

Interview with Derek Piotr

written by [Beach Sloth](#) August 4, 2021



Derek Piotr explores the history of sound and what traditions created them with a lot of his latest output. Over the course of his surprisingly long career, he's had one constant – a unique voice. This is quite literal as his study of the voice serves as the very focal point of his entire body of work. From the very beginning of experimental origins, there have been instances of interest in the tradition of music. In some of his earlier work, he explored the gamelan amongst droning industrial landscapes. Even at its most heavily treated, one can sense the pure humanity and celebration of community that can be found within his intricate, deeply layered works.

Most recently, he has released work that explores an ancient form of folk – from Invisible Map, his January 2021 Invisible Map single to the May 2021 Making and Then Unmaking album. No matter what though there is always an undeniable appreciation of the natural world that shines on through in his rather extensive, decade-plus long discography. For a long time, I have considered his work to be among the most interesting stuff I have come across, and I do like to keep tabs on his goings-on. Nor am I the only one – in 2012 his work was nominated by the jury for Prix Ars Electronica, a particularly prestigious jury for experimental digital media.

I decided to sit down with Derek, virtually of course as I lack any permanent address.

1. Do you want to discuss a little bit about what inspired your newest project “The Lamkin Reader”? The ballad is an interesting one, rather unique in origin, and what drew your attention to it?

I first heard Lena Bare Turbyfill sing “Bolakins” in December of 2019. I had been researching traditional Appalachian balladry for a project of my own, a solo album, and had downloaded some compilations of Appalachian singing from the Library of Congress. I later came to find out that “Bolakins” is a variant of “Lamkin”, one of the oldest Child ballads still in circulation; the song has been transmuted into such unusual

titles as “Squire Relantman” and “Bold Ankin”, and has been covered by the likes of Steeleye Span and featured (as “Long Lankin”) on the Adult Swim program *The Shivering Truth* as recently as 2018. The content of “Bolakins” is bloody, shocking, and alien. One line goes, “We’ll stick her little baby full of needles and pins”. Obviously, this pretty immediately held my curiosity, and I began to favor this ballad, along with others (“The Dewy Dens of Yarrow”, “Georgie”). I also realized, as I was requesting digitized archives of folk-songs from various institutions, that “Lamkin” is typically among most traditional song repositories. Some of the versions were quite unusual and I decided it would make sense to compile versions across an audio compilation, akin to Charley Seeger’s [Barbara Allen compilation](#). Ahead of the audio component, I released “The Lamkin Reader”, a slightly more free-associative and “artful” linking of the versions represented visually instead of sonically. You can purchase it [here](#).

2. Do you think that it is possible to marry the digital and the traditional, at least musically? So often a lot of people discuss how raw folk needs to be in order to make it “real”. What are your thoughts on this?



photography by Matty Bovan

A really good question! I think about this constantly. So much of my early work was extremely digital and heavily processed, but when I began singing ballads and writing folk music, I became very puritanical. There’s only reverb in like 2 spots on *Making and Then Unmaking*. I began to feel very strict about my sonic practice and wanted to keep the studio tricks to a minimum; these are of course impossible to do out in the field when singing, and even the concept of “Lena with a laptop” (as I’d considered if Mrs. Turbyfill, who was born in 1905, might have made music if she were alive today), seemed to come to the idea that the results might be pretty unmolested. A really good example of someone working today with a rich folk history is Shirley Collins: she just released an EP last week and is in her 80ies. I think you can include ambient moments within folk but I’d be very very hesitant myself before merging the two. I think about this an awful lot, so thanks for that question!

3. How does nature inspire your work? You are far more country-dwelling than I (I’m very city-centric) and do you think you would still have the same interest in sound had you grown up in more heavily populated places?

I think not. I am not sure which is nature and which is nurture, how I came to be so inclined, or if it was even nature nurturing me, lol. But I definitely go around to other places where this sort of music is still in full display (Appalachia, Northern England), and they are just as pastoral as where I grew up. I think it definitely impacts how you sing as well; people like Berzilla Wallin and Roscoe Holcomb sing with a whole lot more gusto than most singers now, directly due to the fact that there was more land and space, and there was more time spent outside away from structures to sing. Now, most people sing in their homes, the acreage we live on is so small,

and TV and radio have subconsciously shaped the way we hear voices and parrot them back: so much (well, nearly all) broadcast singing is microphone-assisted, so the vocal projection is cut at least in half. It all contributes to a much different way of singing today than 100 years ago, which I find somewhat disheartening.

4. Is there a need for music to tell a story? Does narrative add something to sound, even if it is wordless?

Well, I've made wordless albums before, but I like to think even those lead the listener on a journey of sorts. A lot of music I've loved since I was young was purely acoustic folk, but folk from Thailand or Madagascar, so I couldn't understand the words anyhow. I've learnt so many ballads and sing them myself since the beginning of my research. A lot of people have asked how I can remember an 8-minute-long song like "The House Carpenter" front-to-back without shuffling the verse order or forgetting a line, but for me, I put myself in the story of the song. I see the story in my head as I sing and that's how I keep track. I like both, but right now I'm definitely more into stories.

5. Where do you see your music heading towards? I feel there is always a joy with your output in that I never know what path you are going to take next.



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It's funny you asked about digital influence, because I'm going to try and really take my time and invite a little more studio processing into the next one. I've only just begin writing. It could end up that every track on the next album is a total marriage of digital and acoustic, or it could be that half the tracks are dry unaccompanied singing, and the other half are honky tonk. I just don't know yet.