

Madalyn Merkey on sound as material



November 16, 2017 -

As told to Elliott Cost, 2922 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Technology](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#).

Many musicians and DJs accumulate extensive collections. Is collecting important to you?

In relation to music I collect a number of things. Definitely PDFs. I'm always trying to collect historical documents relating to the history of electronic music in an academic setting. I always like reading about festivals and symposiums from the 80's. I find those are a great source of inspiration. I don't collect too many samples since what I do is mostly real-time synthesis where everything is generated on the spot. I definitely collect a lot of historical literature relating to electronic music. I also collect cacti.



Aloiampelos tenuior hybrid or *Alôe rupestris*.

Do you have any daily rituals?

I do a classical music [radio show](#) every week that I don't really relate to my personal music. It causes me to be more humble and also to be more prepared. I meet the public and interact with them. I have to take calls and criticism very early on Sunday morning. I also interview performing artists who have a real presence in their field. It feeds into my daily ritual and I'm always thinking about what classical pieces I'm going to play. I'm constantly in this other world.

In my own practice, listening everyday to sounds that are around me is crucial. Listening to the bus coming or sonically seeking out spaces. I feel like that is certainly a continuation of my own creative practice because I'm always considering different levels of sound and how I react to them personally.

What types of spaces do you work in best?

It's nice to have a quiet place. Sometimes when I'm working on a sound I don't even listen to it until the final step. I keep it very theoretical, like I just need to get my numbers right before I indulge in the environment that I'm creating. If I'm not sure of what I want to achieve, then I will likely be satisfied with whatever sound comes out of my computer. So silence and thinking more theoretically is one state of working.

When I'm listening to sounds I like to be by myself. The ideal space is listening on nice speakers at home. Also the performance space is so important, that's where the magic happens. You're out with a bunch of people and sounds emerge that I've never heard before. It's a unique experience because my volume never really gets that loud when I'm at home. When I'm with a bunch of people their energy is definitely crucial to the creative mood and me trying to introduce people to what I do.

I was looking at a PDF of one of your compositions. There's such a structure. It reads like a concrete poem. I was curious how precise your scripts are? Do you ever specify certain parameters of the space where the piece will be played?

In an ideal situation, I want to be familiar with the architecture, or at least know the dimensions of the space. You can't get too caught up on theorizing acoustics, but it definitely helps. If you're in a very reverberant space you might want to change the durations of the individual sounds or add more silence between them to fully decay. As far as the composition or scripting part goes, it's not necessarily a finished score; I'm just designing little tools that I can use inside of my own performance world.

I like to be structurally precise in some regards. For me, being an electronic music composer, I still have a need to communicate my ideas, not always in a traditional form on paper, but in a way that I could possibly explain to someone else, or mainly as a starting point for further mutations. I think an idea that was important to me starting out in electronic music was that I'm in a world where I can't necessarily recreate the sounds that I've made previously. Writing it out gives me some confidence that I will be able to make it happen again, but I think more so writing helps me realize what I've done previously.

So you are constantly writing?

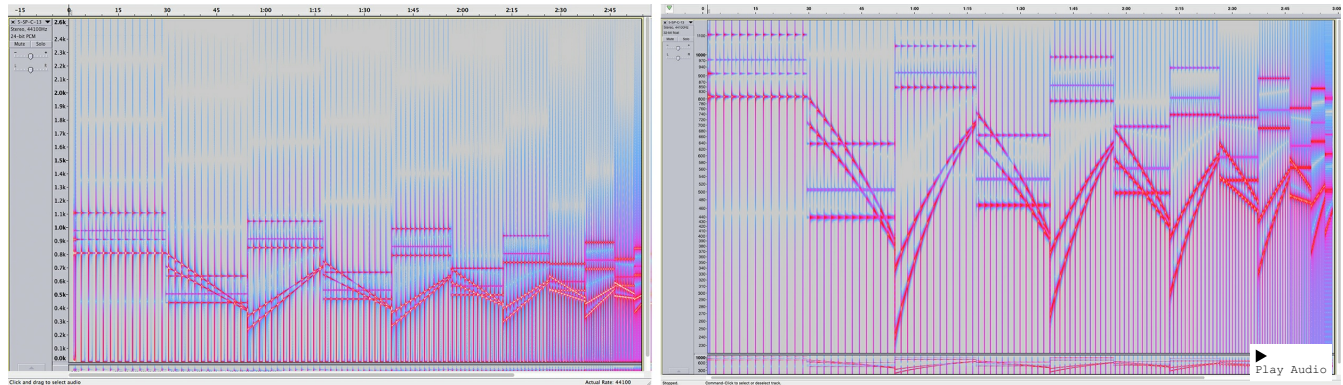
I always start out by writing the parameters, like what's the highest and lowest frequencies that I'll be using, the file names, etcetera. From there I add more complexity and modulation. I'm not always writing but rather drawings small graphs for ideas of how I want certain sounds to be introduced to create a cluster of sounds over time. This form of

drawing is definitely crucial to me, but I'm not as organized as I wish I was because I find notes everywhere.

You studied visual arts in school. Was there a catalyst that pushed your work into the auditory?

I don't know why I stopped drawing. I think it wasn't difficult anymore. I was also piling up all these material possessions. I had to think about storing them and I moved towards sound because it had a complexity and an instantaneousness. I didn't need to draft something all day to make a sound happen. I could just record it and it was out there. This communicated my idea, however raw, instantaneously. But I think it was also the level of complexity that I was able to achieve and its ability to fill an entire room. I could just bring my laptop and fill a whole entire space with sound—even the little cracks in the walls. It appealed to me because it didn't actually take up any room. I didn't have to cart it off to a storage facility.

Also with sound you get the experience of time. With a visual image you get all the information at once. You then have to look in at the little parts, but with sound you get more of a reveal over time where you don't have all the information immediately. This is exciting as an artist. There's a different kind of control.



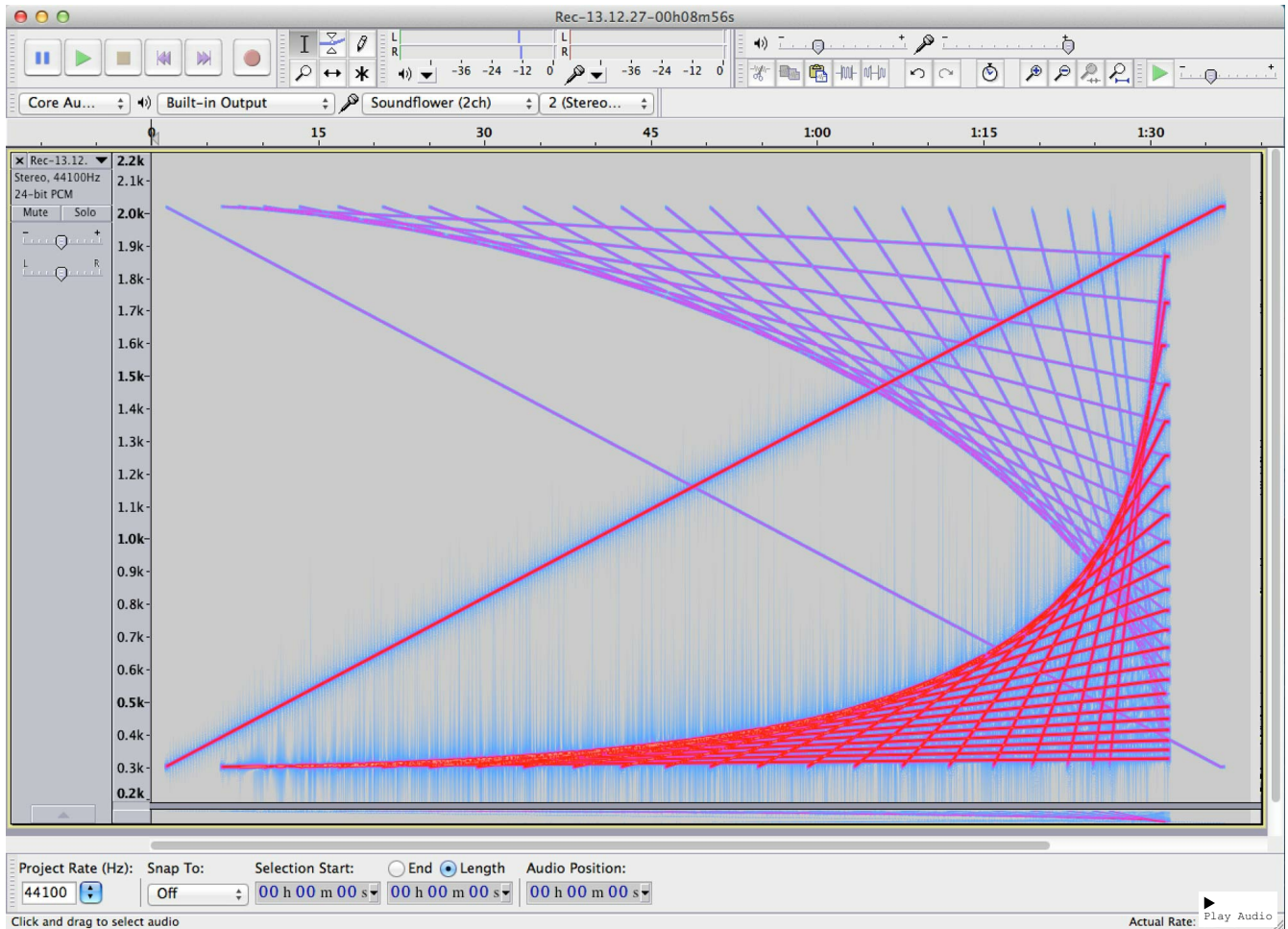
Spectrogram of *SP/C/13* in Audacity.

Control seems to be an important part of your performances. When I've heard your performances, it's almost like you are sculpting each individual sound. Do you think of each note in a composition as having its own identity or personality?

An important element that I think about when working with sound is that it's atmospheric and not necessarily musical. To me the individual sounds are alive and changing. Even though I try to control the shapes of the sounds I like to also use my computer to make surprising things happen or have them constantly changing because that's not something any instrument you buy off the shelf can do. I like using computer music over a modular system just because I can pile on as much as I want. Again it's not a physical burden on me because it's all on my computer and not pounds and pounds of metal.

Would you say that rigor is part of the reason you create music?

Yes, I think so. I think that keeps me interested and is part of the reason I make art. I never thought I really cared about being part of a historical dialogue, like, here I am in the line of history, but I feel that with experimental music there is a lot of territory that isn't charted. There's so much complexity you can achieve. One example would be sound phenomena.



Spectrogram in Audacity.

It's really exciting and puzzling because rigor doesn't always come naturally unless you continue to practice. The difficulty is definitely fuel. For me if it's not difficult it's not going to be interesting or worthwhile for very long.

Mills College is known for many esteemed composers. When you were studying there was it important for you to mold your identity as a musician?

I worked at the paper archive at Mills so I got to read a lot of documents and correspondence between people like [Morton Subotnick](#) and different art foundations. I got to see different scores, circuit diagrams, and programs. That was really helpful just to understand the history on a one-to-one basis through the documentation.

Something that challenged me was working with other performers, especially acoustic musicians, because when I came to Mills I was very much inside my electronics, happy making sounds that never touched the air. Working with musicians is something I do more regularly now. I collaborate with a pianist, Julie Moon, every Tuesday morning. It's helpful in expanding my own knowledge of music and performance habits.

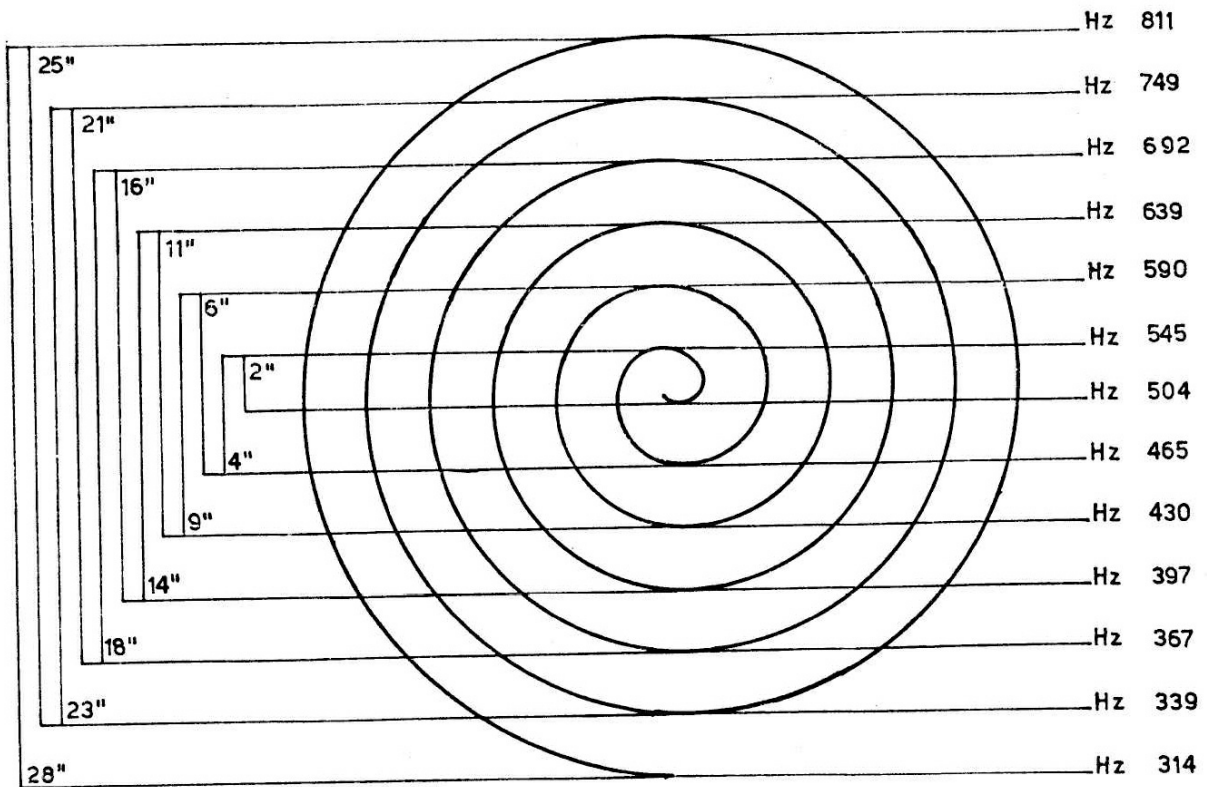


Tavola V - Progetto: SP/C/13 (spirale curva).

Geometric figure of project SP/C/13 from *Two Schools of Electronic Music in Italy* (1968)

While at Mills I also translated a book of Italian electronic music projects from Turin. It was written by the composer Enore Zaffiri, who founded the first electronic music course in Northern Italy that was later moved to the Music Conservatory of Turin. I got to go to the Conservatory of Florence and they helped me finalize the project. I was able to visit and listen to their archive.

Can you talk a little about collaborating when there are layers of technology and translation between your collaborator and you?

That was definitely the case before I went to Florence. I read an article by a professor who taught there, and that's how I became interested in the conservatory. Even though we had translation differences he was such a kind and open person. He was very generous.

When I was working on translating the book, even though we have a rich community of academic experimental musicians and pioneers in computer music, nobody knew who Enore Zaffiri was. They knew who Pietro Grossi was, the founder of the first course in electronic music at the Conservatory of Florence. He worked with a big IBM computer when writing his compositions. You would have to wait a day for your composition to compute so he would sleep in a cot while the computer was commuting overnight. So to find out about Zaffiri I had to reach out through the ways of cyberspace. I think it's great. It definitely gives you time to figure out exactly what you want to say and conduct all the research to make a meaningful exchange.

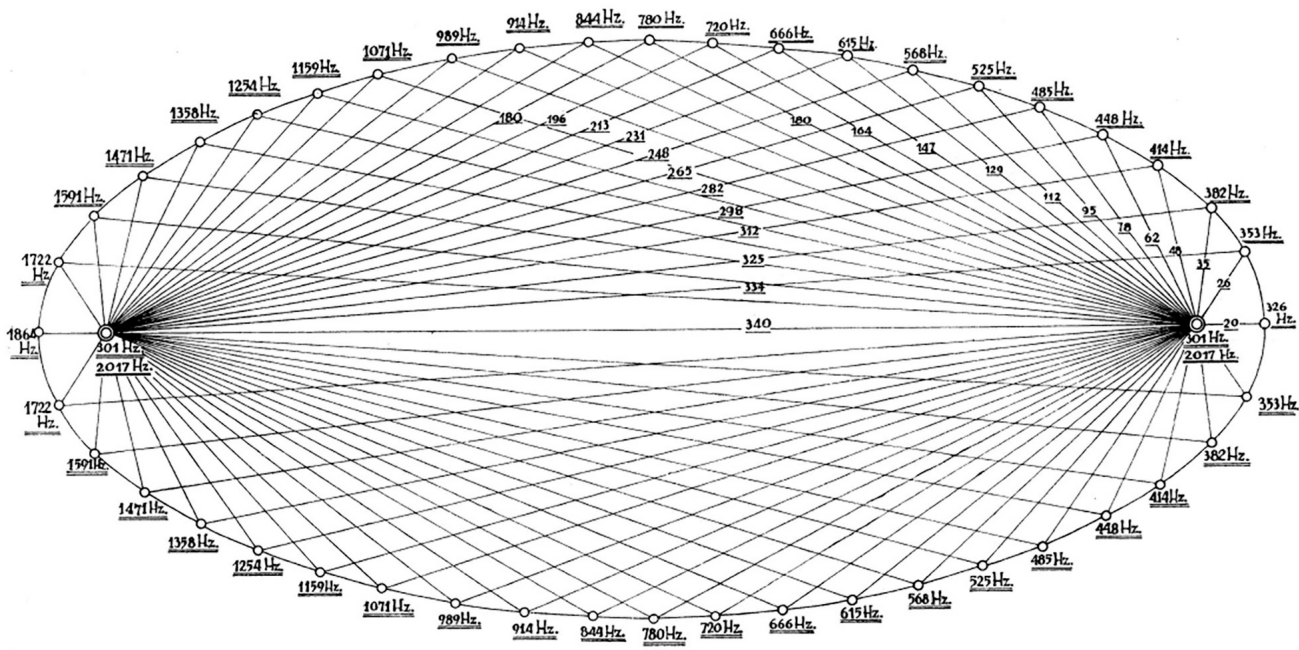


Tavola I - Progetto: EL/25 (ellisse).

▶ Play Audio

Geometric figure from *Two Schools of Electronic Music in Italy* (1968).

As an artist do you think it's important to build or at least understand the tools that you work with?

As far as technology goes I haven't pushed my own Apple computer to the point where it's not working. In that regard, I'm in a safe space. Outside of technology: yes, understanding materials and tools is what motivates me to wake up in the morning. It's important to experience what tools are readily available, be able to dissect them, and decide what kind of functions you want to keep in your toolbox for the future. I have used both manufactured electronics and systems I've built to make music, and value both experiences deeply for different reasons. But in building my own tools, the outcome is so uniquely me, and I find great joy and peace in what I have achieved so far.

You're an avid Twitter user. How do you stay sincere on social media?

It's difficult. Given the state we're in today, there's so much garbage out there. After the inauguration I think a lot of artists were thinking, "Oh, my work is not important." There's so much drama happening in the world, but now drama is happening every other hour. I think we're getting out of the rut that was the election and hopefully getting back to creative work because for a while it was like, "What is the actual focus? Should I not focus on what I developed? Should I be helping out in the larger community?" It's definitely important to reflect, but the purpose of social media is always moving around. It's important not to get caught up in it. I respect a lot of artists who stay away from it, but for me I just like to have fun with it. If I'm crafting a tweet I'll just be laughing. It has to make me laugh. Even if nobody likes the tweet, if I can go back and read it and it gives me just a chuckle it's worth it. That's kind of where I come from. Recently I've mainly been advertising my radio show on social media. It's funny to me because that's such a different world from my performance life, but it's something I do regularly. I don't know how many people listen to the show besides my mom.

I heard someone say recently that they had filled up on their social media quota for the day. It's nice to think about attention as being finite..

I used to be more hardcore, like I'd rather suffocate than be on Instagram. I didn't have a fancy phone and so I would look at my friends' phones and it was just food photos.

Do you take breaks from the internet?

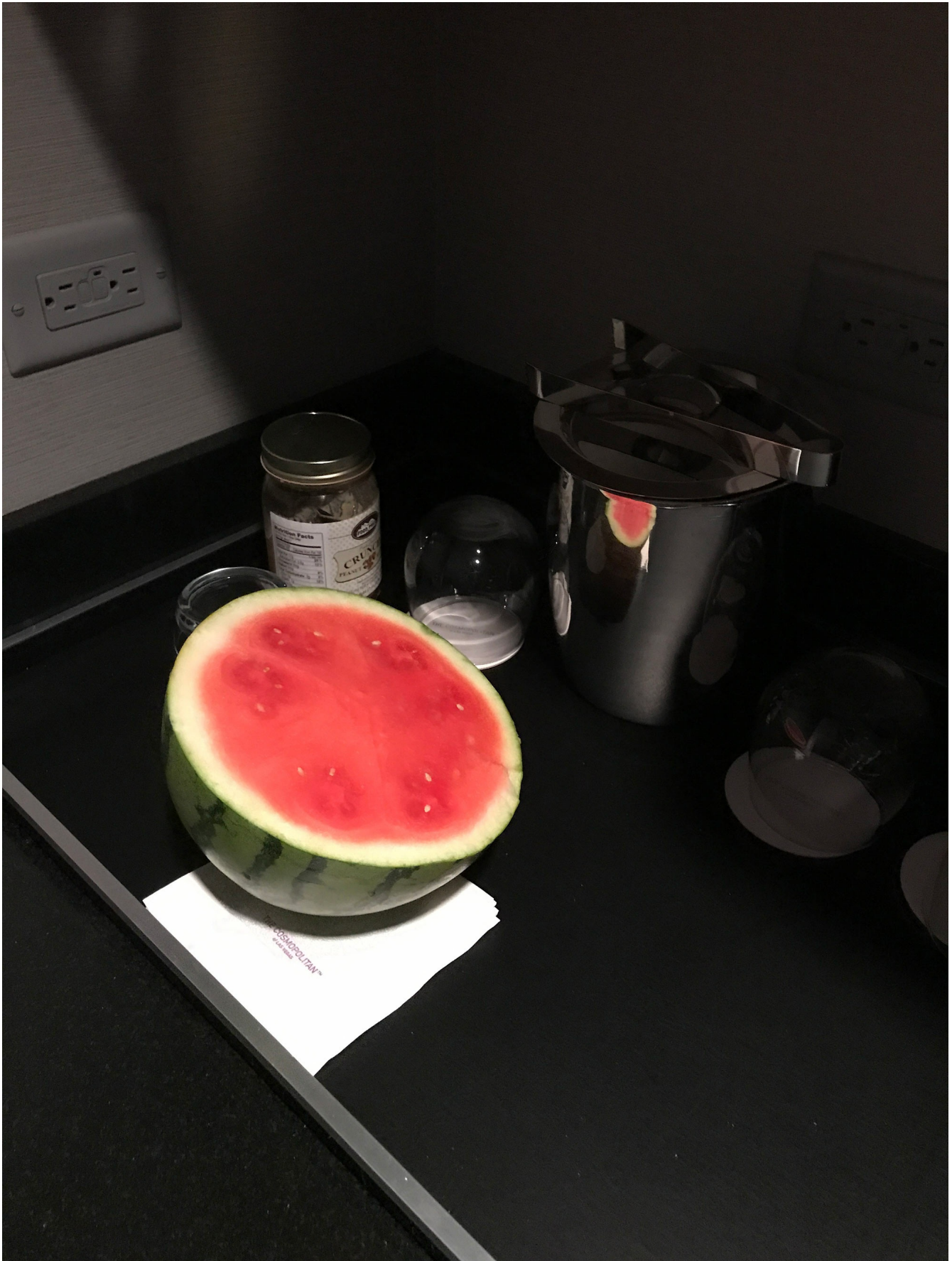
Perhaps not the whole internet. Yes, I do from social media. It's good to delete an app every once in awhile. Especially when you're working on a hardcore project because a lot of it is just distraction. Also, by not being on social media you miss a lot of events, that is sad, too.

The Bay Area has an extensive electronic music history. Is that why you ended up there?

I think the Bay Area offers an acceptance of different ideas and styles of making music that's quite unique. The weather is also very pleasurable. Usually cool with lots of fog. Yeah, I don't know, it has some elements that are good and some that are bad, but I feel like that's all living situations. Before, when I lived in Chicago, I would have the winters to stay in and work on a project, so that was intensive, but I feel like California has a lot more balance. You can get physical activity outside. That's important to me. Especially if I'm working on an intensive project. I like to do a day inside and a day outside, reflecting and just moving around. Either listening to what I did the day before on headphones or thinking about it or going on a hill and writing. For me being outside is the ultimate paradise. It's where there aren't any road blocks. I won't get stuck in my head.

I've spent a few months in LA here and there since I've moved to California, and that's a place where I have such a hard time doing any work. I will come back with like one page and think, "Oh I really just worked out these equations. I could have done that in two days." It's also because it's incredibly hot there. It's like trying to do work in a sauna.

I guess I should also say that I love California because I love fruits and vegetables, and they are all grown here. My love for fresh food is crucial part of my life.



Taken on Madalyn Merkey's iPhone 7 Plus (iOS 10.3.2) at 10:57 AM on September 17, 2017

Which fruits and vegetables are you into right now?

Watermelon, okra, chard, pineapple.

Madalyn Merkey recommends 11 cacti:

1. [Ariocarpus fissuratus subs. lloydii cv. latus](#)
2. [Astrophytum myriostigma cv. Onzuka](#) (astrophytum deserve their own list)
3. [Avonia quinaria subs. alstonii](#)
4. [Aztekium ritteri](#)
5. [Copiapoa barquitensis](#)
6. [Copiapoa cinerea](#)
7. [Dioscorea elephantipes](#) (not a cactus, but nice plant from South Africa)
8. [Fenestraria rhopalophylla](#)
9. [Haworthia truncata](#), (any subspecies)
10. [Pseudolithos micrurtinus](#)
11. [Aloe suprafoliata](#) and [branddraaiensis](#) (aloe plants deserve their own list)

Name

Madalyn Merkey

Vocation

Computer Musician, Composer, Cacti Enthusiast





Photo: Sean Tatol