportunities to present his music in the way that he has always wanted it. But I think at that time, maybe outside of Europe, his loft was really the only place where you could hear it in the way he intended it because it has to be really loud. When you experience Phill's music with the right volume... you can sense this moment where it clicks and it's not coming out of the speakers anymore. It's just like everywhere around you... it's bouncing off the walls and then you move your head to the left, you move your head to the right and you change your phase relationship to the two speakers, changing what you are hearing. That's the point where you actually become an integral part of the listening mechanism. I would say the three most mind-bending audio phenomena I have ever heard were all people of that generation. The first time I heard Tony Conrad live, the first time I got to hear Phill's music in his space with the system that it required and also Maryane Amacher when she did a piece in Switzerland. Actually she was a little older but those were the three situations where I thought: "what I am hearing is not possible". But of course it's possible, we just needed them to show us it was...

For Phill advancements with digital technology made his music both easier and also made it possible for him to do things that he couldn't do before. One important thing is that Phill's music really is a music that only works on CD or digital reproduction because if you are cutting his music into vinyl you are physically cutting the waves into the grooves and because there is so much detuning in his music a lot happens in terms of the phase relationship between the channels. Cutting with vinyl, if the phase between the left and the right goes out of phase the cutting block can't do that physically, you can't cut that, the needle would pop out the groove. So if there is an extreme discrepancy in the phase in his music, which there is, it physically can't be cut on vinyl. So in many ways he is one of the composer you can really say was made for the digital medium; strangely enough.

That kind of music... Let's say... when people say minimalism, that is a word I know Tony didn't like but they get put into that kind of box historically because they are a similar generation and it was in a way a similar break that they were making. People I am thinking are someone like, of course Phill, and Tony Conrad and a generation later there's people like Arnold Dreyblatt. But concentrating more in people like Tony and Phill there is a political element to what they are doing of "not being composers". It's more an artistic life endeavor than a composerly endeavor. That way of working I don't think it has a very long history in Japanese avant-garde music. It's very much the composerly endeavor. I don't think you could actually find anyone who does that in Japan. The first time Tony Conrad played his own music in Japan I remember the audience being absolutely shocked. People were just freaked out, they had never heard anything like that. And I notice it at times when Phill comes and performs... they have to get accustomed to it. There is of course a lot of loud music here but it's not the same thing because it's a very concentrated and very purposeful physical phenomena that happens. It's not a way of working or a lineage of music, I guess you could say, that has a long history here.

I would say Phill for me was not necessarily a direct influence but more a strengthening influence in a sense of time; in a sense of ignoring the idea that a piece of music is supposed to be eight minutes or twelve minutes and letting it be what it is. Especially when I was in college with all the bad influence of the professors telling me to learn my retrograde in inversions and this and that, it was about not being afraid to go and let something happen for thirty minutes. You could do that if you, say, were John Cage or something like that.... That's a whole other talk... I don't mean that disparaging, at all. The professors would be trying to do things like that. I sort of needed people on my side; people that I could look to give me courage to just do it. Phill was definitely one of those people, especially because it was my last year or so at college when I first heard his music. So he was someone coming up to play and hitting a home-run for me to have the courage to just say, ok, it is ok to do this; I can do this if I want to do this...

For most people when they think about music they think of it as something that is coming from the hands of somebody, coming out of instruments, coming out of technology. But there's very few people who had made music, whether they are composers or sound artists or whatever, who actually... I guess you could say go beyond that into the realm of phenomena. And Phill is truly one of the greatest of those artists that have moved into that new realm of possibility. It's an amazing opportunity to be able to hear his music, and the fact that his music has been released and supported and there's still a chance to hear it live in the setting where Phill makes that magic thing happen. I think his life work, as opposed to calling him a composer or a film-maker or anything, just his whole life work (and that includes his attitude towards supporting other people's work through his label and his space that he has run for so many years relentlessly in New York and in Gent...) is also an inspiration to keep doing whatever you want to do, whether it has anything to do with music or not. He is a person who has never stopped and continues in his eighties fighting the good fight as I like to think of it. But also just the experience to hear his music... it will take you somewhere that you didn't know existed and hopefully will then change the way you look at everything else or hear everything else afterwards.



Phill Niblock. Alessandro Farese