

As experienced music consumers wait with bated breath for the next major musical upheaval, a small core of rich-sounding, highly mobile individuals are re-shaping the sound landscape without the assurance of being part of any larger movement. Their ideologies, creative approaches, and end products differ widely, but they do share a common bond of anti-establishment. Feasibility in the face of information overload, and a drive to look sound beyond the limits of live performance.

Starting with the guerrilla media tactics of industrial music in the late 1970s, the author charts an ongoing trend in electronic music: an increasing amount of sonic quality, recorded output and inspirational content, accompanied with a decreasing amount of time, personnel, and capital investment, from the use of laptop computers to create remote outposts of noise, to the establishment of semi-autonomous pop-labels largely by sound artists. 21st century sound culture is expanding in its scope and popularity more as it divides in other respects.

The text of MICROBIONIC is built up from archival research into the world of audio extremity, including physical travel to the various 'hot spots' where these new sounds are made, and thousands of hours listening to live and recorded music. Numerous exclusive interviews with leading lights of the field were also conducted for this book. William Bennett (Interhouse), Peter Rehberg (Mogai), Peter Christopherson (Throbbing Gristle/Earl), John Thomas, Francisco López, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Bob Ostertag and many others weigh in with a range of thoughts and opinions that underscores the remarkable diversity to be found within new electronic music itself. Illustrated throughout, MICROBIONIC provides a host of audio phenomena that range from the mysterious to the terrifying, and provides a perfect gateway into this parallel sound universe both for the uninitiated and for diehards seeking to learn more.

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MICROBIONIC

THOMAS BEY WILLIAM BAILEY



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# MICROBIONIC

RADICAL ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND  
SOUND ART IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THOMAS BEY WILLIAM BAILEY

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FRANCISCO LÓPEZ:  
THE BIG BLUR THEORY

As we progress further into the dense forest of uncertainty that is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, something becomes painfully clear about our relationship to recorded sound: the overwhelming majority of it is inextricably linked to an image of some kind. The art of the record album cover has, by now, been immortalized and anthologized in countless coffee table books and museum exhibitions, while the physical appearance and photogenic quality of the musician has become every bit as important of a marketing point as their instrumental virtuosity. Consumption of recorded sound as a lifestyle accessory, or as a metaphor for some fixed set of experiences, has lessened its value by lessening sound's essential ambiguity-suggesting, for example, that the sound of a distorted guitar must always be a 'soundmark' of youthful rebellion, or that the sound of a harp must be a prelude to ascension into a stereotypical image of heaven, complete with angels frolicking on clouds. Sound artist Brandon LaBelle, discussing the challenges of perception involved in making site-specific sound, suggests an asynchronous relationship between the time it takes to comprehend audio information *vis-à-vis* visual information:

"I find that vision and sound differ radically in terms of duration: to enter a space and listen to sound is much different than entering to look at something. Often, sound just takes a great deal longer to comprehend and appreciate. Vision in a way is much more stable-well, maybe in the way I am using it- so, it somehow rivets attention; like a photo album, a viewer flips through during which time sound may enter the 'picture', as a kind of backdrop that suddenly comes forward on a corporeal level. Maybe that is presuming that sound 'interferes' with vision, straddles it, undoes it, etc. In this regard, often the visual operates almost as a 'musical' instrument from which the acoustical originates- that is to say, we look toward the instrument to understand the sound."<sup>1</sup>

As an artist who specializes in sound installation pieces, LaBelle likely knows, all too well, the frustration that can come from trying to communicate a sonic idea in a space whose visitors consider themselves 'viewers' first and foremost, and who can come to view sound as an intrusive or parasitic influence on their complete digestion of visual data. However, the mediation of sound has existed long before the intervention of, or intersection with, the visual artifact- prior to this, it was language that intervened and imposed itself onto sounds and made them either complementary to, or subservient to, vocal and narrative elements. If sounds were left alone, they might not be able to tell a *specific* story, but this would not

mean that they didn't have some form of narrative quality to them, once organized in an evocative enough way. Humanity has had a long history of distrusting or fearing unmediated sound, giving it a support role in Bardic lore, theatrical productions, films, and other forms which enlarge and celebrate the human experience – but whether sound has been allowed to be in the 'driver's seat' of such productions is open to debate. This should not be taken as a dismissal of all sound experiments that involved stimulation of the other senses: there is a strong tradition of music, especially in the electronic field, of working with synaesthetic experience (to be touched upon in the next chapter) and with the way that pre-set behaviors and beliefs can be dramatically altered when a synchronicity of sound with sight, smell, taste or touch opens up hitherto unnoticed pathways.

Maybe the real problem, then, is not the 'visualization' of sound, but the attempt to present sound in an anthropomorphic way, or in a way that supports a grand teleological view of human history (i.e. that all we do as a species has some ultimate 'meaning,' that every miniscule word and gesture must signify something infinitely greater than itself.) I would argue that the most intense and successful synaesthetic experiences have been inspired when a sight, smell, etc. collided with a sound that was *not* being overlaid by unequivocally 'human' elements. It would be truly disappointing if 'pure' sound were phased out in order to make way for a world in which all the sound we heard was nothing but *symbolism*; sound being represented in a 1:1 ratio with a universally understood image, memory, etc. This could apply to any artistic discipline as well: Marcel Duchamp once spoke out against the preponderance of "retinal" painting, suggesting that mastery of formal composition was not always enough to stimulate the imagination.

Resisting a teleological appropriation of sound –and indeed any artistically arranged form of sensory information- can be difficult. It's not particularly easy to argue that the great musical works of the past, dealing with such teleological principles and themes as Promethean spirit within humanity, have not had the ability to provoke and inspire. Even those whose method was destructive leaned towards a possible Utopian or apocalyptic premise for their work, as theorist Raymond Williams suggests the Italian Futurists did: "The Futurist call to destroy 'tradition' overlaps with socialist calls to destroy the whole existing order."<sup>2</sup> Williams attenuates this statement somewhat, though, also admitting to some ambiguity in the terminology of F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto: Marinetti's pronouncement that "we will sing of great crowds excited by work, pleasure and riot...the polyphonous, multicoloured tides of revolution"<sup>3</sup> was one that, per Williams, "carried with it all the ambiguities between revolution and carnival."<sup>4</sup> At any rate, this kind of thinking is extremely resilient and is hardly confined to the creative classes, having been bounced back and forth between both sides of the Left / Right political divide and having been adopted by evolutionary theorists and Church clergymen alike. Meanwhile, the blazing speed in technological

development and the acceleration of human conflict seems to confirm the belief that “something is coming” on the horizon, although what that “something” is will likely remain hotly debated for the foreseeable future. If the various socio-political inclinations are united in any way whatsoever, they are united by a stark fear of insignificance, by an increasingly urgent need to expose secrets and to endlessly catalog minutiae into lists ordered by relevance.

## **La Bahia Inútil**

In the middle of his book-length essay *Impossible Exchange*, philosopher Jean Baudrillard takes a brief detour to offer us an intriguing image of a curiously-named geographical area in the South American land mass:

“When you travel from Punta Arenas to Rio Grande in the south of Patagonia, for a hundred kilometers you skirt La Bahia Inútil – Useless Bay- where the sky is low, purple, and immense, and the sheep have an air of night owls about them. It is all so vast and empty, so definitively empty, that it does not even merit a name; as though God had by some oversight cast this superfluous landscape down here- a landscape all the stranger for being part of an entire landmass, Patagonia, where all is useless and senseless.”<sup>5</sup>

As Baudrillard’s observations might suggest, purposelessness does not always have to equal bleakness or a terrifying void: if anything, his rich description of this ‘superfluous landscape’ inspires further investigation. Meanwhile, the world of recorded sound may have its own Bahia Inútil in the works of the bio-acoustic researcher and composer Francisco López (formerly based in Madrid, with recent residencies in Montreal and Amsterdam.) López is certainly no stranger to the sweeping ‘useless’ steppes of Patagonia, and he has made a number of eyebrow-raising statements like “I have no interest in changing the world...actually, so little that I have interest in *not* changing it”, “I work hard really hard to create useless things- and I’m proud of it”, and finally “purposelessness...that’s what we really need”. It would seem, on the basis of these statements, that he is the anti-teleological artist *par excellence*. López seems fairly uninterested in what will eventually come of human endeavor, to the point of being more Taoist in his actions than anything. At the very least, López could be seen as a sonic disciple of Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran (an admitted influence on the composer), who believed “we are not failures until we believe life has a meaning.” Sound, for López, may still have valuable functions relating to the spirit, such as ‘creating soul’ (a proposal courtesy of Greek composer Jani Christou.) However, he rejects attempts to make sound a shaper of the human historical narrative, like Jacques Attali did when suggesting that sound has a ‘heraldic’ or prophetic function:

“To tell you the truth, this sounds like bullshit to me...I see no ability in music for 'prediction'. If anything, with regards to historical time, most music seems to have an ability to mark the present and, even more clearly, the past. Think of any example, from Elvis Presley to Inuit music.”<sup>6</sup>

Restlessly criss-crossing the globe with just a selection of portable recording equipment, López' sound experiments bring to mind the characters in the Tarkovsky film *Stalker* (another admitted favorite of the composer): treading through the fluid and vast “Zone” where emerald foliage melts into rusted-out machinery and abandoned weapons, and where a curious, palpable irrationality is always in full bloom. López is easily one of the most prolific agents of the art of field recording: an art which concerns itself with the seemingly neutral activities of documenting and cataloging the sonic phenomena of the biosphere, and its man-made extensions, without attempting to act as an arbiter –a ‘narrator’- of any of these processes. It should be clarified that field recording is not merely, as the name would suggest, something which must take place in a pasture, savannah or other environment left relatively unmolested by humanity: the practice, as it stands now, extends to the most electrified, concretized, and developed sectors of the hyper-modern metropolis as well, thanks in part to the efforts of artists like López himself. The hum of generators, the strangely lulling drone of dissipated highway activity, and bubbling polyglot marketplace voices are all authentic field recordings on par with the ones more likely to be utilized as the backdrop to a *National Geographic* TV special.

While some of the more acclaimed works of field recording still deal exclusively with of the ‘secret life’ of the animal kingdom (Chris Watson’s 1998 Touch release *Outside The Circle of Fire*, for example, features astonishing recordings of African ‘big cats’ napping under trees), this other face of automated and electronic society can produce a documentary effect similar to raw nature recordings. Just as birds recorded in the wild sing different song phrases than when in captivity, humans and their activities sound different than when they are dragged into a recording studio or an environment where they are aware of being focused upon: a desire to create an unvarnished ‘sonic image’ –the *image sonore* of *musique concrète* luminary Pierre Schaeffer- that presents things ‘as they really are’ permeates the culture of field recording; and if this goal is not attained, then at least the adventure involved in traveling to and immersing oneself in certain locations can be personally edifying for the recorder. It is perhaps the latter action that is more important to Francisco López, since he remains skeptical about the ability of field recordings to truly substitute for any given environment. He has likened this process of perfect audio reproduction to “building a zoo”, something which offers, at best, a limited synopsis of a total natural environment. Expanding on this idea, he states that

“I was specifically referring to the idea of field recordings making you 'feel transported to the place', so common in New-Agey interpretations of environmental recordings. Sitting comfortably in our favourite armchair -without the heat, the cold, the thirst, the flies, etc.- might indeed be an engaging experience, but certainly of a very different nature than that of 'being there'”.<sup>7</sup>

The process of field recording, despite such 'New Age' methods of marketing it, does not end with furtive attempts at zoo-building and taxonomy. Many sound artists have also applied the basic techniques of field recording to uncovering another kind of 'secret life': that of stationary objects, occasionally massive in scale, that are not normally perceived as static monoliths not making any kind of 'sound' whatsoever: suspension bridges, for example, or the mic'ing of the World Trade Center's 91<sup>st</sup> floor by Stephen Vitiello (Vitiello was a resident artist of the WTC complex two years prior to its destruction.) In Vitiello's case, the simple use of home-built contact microphones, applied to various pressure points of the structure, revealed a deep and ghostly rumble which is difficult now to see as anything but an ominous harbinger of the towers' ultimate role in the great game of global power struggle (this piece's inclusion in group exhibitions, like a war-themed show at Vienna's MOMUK in 2003, did little to minimize the historical overlay onto an otherwise open-ended sound piece.) Had the events of September 11 not occurred, this would have been just another in a series of Vitiello's similar experiments with contact microphones acting as stethoscopes, gauging the breath and pulse of the seemingly inanimate: Vitiello has attempted the same sort of experiments with more mundane materials: his *Contact Microphones on Steel Plate* utilizes a rusted sheet of metal somewhere in the tiny desert principality of Marfa, Texas.

Though these combined field recording techniques usually seek to re-integrate listeners into a world that is not tyrannized by retinal information, some amount of metaphorical comparison with visual culture is inevitable: there is Schaeffer's *image sonore* as noted above, and many allusions within the sound recording culture to theater, or a "cinema of the ear". The French acousmatic artist Lionel Marchetti is particularly enthusiastic about this expression; in one essay he invites prospective recorders to go on a "sonic shooting", also likening the acoustic space around a recorder to "...the poet's page, the painter's canvas, the calligrapher's roll...television, or the computer."<sup>8</sup> Yet, even while employing these visual metaphors, Marchetti hints at the dynamic potential of sound recording- in his reckoning, a kind of catalyst for the evolution of hearing itself:

“The purpose of painting is its ability to give us fixed visual images, framed- while at the same time very far from shifting reality- yet

which can lead us to another version. Is it not the purpose of the recorded sound -we could say 'fixed sound'- to give us sonic images devoid of visual associations, which would thus powerfully stimulate another kind of hearing than that of one's interior imagination?"<sup>9</sup>

On this point, at least -'sonic images devoid of visual associations'- Francisco López would likely agree. The possibility of attaining 'another kind of hearing' that overrides the tumultuous noise of one's own inner dialogue seems like a monumental challenge, but then again, few have made the adequate preparations necessary to confront this challenge on the level that López has.

### **Invoking the Absolute**

Whatever you do, don't call Francisco López "minimalist". While you could be forgiven for applying this overused designator to the man's packaging aesthetic (López usually releases CDs in plain jewel cases with no booklets, and with unassuming titles like "Untitled #159"), it hardly applies to the man's actual output: with only a minimum of filtering, EQ adjustment and studio finesse, López records and presents sonic scenarios either too overwhelming or intimate in their character to be confused with cerebral, academic minimalism. From narcosis induced by the unaccompanied sound of a vinyl record's crackle, to buried memories unearthed by different shades of rain forest ambience, this sound's capacity to evoke or invoke sets it apart from the minimalist music performed in concert halls- in the end, lack of notation and an increased emphasis on extended duration of 'pieces' are the only aspects in common between the two forms.

Distance from minimalism also applies to the composer's breadth of lived experience. To remind his listeners from time to time of the sense of adventure that has been distilled into his voluminous body of recordings, López will tease the imagination with an unabashedly romantic tale: perhaps a scuba dive off the Cuban coast followed by a puff on a 'Montecristo A' cigar, or lying on the floor of the Costa Rican rain forest in total darkness with leafcutter ants as his gracious hosts. For most, this would be a vacation story to be recycled as a piece of pining nostalgia over and over again, during brief cigarette breaks outside of the office workspace. For Francisco López, it's merely what he did on that particular day- a footnote in an expansive diary of sensations and interactions that have accompanied a definitely above-average amount of global travel.

López is a cutting critic of formalist, academic minimalism, instead entranced by what he calls 'blank phenomenological substance'- not even the titanic influence of

a composer like John Cage is given a free pass by López, who attacks the 'proceduralism' of his work- López is particularly incensed by Cage's statement that "a sound is a sound" although only *certain* sounds are 'music'. If Cage himself comes under critical scrutiny, then his followers –'Cageans'- are held in even lower esteem by López. He writes:

"I believe that the Cage 'revolution', instead of 'freeing music from taste and traditions', re-restricted it again to the fences of the same old Western paradigm of formalism and proceduralism. It's no use to fight the traditions just running away from them within their land, and staying in a hideout offered by them and, therefore, illusory as such hideout. This is puerile and futile. Let's cope with the traditions face to face instead of exaggerating what we want to change from them in a convulsory movement of negation. I don't think it's possible for music to be freed from taste and memory (and Cageans themselves are a proof of this) but, what is more important and relevant, I don't think it should; even in the more extreme position of anti-traditionalism."<sup>10</sup>

As a reaction against all the aforementioned schools of thought, López suggests 'absolute music' as a more fitting signifier for his work. López cautions, though, against possible misperceptions of the term 'absolutist', a term often used in the West to criticize some obstinate individual mired in their own way of doing things, regardless of its efficacy. López is himself a champion of flux and continual metamorphosis, steadfastly denying that 'absolute' is a synonym for some kind of creative or conceptual metastasis:

"It has nothing to do with 'inflexibility' or non-change. The term 'absolute music' was created, during Romanticism, by poets defending the idea of music being the most sublime of all arts by its detachment from text and specific meaning. This was a reaction to previous epochs of intense dependence of music from text in opera, and heartily defended the notion of music attaining its full, real, essential potential and strength when devoid of descriptive or narrative elements alien to the music itself. This is a remarkable oddity in the universal history of music, and I personally find this idea completely akin to my natural perception of the essence of music and sound."<sup>11</sup>

López also explains that, according to Carl Dahlhaus, 'absolute music' is a phenomenon "...whose contemplation alone allows one to escape the bounds of mortality in moments of self-forgetting."



López has earned his notoriety in the sound art world not just for offering a constant flow of new releases, but also for an adamant refusal to let textual references, visuals, and any non-sonic element sully the purity of the aural experience. To this end, López blindfolds his audience members (complimentary blindfolds have also been included with select cd releases of his), performs from a mixing desk in the center of the audience rather than on a proper sound stage, and veers away from any conversation relating to the 'tools of the trade': anything which will serve as a distraction from the listener being able to accurately form a sonic universe as unique to them as possible. Without a doubt, this tendency may startle or alienate concert audiences used to paying money for spectacular visual extras like laser light shows, film projections and the pyrotechnic eruptions cued to coincide with the more triumphal portions of the musical program, but no amount of complaint has yet convinced López to change course. It follows that he is also highly disinterested in linking his compositional output with personal experiences or epiphanies- a naïve attempt on my part to make the composer disclose some of this information was met with characteristic intensity:

"I can't recall a single instance in my life in which 'understanding' the reason of any creative actions...has changed anything essential in my work. I find that kind of analysis completely useless and uninteresting."<sup>12</sup>

Confucius once said that "when a finger points at the moon, the idiot looks at the finger," an axiom which might be applied towards the present-day obsession with "gear" and other ephemera of the modern sound stage. Francisco López is perhaps one of the most outspoken opponents of this stage- seeing it as a needless intermediary between an artist's vision and the audience's perception of the music. He proposes that "music should be liberated from theater" and also reminds us that "Pythagoras had such a great idea... all the concert halls should have a curtain to hide the orchestra; for the dignity of music."<sup>13</sup> The term 'acousmatic' does derive, after all, from the *akusmatikoi*, the group of Pythagoras' acolytes who would only listen to their teacher speaking from behind a veil. In modern acousmatic music, the veil of Pythagoras has been replaced by loudspeakers or sound amplification equipment, which project audio information but offer no hints as to the source material comprising the original recordings.

In sharp contrast to some of his other electronic music peers, López does not see the new trend towards reduced on-stage skill exhibition (e.g., 'performing' by blankly staring at a computer) as anything sincerely radical or contrarian. In fact, he believes that on-stage presence in and of itself is causes even the most radical new music to share common goals with pop music's development of a personality cult- whether dazzling virtuosity is exhibited on that stage or not. It's a sensitive issue, especially considering that most of the artists surveyed in this

book, including some of López' own past collaborators, still rely on a conventional stage set-up for live exhibitions of their sound (although the exact reasons for doing this vary from one performer to the next, as do the degrees of willingness to appear in such an environment.) In response to *Sound Projector* interviewer Gregory Gangemi's suggestion that appearing onstage with a laptop still reduces the performer to a kind of 'idol', López responds:

“...well, it's an idol anyway, no matter what you do: if you're dancing like the Spice Girls or you have a laptop on stage you're an idol for a different kind of people. Or you're an artist or a star or whatever. It's like....what is the reason for someone with a laptop to be on stage? Originally, the reason for musicians to be on stage was for people to be able to hear the music and see them of course. But now I think those reasons are not operating anymore. Or a DJ on stage, for example....a DJ on stage, I don't see the point of that. It's sort of following the traditional rock 'n roll show aesthetic, translating that directly into something that could have more potential.”<sup>14</sup>

The presence of onstage DJs has always stoked a debate about the degree to which audiences really desire total freedom: for each faction that wishes merely to dance uninhibitedly, there is another that enjoys being led around by the nose and following a clear set of cues that cement their role as a participant in a loosely-scripted, popular drama. It seems the 'idol' factor will remain with us as long as there exist those who enjoy the security of a hierarchical “performer vs. observer” or “shaman' vs. initiate” relationship.

However, the idolization of the artist is not, according to López, the sole problem arising from the staging of live electronic music- there also exists a kind of technophilia among audience members, or a desire to know the precise technical specifics of the sound being produced: what hand movements and knob twists correspond to what noises, what plug-in or clever coding technique is causing 'x' effect. Owing to the relative newness of electronic music tools compared with the traditional string, woodwind, percussion and brass instruments, the desire to decode the relationship between the artist's movements and particular musical functions becomes a game that, although it gives audiences something other to do besides lapsing back into conversation, can interfere with the actual direct experience of the sound output. As per López:

“If somebody is looking at me during the live show, they will be looking at what I am doing with the equipment, trying to figure out how I am doing that, what is happening...I'm concerned with this

because it's a problem, and I don't want people to look at that. I want people to focus on what's going on in the space."<sup>15</sup>

López' objections should certainly raise a host of questions for the aspiring sound *artiste*. Yet it seems unlikely that musicians, armed with either the most bare-bones sound equipment or the most complex and unwieldy setups, will be able to tear themselves from the performance stage. The need for validation by an audience is something that only the bravest souls seem able to truly distance themselves from- and most would likely treasure the increased social contact that comes from having befriended audience members on the strength of a successful concert. Even the most confrontational noise artists seem to enjoy a bit of 'networking'; a good round of chatting or a post-show meal shared with enthusiastic audience members as the evening winds down after the performance. Human social nature almost invariably trumps the will to let art stand on its own merits, in a way that does not have to be 'authenticated' by any kind of critique or peer review. For López, though, who confesses to being a 'loner' and seems quite content as a solitary cell, the social element attached to even the most experimental of music is yet another corrupting influence:

"I'm one of those who believe more in the idea of creators having - for good or bad- their personal path, rather than one that is molded and defined in response to the degree of acceptance. The latter is a very dangerous path, and I naturally don't have any inclination to that."<sup>16</sup>

One release of López' – a cassette anomaly entitled *Paris Hiss*- perhaps sums up, better than any of the above writing, his attitude towards the role of personal identity in the final presentation of his work. This release, on the Banned Production label, comes with two sticker labels affixed to either side of a cassette, bearing the artist's name and the album title. Since these labels cover the two tape reels in the center of the cassette, it cannot be played without first destroying or rupturing the sticker labels- an act which, like López' cover-less CDs, discards the importance of the creator's persona in favor of actual content.

## The Morality of Sound? Schaeffer vs. Schafer

Francisco López, in spite of his background in biology and his strong emphasis on bio-acoustics, has criticized the traditional 'acoustic ecology' blueprint as laid out by composer R. Murray Schafer (author of the seminal *The Tuning in The World*) in the 1960s and beyond. Although López is no anthropocentric man by any stretch of the imagination, he is a vociferous opponent of Schafer's own Luddite opposition to man-made technology. Schafer recoils in horror at the artifice of urban environments, derisively calling them 'sonic sewers', and calling for anti-noise legislation in booklets such as *The Book of Noise*. Schafer has, in the past, composed sound pieces based on Vancouver traffic noise, although his forte has been elaborate performance pieces set in the wilderness, featuring an eclectic mingling of Asian, Egyptian and North American spiritual themes. Schafer's attitude towards the noise of mechanical processes, and their irrevocable destructiveness, is swept aside by López with little effort- López states that noise is just as much a component of nature as it is of the urban environment; that the rain forest is as saturated with audio information as vital intersections in major cities. If we have to decide this argument merely on the basis of comparative experience with world travel, then the peripatetic López emerges as the clear winner. Speaking at a lecture in Kita-Kyushu, Japan, López says this on his disconnect with Schafer:

"I have no intention of telling anyone how the world should be, especially like Hildegard Westerkamp and Murray Schafer. Where I deeply disagree with these people is that they feel that they have to tell the rest of the world how the world should be. The main concern of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, which is based on the ideas of Schafer, is to tell people that the world today is very noisy. And indeed it is, but isn't that the way it should be? Is nature better when it's quieter? Are machines evil because they make a lot of noise? Is that noise boring because it's always the same?"<sup>17</sup>

The innate 'evil' of machines, computers etc. is, as López' comments hint at, a concept very much based in Western, Romanticist ideas of naturalism, with nature being a benevolent, protective matriarch, her silence being tantamount to tranquility of the spirit. However, an incident described in architect Jack Kerr's book *Dogs and Demons* (an intense, alarmist work chronicling the deterioration of traditional Japanese values) illustrates that some residents of urbanized areas in Japan can actually find natural noise to be an intolerable *intrusion*- one anecdote in Kerr's book recalls how, on the 'suggestion board' of a Japanese town's ward office, someone has writ large (and in total sincerity) KILL ALL THE FROGS in frustration at the sleep loss engendered by the amphibians' nightly performances. At the same time, the Japanese Construction Ministry can mobilize cement mixers and other heavy equipment to residential areas in the

dead of night, with little public protest (although I *personally* didn't enjoy having a New Blockaders concert being re-enacted on the sidewalk outside my apartment, at 3 a.m. on a 'work night'.) So, for one, Schafer's view of 'destructive' machinery is not something that is universally agreed upon, many urban residents are either calmed or invigorated by the sureness of mechanical repetition, a welcome bit of certainty within an urban landscape otherwise choked with sticky social dilemmas. Schafer's objection also seems to be on purely aesthetic grounds: rather than attacking the long-term effects of constant mechanical noise on human sanity, and the migration or mating habits of native animal species, he assails this noise-making apparatus from a mystical point of view. It begs the question: why is the swarming mass of trumpet calls and monks' voices in Tibetan liturgical music capable of lifting one to spiritual heights (even someone with no knowledge of Tibetan language or religious custom), while meditation upon the dense, hypnotic sound qualities of a video arcade or factory isn't? Furthermore, what should be done about naturally occurring sound phenomena, massed insectoid noises for example, indistinguishable in rhythmic or timbral quality from a mechanical equivalent? Such things crop up in unexpected places: many who have ingested psilocybin mushrooms have reported an industrial-strength grinding and buzzing in environments far removed from any kind of industrialization.

López personally refuses to characterize any form of sound as 'evil', but then again, doesn't view it in any moral light whatsoever:

"I think creative work with sound should be allowed to have all possible levels of intensity for those who might want to go through them. In a way, this is nothing more than a reflection of what we find in reality, where things have very wide dynamics, in terms of loudness, frequency content, time / pace, etc. If by 'noise' we understand harsh, loud sounds (I'm not so sure this is the best way of defining it), a lot of people are already convinced of their interest in this. And, to be sure, I never had the intention of convincing anyone about any of this."<sup>18</sup>

López' reluctance to map a personal agenda onto nature separates him not only from the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, but from much of the stigma surrounding 'ecology' in general: the term *ökologie* itself was first put into use by Ernst Haeckel in the 1860s, the Social Darwinist ideologue who used ecological concern as a front for providing a pseudo-scientific basis for the biological superiority of Teutonic peoples. The historian Daniel Gasman proposes that "racially inspired Social Darwinism in Germany...was almost completely indebted to Haeckel for its creation"<sup>19</sup> and that "his ideas served to unite into a full-bodied ideology the trends of racism, imperialism, romanticism, anti-Semitism and nationalism."<sup>20</sup> This ideology was the *carte blanche* that the Nazi regime needed

to legitimize its quest for *Lebensraum*: since virtually all other peoples outside of the Aryan race had an inferior understanding of nature, it followed that their subjugation and eventual liquidation would be the salvation of all biological life on the planet.

While the pluralistic Schafer would undoubtedly bristle at being compared with such people, the belief in humans as liberators and saviors of nature is shared by both him and by the 'ecofascist' radicals who follow in Haeckel's footsteps. The urge to 'save' a supposedly inferior or helpless life form often turns into a brutish form of domestication or colonization, and for many this tendency to 'save' conceals a host of ulterior motives, or at least betrays a deep sense of remorse over past actions. It is here where López' distinctly 'hands off' approach to acoustic ecology separates him from such tendencies- he refuses to set himself up as a 'chosen' emissary of mankind to the natural world, saying things such as "the more I like an object, the more I want it to be possessed by someone else...someone with the courage and skills I lack for keeping material things alive and healthy."<sup>21</sup>

## **The Wild Hunt for Beautiful Confusion**

Undoubtedly, lengthy and sustained exposure to high-decibel output on either pole of the frequency range is going to have a damaging physical effect. While opponents of noise will certainly point to this as a key factor in the need for it to be regulated, this is not the only point of concern: there is also the psychological transformation that intense noise engenders; the possibility that it will turn otherwise meek souls into uncivilized, raging Berserkers. Those who fancy themselves as the defenders of a biosphere under attack from torrents of mechanized noise are put in a precarious position when also making this latter claim; because they must also admit the possibility of noise as an archaic, paganizing force- not the sole domain of Futurists and urban developers. One Austrian esoterica enthusiast, writing under the pseudonym of Adam Kadmon, reminds modern readers of the atavistic use of noise in Teutonic rituals like the *Oskorei* or "wild hunt", which provided the antidote to monotheistic belief systems' divorce from the terror of nature:

"Noise played an essential role in the wild hunt, as it did in many pagan celebrations...magical noise as an archaic technique of ecstasy was a characteristic of many non-Christian cultic activities. Bonifatius, later canonized after cutting down the 'Thor Oak Tree' (for which he was killed by pagans for this outrage), cursed the noisy processions of the Germans in winter. The German language uses the term *Heidenlärm*, heathen noise. Deadly silence and

murmuring apparently seemed to be the trademark of the Christian liturgy...<sup>22</sup>

Kadmon, drawing on a variety of sources, characterizes the *Oskorei* as a hellish and chaotic rite in which the goal of increased noise levels -the noise being generated by human cries, percussion, crashing of cymbals and so on- was to “awaken nature, which slept in the frozen earth”<sup>23</sup>, not to distance technocratic mankind from its influence. Kadmon then proposes that this tendency has been, in the late 20th century, reinvested into the bloodthirsty werewolf subculture of extremist heavy metal: the cartoonishly-attired denizens of the Scandinavian Black Metal cult, in particular, bore some similarities to the *Oskorei* riders by masking their true personalities in grim face paint and demonic pseudonyms. The endless trance-like whirling of Black Metal instrumentation (queasy tremolo guitar riffing and strobing “blastbeats” played on multiple bass drums) causes Kadmon to ask “is Black Metal, with its hard, austere sound, the *Oskorei* of the Iron Age?”<sup>24</sup>

This brings us back to the relationship between noise and evil. This relationship is not wholly discouraged by countless musicians and noise-makers with definite pretensions to evil, who prefer their music as loud and distorted as possible in order to create a stimulus on par with that of cataclysmic events such as war or natural disaster. Black Metal, with its incessant, morbid miasma of guitar fuzz, and its cold, rasped and shrieked vocals, is widely noticed as one of the more evil manifestations of modern music. Queasy tritone intervals -one of the most dissonant intervals in the Western harmonic concept- are deliberately employed thanks to their accursed status as the *diabolus in musica* during the Middle Ages. Songs are intentionally under-produced or perversely stripped of mid-range sounds to make a kind of audio metaphor for lack of compromise (moderation and temperance being values which these Nietzschean ax-slingers find particularly abhorrent.) Black Metal musicians compliment their sonics with a hostile image, girding themselves with such misanthropic talismans as ammunition belts, homemade arm gauntlets bristling with nails, and invariably black clothing. Of course, a thorny mythology surrounding the scene- loaded with incidences of church burning, murder, racist agitation and ritualistic self-abuse (the bands *Abruptum* and *Senthil* have both claimed to torture themselves in order to produce more authentic recorded shrieks) irrevocably completes the ‘evil’ package.

But without the harsh visual components, the severe blasphemies re-printed on the albums’ lyric sheets, and the band members’ own attempts to promote themselves as Vlad the Impaler reincarnate, could even Black Metal avoid being pegged as an ugly form of ‘sonic sewage’? By Schafer’s logic, no- since any attempt at liberating the sounds from their composers would be a deceitful task, a capitulation to ‘schizophonia’.

But, just as Brion Gysin claims that ‘poets don’t own words,’ López contends that musicians and composers do not own *sounds*, and therefore the entire concept of a ‘connection,’ and consequent ‘separation,’ between sound and source is false. Firing another shot across Schafer’s bow, López states:

“Since sound is a vibration of air and then of our inner ear structures, it belongs to these as much as to the ‘source’. To criticize sound recordings in [schizophonic] terms is simply not to understand the meaning of the Schaefferian concept of sound object as an independent and self-sufficient entity. The schizophonia of Schafer and the *objet sonore* of Schaeffer are antagonistic conceptions of the same fact.”<sup>25</sup>

Maybe it is no coincidence, then, that one of López’ own better-known pieces, *Untitled #104*, released on Montreal’s Alien8 label, is a 40-minute hailstorm of extreme Metal samples, and that (despite the vague familiarity of one or two ‘grooves’ arising from the maelstrom) it sounds uncannily similar to his recordings of natural phenomena. The vertiginous assault of drum sounds on the piece hearken back to López’ distant past as a drummer for various punk bands. More to the point, though, one reviewer accurately summarizes the piece’s ability to warp perception through a kind of stimulus flooding, noting “once you make it through the first 5 minutes, all that’s left is a whistling rumble that mostly reminds of the sound of gas pipes.”<sup>26</sup> This is an especially challenging piece for López to pull off, since the sounds are so hopelessly wrapped up in the willfully contrarian and harsh world of heavy metal- or, maybe more accurately, it is a challenge to the listener to hear this bombardment and to imagine the sound in a non-‘metal’ context, free from corresponding mental imagery of black leather, spilt beer and thrashing manes of hair. In recent years, plenty of musicians not aligned with the “metal” subculture have attempted such sound pieces, which tantalize the listener with something vaguely familiar, yet systematically delete key points of reference (especially the histrionic vocals), leaving them rudderless on a sea of indifferent noise and –when confronted with such a ‘pure’ form of the music- wondering how they came to embrace this music in the first place. *Untitled #104* can be counted among the better of these experiments, with a few others –Kevin Drumm’s *Sheer Hellish Miasma*, selected works by Merzbow- offering the same sort of enlightenment through the total exhaustion of a particular musical concept.

This feeling of intense dislocation is, to borrow from López’ own lexicon of terms, a form of *belle confusion*- a voluptuous beauty that comes precisely from having no immediate connection or relation to anything at all; having a vast sonic space



all to one's own. This can be accomplished just as easily with the battering power of *Untitled #104* as it can with pieces so quiet and elusive that the ears would 'squint', if they could, to ferret out the carefully obscured, dust mite-sized details. It should be noted that a skill for mining the depths of quietude has endeared López to other such representatives of this style (Bernhard Güntner, Marc Behrens, et al.) just as his ability to transform sound from ethereal presence to physical force has placed him in a league with psycho-acoustic heavyweights Zbigniew Karkowski and John Duncan. It should not be assumed, though, that López' explorations of quiet have some more 'intellectual' basis than his into the visceral, flaring loudness of his recorded boiler rooms and war machines. He is careful to warn against "...a common misinterpretation of silence and quiet sonic events as having some kind of hidden "conceptual" content"<sup>27</sup>, stating that

"It is my belief that this has to do with the limited conception of narrow dynamics in most music standards. This applies to many sound creative frameworks such as the volume dynamics, the frequency range, the timbral palette and the pace of unfolding for sonic events. When music is a commodity for background 'ambience', for dance, for radio broadcast, for big live shows with crowds, and so on, the constraints (mostly unnoticed) keep holding a strong grip on us. When music is a world in itself, the territories are vast and thrilling. We can go from -60dB to 0 dB and feel all what is happening, we can endure deserts and oceans of 10 minutes of silence, we can flow in mountain and abyss crescendos of 40 minutes, we can walk on thin shreds of thin air or be smashed by dense waterfalls and things like that, which I do in my pieces. There's nothing conceptual about this, but rather an immense spiritual universe of open possibilities, or at least this is what I forcefully try to create."<sup>28</sup>

López also argues that silences and perception-testing murmurs within his work should not be seen as some kind of aberration when the visual equivalent of such (i.e. smears of paint on a canvas) has been accepted as a legitimate compositional technique. This hostile response to low-volume information has always dogged the unwitting emissaries of so-called "extreme electronic music": see also the uncomfortable reactions engendered by the inter-song silences on early recordings by Whitehouse, for example, and –by contrast- the almost universal acceptance of 'negative space' as a device in visual artwork.

The interest in capturing the full range of dynamics runs parallel with López' frequent invocations of the power of 'spirit' (although this should not be confused

with religious questing, he has in fact called religion an unnecessary “side effect” of spirit.) López seems intent on creating something as amorphous and prone to subjective definition as that which we refer to as ‘soul’, and it is hard not to draw parallels between his love of blurred boundaries / indistinct horizon lines and the spiritual goals of disciplines like Zen Buddhism (“what seems to be evolution for others is dissolution for me...a big *blur*...it’s so beautiful.”) What López strives for in his sonic transmissions could just as easily be the *satori* of Zen monks, that moment when all perceptible phenomena fuse into one; the ecstasy in Rimbaud’s *L’eternite* when he witnesses the sea mingling with the sun. Like such experiences, whose intensity can hardly be translated into mere words (thanks to the final dissolution that they cause between ‘knower’ and ‘known’), the attainment of the ‘big blur’ is similarly an experience that defies the most advanced vocabularies: and Francisco López likes it this way. It is his beloved Cioran, after all, who referred to words as “silent daggers,” also claiming that “we die in proportion to the words we fling around us.” In López’ appraisal, conversion of sound to language is no more likely to succeed than conversion of sound to visual information- and no more necessary.

When all is said and done, López’ approach challenges more than just the usual musical conventions, but questions the very nature of our human relations themselves (both our relations to one another, and to the biosphere we inhabit.) Whatever worth this approach may have for others, his unapologetically solitary method of exploration has seemingly worked for him personally: revealing the sonic component of a universe that, while not becoming any more purposeful, becomes ever more detailed and lush, and also exponentially more confusing with each would-be ‘breakthrough’ discovery, playfully evading our most carefully laid snares and our attempts at dominance through rationality and pragmatism. López’ ongoing, intuitive journey into total dissipation would be a painfully lonely one for most musicians, plenty of whom are fascinated with the process of metanoia, or an attempt to forge a novel worldview. Meanwhile, the Big Blur just seems to beckon more seductively with each failed attempt at novelty...

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<sup>1</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Site Specific Sound*, p.62. Errant Bodies Press, New York, 2004.

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- <sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, p. 52. Verso, London / New York, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> F.T. Marinetti quoted in *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 23. U. Apollonio, ed. London, 1973.
- <sup>4</sup> Refer to 1 above
- <sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, p. 44. Verso, London / New York, 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> personal interview with the author, March 2006
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Lionel Marchetti, *The Microphone and the Hand*, trans. Patrick McGinley & Matthew Marble. Reproduced in *Fo(a)rm* #5, p. 115. Ed. Seth Nehil, Matthew Marble, Bethany Wright.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>10</sup> Francisco López quoted at <http://www.franciscolopez.net/cage.html>
- <sup>11</sup> refer to 5 above.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup>
- <sup>14</sup> Sound Projector #11
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> refer to 1 above
- <sup>17</sup> Francisco López quoted in *Substantials* p. 140. Akiko Miyake, ed. CCA Kita-Kyushu, 2003
- <sup>18</sup> refer to 5 above
- <sup>19</sup> Daniel Gasman quoted in *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*, by Janet Biehl & Peter Staudenmaier, p. 60. AK Press, San Francisco, 1995.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> refer to 14 above- p. 114
- <sup>22</sup> Kadmon quoted in *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind, p. 339. Feral House, Los Angeles, 1998.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340
- <sup>25</sup> Francisco López quoted at [http://www.franciscolopez.net/int\\_revue.html](http://www.franciscolopez.net/int_revue.html)
- <sup>26</sup> Discogs.com user 'Peshehod' quoted at <http://www.discogs.com/release/123683>, March 8, 2005.
- <sup>27</sup> Francisco López quoted at [http://www.franciscolopez.net/int\\_loop.html](http://www.franciscolopez.net/int_loop.html)
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*