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## Interview: Derek Piotr

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*If you're looking for something to complement your reading why not select some of the sounds of Derek Piotr. He's an experimental musician - really a producer and composer - and recently shared his thoughts on being a life-long fan of John Bellairs's books.*

**Q: You called yourself an "experimental musician" - how would you explain that?**

**A:** "Experimental" is a really nasty shorthand to describe what I do. In reality I have a real grudge against the word, in a sense: experimental implies that you maybe don't know where you're going with the work, and I do apply very specific vision to what I do. I work mainly with the voice, processing it in a digital way. This allows for some glitchy surprises which I suppose reinforces that there is some "experimenting", however, I generally find that I am guiding all of the ingredients towards a predetermined shape. I use found sounds a lot in my work, but this does not preclude the possibility of using instruments and other musicians as well.

**Q: How did you become interested in such a thing? Who or what are your influences?**

**A:** I was always involved in music since I was young, singing in the choir in elementary school and later on taking clarinet. I began listening to pop records at the turn of the millennium, and many of them were definitely production/processing heavy. It gave me a sense of wonder and

shortly thereafter I got my first music-making software and tried a little bit to emulate what I heard. It always turned way more skewed than traditional pop, though.

**Q: Is your music designed to be created and recorded in the studio or are you able to pull off this sound live - that is, remotely and away from the studio?**

**A:** I do a lot of live performance, in various scenarios. Traditional concert venues, record stores, libraries, train stations, churches...they are different beasts. I deeply believe in the "old-school" notion of a record album: I put a huge deal of effort into studio trickery, credits, liner notes, album art, and promotion around the album as a project. The live shows just kind of drip off of me, more improvised, spontaneous and feral, but I have the hugest and highest love and regard for my proper studio records.

**Q: How long does it take to compose and create individual tracks? It is a lengthy gestation period? Do you have a library or sounds or rhythms stored away, waiting to be crafted into your next piece?**

**A:** It really depends. You hit it bang on the nose, that I do have a chronological library of sound. I arrange folders on my desktop by month, and by year. Sometimes I forget sounds, sometimes a sound that wasn't telling me much gets rediscovered years later and is exactly perfect for what I'm working on. Others are terminally duds.

**Q: You mention using found sounds: what are some of the more obscure or strange sounds you've found?**

**A:** I love recording appliances actually - AC, fans, vacuum, even a heating duct has featured on my records at some point. I recently recorded a sex toy for my next album. I don't make it a point to record unusual sounds for my records, I more get a kick out of warping recordings of my own voice into shapes (kick drums, bass drums, high sine waves, little clicks, etc.) that otherwise wouldn't be considered "vocal".

**Q: You feature a few tracks on your website. Of those, which are your favorite or would give a new listener a sense of what you're creating?**

**A:** I am really proud of some pieces I've done that are more repetitive, like "Wash", "Sunlight, Fruit Trees" and "Tonic/You Move", but I have recently been playing pretty abstract #voicenoise shows live, which feature very little repetition, many of those are on [SoundCloud](#). I like both extremes, really solid repetitive motifs, and total chaos.

**Q: What are some of the people or places that influences your work?**

**A:** I am pretty avidly living a beautiful home life, gardening, cooking, spending time with loved ones; I have always had the theory that life influences art, not the other way round, and if successful, there is a bridge back to life in which art plays a supporting role to heighten

moments, either aesthetically or emotionally, with the overall goal of being more expressive. My music for me is very inspired by these moments with other people, but I feel the end result is weirdly landscape-like in texture, that is to say, it's elemental, like a rainstorm or a mountainside: it would exist and continue on with or without human involvement.

**Q: What are your long-term musical goals?**

**A:** I want to start producing for other people more, otherwise just continue on performing and recording albums. I've been fortunate to collaborate with a lot of amazing artists in my career, can't ask for much more.

**Q: Speaking of collaborating, have you ever considered an experimental music adaption of one of Bellairs's book?**

**A:** I would certainly do this if commissioned. Generally I don't involve other themes or concepts in my work unless commissioned...for instance I recently played a show in Brooklyn for a space-themed showcase; for that performance I used a lot of NASA archival recordings, something I wouldn't normally include in my work.

**Q: That seems a decent-enough segue. How long have you been a fan of John's work?**

**A:** My fourth grade teacher introduced us to the series – it must have been 1998 or 1999. I was struck not only by the content of the stories but by the stuff of the universe - Bellairs has such a fondness for ritual, antiques, bric-a-brac, history, and magical lore, that I was always drawn in just by the description of coins on a table, or the description of King Solmon's debate...

**Q: Do you remember the first book you read?**

**A:** The teacher in question read us *The House with a Clock in its Walls*. I remember greedily reading the rest of the series, and Christmas that year received B&N's *The Best of John Bellairs*; the original trio of Barnavelt tomes.

**Q: You mention the three series: your favorite?**

**A:** It might have to be the Johnny Dixon series; simply because I myself have a troupe of eccentric 60-somethings in my social life and have for some time (me being in my mid-twenties, I fondly refer to them as my old lady brigade -- not to their faces of course!). The professor's irritability, eccentricity, and enthusiasm for all things grand and absurd always struck me as familiar. Though Mrs. Zimmerman may well be my favorite character of the Bellairs universes, I found her a bit too much of a disciplinarian to fully feel like we'd get along (her insistence that crystals have no naturally radiating helpful energies - phooey on that!).

**Q: There was a discussion once, somewhere in our archives, speculating how things would have been had John stuck to one series of books – your thoughts?**

A: By the end of the Lewis Barnavelt series, I think Strickland does a pretty graceful job of moving Lewis and Rose Rita up in years, but I wonder how John would've handled that. One of his great gifts was dissecting the foibles and melancholy of being a very young outsider in a world of Big People. I am cautiously optimistic that he would have handled teen angst with enthusiasm! I can't help but wonder, too, if Johnathan and Florence's mortality would have been touched upon if he had continued all their lives logically....

**Q: Your favorite series...?**

A: I may actually have to say the Lewis Barnavelt series. Anthony Monday is the obvious choice for least favourite simply because of the scarcity of stories, but I like Ms. Eells, her brother, and their lapsang souchong pow-wows. I also think it's kindly of Bellairs to spare Anthony from the archetype of orphaned child discovering magical powers: Anthony lives with his mom and dad, and has an older brother, but gets into mystical mischief with his one-woman Old Lady Brigade. I also can't help but laugh at the "tasteless" house kimono Ms. Eells owns.

**Q: What are your thoughts on Brad's continuations?**

A: I think Brad gracefully carried on Lewis and Rose Rita's lives; more seamlessly I think did he tackle Johnny Dixon's adventures in Duston Heights. But a few repeated references (Count Cagliostro, having the personality of a leaky inner tube, etc.) feel like deliberate echoes of Bellairs's style that weaken the feeling of transportation. You can't have everything. I also have to suppose that some kid in his preteens may be picking up a Strickland volume with no prior knowledge of the Bellairs universe -- so everything might, to them, feel fresh.

**Q: Do you still think John's work has a valid place in today's world?**

A: I think there are people out there who have not forgotten or who already know something, but I am worried that the zeitgeist is far, far flung from John's ideal, and probably always was. The magic is that he was there for the 3.5 people who got it, and in a sense, he was never mainstream. I don't think he needs to have any more validity to the world at large than he always had, which makes me feel so conflicted that he's getting his due with the movie.

**Q: Knowing John's love of history and trivia, what's a place or thing or bit of history from your area that you think John would have gotten a kick out of?**

A: My hometown in Connecticut is full of amazing revolutionary trivia - the book *My Brother Sam Is Dead* is based in Redding. One particularly grim piece - we have a Gallows Hill road where, supposedly, hanged British soldiers were shown off to others encroaching as a stern warning.

**Q: If you were making a movie based on one of John's books – and hey, someone is - what's one thing you would to ensure is included?**

A: In *The Trolley to Yesterday*...Brewster turning pink!

**Q: Compleat this sentence: you know you've read too much John Bellairs when –**

A: ...you begin suspecting there is a concealed, springy sword in every cane or umbrella you see ;)

*Thanks, Derek! You can learn more about Derek – and indeed, sample some of his sounds - at his website, [derekpiotr.com](http://derekpiotr.com) and [@derekpiotr](https://twitter.com/derekpiotr).*