

January 25, 2024 -

As told to Paul Barman, 2383 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Identity, Collaboration, Success, Independence.



On being guided by your inspirations

Musician and producer Celestaphone discusses escaping hive mind, the balance involved in an independent artist, and art as meditation. **One of the things that sets your albums apart, to my ear, is the sequencing and segues. Can you share your science on that?**

If there's any science it ain't mine, that's nature we're playing with. I'm just making potions. It can be anyone's cyanide but my own. You want to know your ingredients a little bit better and so maybe start data collecting.

That's what I do, get the data and chisel away. For every song that makes an album there's at least twice as many that don't. I'll spreadsheet the keys and tempos of every idea that could fit with a project I'm starting. A gut feeling usually tells me what will be the first and last song.

Since I tend to like quick and connected transitions the technical relatives on this sheet might suggest good ways to order tracks, but feel is the final factor. I might prefer to choose a distant jump somewhere, make it modulate smoothly, or not and keep the tension. It's the cut-and-try that anyone building an album goes through. In the end I get something approved through me, not through numbers or science but they can be helpful.

For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?

Tunes first and foremost, there's rarely an hour I spend awake not listening to something. I love collecting wax. I'm always in the process of looking up a million things, browser tabs galore, seeking the fringe from any medium. So the internet is a biggie.

How or when did you realize you would become an artist?

I took the music route because it was all that really mattered growing up. My folks write and produce songs. So they had old music softwares and keyboards, I think a PX7. Also tons of CDs. For some reason the stuff with sampling interested me the most, even the old stuff. I heard albums by MJ, Art of Noise, and Kate Bush that pretty much printed the Fairlight and Synclavier sound to my brain. Then hearing Madlib and Dilla pushed my interest in sample tech.

I only heard of the Synclavier from The Real Frank Zappa Book.

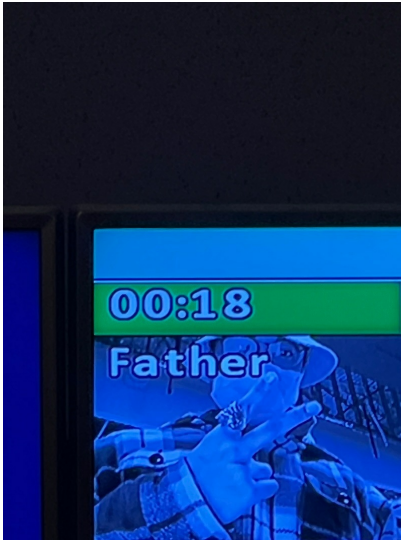
I have spent horrendous amounts of time trying to thread together all the recorded interviews of Zappa talking about the Synclavier and his works with it.

What are you trying to learn from his methods?

The way he'd build patches. Some of the things he came up with were mind blowingly ahead of the curve. He had built one of the first truly huge, orchestral sample pack libraries for his Synclavier, nearly released it for sale too.

And one thing he did with the samples to build patches was so cool I learned from Charles Amirkhanian's Ode to Gravity interviews. He'd sample a long note from multiple instruments crossfading into each other and so, when he'd do chords with it sampled back into the Synclavier, it was like this explosion of timbres. He called those "evolvers", Civilization Phase 3 probably has the most examples of them. Even to this day, with all the processing power, that orchestral Synclavier stuff he did is just so complex it sounds alien.

I've heard plenty of computer music but the Zappa stuff is undeniably the result of someone spending every hour available into making a piece, incredibly intricate. And he admits this, there was no time to waste. And this was on old gear! So it might be so much easier now but still difficult for most.



Do you build your own innovations in your music?

Definitely, when it comes to tidying up samples for example there's techniques I've got that I can only assume are unique because there's no software to do them for me. I'm always wishing I could program automated ways to do these things.

Recently Adobe released an AI tool called Enhance Speech. It isn't the first tool to do what it does but probably for now the most accessible. It'll take a badly recorded vocal, sort of resynthesize it through AI, and you get a fuller and cleaner version in return. Someone should absolutely make a similar tool for bass, I'd argue that it'd be easier to do. I'm really particular with bass so it would be nice to have something take on the heavy-lifting. For me currently, it's a combo of tilt EQ, dynamic EQ, compression, spectral editing and more to make a bass source sound thick for hip-hop. Time consuming, especially if the original is really weak.

It sounds to me like you feel AI could do as good a job as you even though it would be more automated and less your detailed fingerprint.

It could even do a better job if trained right.

A lot of people want to debate AI now. It's so much more hot button than 6 or 7 years ago when I was using something like waifu2x to upscale images. Most of the arguing is over ideas of authorship. It seems that, being an indie artist is oftentimes a balancing act between self-incorporation and artistic output where leaning one way too extremely has dire consequences. On one end you can hyper-fixate on your work being so-called intellectual property to the point of becoming an authority obsessed rent-seeker, and on the other end you can publish so very nonchalantly that the output becomes an unfollowable unorganized mess. I guess I'm in the healthy middle, my stuff is organized but IP is a joke to me nonetheless.

The silver lining behind IP institutions are resultant cataloging and metadata. If society can increasingly churn its art into datasets for information-sake, not just for royalty flow, that would be progress. So, I encourage AI developers to keep breaking through and avoid acquiescing to IP dogma which has so many spellbound. The merit AI has in the art world is obvious to those who are not clutching gold and pearls. I've continued to use AI as someone who enjoys altering source material to come up with all kinds of culture soups.

That's not me dapping up the technocracy though, not interested in their licenses either. Decentralize, prioritize open source software. This technology is going to rapidly fuel inevitable techno-feudalism. So people should take things into their own hands while they still can. Create your own websites, host your own work, that's called digital sovereignty. I won't even get into determinism, but yeah folks should probably reach a consensus there before making criminalizations based on notions of originality.

Let's get into determinism. What are you talking about?

We need to come to a consensus on what originality is or if it even exists.

I see the remixing with AI as akin to sample based music obviously, music which some people still see as naughty. To accomplish these collages comfortably you can't go about fearing phantom contributors, you've got to just trust the goal. So that's what I do.

How do you get started?

With a story to tell, an inspiring aesthetic, and an urge to challenge. As long as these fill the air, a piece will bloom. Starting is so much easier than finishing. There's little investment kicking off, and you can very quickly live the end in reverie. To pass the start you have to convince yourself that the done deal will compete with any euphoric ideal or expectation.

What does artistic independence mean to you?

I'd say artistic freedom is more attitude than achievement. Choice of assignment, environment, and method to self publish; a perpetual meditation.

What do you mean by a perpetual meditation?

Constantly asking if you're doing things out of convenience, or to adhere to a recency bias. A reminder that even if you're contractless, that doesn't eliminate tradeoffs.

Do you mean copying other people?

Yes, because it's unavoidable. So when it feels like conformity, don't hesitate to assess it as such.

As all these artistic outputs are constantly driven in people's faces, it's easy to see a masterpiece in the shadow of a bright new object. Artists start trying to keep up with each other to be at the top of some feed. But if that urgency to be recent is forced, an artist may end up with their work severely undercooked.

People see more than ever if you're not discussing what's in the crowd, you're less likely to be awarded social points. Having a hiveless thought is resistance.



What path led you to where you are today? What has been the most surprising thing you've realized along your creative path?

Research and great teachers paved the way. Any mysticism was crushed by my immediate family early on as I was taught of their own creative experiences.

I had already heard the woes, what-ifs, regrets and ego. Innocence was scrubbed from the jump, I couldn't come into music clutching myself like a lottery ticket after that. The only option left is to be devout, not catastrophizing recognition and sustainability. Tomorrow's most obedient get put on a pedestal because acclaim is a pay-to-play game where you have to be building someone else's portfolio at all times, tidy so that it can be monetized. Middlemen get their backs scratched and suddenly your work has to go through a thousand hoops. Attention is not going to come quickly, if at all, for unprocessed bohemians.

So with that being said, the only surprises left are the creations. I'm surprised a record like *A Year Of Octobers* even exists.

How do other people or collaborators figure into your work?

Always in a sense that there's an element of commentary- we're all in this together. I'm also nothing

without my influences. However, more directly I've had the privilege of working with some of the absolute best musicians, something to make a habit out of.

How do you edit after your first pass?

In the production it's building momentum, so adding detail, dynamics. Subtle as to keep integrity; introducing stuff like effect automation, noise, panning, even new instrumentation. A lot you can do to keep it moving. I'm usually entering the mix phase at this point as well, and with each album the mixing is my task to do. It's what I spend most of my time doing with an album. Wouldn't have it any other way, love it.

How do you know when a project is done?

For me it's time to publish when any excuse seems trivial, and none of what's printed feels empty. Fulfilled enough emotion, enough logic.

What are the rewards of your creative practice?

Reflection is the reward, inward and outward. If you're currently a recording artist, you are a part of the very beginning of this artform as we know it. Music is everything and eternal, but us capturing a sliver of it spans less than 150 years, which is nothing. Being a cog in this primitive, limited thing which undergoes constant development, is a wild and important occasion.

Let's dig into some lyrics and song titles on Paper Cut from the Obit. What is Terryology?

It's that one actor, Terrence Howard. He's come up with this thing that he's coined Terryology as a means to prove that one times one equals two.

The song is like theater. It's a conversation between someone that has skepticism about aliens and new age concepts, versus someone that's deeply invested in that and is not a skeptic at all.

"Eternal inflation, fractal cosmology. You serving sothangon with some fries at the Jollibee." There's so much vocabulary in here I don't know. What is Mantindane and sangoma?

"Mantindane" is this term for gray alien which I learned from reading Credo Mutwa, who influenced the Marvel comics. He was a sangoma, someone in South Africa that someone might come to for spiritual advice. So "mantindane sangoma say" is the sangoma saying what the alien is called versus Roswell Gray, an American term for gray alien.

So you are really drilling down into esoteric knowledge that certain subcultures, presumably internet subcultures, are also obsessed with and have never heard in a rap lyric before, either in vocabulary or in general subject interest. And so blowing their minds by talking about the stuff that is only talked about in little forums, but not in culture.

That is summing it up quite nicely. I wouldn't even say that I'm necessarily obsessed with this stuff, but I just generally look into a lot of things, I guess, just come across randomly. It's kind of like digging for records.

And you're doing that one subject at a time.

Yeah. I like to make these little esoteric culture conversations within the lyrics. That's what I do. It's internet theater.

Internet theater! "Karl the Fog wants his job back."

So, Karl the Fog is literally fog that has been live-streamed since the earliest days of the internet. It is on the campus of this school in San Francisco. I'm saying, in that line, that the person who is being surveilled and having their privacy broken by the government, is taking the job that Karl the Fog had of being live-streamed, 24/7.

How would I know you meant that? Maybe it doesn't matter.

Yeah, exactly. The mystery not only relies on the lyrics, but it relies on the music, too.

What's your dream project at this point?

Just more collaborations, more producing other MC's. Probably a classical album, an electronic classical album.

Celestaphone Recommends:

"It's Up to Me" by Essra Mohawk

"Sleepy" by Ike Willis

"Get Around" by M.I.A.

"Shooters" by Durag Dynasty

"The Corner" by Clipse and Re-Up Gang

"Eye Patch" by De La Soul

"Same Song & Dance" by Eminem

"Flim Flam Man" by Laura Nyro

"The Donor" by Judee Sill

"Chimney" by Moor Mother & billy woods

"Get 'Em" by South Central Cartel

"Mangosteen" by ELUCID

"Let Yourself in for It" by Robert Palmer

"(((tourette's)))" by MC Paul Barman

"The Key" by Styles P

Name


Celestaphone


Vocation


musician and producer

Fact

Related to Musician and composer Celestaphone on being guided by your inspirations:

 [Rapper, producer, and musician Jason "Nosaj" Furlow on growing with your audience](#)

 [Rapper and comedian YOUNGMAN on turning your everyday into art](#)

 [Moor Mother on creating the future you want to see](#)

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



↑