

On doing the work



Musician and composer William Basinski on revisiting your scraps and rejects, being open in collaboration, the joy of listening, and making the most of your time.

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As told to Max Mertens, 2680 words.

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

Your album, *Lamentations*, was made using tape loops and music from your archives dating back to the late 70s. How did you go about organizing this material and assembling the collection?

Last summer I was feeling "I need to do something and I don't know what to do." I found this little takeout container of loops—which is kind of how I have them in boxes. The droney loops that are on the record were like the left-behinds, the rejects, the ones that weren't pretty enough. I pulled these out and I started sequencing them. I found this study that I had done for the overture to *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* opera. [Anohni](#) had told Bob Wilson "Well I need Billy to be co-music director with me," so I got the call from Anohni, dropped the phone, like "What did you say? Yes I'll do it."

They sent the book, and we were looking through all the stories they were going to do through her life and everything. I did a bunch of research on Balkan music, which I find very beautiful, and I made this two-tape loop study for the overture using my typical string sounds. Then I found this beautiful, beautiful Balkan folk tune ["Ko Pokida Sa Grla Djerdane"] on iTunes from the archives of Radio Belgrade sung by Svetlana Spajic. The lyrics were written in 1907 by the famous Serbian poet Aleksa Šantić, and they describe a dialogue between a mother and a daughter,. It's surprisingly modern. It's about a girl making up excuses to her mother in an attempt to cover up her nighttime adventures. The mother says, "O, my daughter, o, my sorrow" so I chose that line for this piece.

That breaks up the drones and "Tear Vial" is that really pretty piano loop, which I know is from 1979, because when I was first starting to do the looping I didn't know you were supposed to cut the loops on the bias so you could have a little crossfade in your splice, and I would just cut them straight up and down and tape them together. So there's a click in there, which I never liked that didn't end up being with the other piano loops that were in; for example, the *Melancholia* stuff, the different variations I did in that period in the early '80s in New York. It was kind of left behind and I found it really beautiful now. I had my assistant Preston here one day with his girlfriend, like "Do you want to hear something new?" And they're like "Yeah."

Then about this time last year Preston and I were in the studio in the back, and I had my big ol' Norelcos, which are too big to tour with. I had this one loop that I'd been using as an encore on my tour last year, people loved it, and so I was like "Look let's get this deck, I'll wire into Ableton, let me just manipulate this loop and see what happens." We ran it and changed the speeds, and all of a sudden the opera singer's voice came out and everything. We did pretty much a live 15-minute couple of takes, and we were both like "Oh wow." It kind of disintegrated as it went along and Preston said "It's a Basinski classic." It was like, "Oh, now we have a record so it's going to be a double album."

Do you have somebody helping you sort through these boxes of tapes? Is any of it digitized?

It's so terrible. I was so bad for years, thousands of cassettes and horrible DAT tapes—what a shitty medium that was. So many times I wouldn't label shit and you move on and whatever. It's a huge archive—actually, today I have all these old, top-of-the-line 90s TX and TASCAM tape decks, they're all broken, they cost \$3500 back in '89, '90, they last for five years and then they're toast. Today we just bought a really beautiful looking, supposedly in perfect condition Marantz cassette deck from some people in Texas, so Preston's going to start archiving all these cassettes and we're going to try to get things organized.

While *Lamentations* feels dark and apocalyptic, you also put out this SPARKLE DIVISION record, which is the polar opposite in a lot of ways. With that album, were you thinking about the challenging the public perception of your music?

No, I don't try to play those kind of games. What happened was Preston had been working for me, and I knew he was really talented, and into dance music and techno and hip-hop. He started showing me some of these banging beats and I went "Wow," and I got my saxophone out and got the mics up. So we started with one track, kind of having fun with it, and he kept bringing this stuff and we'd do some more. It's not him and it's not me, but it's something we did together. He got cold feet about it, and after the 2016 election, we moved onto other things. But I kept listening to it, and we kept tweaking things and I sequenced it the way I wanted.

We got Henry Grimes in the studio in New York to play on that one track, when he and [his wife] Margaret heard the piece they were like "Lot of babies gonna be born to this one honey." I first met him at the Empty Bottle in Chicago in about 2004, and ended up becoming friends and staying in touch. Then we got my friend from London, Xeli Grana, who's an amazing natural singer with perfect pitch, pure theatre, she can just make stuff up and sing a cappella. Got her to sing one time when I was in London, we were at my friend's loft, we're having some wine and Xeli starts going and I turned on my phone. She just went off on this whole musical about her life and some pretty serious childhood trauma, but in such a wonderful way, such a poetic way. We ended up using that one little sample at the end for the title track of the album.

I used to produce bands in the '90s at Arcadia, when I had my big studio and we put on shows. We had a company there and invited people back that we liked, we would do these little seasons, maybe four shows in the fall, winter, spring, summer. If one band was playing, one of the other bands might be helping with the door, barback or whatever, we all helped each other and these amazing musicians played on each others' records. So this is me producing again and encouraging all these people, and just trying to see what happens and it turned out great. I kept listening to it and going "God this is so good. I'd play it for people when they came over, not telling them what it is, cocktails by the pool. "What's this?" "Oh this is the Sparkle Division record."

Finally about this time last year I told Preston I'm going to talk to Jeremy [DeVine] at Temporary Residence, because I had sent it to them and they liked it, but it was awhile back. They and made us an offer for a small advance and so I said to Preston, "Listen we could still get that small advance and we could have it out for summer, I just talked to Jeremy." So luckily before COVID and the entire world shut down, we got our little advance and got it all rolling, and the kids came up with that crazy album cover. I wanted Leonora Russo, the Queen of Williamsburg, my Brooklyn mob mom on the cover. She's the one singing her version of "St. Louis Blues," which is one of her famous numbers she would do to entertain people as they walked by on the street in Brooklyn on Bedford Avenue. She was my dear lady friend, neighbor for years. I had moved to California and she was so miserable about that. She would call me all the time and we were sitting out on the patio at my old house having a cigarette, she called and I had it on speaker, and I told Preston "Start recording on your phone." She did her number and Preston took it and found a 1978 recording of "St. Louis Blues" on YouTube, and just did a little time compression and hacked it in there with hers so it sounds like an old 78. It's just hilarious.

This year, you also released more music from the archives with Something From The Pink House and Hymns of Oblivion. Has the pandemic caused you to rethink or be less precious about keeping music in the vaults?

A little bit. The *Hymns of Oblivion* thing I worked on for years. We had our first loft in New York. They wanted to tear down the whole neighborhood and they thought they could get away with it, but they didn't realize there was a bunch of old loft residents from Tribeca that had been moving to downtown Brooklyn, and they already went through that shit one time and they weren't going to have it. We got pro bono top lawyers to fight these fuckers

on their crappy environmental impact statement grounds and they held them up for years, and finally they had to settle with all of us and we got a bunch of money, and found this gothic ruin in Williamsburg on the edge of nowhere and restored it I got to build a studio and real equipment, and started to learn how to pull all the stops, you know? I worked on it for years; I never finished it, there were certain things I would have loved to remix. I've listened to it every now and again, and at the beginning of the pandemic I was like "Fuck it, it's Bandcamp Friday, let's just see what happens."

Your partner, James Elaine, is a visual artist and you've been together for many years. How does he inspire your creative process and vice versa?

Oh, Jamie's wonderful—he's an incredible artist and also a huge music lover. When I first moved to San Francisco in '78, he had a job at a big used record store in Berkley and he had everything, he had the coolest new German stuff, Connie Plank, Conrad Schnitzler, of course Fripp & Eno. Anything different and the top of the top of coolest, he had it or would get it. So I got to hear all this stuff and was just like, "Wow, there's so many options that are available to me just with working with tape." I got to learn about art from him and his other artist friends. Most of my friends were painters doing really interesting work, and they all loved music. Seeing the back of the Fripp & Eno album cover where they show the Frippertronic tape going from one end to the next and creating a tape delay, I went and bought some tape decks, those big ol' Narecos and some old used tape and started "painting" with sound.

Jamie wanted to move to New York to make it in the art world. San Francisco, he'd had some shows there, but it was very provincial then and they weren't really getting it. So we moved to New York and we were there for 10 years in the one loft, and almost 20 in Arcadia. He took a job in '99. He had been running the emerging artist program at The Drawing Center for many years and discovering young artists, giving them their first shows at a museum. So he was like an A&R guy for the art world in a way.

Being an artist, Jamie as a curator isn't like an academic, he's not a writer, so he's not trying to come up with "this is about me." He just picked the work that he liked that had some kind of brokenness that resonated with him, and he would help these people... Artists, especially young artists, tend to get really nervous in their first opportunity and maybe want to do too much, and he can help them focus and keep it cool.

Arcadia lasted for 20 years, and it was this tremendously fertile creative period, all this great music came out of it. Do you think artist-run spaces like that can exist and thrive today in these cities in the face of gentrification?

Well, it's certainly more expensive than it used to be, but there are people doing it. Of course everything's fucked up because of the COVID pandemic, and even the clubs and everything, who knows what's going to survive when this is over. It's extremely difficult now, but people will do what they do and maybe people won't go to New York that don't have trust funds, and they'll stay in their small towns and make their scene happen there where it's inexpensive. You might be able to find an old industrial space or something like that. People are gonna do it. They'll find a way. Creative people are going to be creative.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic I think is that many people are thinking about how they consume music and sitting with it more. I know people listen to your music doing all kinds of activities from doing household chores to sending emails, what are you listening to these days?

Sometimes I listen to a couple of college radio stations that I like; especially on Saturday and Sunday, they have a bunch of really cool shows. I sometimes listen to the oldies channel—certain shows are really good. Every time the goddamn Bee Gees come on I have to turn the fucking shit off like, "How did they get away with that, that awful bad falsetto, ugh." I listen to some of Jamie's playlists. I have millions of them. Sometimes I'll put on *Water Music* and just chill—I created this stuff for me and it's very peaceful. There might be a light breeze on the pool and it's just perfection. Sometimes I don't listen to anything; I listen to birds. I've been getting some new records—I never was a record collector—but when one of my friends drops a new record, I buy it and listen to it. I just bought a new thing from [Room40](#), Chris Abrahams from The Necks' [new album](#). It's all him on the acoustic piano. It's very beautiful.

Have you been working on new music while quarantined?

Yes, we're working on some new stuff. We keep trying to see what's happening. I'm finally starting to feel like "Okay, let's get off the doomscrolling and do some work."

What advice would you give to artists trying to make art during these very turbulent political times, who might feel stuck or uninspired?

Just do it. Show up for work—you never know what can happen—and record, record, record. One time in the summer of 2001, I was about to be evicted from my loft and had no money, my shop had closed a few months earlier and there was no jobs and no work. It was a beautiful summer day and I sat in the sun in my bedroom on this couch, pulled out this *The Way of Zen* book and started reading it, and was like "Dumbass, use this time you have, get back into the studio, and go back to archiving those loops." And guess what happened? *The Disintegration Loops* happened over a two-day period—so you never know what can happen if you show up for work.

Selected William Basinski:

Watermusic (2000)

The Disintegration Loops (2002)

Selva Oscura (2018) (with Lawrence English)

To Feel Embraced (2020) (as SPARKLE DIVISION)

Lamentations (2020)

Name

William Basinski

Vocation

Musician, composer

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Danilo Pellegrinelli