



Bubblin' Up: Derek Piotr

With his new album on the way, XLR8R dialed up the New England-based sound architect to muse on his inquisitive style. [Luke Cheadle](#)

When looking to do a feature on Polish-born New England-based producer [Derek Piotr](#), a Bubblin' Up almost seemed redundant; after all, since 2011, Piotr has released a full-length album every year, alongside EPs, remix packages, and one-off commissioned projects—since that first release, Piotr has also released a cut via [XLR8R's mp3 section](#) nearly every year without fail. Even with his striking release rate and consistency, however, Piotr has still managed to fly somewhat under the radar—the avant-garde nature of his work is undoubtedly a factor in it not reaching a much wider audience, hence the reason for shining a bigger light on his boundary-pushing sonics.

When looking at Piotr's sprawling body of work, exploration of the human voice and inquisitive experimentation runs throughout. Each piece is a focused investigation into a sonic style or theme; last year's *Drono*, for example, digs into the world of drone, whereas 2012's *Airing* pays

homage to the first composers of electroacoustic music and their experiments. Piotr's latest outing, *Forest People Pop*—which is scheduled to drop on June 16 via [Bit-Phalanx](#)—is a warped and eccentric pop album that looks to comment on and provide Piotr's take on the hyper-glossy, futuristic trend that has been rife within electronic music the past few years. Calling this record pop, however, doesn't exactly fit its mold; every sound, beat, and vocal line has been twisted and melted into indiscernible, alien-like textures and sounds that take more than a few listens to wrap your head around. Once the album has had time to marinate, though, a whole new sonic world opens up, one built from exotic tuning systems and the mind of a true sound architect.

With the album's latest single now [on the shelves](#), *XLR8R* dialed up Piotr to find out more on his history, inspirations, and unorthodox production style. Alongside the feature, Piotr has also offered up the premiere of album cut "You Move/Timelapse" and the album's cover, both of which you can find below.



Photo: Christiana Rifaat and Dylan Perkinson

Where did it all begin for you?

Music was always part of my life, my parents always had records on and I was always singing as a kid. Even all of the earliest films your parents would show you, like Disney musicals or whatever, I would watch them again and again and sing along to them. I was always in the

choir, this was when I was around 8, 9, or 10 years old, music was always in my surroundings. I really got into the production side of things in high school when I took music theory classes. Most young people born in the west grow up on some sort of pop music, whether it's on the radio or through films, you get exposed to it no matter what. I was always a little more conscious of that than most kids. I knew what song appeared in what film and what was on the radio. That element of connecting to music in a very general way was always there. But I always felt like listening to what my parents had or the first couple of CDs I bought, which were dumb pop records. I was always searching for something. I really enjoyed buying CDs, like Marilyn Manson, but it always left me wanting more. The first time I felt satisfied from music was *Medúlla* by Björk. I heard it in Borders, heard the previews, and it just sounded so correct to me—music hadn't sounded like that before, I had just been listening and enjoying but this was some other level of immersion that I was experiencing. I think I slowly moved through Borders into the electronic section and then into the more experimental section, just from talking with the clerks there. There's also a really cool record store named [Disc N' Dat](#) in the town next to the one I grew up in, I think it's still there— one of the last CD stores in Connecticut. So, by the time I was sixteen or seventeen, I was studying music theory and listening to mostly avant-garde music, like [UbuWeb](#), Morton Feldman, [John Cage](#), [Stockhausen](#), and also sound poetry and speech experiments. [Björk](#) was basically the gateway drug to this other world of music for me. That was the direction I paid attention to for a long time. I think to some degree these influencers inform my use of texture because even when I'm trying to write something poppy with a beat, it's still this weird textural thing and not normal by any means. Recently, though, I've been listening to a lot of acoustic folk music from around the world, whether that's from Indonesia or Thailand, or really weird Irish folk.

I think a lot of the Eastern music is ignored by the Western world, not as many people look into it and investigate it like they should.

Well, people love Major Key. Major Key anything. Regardless of how chromatic and beautiful music might be from the Philippines or Indonesia, people would rather listen to Muddy Waters or some old Blues music and that's because it's on a scale that people understand. I've heard enough white people tell me that music from Asia is out of tune and off key and I just sort of wince at them and don't reply because they are wrong. It might sound like it's off key to Western ears because they are working with something that [Harry Partch](#) used to investigate: that there are more notes between the keys on the piano than people are aware of. So, to most, any notes in between the piano notes sound wrong, but they're not and they totally exist. But, you know, if people grow up in a box, then they grow up in a box.

And the box feels familiar and comfortable to them and it's hard to get away from that.

Yeah, and I can't say why I'm drawn to music like this. There are, of course, a bunch of producers that are drawn to this type of thing, too. I just did a track with [Don't DJ](#), he was in a group called the Durian Brothers, which is Southeast Asian. I think he put a record out called [Gammellan](#), I was really excited about him. We did one track together on an EP that he is releasing. Gold Panda is another example. People do get smitten by the sound, but it's not common.

You released your first record in 2011, how long before that were you actively producing your own music?

I've been making music for about 11 years now. I started in 2006. It's tricky because if I was born 10 years earlier, the music I was making then might have ended up in someone's shoebox or on a mix CD in their car. But then the internet came along and the shoebox became Last.fm. I had done some tracks under a different project name and, like every 13 year old, put them out on Last.fm and sort of tore them down immediately after I realized what I was doing. I don't think they exist anymore, I even had to argue with MusicBrainz or Rate Your Music to delete the project off the internet. I also sent Discogs an email to delete it. I had to erase it from the internet, stuff before 2011, it was meant for a shoebox but back then the internet felt very isolated.

I was making music for around five years before doing my first proper record. I bring up Last.fm because when I put some of my first speech experiments online, Last.fm has an algorithm that recommends similar artists to you, and one of them was [AGF](#), who I had no idea of. I had dug into a lot of stuff like that but never her. So I investigated all the similar artists and I got her first record, [Head Slash Bauch](#), which I think *XLR8R* called a "garbage disposal nightmare," but it's this very textural and weird and wonderful record. I've never heard music like that before. If you haven't heard it, you should go and listen. It's on her Bandcamp, so it's not hard to find (you can check out [Head Slash Bauch here](#)). Even the stuff she makes now isn't anywhere near this record. It's really special, warm, and, I mean, it's really hard to describe and find reference to, really—it changed the way I thought about music. I wrote her an email at some point and, you know, I thought she might live in Russia or something and not want to do anything. She actually emailed me right back, that was 2008, and for two years we sort of built a friendship. I sent her some tracks and then she asked if I wanted to make a record and if I wanted help with my music. So she assisted on my first record and I had [Blevin Blechtum](#), [Scanner](#), and Twenty Knives—*XLR8R* actually [featured the 20k remix](#) way back in the day—do remixes for me and I put together a remix album. I've been able to produce an album a year since then—but the kick start was hearing Antye's (a.k.a. AGF) work and then her saying she will help me put a full-length. Along the way, it's sort of been a case of working with my idols in a funny way. My latest record, for example, had [Maja Ratkje](#) and [Thomas Brinkmann](#) on it.

How do you maintain the consistency?

I always give myself constraints on my albums. For example, I'm only going to do woodwinds, or I'm only going to do noise or only drone. That approach is very helpful to me because it allows me to ignore any other distractions and focus on one area of musicology.



What has always drawn you to working with the voice?

There are a bunch of answers I could give you, really, I think about this a lot. One is the early radio experiences with my parents and being very conscious of the times the radio would flick between channels with bursts of static, or when the voice would chop up into bits but still be a discernable voice, even if barely there—you really don't need much vocal material to make something interesting, I find that really fascinating. Humans are wired somehow to recognize other humans and there is this thing called the cocktail effect. Say you're at a party and you can listen to one conversation by focusing on it even though it's occupying the same basic frequency range and volume as all the other conversations in the room, but you can follow a thread to what you want to hear. Humans have this ability to transcend auditory limits when it comes to the voice. The other reason was just out of necessity. The first music I made was in 2006 and I didn't have a microphone but my friend in Cape Cod did, so I would sing down the phone to him and he would record it and autotune it and send it back to me. So that obviously produced some really weird distortions, and I would cut it to shit in Audacity. At some point, I got a really bad mic from Radio Shack and that, too, was full of noise and weirdness. So instead of focusing on getting a clean vocal performance, I fell in love with the textures if you knocked against it, for example. I would turn that into the focal point, rather than a mistake. There's no way you would ever get a clean vocal performance from a mic like that. I think it was a subconscious fascination that manifested into this technological interplay.

This brings us to my new record. I'm kind of a technophobe, I'm still running a super old MacBook and am horrified by the new ones—I'm not always looking to update technology. People write about my work sometimes and they think it's futuristic or innovative but for me, I'm

just preoccupied with all this stuff that was going on in 2000 and 2001, like glitch in its purest sense. Now, Ableton has the option that you can seamlessly merge clips and there is no popping or hard cuts, so we are getting further and further away from this glitch idea and I feel one of two ways about it. So my new record is sort of trying to comment on or play the game in regards to a lot of the work that has been done in the last three or four years in electronic music. I don't really want to name names but there was this new movement in electronic music where everything was seamless and shiny and manicured—there have been a dozen think pieces about it—and I wanted to add some opinion or reference to what is going on. I don't really agree with that stuff in regards to my work, because I'm very nature oriented and a lot of my work is very earthy and elemental, rather than this metropolitan, manicured experience.

Drono, my last record, was a really dusty record and I wanted to do the opposite with the new one, to not only see if I could but to be a second sibling to some of that 2014 and 2015 stuff where it's a little more wooly, a little more splintered.

What was your studio setup for this latest album?

Hyper minimal. I really just used my laptop, a couple of good mics, and a sound card. Nothing crazy. There are a lot of sounds on the record, though; on "Light," "Ice Flow," "Clear," and "Intersection of Rivers" you'll hear these glassy, elastic pong sounds and that's a pizzicato that I played in Boston like 10 years ago. I recorded these violin samples at my friend's studio in Boston but never did anything with them and the pizzicato—I think I just ended up manicuring it and it turned into the body of the song. I kept detuning it and it became a melody and I use it a lot when I'm playing live to give some kind of spine to some of my textures if I am playing a more ambient show. I've just kept manicuring those sounds and they found their way into light as the main squeaky beat. There's even more violin, the sort of Missy Elliott bassline, that's a violin too and it's all over "Ice Flow" and "Clear." I'm pretty conscious of this idea that if you use the same sample 60 times it's a little more powerful than using 60 different recordings. If you're doing a drum line, for instance, I really like this sensation that you've massaged the sound into some sort of potency. A lot of people record a lot of material and use a lot of material and there is a lack of intensity because the lack of relationship between the composer and the sound itself isn't developed or pushed. I think this is why an act like [Pan Sonic](#) worked so well, because they chose their sounds very carefully and just pushed them really hard. It doesn't really matter what the sound is, as long as you had a close relationship to it, I guess. That's why pop music is so great, because they have sculpted the backing vocals to sit in the back of the mix, but they are still there; and the hi-hats are filtered and reverbed in such a way that they're playing some illusion trick—it's very manicured stuff and I respond to that because it's a hallmark of caring about the sound.

Are you constantly collecting field recordings and various samples to use like this?

Yeah, I have a year folder for every year since I started working and, inside that, is a month folder. Little one shots, or voice memos from my phone, or field recordings, or vocal takes that I don't like that I could chop up and use, anything really. I pride myself on not using sample packs or anything other than what's built into Ableton. I try not to use other people's sounds in creation.

Do you think your physical surroundings of where you grow up has had a big effect on your musical style and the way you create?

Very much so. I write better when I'm in a forest than when I'm in an urban area, for example, and the rare moments that I'm stuck in suburbia, I almost can't write at all. That can be kind of liberating though, it puts this stagnant gun to your head and forces you to work against it. But in general, I am happiest when writing in quiet spaces with unstructured time schedules so I can do vocals when I want, or if I'm not feeling it, just program patterns all day. Having to co-exist in spaces where other humans are close by kind of restricts when you can sing and I've definitely had some frustrating moments where I've had to kind of whisper into my phone because I couldn't commit a proper take but didn't want to lose the idea.

What are your plans to tour the new album?

I have a few shows coming up, nothing I'm allowed to talk about at the moment, I'm afraid, but really really special shows for me to play this summer. Other than that, I've been working with one friend and going to various spaces and documenting one track from the record at a time and having it well mixed and video recorded. I am hoping to do a series of these and not stop until the record is fully performed.

What else is on the horizon for you artistically speaking?

I'm already plugging away on a new solo record, and I am tying bows on a couple of collaborations which I hope to have out next year. I am hoping to do one more single or EP from *Forest People Pop* in early autumn, as well—I have the track chosen so I'm organizing remixes and other cuts around that.