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## Derek Piotr; A Sonic Sledgehammer

By [James Dietter](#)

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In America, interstate highways systems with uniform speed limits and road signs span our vast country, carrying with it conformity and predictability. Syndicated radio broadcasts a sports talk program originating in Los Angeles all the way to the hustle and bustle of New York City and 200 places in between. Television networks create content for a national audience, and a person living in the badlands of Montana has the same access to MTV as a Bayou-dweller in Louisiana. The Internet can certainly compound this cultural uniformity, canonizing a screen capture of Honey Boo Boo and turning it into a national cultural commodity via an infectious meme.

Such a homogenized country has a monolithic sense of what music sounds like or what it should sound like, or what makes a good movie or how a sitcom should look. With this come genres and labels so that two strangers can quickly gain some context about a musical artist by invoking the word “pop” or “rock” in front of the word music.

Of course, in a great country such as America, where a pioneering spirit has long existed and been cherished, individuality comes forth out of a need to buck convention and stand apart from the dull and predictable crowd. Unfortunately, it’s just as easy to conform to non-conformity as it is to the status quo, to the point that even “underground” art can be labeled and packaged with neat buzzwords. Rare is the artist who escapes finite definition and packaging labels and finds a way of escaping the countless confining qualifiers.

Derek Piotr, born in Poland and currently residing in West Redding, Connecticut, is one such artist. His work is as easy to label as it is to catch a greased pig, and even Piotr requires a quick history lesson to give

his work context: “I don’t know if I would describe it sonically. I think I would try to describe the approach,” he explained in a phone interview. “I’m bridging upon what the first composers of electroacoustic music did in the 50s, which was to record train whistles and tea kettles and babies crying to try and broaden the vocabulary of what is considered music. What I’m trying to do is try to expand the parameters as much as possible to give the listener a sense of what music can be.” And after listening to Piotr’s music, which is characterized by unscalable layers of recorded sound, usually void of lyrics or familiar structural elements such as verse or chorus, a person will indeed be asked to stretch their definition of what music is.

This is something Piotr understands may not be easy for everybody. “It can be quite alienating at times, but overall I’m trying to make something beautiful but what might not be the same five chords the Beatles used or something people have heard all the time,” he said. Unfortunately, challenging and mass appeal are rarely compatible, but Piotr does not compromise his work for the sake of mass accessibility, “I think if you start to worry about pleasing everyone else you please no one. I’m really trying to please myself and it’s ended up exciting other people.”

And excite other people he has, so much so that he was able to fund the CD production of his latest album, *Raj*, with crowdsourcing. While Piotr avoided crowdsourcing for a long time, his ability to fundraise through friends and fans has been very effective for him.

Preview “Hutan”, the first track from *Raj*, [here](#)

“I was always really against crowdfunding...Forcing people to pay for something that doesn’t exist is a little backwards. On the other hand, grants and funds are really running dry, so my attitude has changed.” When asked if his creative process has changed due to the fact that people are paying for the album in advance, Piotr made it very clear that his newest album doesn’t pull any punches for the sake of audience acceptance.

“Ironically this is my most uncompromising record; it’s the noisiest and more challenging to listeners than previous projects,” Piotr remarked. “I’ve always had a fondness for eastern tones and scales and I explore that more on *I* and *I* draw a lot of expression from punk music. I wanted to make something that is really noisy and almost rock but in a digital sense.”

When a person listens to Piotr’s music, the intention within the work becomes apparent. While the work may lack conventional song structure, there is a sense of scaffolding holding all the sounds together in a cohesive and cogent way. It is not an exercise in throwing random sounds together and calling it art, but an exercise in taking interesting sounds, combining them in unobvious or unfamiliar ways and creating an atmosphere, which Piotr intends to have a hold on the listener: “I’m trying to create an environment for someone to feel some sense of something that’s heightened,” he explained. “I think any good art carries with it a sense of being possessed or heightened”.

“You can make a noise piece and have people moan and cover their ears and as soon as you hear a voice you can’t help but latch onto that. That’s something I’m kind of obsessed with. As soon as you hear a voice, you can’t help it.”

So how does some one like Piotr reach an audience, when the musical landscape is so crowded with conventional acts and cold to divergent sounds? Piotr has harnessed the power of the Internet, and through his website, [derekpiotr.com](http://derekpiotr.com), and other music-centric websites, he’s gotten the word out about his work. This populist approach is becoming more prevalent, as record conglomerates lose their iron grip on sound production and promotion. Piotr defines what he’s doing on the Internet as commonplace, although with a unique perspective: “I don’t think what I’m doing is any different than a 60-year-old writing a dog blog or some kid doing a ukulele cover on YouTube. The platform I’m using isn’t all that new. I think where I differ from other people is that I’m trying to create my own musical vocabulary instead of making a cover.”

*Raj*, Piotr's latest musical dictionary, is his third album and draws inspiration from the natural world. Piotr is a self-proclaimed nature-lover, which directly influences his sound.

"If you listen to a lot of my contemporaries, I'm very organic in what I do," he explained. "Most of the samples are put in by hand to try to emulate something more fluid, because music should be as human as possible. I'm sure both my hands aren't the same size, so why should both drum hits sound as hard?"

### **Piotr's May, 2012 release**

[Airing Bandcamp Embed]



Piotr also mentioned his fascination with the human voice and the reverence humans instinctively have for it. "I think you can make a noise piece and have people moan and cover their ears and as soon as you hear a voice you can't help but latch onto that. That's something I'm kind of obsessed with. As soon as you hear a voice, you can't help it." Listening to *Raj*, it's clear Piotr was very deliberate in making this album feel natural. The music never feels machine-spawned and overly rigid. And while there are no pop song conventional lyrics, the use of human voice is sprinkled in to grab the audience's attention, humanizing the variegated sonic landscapes.

Piotr's latest work demonstrates his progression as an artist, specifically his embrace of sonic layers. "I used to really value minimalism for the sake of minimalism, and it doesn't make sense to me anymore, so now I really work in layers," he said. "People still call my work minimal, but I'm using 50 or 60 tracks..." Indeed, the album is chock full of sound, which is both enveloping yet even-keeled. At times the sound creates a blanket of disparate textures, which, when woven together by a talented artist such as Piotr, becomes comforting and strangely familiar.

When talking with Piotr, one gets the sense that he is very passionate and sincere about his work and is telling the truth about his lack of regard for fame or commercial success. "Success is not something I've ever cared about," he said. "I'd be making music even if no one listened to it. If it affects two listeners hugely, that's a huge success." Another driving force in Piotr's music is a desire for self-improvement: "I'm a pretty intense self critic," he offered. "There wouldn't be incentive to do anything if I thought what I did was so great. As I keep doing albums there are fewer moments per record where I feel uncomfortable listening back, so that's probably a good thing, but if I had no moments I'd give up, there'd be no point".

Despite covering so much ground in his three albums, Piotr feels he still has a long way to go. He looks to a master painter for inspiration: "My short term goal is to promote I. Long term, there is so much more I have

to cover. My goal is to have a Dali painting of sound. Not as bizarre, but I want that fluidity of the surreal and the actual without resorting to escapism to try and not be able to tell what's recorded and what's processed."

He revealed, perhaps in jest, that his grand finale will cover it all.

"Maybe when I'm 80 and losing my mind I'll record everything and make a three-hour album." And perhaps the world will be ready when he is 80, thanks to efforts by musicians such as Piotr who continually push the envelope so that Americans and listeners the world over will never be without something new and interesting to listen to.

**The best place to keep up with Piotr and his new album, *Raj*, is at [derekpiotr.com](http://derekpiotr.com). The album is due to be released at the end of February.**