

Stephen O'Malley on collaboration as exploration



October 16, 2017 - Stephen O'Malley is a guitarist, producer, composer, and designer based in Paris, France. He's played in a number of doom, drone, and experimental bands, and is best known for his work with Greg Anderson as Sunn O))). He's collaborated with a number of musicians, including Merzbow, Scott Walker, Alvin Lucier, Iancu Dumitrescu, Keiji Haino, Johann Johansson, and Attila Csihar, as well as visual artists, including Banks Violette, the theatre director Gisèle Vienne, and the performance artist Nico Vascellari.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2500 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Focus](#).

People tend to view drone as minimal. I'm curious about having an artistic practice that, from the outside, may seem specific—but you've managed to find new ways to investigate this approach for two decades.

The term "minimal" is misleading. There was a moment where I was interested in minimalist music and artwork and things like that and tried to understand what that meant, but musically I never really used that word so much. I mean, it's an easy way tag it as, "Okay, there's absence of a lot of things that a lot of music has or that you might expect from music," but we're really focusing on so many details of sound.

Maximalist.

Very metal word. It could definitely can apply to Sunn O)))—there's so much excess in what we're doing, but I don't know... For me, it's more about intonation. I mean intonation in the way of discovering all of these elements in sound and the work we do with sound and focusing on those. Then, by focusing on those, all of these other elements reveal themselves, or the awareness opens up from my point of view, you know? It leads to a lot of different things. It certainly doesn't seem formally minimal at all.

It's more chaotic and unformed. With sound there are just so many permutations to either focus on or become aware of or to experience or to have in your tool set. It's more about space, I guess. Space is certainly not minimal. It's filled with things, of course.

You collaborate with a lot of people, which offers new points of entry. Is this a way to find endlessness in your process?

I think collaborating is the only way to explore music, these relationships, and things. I have a certain amount of experience and skills that I'll bring to music, but every single musician or artist has their own specific set of experiences as well, so it's fascinating to try and communicate with different people and collaborate and try to create something together. It's exciting to do that. I probably wouldn't be able to do any music if it wasn't for collaborating. I grew up with that just playing in bands. You don't start being a solo artist, at least not with my background.

Even with the more complex, serious projects I've done, it's all down to the collaborators, or the people I'm collaborating with to make anything happen. You learn so much from them, not only about their way of doing things—it gives you another point of view and another way you can look at your own material and your own work.

How do you go about finding a collaborator? Is it something where someone does something interesting, you admire their work, and you reach out to them?

It's usually based on a relationship, and sometimes those relationships start because of, like you said, being aware of what someone's doing and admiring their work and then meeting the person and having some sort of connection. It seems like, especially with the more experimental musicians I work with, at one point you're like, "Well, why don't we try to play together?" Then, by the nature of my music for the past several years, if we're going to go through the effort to get together and try and play together, why don't we just go in the studio, or do it on stage where we have more resources to really go for it and try something?

Certainly there's been many times in both situations where it doesn't really work out. It might be enjoyable because it's getting to know someone a bit differently and in a way that's unique to music, this kind of relation that you can have even if the results aren't really anything new or you know, up to expectations. Then again, I always try to leave the expectations at the door and go for the immediate experience together and be open to see what happens. The only expectation I would have, or try to have, is that I don't know what's going to happen.

With collaborators sometimes you continue to work together, and it's in parallel. Then, there's always a point of differentiation where you come apart and you stop working together. Sometimes that happens quickly. Sometimes the collaboration lasts a long time, which is a real gift. Like any relationship, you develop over time and form nuance and complexity and history together with those ideas... and on the personal side, too.

But I don't go out of my way to try and keep things going with people. If it's naturally working and all of the mundane stuff around it is agreeable, then just follow that flow. There are plenty of collaborations that I thought would be great, but were boring or didn't work, or we might have a great connection, conversation, and then when we play music together we just can't synchronize.

When I moved to France I started doing a lot more improvisation—live projects—as an experiment to try to have a more immediate experience and more risk, and to try to dissolve some of the expectations of reaching a final product and just having the energy of the action of playing be the point. I'm glad I did that for many years, but at some point I'm someone who likes to construct something with more complexity over time—like a track or record or concept within the collaboration, too.

You've always done graphic design work and collaborations with contemporary visual artists. Is a collaboration like that different then when you're collaborating with another musician? Do you see your role shifting in these different situations?

Totally. It took me a long time to realize, but when working with [theater artist] [Gisèle \[Vienne\]](#) or a visual artist or filmmaker, you're really serving someone else's vision, and you need to also serve their structure. Depending on the person you're working with, they may be open to modifying things for your own point of view or your own way, but it's in some ways, a relief to be serving someone else's concept and idea.

Depending on who that person is it might be pretty confined, where you can go or what you need to do to provide that creative service for them. Then, I've had collaborations with visual artists where it's just totally open, like, "Yeah, just do your thing."

The worst thing someone can say to me is "Just do your thing." What does that mean? Which thing, or what thing do you think I do that you like? Try to be more precise about that. I don't know what my thing is, but on the other hand, sometimes it's a good opportunity to experiment in a way you wouldn't do before. It's like, "Okay, I'm going to try this totally other thing that I haven't had a chance to do yet." It might not be appropriate in my own work normally.

With musicians, my experience is very different—even with composers. I've been pretty lucky to work with people who are obsessed with tone and sound and timbre and spontaneous phenomena happening. That point of view can be quite different than working on a visual based project or a dance piece or a film or something like that.

How do you know something is successful? I imagine expectations shift depending on the project—for some it might be artistic success, another may be more emotional.

I don't really know how to qualify what successful is. I guess the one thing that's true is that things continue to happen and opportunities continue, so I guess just from the way I grew up, that's a form of success. The continuity of a project or the making music, or having this kind of life, all feel like a success.

It can be quite immediate. In a live situation when the energy is just profound—if that’s emotional or physical or both. Just the opportunity to meet a person and try to do something is a success. For me the most obvious is probably the [Scott Walker](#) project we did with Sunn O))). It’s like, this guy is a master, and he’s in his 70s. He’s inviting us to be his band with his music. It’s an honor. Also, selfishly, it’s a great opportunity to learn something about why is this stuff interesting to someone like that.

Do you ever deal with creative blocks, or is it the kind of thing where you have so much going on that you can bounce between different projects and avoid getting stuck on any one thing?

I think there’s two different things. There’s creative block and then there’s being busy. Sometimes they’re happening at the same time. You could be busy with a lot of concerts, improvised work, or collaborations and still have the creative block. There’s a point, though, where it’s like why keeping so busy becomes a question. Is it just about convincing yourself that you are constantly creative? Then, the question becomes maybe those ideas are not going to be as interesting as something I can come up with if I sat in the mountains for six months trying to write something by myself, you know?

I don’t know how to do that myself. It’s definitely the continuity of the wave of creativity. There’s a lot of dynamics in there, and has to do with a lot of things around it too, not just what you’re creating. Sometimes I’m like, “I haven’t written a fucking song since 1997,” you know, with riffs and a bridge and this kind of thing. Then, it’s like, “Oh, but these other pieces of music, their structure’s way more complex than that kind of rock song.” That’s such an obvious, “Okay, this is a song.” It’s easy to identify it as something that’s complete somehow. But I’ve never really been in a situation where I felt like a full block like I just can’t do anything.

I’m always curious to experience other people’s work too, you know, or see new art films, read, and listen to music and watch music in different forms. I’m one of those people that’s more like a sponge, where I get inspired pretty easily by someone’s stuff. This doesn’t mean I take that as an influence or inspiration directly, but it gives some light.

It reaches a point when someone’s been an artist long enough that their life becomes all about what they’re making, even when they’re taking time off. Your brain’s resting, but you’re still figuring things out. When you go back to it, it’s not like you’re going back to it from a completely cold spot. You’ve been thinking about it, and doing the work, even if it’s a different kind of work.

It’s based on your imagination and your exhilaration and your ideas. Those aren’t going to just turn off. I saw this really funny interview recently of Lou Reed and [Laurie Anderson](#) on [Charlie Rose](#). Laurie Anderson was actually the guest, but Lou Reed shows up with her. This is pretty recent, like 2007 or something, or 2005 maybe. Charlie Rose invites Lou Reed on to be at the table, and of course Charlie Rose is basically interviewing Lou Reed and then asking Laurie a few things about their relationship and how they worked creatively together concretely but also what their relationship shares as far as inspiring each other. Lou Reed was talking about writing a lyric that Charlie Rose was talking about. He’s like, “Yeah, I was on a plane with Laurie, and I wrote the lyric on the plane.” Then Charlie Rose is like, “Wow, you spent the whole flight overseas working on this poem,” or something. Lou’s like, “No, I wrote it in five minutes.” Charlie Rose, he was like, “What? How is that possible? That’s genius,” or whatever. Lou Reed’s like, “Well, I’ve been thinking about it for like two years.” It was some piece he did with [John Cale](#) about Andy Warhol. Then, they started talking about Warhol’s influence. It’s like 30 years of ideas strikes at that moment for him.

My down time is in Paris, so for me I’m not going to be watching Teletubbies or something all day. It’s not turning off my brain. Some people I know do that. They say, “Yeah, I’m into this because it turns off my brain.” I can understand that, too, but I get pretty excited easily with things. I’m curious, you know, and yeah, some things lock in when you’re doing something like doing lead climbing, you know?

There’s also an aspect of meditation in regards to artists who might always be working in their mind; physically when they come down to the project, and actually are executing, it’s already finished. It’s finished, really, before the execution happens.

You structure your life because your work is what you’re excited about, and you’re going to do things that contribute to that even when you’re resting.

It’s not separate from my life. It is my life. That’s just what it is. When I was younger, I worked for someone in an office in a creative way, and at that time, there were separate lives. There was the day life and then the night life. Night life was more leading to my lifestyle now. I enjoy all of this, even when it’s not working or it’s shit, you know? It’s like, “Fuck it, this sucks, but at least I’m playing with [Richard Pinhas](#) on stage. This is insane. How did this happen? How did everything end up to this moment?” I like to stay a little bit juvenile and naïve about it, like, “Wow, I’m here at this moment, doing this thing.”

A few things go the right way and then opportunities arise. You take advantage of those, and it works. But there’s always a chance those things don’t come together and you’re juggling the day job and the night job.

It’s true. You have no idea what’s going to catch people’s interest and turn your work into something that supports exploring in a bigger scale for years. No one knows with creative stuff, I don’t think. It’s so hard to predict. You just try to keep your expectations reasonable, and keep an eye on where you’re at. And, you know, regardless, it can be enjoyable no matter how successful you are, or how recognized, because you’re working on your art.

Stephen O’Malley recommends:

5 reads on space and time:

[The Ends of the World](#) - Peter Brennan
[The Mind In The Cave](#) - David Lewis-Williams
[Sculpting In Time](#) - Andrei Tarkovski
[The Poetics of Space](#) - Gaston Bachelard
[The Living Stones](#) - Ithell Colquhoun

Name

Stephen O’Malley

Vocation

Musician, Graphic Designer

Fact

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