



DAVE PHILLIPS : 2007 INTERVIEW

by Thomas Bey William Bailey

Occupying a lonely but highly captivating interstitial space somewhere between noise, musique concrete, confrontational theater and alluring absurdity is Dave Phillips, one-time bassist for the Swiss grindcore wrecking crew Fear of God and frequent performer with the Schimpfluch collective (specialists in the techniques of "brutal humoroid drama" and "psycho-physical training"), among others. DP's solo offerings have, in the past few years, caused a stir amongst the key individuals who normally review and disseminate adventurous sound. Their hyper-clarity of production, baffling diversity in the sound events on display, and corresponding diversity in the unconscious responses evoked - from wild laughter to creeping dread- all combine to make them nothing if not highly unique in this genre.

DP's more forceful audio moments, loaded as they are with feral screams, stereotypically 'ugly' vocalizations, and a panoply of electronic shocks and sharpened sonic debris, would cause some of the uninitiated to envision him as a deranged and tyrannical character. But, as is usually the case with things like this, the truth is somewhat different. A committed vegan and- from what I can tell through my limited contact - a genuinely concerned soul, Phillips is a person of much greater complexity than the garden-variety misanthrope too often associated with this culture. His art manages to accomplish a truly rare feat: being utilized as a 'critical' music (often questioning the arrogant human sense of omnipotence) while also being enjoyable and intriguing on the basis of its auralty alone. I interviewed DP in mid-2007 in preparation for my Micro Bionic book, here then is the full unedited transcript of our discussion.

OK, easy question first- what first prompted you to get involved with music / sound?

I've had this passion for and interest in sound from an early age on - connection, fascination, obsession, whatever you wanna call it. I couldn't have done otherwise than to start playing sound myself.

Have your motivations for working with sound changed much since this time?

In that aspect, no - it's my language, I have to constantly get involved with sound (and all that it involves), without that something utterly important would be missing.

More on the above- do you feel working with audio has any special advantages over working with other artistic media? Do you feel like it's any more of a direct conduit to certain emotions and experiences than painting, poetry etc.?

Theoretically all 'artistic' forms are equally valid. It depends on what one likes, no? For me it's not a matter of choice - it's the form I'm most passionate (etc. etc.) about, so I regard it as the most effective.

What kind of 'environmental' factors contribute to your sound? Or, in other words, what are the daily experiences that most contribute to it?

I'd have to reverse that question. What 'environmental' factors do not contribute to my sound? All around me does, in one way or another. As much as certain audio preferences might do, so do social structures and life around me, natural (and unnatural) environments I'm in, my direct vicinity or a global context, my subjective perceptions and sensitivities.

How did your involvement with Schimpfluch-Gruppe begin?

I met Joke (Lanz) in the mid 80's, through attending the same punk-ish gigs in and around the Zürich area. Rudolf (Eb.Er) and I met through my work at RecRec (a label and distribution for independent music in Zürich) at the time, somewhere around '88 or '89. We took an instant liking to each other and spent more time together. Marc/G*park and Peter/Inzelt I met not too long after at some Psychic Rally radio shows and at the first Schimpfluch Gruppe appearances in Zürich.

Have there been any particular 'high points' for you while working with this collective - moments where everything seemed to 'come together', so to speak?

All the activities in the early days created a strong bond, be it involvement in certain live actions (organising as well as playing), the Psychic Rally radio show and in just being together, communicating, exchanging, creating and drinking. There were definitely lots of high-points there, but more in a social context.

In a live context, there's been a few performances where all went perfectly, at least in my perception, like the Schimpfluch-Gruppe action in Baden/Switzerland (Lanz, Eb.er, Phillips '95), especially the one in Tainan/Taiwan (Eb.er & Phillips '96), one in Paris ('spaghetti', Eb.er, Phillips '96)... the more I think about it (with Joke as Sudden Infant in Solothurn in '93, with Rudolf in a studio in Osaka working on 'Arschloch-Onna' in '96 or at the Setagaya Museum in Tokyo the same year, with Joke and Daniel in Leeds in '03)... I'll stop here.

Especially with your work in Schimpfluch-Gruppe, there is a strong Viennese Aktionist influence - in what ways do you think your work (both with S.G. and solo) differs from the activities of Guenter Brus, Schwarzkogler etc.?

Personally I never considered the Viennese Aktionist movement more important than many other 'influences' - although still important, at the time at least, but like said so were and are many others, so I don't feel it necessary to single this particular influence out. Rudolf and Joke are much more knowledgeable on this subject.

Is there a kind of 'common thread' or idea that unites all of the projects you are involved in (Fear of God, OHNE, etc.)?

That would be me and my wish and need to express.

How do you feel about the current state of the musical / audio 'underground'? Do you think enough progress is being made in musical ideas? Or, having said that, do you think we really need constant progress in areas like noise, drone, other forms of extreme music?

Who am I to say? My view of what's happening is 'limited' (not that it's a limitation, on the contrary) to what I get to see and hear, mostly through people I share an event or trade sound with. Is progress being made at all? I don't know either. Neither whether it's possible. But it's not really a value I would measure with - I'm more interested in what it communicates, call it authenticity or individuality in expression, in all sorts of different given contexts. There's usually a larger amount that I don't like, and a handful I like - but not often for their 'progressiveness'.

Branching off from that, do you think people are taking enough risks with noise and other forms of experimental music?

No. but it also depends on what people want to achieve. And, if it weren't for more entertainment-orientated, 'safe' or mainstream ways there probably would be less of an interesting balance.

Do you think these aforementioned musical forms still have the potential to radicalize people, in the sense of making them active creators instead of passive consumers?

If music/sound wouldn't have that potential it wouldn't have that much of an importance for me. Though I wouldn't call it 'radicalising'. It's got more to do with raising consciousness. Alas, people are affected in different ways, as much as taste differs, so many forms are valid. People can be positively activated by all sorts. experimental music is just one of those.

You seem to use the human voice as a basis for much of your sound. What is it about the voice that attracts you to using it as an instrument? For example, John Duncan told me that he focuses on voice since 'it can be recognized as a human voice even when manipulated by the most advanced technology'. Do you have an opinion similar to this one, or something different?

Though I don't disagree with John, my reasons are probably more practical - it's what I have. That, and that I very much like an 'organic' sound.

You're part of a small group of experimental artists (including Randy Yau and a few others) who are putting a microscope onto vocal sounds that we normally take completely for granted- breathing, sneezing, belching, screams, groans etc. What's your ultimate goal(s) with this exploration?

These are sounds I am constantly hearing and doing myself. The 'reasons', again, are in the 'practical' since 'present' realm. Input (into my ears) triggers processes. I like the sound qualities of these noises as they are utterly human, even though our way in dealing with them might not be (belching is not really 'taken for granted' but often frowned upon etc.) (Some of) my 'goals' feed on that.

I'm interested in the way you use lengthy statements as song titles (especially on the 'III' and '6' albums) that make clear your stances on humanity, consumerism etc. before the CD even enters the player. To me, this seems to me like an inversion of the 'alternative rock 'n roll' convention- having a one-word title for a meandering song that often goes nowhere musically or conceptually. In using these lengthy track titles, was your intention to make the listener re-consider their place in the world even if they didn't 'understand' your compositions on their own merits?

As with sound itself, I see the idea of a 'songtitle' as a way of communicating. Rather than 'naming' a piece I use the songtitle 'position' to try to add a level or different aspect to my audio expressions (if one decides to listen after reading the titles). Even if people don't like the music but might have titles to dig into, that's not the point. I can only but leave it up to the 'listener' whether he or she would like to see a title in context with the sound, as something separate, or in its whole as an idea. I like to refer to my work as 'intimate sound' as it deals with things that are of importance to me or reflect my way of feeling and thought. what I do is in the interest of communicating those things.

On your website there is / was a short essay about insects, and the many valuable uses they have for maintaining our ecosystem. This essay ends with a question suggesting that humans perhaps serve fewer uses than insects ("...and why do humans exist?"). Have you personally found a satisfying answer for this question?

No, but I'm trying to learn. I opt for personal responsibility, intervention, and the potential for 'growth'. After all, we are the youngest animal on this planet and still have loads to learn. I'd like to try to add to the change of a lot of things that concern the human race in relation to its position on this planet, to other sentient beings and organisms, for myself as well as for others. Our (so-called 'first world') current value system is often pretty fucked up; our distance from initial circumstances such as so-called 'chaos', the way we treat fellow beings and the environment in the interest of gain and power or just for the heck of it, our astounding greed and selfishness, of individuals as well as of corporations and governments, the incredible importance we adhere to material

things, money and comfort, the estranging stance of competition rather than cooperation, the time and energy we spend on making money to survive doing things we don't want to do, and seeking distractions to fill the gaps, the things we take for granted, the devastating impact that the mistake of religion has caused on our minds and lives, the unbalanced position our hypertrophied brain creates in the evaluation of situations, the lack of empathy and understanding on a global scale, understanding relationships etc. My reflections on this are what I try to pass on through my work.

Similar to the above question- could you explain a little more your thoughts about the relationship between humans and other life forms? Do you think humans deserve their self-appointed 'elevated' status over animals, or not?

Elevated status? What elevated status? Many humans act as if they are elevated, but to think or feel that is just dumb. Humans definitely have qualities that are well worth exploring, but to think we should only consider ourselves, our values and our goals and to put everything else secondary is a way of perceiving and dealing with things that definitely lacks perspective. C'mon, we know we are seriously dangerous, for ourselves and for all around us. We are (or might be) incredible beings, but might is not right. The ways humans perceive things, the value we give to things, are not the only ways that exist to do so, nor that we ultimately exist in. We're all in this together and there's more to 'gain'/ learn than what is generally proposed. as well as asking ourselves what we really want, we should also question what really matters and what is involved.

What is your opinion about the huge amount of new consumer technology available for people to make music with (cheap CD burning and audio editing tools, free 'plug-ins' and so on)? Do you think this is increasing the number of genuinely interesting artists, or is it leading to a kind of over-abundance of similar sounds and copyists?

What do I know. I generally see an overflow of sound media, and the noticeable increase in quantity does not seem congruent to the increase in quality. That's just one way to see that though, and also one I would adhere not only to sound making and its 'marketing'. On the other hand, maybe generally more people are prepared to take in these forms of expression, of sound, of what's involved. That again could have all sorts of different reasons...

What about technology in general? Is there such thing as a purely 'good' or purely 'bad' technological innovation- or do you think of technology as basically ambivalent?

Technology is also not ambivalent, but just a tool, a means to an end. It can not, per se, be good or bad. but the way we use it can be. or not. But dualism is of no help at all.

I've talked with CM von Hausswloff and a couple other sound artists, who say that they are making their music 'for themselves' first, and for their audience second (CMVH said that he 'could never be sure if an audience would show up'.) For yourself, how much does the presence of an audience affect your art? Are they necessary in order for you to create what you want?

An audience is not necessary in order to create- I very much need and want to do this. But since I'm interested in communicating, I can't say an audience is not important, so I can't say it is 'secondary'. An audience definitely adds to the effect, the experience and the meaning. Their feedback can be constructive as an input to the whole process, but also, without an audience what I do would make less sense (to me).

Having said that, you've had a chance to tour in numerous different countries that are somewhat more outside the Anglo-American sphere of influence than others, and a chance to test the reactions of different audiences- have these reactions differed much from one place to the other?

Sure. There's people in places that are more hungry for input of a certain type, for something different from 'entertainment' or 'style'- speaking in a generalised way. In the western hemisphere I detect more of a 'lack of hunger' which might be due to saturation resulting in indifference - the more 'civilised', 'advanced' and 'rich' a type of place seems to be, the more people are seeking distraction rather than input or output. This might say something about the regions I've taken to most, such as 'Eastern Europe' or South Korea. Although more specifically I would refer to cities rather than to countries, at this point I must stress places, But not only. It's also due to whoever puts on an event, with what background and in which context and circumstances it happens. And, the more passionate the organisers tend to be, the more interested and interesting audiences usually are. But of course there's always exceptions.

I read an interview with Francisco Lopez once, where he explained his motives for not appearing on the stage for his performances- because it reinforced this idea of the performer being an "idol", and distracted them from the sound. What about yourself- does the audience have to see you; to watch your movements in order to comprehend the 'message' of your music? (I guess this question applies more to your solo performances- not so much to appearances with Schimpfluch and others)

Sometimes it's important to be seen, depending on the context, in the interest of what is trying to be transmitted. Generally speaking the audience does not have to see me since it's not about me.