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## Voice, Earth, and Ground: An Interview with Derek Piotr

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Grunt (noun): a word typically defined as “a low, short guttural sound made by an animal or a person.” The sound is defined by its primitive connections, and like many of the endless verbalizations that the human voice can create, it exists within the space outside of our modern semantics.

Despite this evolution of human vocal sophistication, there is still a primordial otherness found in those ineffable intonations that is simultaneously mysterious and appealing. Strangely enough, humans have often explored this verbal otherness in the creation of music. After all, the human voice does not need words to sing. The voice of an instrument does not either. This space between words, it seems, contains both our primitive grunts and our capacity to love music. On his upcoming album *Grunt* (officially out September 28th), the New England experimental musician [Derek Piotr](#) explores those spaces between the semantics and narratives that are

created with traditional music, employing both his own voice and the voices of others and sonically manipulating them into something entirely different.

Earlier this month, we spoke with the experimental musician about his new album, the tenacity of the human voice, and the New Haven noise scene.



Derek Piotr – Grunt (2018)

**CTS: First off, really awesome album art. It's you right? Who created it? How did it come about? Does it have a specific connection with your art?**

**DP:** Thank you so much. I collaborated with a visual-video artist **Baron Lanteigne** on that image. We actually found it as a still from a video we worked on for the title track to *Grunt*. I wanted some continuity with how I appeared on my last sleeve, *Forest People Pop*, with just my eye showing and the rest of my face hidden by digital-ness. I also felt it was time to be represented as glitchy as the music maybe sounds. I feel a little funny appearing on my album sleeves but I think it has been a natural evolution up to this point. My first 6 record sleeves did not have my face on, but it is time now somehow.

**CTS: Some people on this earth decide to pick up a guitar and write country music. In contrast, you went a very different direction: noise. What originally drew you to this style of art?**

Well, I think if I had started on guitar I'd still be on guitar, or organ, piano, harp, whatever... But the journey I was on when I was about 15 was definitely very informed by techno-pop music. One friend of mine at that time recommended Audacity to me, so my first real experience making my "own" music was editing on the computer. Voice is still my first instrument—I was always singing even younger as a child.

But being born in 1991, I am one of the first generations who grew up totally online, and I definitely think it was due to some of the records I was listening to at the time and also just how we were raised. I remember going to a computer lab when I was 6. I never really sought after the guitar. It has no place in my work. I am very excited by digital edits so I am glad I am in a position in my life where I can constantly make them to my voice.

**CTS: I know there are some people who are used to more traditional musical approaches who may witness a noise performance and either not “get it” or actually have a strong negative reaction to it. What are your thoughts on the contrast of “noise” vs. “music”? Are they one and the same to you? Do you think noise conjures the same emotional and physical appeal as someone listening to a singer-songwriter?**

**DP:** Once I played a show where I was, as always, behind my laptop. One observer suggested I could come out from behind it and sing more. Did Joni Mitchell come out from behind her dulcimer? Or Stevie Wonder his piano? This is the music I make. I fully believe in the idea of music as music, not as art, or shocking noise or some kind of concept piece. Ultimately I want this to be a healing and invigorating experience for people. One blog described me once as a “pure at heart folk singer”. I think it is all a matter of perspective. The work I make is extremely emotional to me. Musicality and emotion are numbers one and two in the equation. Mostly I hope to conjure positive experiences around my work and not be challenging.

**CTS: Did you have a specific goal in creating *Grunt*? Why the title? Where do you see its place in your body of work? Is there a narrative hidden in its sequence or is it purely anti-narrative?**

**DP:** Grunt = either a kind of unfiltered human low guttural utterance or, in Polish, “earth” or “ground”. I feel we as a civilization have gotten so slicked down by web 2.0 and where technology is now, that I tried to technologically subvert that in very rough, direct edits. Also in a lot of voice recordings, not all of which are pretty. I spent a ton of thought and sweat over how the track sequencing should be, but yeah I wouldn’t say anti-narrative ...it is definitely more non-narrative, More of a sonic journey so I tried to make the transitions as seamless and complete as I could.

**CTS: Where do you find your sounds? What helps you determine what is the kind of sound you like versus something that doesn’t “fit” what you are working on?**

**DP:** All of this record was recorded by me. I don’t sample things. There is one violinist on this record, there is Kevin Drumm, who remixed and edited one track, and the mastering engineer. I generally know the sonic landscape I’m after at the beginning of a project, and make recordings and edits focused on my goal. 90 percent of this record is recordings of my own voice.

**CTS:** I think there is an actual human voice singing on one of the tracks... it stands out to a strange effect... did you just think “this is where the one voice goes”? Haha. What do you think the role of human singing serves between all of the static?

**DP:** I think that I try ten million approaches with the voice, and I am first and foremost a singer (as I said earlier), but I think I only sing on two tracks:”DZ”, and later, more recognizably on “Pure”. Those are the most intact vocal recordings. I sing all over the record, it just gets edited to smithereens.

I wanted one song that had recognizable structure melody and lyrics that I could sing live, though. Some of my earliest ideas about making music came from the way the human voice is recognizable even through, say, radio static. even faint flickerings of voice can be heard through the wall of white noise of between radio stations. that is a precious human gift. to recognize other humans. I have not forgotten that idea on this album.

**CTS:** To my knowledge, there is a pretty solid noise scene around the New Haven area, are you familiar with the scene at all? I personally am not, so I am curious on your take. I saw one experimental show at a place called [Neverending Books](#) a few months ago, and it was really wild. It seems like the performance is aiming for a distinctly different goal than someone just trying to perform their song as intended. In your opinion, what makes a noise performance so uniquely its own?



Derek Piotr at Neverending Books in New Haven

I actually have played Neverending books (The audio is [here](#)). The New Haven scene surprised me. It’s amazingly vibrant. I mostly focused outside of my home state for years when I was touring, but this past year has been really Connecticut-heavy. It’s been so nice to have that community at this stage in my work. I am very grateful and enthusiastic about the New Haven scene. Really a nice surprise.