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Raj's primal microsound: interview with Derek Piotr

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Derek Piotr is a Poland-born sound artist based in New England, whose work focuses primarily on the voice. He has been intern to Meredith Monk, had his work nominated by the jury for Ars Electronica (2012), and featured on Resonance FM. [Raj](#), his third full-length album, is released on February 26.

VIOLETCURRENTS: You debuted in 2011, and Raj is your third album since then. You've developed quite a recognizable sound, but I find it hard to place or categorize. Is there a particular genre or scene you feel you belong to?

PIOTR: I've worked with a lot of artists from the LINE imprint, and i think my work deals a lot with hyper-detail, so if i had to pick, it would be the pool of microsound artists. I'm also nostalgic for old mego and Orthlorng releases from 99-01. Still, I don't really think of myself as part of a 'scene'.

V: You talked about work with LINE imprint. Richard Chartier remixed a track of yours, correct?

*PIOTR: Richard Chartier and Steibrüchel did a remix. I started a small project with Tomas Phillips last year, but it isn't done yet. And [AGF](#) of course (*who mastered Raj, ed.*), is now on LINE. I am also working with Simon Whetham on my next record, and Steve Roden is completing a remix for me this year. I seem to have surrounded myself with LINE artists as I've gone about my work, but as I said, I think this is because the label has curated artists who think very precisely about sound, in an intimate way. This is something I also care about, so I suppose it just makes sense.*

V: About that hyper-detailed approach; I'm intuitively reminded of sounds that have an artificial and smooth quality to them. But take *Spine* for instance, the opener on Raj: there's the album's typical tight, heavy beats, yet I'm immediately struck by a certain roughness that permeates your music. Perhaps that has to with your source material? How much a role does chance play in your work?

PIOTR: Recently, Raj got compared to IDM, and I thought that was pretty hysterical. I don't listen to IDM, I've never cared about it. To me, IDM has always been about machines doing things no human could do, while I'm trying to do something so human that no machine could do it.

Microsound can follow similar aesthetic guidelines, being very "techno" in the sense of perfection through electronic means. However, I've always been about translating the kind of organic impulses we harbor in our lives in a much more fortified, organized way. I hike and walk around, and leaves never litter the ground in neat layers, but they're still beautiful. Maybe that's a little too precious a sentiment, but it's one way to put it. Also, we have nerves in our body that are carrying electric impulses, so for me electronic

music or computer music doesn't have to be this sterile thing. Still, for many that is still the equation, although I think that in recent years, electronic music has gotten more organic overall.

There's another angle to this factor of chance. Even though I am inspired by Mego's and Orthlorng's roughness, I want to take my work in different places through collaborations, so I am always curious to see how 'micro' or controlled those can possibly get. Hence my fascination with remixes. It's not always successful, but I often take inspiration from the remixes I commission.

V: So on Raj, we have you focusing on steady rhythms and detailed instances of imperfection. Does that sound like a NY/East Coast take on wabi sabi?

PIOTR: Heh. Well, I think that things can get too clever – IDM again – , and that's boring to me. To have polyrhythms on top of micro detail just doesn't make sense. On the other hand, I am fascinated by noise music, therefore I believe it's important to keep a primal or pagan element in my work. One beat, one march, and all the detail can fall into place around that. Kind of how in most rituals you have one big drum and then a ton of smaller percussion instruments for various parts in the ceremony, but the drum remains the recurring motif.

V: You mentioned pagan elements being important. The liner notes, too, talk of 'black metal noise'...

PIOTR: That's my attempt to inject a bit of humor, the 'black metal noise' part, but I did want to make a really overwhelming, potent record, no meandering and no holds barred. For this album, I think I'd arrived at a place where I was confident enough with production to do it. The noise thing came back to me, I brushed off some of my Blood Brothers and Swans records, and went for it. Listening to a lot of Black Pus' newer stuff last year must've inspired this.

On the other hand, I also wanted to make some kind of world-beat record. I hate that word, but it's sort of the only way to describe it. So this half of the album was influenced by MIA's Kala, Björk's Volta, some of the Sublime Frequency stuff, and then Sufi and Qawali music. And Bhangra styles, which I listened to a ton of last year. To try and synthesize the kind of North American 'noise scene' with something more eastern, I guess.

V: Do you consider the formal side and technical aspects of your music themselves the main narrative in your work? For listeners who dive in looking for a story behind Raj, you're music is quite inaccessible. How true is that?

PIOTR: There are 20 words worth of lyrics on Raj, most of it is wordless. I thought it was interesting, how you told me you thought I sang "dying" on Karakum. Actually, that was a wordless improv. My time interning with Meredith Monk reinforced my idea that words are pretty limiting. When *Focus* from AGORA came out, people kept asking what language Zach was singing in, but *Focus* was wordless also. I think people find a need to put specific meanings on things. I find that amusing, but then again, records that calm and protect me most are often spiky/noisy, but with a warm undercurrent. Using my voice as an instrument versus actually singing on the track, I'm trying to achieve this warm undercurrent in a more direct way. This can be perverse and uncomfortable for a lot of people, but it's always made sense to me.

I did want to tell this story: the first three tracks don't really have one, but there's a loose narrative for the rest of the record. Like, Karakum means black sand, so imagine a desert. Then, the Defilada - parade in Polish – comes up like a procession out of the desert and into the forest: Hutan is Indonesian for forest. Then, the forest gets completely destroyed, and a single tiny flower opens in Open, before sand comes and wipes away everything else, and then we're all just made of light. This wasn't a conscious thing at the time I made the record, but I noticed this in hindsight when I assembled the track list. I figured it might be worth mention.

V: Is that your ideal way of creating music, going at it in terms of albums? Or does it just end up being the best way to release the tracks you create?

PIOTR: We're living in such ADD times. Releasing dozens of loose tracks – as I did when I was younger - doesn't make sense anymore to me. I keep finding these internal structures in me when I begin a new record. Raj, AGORA, and Airing were all specific time/space locations... I also do collaborative EPs on the side, but it's the albums that I care the most about, that really matter to me. The remix releases – not the collaborations – are there to further extend the land of the record. My favorite artists are those who can create an entire era or landscape for their listener during an album cycle. It's really important to me to try and at least hint at that.

V: What about your live gigs? Do you go on stage with the same goals in mind, create an entire era?

PIOTR: I don't often play over half an hour, but it happens. The setup is dead simple: me, a laptop and a mic. Singing and throwing files ontop of a general 'backing' or 'skeleton', that's enough for my mental facilities. I have some staples though; I often end with Focus or Kohti, and I always play Overtaker or Deliver at least once in a set, because those are fun to perform. I perform in Manhattan, mostly, but when I have the opportunity, I travel elsewhere to play.

Right now, I am focused on 'group forest performances', something I initiated last summer, where five or more of us improvise in nature and record the result. They're inspired by MIMEO (*the group Kaffe Matthews etc are in*) and [Wildnis Konzerte](#). It's kind of a fusion of those two. I have one scheduled for next month.

V: Sounds fun. Thanks for the interview.