

# DAPPER DAN

Issue 21



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Our entire call is soundtracked by a recurring white noise which sounds like a broken showerhead spitting water. Or a kettle forever almost reaching boiling point, but never quite arriving. It's a shapeshifting sound, and every time it returns it moulds itself into another familiar character. At first, it feels like an irritating obstacle but the more we talk, the more this sonic parasite weaves into our conversation, both in terms of atmosphere and content. Quite fitting for a chat with an artist and composer who melds elements of noise with renaissance chamber music and polyphonic synthesis. But before anything else, for Bill John Bultheel, the first instrument of every composition is space. Something that's deeply felt and apparent in his site-specific soundscapes involving multiple performers and a highly inclusive approach to audience engagement. Bultheel's aural textures ooze romantic darkness as they morph into a particular atmosphere of existential tension. But beyond aesthetic qualities, he's interested in creating communal experiences of music that sculpt instances of poetry and initiate necessary discussions pertaining to our social structures. His work as composer of Anne Imhof's performance trilogy *Angst, Faust and Sex*, shows his wider interest in multi-dimensional narratives raising questions of subjectivity. This is an underlying leitmotif that appears in most of Bultheel's pieces and further enriches the fabric of storytelling. Here, we discuss the poetic power of silences, the value of shared experiences within musical contexts, and how music can exist outside our linear understanding of time.

Photography by Roman Goebel  
Fashion by Billy Lobos

EFFIE EFTHYMIADI: You create your own instruments for your performances. What gave you the impetus to devise them?

BILL JOHN BULTHEEL: Both in my solo works and in my collaborations with Alexander Iezzi, we build a lot of our own instruments. This comes from a practice of deconstructing existing instruments and adding effects on top, almost like you would with a guitar in noise music. I think what's important is that an instrument is essentially an interface; a machine that turns movement into sound.

The relation between movement and sound has a lot to do with performance. I'm very interested in how movements translate into sound, and how movements transform our perception of sound. For example, in my work, the drum pads [a drum-like, sample-triggering instrument] turn into a string orchestra. And thus, they reveal something about the aggression behind the movement of hitting the pads, as well as the soft melancholia behind the sound. These two elements stand in opposition to each other. Their juxtaposition opens this poetic world that starts speaking on its own. I think sound functions as a body, a dancer's body. It's there to be interacted with. But it's also a physical force.

A constellation of sonic bodies being torn apart or put together. This made me think of composing music or creating performances through building relationships between elements. It's about creating networks that constantly influence each other and can create poetry together. An instrument is this beautiful space where music and performance come together.

EE: Do you ever go about "foraging" sounds? Like recording a particular timbre, ring or cadence of objects?

BBJ: I love recording silences. And silence on Earth is never truly silent. When I was still studying at the conservatory, I was obsessed with sound and space and how much context can exist within silence. I wanted to create this symphony of silences. When you create sound there are two ways of going about it: additive and subtractive synthesis. In the subtractive approach, you basically take a block of noise and you start carving away, like sculpting something out of raw material. You take away different layers and start to synthesise a sonic body by subtracting sounds. In order to create harmony, you add silences in the spectrum underneath, above or in-between. There's something very

poetic about that. So, I was interested in this idea of adding silences on top of each other, compressing them, and seeing what makes each silence so special and what kind of atmosphere they exude. Trying to create a master silence of all silences. In the end, it just became noise.

It's interesting how the accumulation of different silences transports the listener into all these different spaces, and suddenly their perception is in a number [of] spaces at the same time. So, the listener gains access to different spatial compositions and information, like having multiple ears in multiple places. It also goes back to this idea of using space as an instrument, as the first instrument in a composition. Listening is our sense of perceiving space. Sight too, but it's not 360 degrees. Listening always offers a full spectrum of what is before, after and all around you. In order to make sense of the world, you have to be somehow embedded within the world at first. Hearing is what embeds you in not just an environment, but also your own thinking sphere.

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard said that what is actually so specific about human thought is the fact that we're constantly embedded within the horizon of our perception. Without it, you would never



Cotton polo shirt Fred Perry; leather belt Bill's own; corduroy trousers Levi's



Cotton shirt **Maison Margiela**; leather belt Bill's own; leather trousers **GmbH**

be able to actually think. It's this constant feedback loop between you and your surroundings and that's what forms all thinking. He said that in order for the mind to think, the eye has to be embedded within its own horizon. Which means that we have to understand that we're within that which appears to be outside. It breaks this dichotomy of internal and external worlds and perceptions. The outside is within you and what's outside is also inside of you. Those two are never separate and they constantly interact with each other. That's why I find silences so interesting because they become a horizon of thinking rather than just a sound.

**EE:** Your music draws from the Renaissance and early Baroque as well as noise music and machine-like sounds. Can you tell me more about your influences and your relationship to these different elements?

**BJB:** My style goes in various directions. I'm such a flirt with musical genres. What's important is multidimensionality. I work in different fields and collaborate with so many artists that a lot of different types have influenced me. My sound is certainly quite dark and has an inherent heaviness which I share with baroque and noise, or heavy metal music. But at the end of the day, I'm a music nerd and I love listening to all kinds of sounds and drawing from different subcultures. I'm not someone who picks one style over another. Musical ideas transcend aesthetics. A pop song can be just as interesting to me as a string quartet or a piece of distorted guitar. It's more about finding a movement or a musical thought that surprises you and warms your heart.

Since an early age, I've been trying to combine renaissance music and distorted electronics, but never with the intention of making noise or metal-sounding music. It's only afterwards that I really started looking into experimental metal music and finding a home there. Its usage of modality and interest in distorted sound and noise exploration felt like something close to my darker leanings.

**EE:** How do you navigate the translation from deeply felt interior spaces into sound and spaces which are ultimately communal? From the inward to the outward experience.

**BJB:** Music makes experiences visceral, and in doing so can make them public, as in it allows for a feeling to be shared. The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen said in an interview that when people create

new experiences, they change life. When we construct experiences for us or for others, our thinking shifts. Every record that you listen to, every painting that you look at, every poem that you read, shifts your perception. In a way, every experience displaces you. But this type of displacement is what makes you feel alive. When you work with poetry, and I mean poetry in a larger sense, you mould and bend meaning. And this process moves or rearranges your mental state in ways you don't expect. When this happens in performances—especially performances that don't follow preconceived formulas of audience engagement—it triggers a negotiation of an experience.

I'm interested in a communal experience. I'm interested in reinventing sociability, creating spaces for communal experiences of music. I believe they open up a space to renegotiate meaning and offer a place for new forms of solidarity and kindness.

**EE:** In your work, there's often a liturgical, ecclesiastical touch that deepens your particular aesthetic of an often-dark atmosphere. How do you feel about ritualistic and ceremonial elements in music, performance and beyond?

**BJB:** There's a certain ceremonial aspect to every communal experience. That's why I'm interested in performance. Conservative ritualistic or ceremonial occasions don't mean much to me. But more contemporary liminal spaces like, say, raves or forest walks or even a karaoke birthday party, are more interesting to me as formats in which to think of rituals in relation to music. Club culture is a great example in this case. The club as a space that allows for so much more than just listening to music. It can become a capsule outside space and time in a very liberating manner.

It can form a communal experience that's outside societal norms where transcendental connection and a sense of belonging can come to the forefront. And it's something that we truly lack in our daily lives. Spaces like this, communal experiences like this, need to exist to make us feel alive, to escape from being absorbed by a system that can be very dehumanizing. Bringing music and performance together, like I do in my work, allows for this type of space to exist, and for a certain negotiation between bodies to transpire.

**EE:** Iannis Xenakis opposed the general consensus that time in music is everything. He was interested in that which remains once time has been removed. For him, both

musical composition and perception take place mainly outside of time. Music takes place in the instantaneous present, but our experience is not in this present—rather it takes place at the external limit of this present. What do you make of that and how do you approach time, not just practically but also conceptually?

**BJB:** Of all [the] composers, Xenakis understood sound as space and composition as architecture. He was, of course, an architect too alongside his musical practice, working with Le Corbusier on several projects. His ideas have had a tremendous influence on me and how I started to understand music.

Xenakis was interested in these organic sonic forms, "living sounds" that are constantly evolving and morphing, like the sound of rain, hail or cicadas. Sounds that grow and swell. Somehow static and endless, but at the same time dynamic. He talks about the idea of music existing outside of linear time. Music is not just about conveying a message or acting as a material of language. It's more that you create a mould in time which you can enter and have the possibility to move within it. You create sonic sculptures that become this specific perception of life that I had at a certain moment. It's like you enter into a storyline, an atmosphere. It allows you to enter and move into a different thinking sphere where you're capable of completely reinventing what it means to be alive, even if only briefly.

Thinking about music in a linear way, as you would with language, defeats the purpose. Music is poetry in a larger sense. And what's interesting in poetry is that there are all these little blocks and disparate parts that already exist and then you put them together and form something out of them that you weren't aware of before. What you create is essentially nonsense, and this idea of nonsense is extremely important. The fact that what you think you know can be twisted in ways that turn it into something utterly unknown, newfound. It's about bending your perception and preconceived notions in surprising ways.

A friend of mine sent me this beautiful sentence that he came across recently that I find very fitting. It goes: "Poetry is paranoia in polyphony."

Among other projects, Bultheel is currently working on a solo album with pieces for two countertenors and two tuba players, as well as a collaborative album with Alexander Iezzi.

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