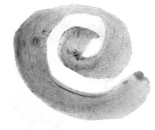


On embracing the unknown



Artist and composer Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe on sound as a sculptural tool, the joy of spontaneous composition, and learning through collaboration.

October 8, 2021 -

As told to Ruth Saxelby, 3522 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Film](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Production](#).

I played "Magick Creek" from your FRKWYS collaboration with Ariel Kalma in the backyard of a bar recently. We were outside but the music also opened up another outside. It confused a few people because they couldn't comprehend where the vibrations were coming from. Thinking about that made me realize how important outsides and insides - the natural world, the internal world - are to your work.

A lot of my body of work over the years has dealt with space, with memory, with being a body in space, with this idea of creating a space within a space. And what you've just detailed there is totally appropriate and actually what I love about sound and the potential of sound. Being able to excite the ear in this way that you maybe wouldn't have expected. Just being able to live within a space for a finite period of time and have that metamorphosis happen. So say, in terms of performance, it was always very important to me to be able to address the space, the staging. To be able to dress the space in my way and make it my own for that moment, and give people who were witness to that the opportunity to develop their own world within that.

When I think about art in any terms, the creation of the work is something that is very important to me, and how the work lives in the world, but at the same time, the way the work lives in the world after I've put it there, it no longer belongs to me. It's this idea of giving the work to someone and letting them—through their own perspective, through their own vantage point—take away what they will from that. And whether they like it or not, that's less important to me. What's important to me is for me to be compelled to make the work and put it out in the world. I will always know exactly what that thing means and what the intention was, what the feeling was to make that work, but I also can't put that upon anyone else, you know? And in that way, it's not precious—and art in and of itself is not precious.

When you're dealing with any sort of a public forum, you can't expect people to understand and feel what you feel or how you understand it. I could make a statement, and I talk all day about those sorts of things, but in the end, it doesn't really matter. Maybe, sure, it's possible I would be able to give someone else a different perspective on what it is, but at the end of the day, someone is going to feel how they're going to feel about a thing, and that's fine. But as far as this idea of space, I'm also dealing with my body in that space, and how I move and function in that moment is something that's very important to me. Leaning into my own intuition to navigate that world is one thing, but then I also have the possibility of discovering new things in that moment for myself. So that, for me, is really lovely and just important.

Spontaneous composition, or improvisation, is central to your creative practice. How did you find that path in the first place?

I think I found it due to having a natural curiosity about things. I came to understand at a fairly early age that I was excited about concepts of the unknown in creative practices. I really started to understand and enjoy improvisation when I was a teenager. There was something about being able to give a life or a vibrance to

something in real time, and not try to hold it inside a box.

For me, I always find that the first idea is the freshest. Once you have that idea, the more you continue to work it—the more you continue to perfect a document of that thing—it lessens the energy of it. But when you come to it from the perspective of making that thing in real time, you can address how it is documented [and] then you can really play around with the edges and push outside of that box. I really like the idea of a work-in-progress. Even the works that I've done that are fixed as specific creative moments in time, if I were ever to revisit that thing, I would really want to play around with it and push outside it.

It came from when I was starting as a teenager playing music in bands or groups. I was lucky enough to always work with people that were like-minded in the way that they wanted to really play with it and have fun. There's a joy in this concept of discovery. It keeps things fresh and you don't continue to cycle through [the same thing] again and again and again. So that's where it was initiated. Once I got to the point I was focused on solo compositional work, improvisation, aleatory spontaneous music, it really kicked it up another notch.

The first iteration of anything I was doing as a solo artist was focusing on my voice. I really wanted to investigate the human voice as an instrument. When you talk about sound or music or sound art, there seems to be this delineation between what one would consider art that you would experience in a gallery space or a white box versus music that you would hear performed in a venue. I wanted to really approach sound in the same way that one would approach a painting or a sculpture. I started to conceive of this idea of sound as a sculptural tool because sound is reverberations in the air. Those wave forms are being processed through our ears and we understand it to be a certain thing, so why would you not think of sound as a paintbrush or a hammer and a chisel? It's this idea of carving the air, which is what you're doing. I really wanted to push that idea forward and really concentrate on what that meant to me, and how I could approach it in a way to put it out in the world where people could also understand it in that way.

The delineation that's often made between "art music" and "music music" obviously involves a lot of institutional bullshit. More often than not, it's whiteness that's deciding this thing is art and this thing is "just sound" or whatever. I see music journalism as a co-conspirator in that delineation.

I absolutely believe that. [Music is] a very commodifiable art form. It's something that can be produced and then turned over again and again and again to make more and more money. And you have these traditional forms that have been set down and people understand, *Okay, well, I know what this is*. It has a lot to do with perception. When you think about Bach or Beethoven, when you think about The Beatles, there are these forms that have been established so many people understand it as this thing, and many people enjoy that thing because it's been established as, *Obviously this piece is wonderful because this person who made it is a genius*. And that's fine, but my issue is these things are passed down and taught over and over and over again.

When you're dealing with any sort of a creative endeavor, to say "you can only do it this way" doesn't make any sense to me. When you say, "okay, this is art" or "this is music" and you're confined by this structure and you can't move out of it—or when you move outside of it, it's no longer that thing—who's to say that? And I'm talking on a very broad level. When you're talking about very specific traditions and theories [being taught in conservatories or classrooms in schools], I get that, that's fine, but when you say, on a much larger scale, "well, this is a sound, but it's not musical," who's to say that? There are certain types of noise that people find musical or lyrical and who's to say to that person "that's not music" just because it hasn't been defined as that before?

I think there's a complacency that's always being challenged, but it's definitely there and has persisted for decades upon decades upon decades. And of course, as time goes on there are generational shifts. You look at classical enthusiasts in the '40s or '50s who heard jazz and thought, *Oh this is racket, this is juvenile, this doesn't make any sense, this isn't musical or artistic*. But then you flash forward however many decades later and jazz enthusiasts could say the same thing about power electronics or whatever. So it's a real shame to me that these traditions have had a really stranglehold on how people consider artistic practices [and] creative endeavors. Obviously, these industries that have been established to be the gatekeepers of these things want to keep the status quo. Yeah, it's a bummer.

I wanted to ask about your idea of "work-in-progress" as I'd always thought about it in terms of "to get to the finished thing."

I think if you were to consider the novel *Mount Analogue* by René Daumal, [you'd understand.] The novel is about the journey and the apex is not reached because he died before he finished the novel. I think that's a really fantastic way of thinking about things: embrace that journey, embrace every part of it, because point A to point B, that's where the meat of it is. Yeah, sure, there may be some sort of grand elation to reach that apex, but at the same time, along the way, what did you experience? And what can you take away from that journey? Because once you get there, you just go back down. So what's more interesting?

I'm reading a book about cultural practices of trancing around the world, and the role that music plays in accessing an altered state. It made me think of your work.

A lot of my work from probably a little over a decade again was really focused on this idea of trance and being able to let go. That's something that I also came to earlier, this notion that I wanted to be able to become untethered and just put it all out there. Some people will frame it as catharsis, which I think is fairly accurate, but it's about this idea of being able to just exist in that space and everything that comes out of me in that moment is true to that moment. It's not a put-on. I like being able to play in those spaces but there are definitely many examples of moments in which I don't know exactly what I am doing, and that's okay. I really enjoy this almost... you can frame it as ecstatic. Spontaneous and ecstatic. Sure, there are a lot of cultural touchstones that you can draw from with music or ritual, whether it be Sufism, whether it be rituals in Gnawa music, there are so many examples that have existed in the world for so long. I really enjoy being able to come in and out of my body in those moments. Check out and then check back in and see where I'm at and then check out again.

In the middle of a set, are you ever like, Uh, wait?!

Oh absolutely, that definitely happens. It still happens. Very early on, when I was very concentrated on vocal work, I could truly get out and just be gone. But then when I was utilizing some sort of other instrument, I would have to pull it back just a little bit so I was able to have some sort of control over whatever else I was using. Once I started using modular synthesizers, there was an element of being more controlled in those situations. But once I started to learn how to use that instrument, it became more about viewing [it] as an extension of my own body and, at the same time, as a collaborator.

Because of the organic nature of an instrument like [a modular synthesizer], it gives you so many potential variables. You initiate a dialogue inside of the instrument and then as the machine talks to itself, it's pushing energy out to you and you're giving it back, so it becomes a very cyclical thing. When I first started using modular synthesizers, I was far more concentrated on what was happening with this other entity that I was engaging with. But the more I understood how to use that thing, the more I would relinquish control and also understand how to dialogue with this instrument in a way that it could move and I could move with it or we could move against each other.

Collaboration is another big pattern in your practice. What drives you to be in dialogue with other artists in that way?

I think mainly the fact that I'm able to garner knowledge from others. Nobody knows everything, we're all constantly learning. I want to be in that space where I'm able to learn from others and then others can learn from me. These ideas of relinquishing control definitely step outside of just using a machine [which] can generate sound on its own, but also in dealing with other people, other artists, and the way in which they view their practice, the way they execute their practice.

There's always something to be learned, no matter how young or old you are. It's a constant. That's something that's always been very exciting to me. There was a moment where I was very focused on understanding myself, understanding my own body, understanding how I move, understanding how to trust my own intuition, and once I got to a point where I was comfortable enough to engage with another person, that was when yet another period started,

another phase. It's something I really love because I try to collaborate with people that have a very deep understanding of how their process is working. Once again, you have another dialogue, and I love that.

Collaboration is often virtual these days. But for you, it feels like collaboration is material, physical, spatial. Especially with regards to your *Candyman* score. How did you come to foster that relationship?

Truly it was down to the fact that I was approached to do the score and I came with a very specific proposal in which to carry out building that world. I've been talking a lot about this concept of world-building lately. It's a term that I've not really used before but the more I thought about it, it's definitely a part of my make-up and things that I've been doing for many years. This idea of being able to build a world and have it exist as its own alternate universe. I brought to the table this concept of being able to—while coming in very early in the process of the construction of the film—build a world and build a narrative in real time as the film was being made.

I had very specific ideas about energy and displacement of energy and utilizing elementally different components that make up the film. Being able to create a dialogue with Nia DaCosta, the director, was huge for me. Anytime that I work on a film, it's very important to be able to collaborate with the filmmaker and not be the dressing that you put on after the meal has been made. The score is such an integral part of cinema, and obviously there are many scores that have composed at the tail-end of a project, but I feel that when there's a true collaboration happening with the composer and the filmmaker, the composer is able to integrate that score into the film in a way that it exists as a character within the film. That's something that is very important to me. I always want to be able to view the score and the sound in the film as a character that is acting and reacting in the span of that film in a way that's not a flourish on top of an idea. It's actually a part of the narrative and it's creating its own narrative in that landscape.

And so, being able to do field recordings on location was huge for me. To be on set and watch how Nia worked, see how she directed the actors, how she conceptualized these different moments, was very important. Once I saw how she was working, I could then apply that to what I was thinking about for the score. We could have very open conversations about what the scene was. I was able to create themes inside of that narrative for specific scenes or specific characters that were not so on-the-nose as a theme that you don't really consider it as that.

In that way, you can take the score out of the context of the film and it lives as its own entity as a sound recording. If you just have the audio, there is that narrative that pushes through the length of the score. Obviously, there are moments that may stick out once you see the film and you understand that the sound and the image are intertwined, but to be able to create a work that can have its own life outside of the film is also something that is very interesting to me. I always want to try to be able to do that: I want to have something that's compelling not only in the scope of the film but can be compelling outside of that.

I wanted to come back to your "art is not precious" idea. It is precious but I am also thrilled by the idea that it's not, and would love you to unpack that a little bit.

I have witnessed people really get in their own head about how their work is perceived by others and become really upset when it's not understood as the thing that it was meant to be. But it will always be that thing, because the person that creates that work does so very specifically, very intentionally. If others don't understand that, or get to that point, that's on them. It's always going to be the thing that you made and it's always going to have that life [outside of you]. Unless you keep it to yourself. Some people may get to a similar place with it, but no one is viewing that work from the artist's vantage point. Everyone has their own vantage point, everyone perceives things in their own way.

It's also the idea of saying that something is done "the wrong way." If you're talking about something outside of a creative endeavor, sure that's absolutely viable, but when you're talking about an artistic endeavor, whatever the artist says that thing is, it's that thing. Whether it's music, a film, or a painting, the end result of the process and the work is what it's meant to be. People can have an opinion or an impression of that thing that is their own, and that's why I say it's not precious. Because once you put it out into the world, it no longer belongs to you. I think the more that people understand that, it's not that the work will be any better, but I

think the life of it can be more vibrant.

Robert A.A. Lowe Recommends:

5 things in no particular order

Deadbeat Club

This LA-based art book publisher started roasting and selling small batch single origin and signature blend coffees just before the pandemic and the result is amazing, ethically sourced, truly flavorful coffee.

Sam Waymon's Ganja & Hess and Gerald Busby's 3 Women film scores

Two incredible film scores by two incredible composers that have both just recently become available for the first time ever as standalone releases.

"Do No Harm/Take No Shit" T-shirt from Cosmic Peace Studio

Among the myriad of incredible objects made by Rose Lazar's Cosmic Peace Studio, this stands out as the perfect mantra for my current state of mind.

The works of Corey Presha and Toyin Ojih Odutola

Both of these artists' paintings have captured my complete attention as they have created such complete, intricate worlds in their art.

Steve McQueen's Small Axe

During the span of 2020, this series of five films by artist Steve McQueen allowed real space for emotional connection through cinema on a small screen. The way in which these stories, based on real people and true events, were told, even through moments of the pain of existence as black folks in the UK, gave me great joy to invest in.

Name

Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe

Vocation

Artist, composer, curator

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