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The Interview Process: Derek Piotr

Recently Beach Sloth was fortunate enough to sit down with Derek Piotr to discuss his upcoming album "Tempatempat". Beach Sloth has followed Derek Piotr's career from Agora to Airing to the most recent release, Raj. Darkness reigns over much of Derek Piotr's work. To shed some light on those shadowy sounds Derek Piotr was kind enough to answer a few key questions about his forthcoming work and his methods.

1. First of all, before getting into the new album, why does your work explore so much darkness? Will there ever be a cheerful Derek Piotr record?

It's funny you say this because I find Tempatempat really luminous ... Raj too I thought had a kind of brightness to it, in the way maybe that onyx or marble has a sheen but is still made of dark material... it's hard to say how the outside world perceives you I guess, but I do consciously use a lot of playfulness and humor in my work. I enjoy the quote that reads roughly "where the light is brightest, the shadows are deepest". Also, I reference the concept of light a lot in my lyrics, and this is a very conscious choice.

2. "Tempatempat" differs rhythmically from a lot of your previous work. Why the shift?

I feel like I am just getting better / more comfortable at what I do, honestly. I never have a plan in mind when I begin to work but very quickly the tone or character of what I'm about to do next reveals itself. I've also noticed that I seem to pendulum between noisier and more accessible material. My first album, AGORA, was quite harsh and noisy, and Airing was pretty calm and almost neoclassical. With Tempatempat I immediately felt the pendulum swing in the other direction from Raj, which has a lot of very basic, in your face, pagan stomp-rhythms, often with little or no syncopation, and knew pretty immediately that the beats for Tempatempat should be shifting, more open, and full of tiny details and polyrhythms.

3. How do you decide which songs need vocals?

I include my voice as an element in every track I have done so far, sometimes subliminally, but I can usually just tell what shape the track will take and how my voice should lie in it. It's a very intuitive thing. I often consider voice one of my instruments or textures, so I generally make tracks that use my voice as an instrument rather than going for a song structure and singing over it A-->B. however, for Tempatempat I wanted to place emphasis on using words (which I rarely do), and in using my voice in a more straightforward manner, which resulted in maybe 75% of these tracks being pop songs, when usually it is the other way round...

4. What are your thoughts regarding repetition in music?

I am fascinated by trance-state repetitious music, which exists in all corners of the globe. Particularly on this record I was listening to a lot of Indonesian gamelan music and pop music from Thailand and repetition plays a huge role there. I think minimal techno and a lot of electronic music actually owes a lot of its style to hypnotic folk and drum music from the east, it is something I am very, very preoccupied with lately. I have a great respect for repetitive drum patterns, which are really riveting when done right. My earlier works were characterized by a lot of mulched up rhythms and free-time, and this is something I care a lot about still, but recently nothing is as satisfying as a 9 minute track from Bali with one drum and one flute...

5. A lot of the tracks seem to circle back to your earlier works. Is there any reason for this or is it a coincidence?

It is a very, very conscious choice on my part to make sure that I don't lose focus of the root of my sound. A lot of musicians I enjoy have shifted their focus drastically over the course of a few records, and totally dislodged the beauty that was their initial impulse. St. Vincent in particular has done this I think; I found it pretty disheartening. Without giving myself some kind of straightjacket formula, I try and remember to keep what I do "clumsy" to a degree, and roughen edges that I may have smoothed. I think it is dangerous to move too far away from the initial thing that drove or fascinated you, because often the new result lacks intensity. But I also think to some degree you can't help but produce a certain kind of sound, there are just threads that follow you for your whole life...

6. You use a lot of external information regarding double meanings from multiple languages for the track titles and lyrics. Why do you pursue this "dual meaning" in your work?

It is foremost an attempt at universality. All of my album titles have at least two meanings, depending either on how you break the word up or via translation. Agora in English typically refers to a meeting place, the ancient Greek agora, but the word also means "now" in Portuguese, and my cover photographer is Brazilian...Airing is "air" and "ring", or radio waves and bells, the sound palette of that record. Raj meant both "kingdom" in Hindi and heaven or paradise in my native Polish, and Tempatempat, depending on how the word is broken, means either "forging place" (Tempa Tempat) or "fourth place" (Tempat Empat), and this being my fourth record makes it an obvious fit. I spent a lot of time researching things for Tempatempat, and a lot of concepts interlocked. (<http://derekpiotr.com/albums/tempatempat> has a lot of links and media included to explain this). The biggest revelation came about when I recorded Bhadrakali and Yogyakarta. Initially the takes were just empty phrases that I meant to re-record and fill in later, but months later, when I was beginning to think about an album title, I wondered about the Indonesian word for spirit, which turned out to be "roh", a syllable I had sung a lot on both of those tracks. Transcribing the rest of the words and dumping them into the translator produced two entirely coherent lyrics sung in Bahasa Indonesian. I pretty much

don't believe it myself but I have to assume I was possessed by a Sufi, the more literature I read confirmed that...there are PDFs of the lyrics at the link above. I hope someone might learn something from some of the links embedded.

7. Does nature influence the design or structure of “Tempatempat”?

500%. I live in the middle of the forest and take walks every day. Conifers in particular I created as homage to a pine stand that faces my house. Simply being outside in the beauty of nature has moved me to tears before, so it is something I think about a lot, yes.

8. Is there an ideal way you'd like “Tempatempat” to be listened to?

In the forest in summer.

9. Who do you consider your influences?

Emotionally speaking, a lot of people and things. Most notable I guess in a sonic sense is AGF, she helped produce my first record and I had been listening to her music for 3 years at that point, and I still listen to it quite a bit today. Meredith Monk's work has helped confirm for me the hunch I had that wordless vocals are just as or even more powerful than lyrics... St. Vincent's earlier work had a profound impact on me, also M.I.A.'s Kala. Other than that, a wide variety of things as of late. Sublime Frequencies. Smithsonian Folkways. UNESCO World Heritage. Nicholson Baker. Pine trees. Turmeric.

10. Considering the versatile nature of the pieces how will you prepare this for live performances? And what sort of engagement do you have with your audiences?

A lot of them are virtually impossible to play out live. I have drastically re-arranged a handful of them, and reinterpreted some old tracks. I am not afraid to use backing tracks in my live sets, I always live trigger and manipulate textures and randomly selected pre-chosen files to keep things interesting, and I am continually using my voice. As far as audience engagement, I prefer to be in my own bubble and let them be in theirs. I love playing in pitch black and letting the audiences close their eyes and be in their own space and time. The interaction happens post-gig.