LIVING ✳ MUSIC

**University of Michigan
School of Music
American Music Institute**

Home

Browse Interviews

Search Interviews

View by Scene

View by Role

Nominations

Corrections

Sponsors

INTERVIEW RECORD

List View   Skip to Transcript   Search   Correct   <<First <Prev Next> Last>>

Scene(s)	Improvisation World Crossover
Role(s)	Performing Composing
Informant Name	Robert Spalding Newcomb
Position	Director of Information Technology
Institution	University of Michigan
Image	
Audio Sample	No file available.
Audio Sample Title	
Biographical Notes	Robert Spalding Newcomb An artist people consistently find difficult to categorize, especially in a music scene as diverse and challenging as the one in his hometown, Ann Arbor, MI. A composer, multi-instrumentalist, computer programmer, theorist, writer, and poet, who combines elements of numerous musical disciplines and cultural domains into a performance style that is truly a unique matrix of energies. Creative explorations focus on the study of musical and linguistic structure, complex systems, cognition, transcendent states, and improvisational performance. Aesthetic niches, adjectives, labels and comments from audiences describing the solo concerts: ...a riveting performance, intense, profound, challenging, minimal, magical, just amazing, avant garde, free improvisation, experimental, spontaneous composition, technical but not techno, computer music, raga-like, mystical, a meditation, an original paradigm, computer algorithms, new forms, razor edge guitar solos, meditative sitar improvisations, compelling poetry/spoken word, and most often, 'unlike anything else.' Newcomb has immersed himself in a wide range of musical exploration including traditional folk and blues traditions of the British Isles and the US, classical guitar technique, jazz theory, improvisation, composition, digital audio, computer music programming, advanced artificial intelligence and machine learning, and Indian Classical Music. He has toured India (2005) as a guest of the US Embassy. He has published his compositional theories and described his unique music software in the Cambridge University Press (UK) journal, 'Organised Sound' (1998). He has produced four self-published albums of original music (1986, 1991, 2000, 2004). He has designed and implemented complex computer systems for the New York Stock Exchange, Chemical Bank, and Manufacturers Hanover Trust/Prodigy in New York City (1983-1989). His computer music has been featured in electronic music festivals and conferences worldwide (1993-1999). He has been commissioned to compose music for dance, yoga and carillon. He has held the position of Director of Information Technology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance since 1998. In addition to his ongoing solo performances, Newcomb is currently working on a documentary film on the life of his longtime yoga teacher, centenarian Swami Bua (New York) and a multimedia dance/theatre production about the 2004 South Asian tsunami (New York and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

	Contact: rsn@partialmusic.com
Link	www.partialmusic.com
Type	Interview (in person)
Date	23 March 2007
Transcript	*Interview with Robert Newcomb*

AK = Andrew Kotarba
RN = Robert Newcomb

AK: What was your first involvement with music and what inspired you to pursue it later in life?

RN: I lived in a very musical family. My mother was a pianist. Nothing too fancy, no real classical concertizing and things. Her grandmother was a child prodigy in piano who did, supposedly, amazing stuff. My father was a singer, Perry Como'ish. semi-professional. One of his brothers could memorize Mozart piano pieces on one listen and could play it back. But he couldn't read music! I guess it was genetic. There was a lot of music around the house. They played a lot of music. From Charlie Parker, Leadbelly and classical music.

AK: And yourself, you started with the drums?

RN: I was a kid and kids play with what's around them. So rather than playing the table I played drums. Then I got a toy guitar. The first thing I did seriously when I was 10 through 12, I played cornet in grade school. Then I got tonsillitis and had to stop. The next time I played a brass instrument was alto sax when I was 19 for a year or so.

AK: When did you start getting involved with technological things and electronic music?

RN: Between the time I was a teenager and the time I moved to New York City in 1978, for 6 or 7 years, I was doing acoustic folk music, blues, slide guitar and folk singer things. I was also doing free-form improvisation on guitar and I wasn't sure where this stuff was coming from so no one would play with me but people liked to listen to it. Then I got involved with Indian music, raga-like improvisation and that became my mindset and I left folk music behind me. I needed to make money so I got into computers. I got into programming in the 80's when the Apple Macintosh was just appearing. Anyone who wanted to do computer music needed huge funding because the technology was so expensive . So while living in New York I was playing guitar and I was working with computers as my day job. I tried to translate my programming chops into something in the computer music domain, and this was in the pre-midi era. It was all analog synths and lots of cables. Digital was happening but there wasn't a standard protocol. Over the next 10 years I had a double life working on Wall Street and programming big systems during the day and the rest of the time I was designing a compositional system and continuing to improvise and trying to connect the two.

AK: Was it a difficult balance between your everyday job and musical exploits?

RN: Oh yeah, it's a big part of life. The brain gets into its tug-of-war. I think the closer my day job has gotten to the musical setting, certainly in the 10 or 12 years I've been at the university, it's been harder and harder to keep the two parts of the brain apart. Unless you are making a living with the creative side of your brain there will always be a disconnect. I am surrounded by it here so I try to reconnect to a similar mindset when I leave here each day

AK: Since you were brought up when this technology was all brand new and seeing it now, what do you think of the progress that's been made and where do you think it will continue to go?

RN: I was lucky enough to become unemployed shortly after opting out of the New York City world and moving to New Hampshire to work for New England Digital Corp. (later The Synclavier Company), the first folks to make a digital audio work station. (DAW) I spent the next 4 years doing consulting and things. During that time I did a ton of software development in one of the more powerful languages of the time, which was HMSL/Forth, on the older Macintosh's. During those 4 years I feel like I sped off real fast. The stuff I was doing was very complex and 'conference-worthy', which I did a few of. That's when the business world subsided and I didn't have to deal with that part of my life. At the time I felt like I was way at the front looking back. Since I've been here ironically I've let go considerably of the technological world and integrated more into real-time performance. I have not brought the full complexity of my technology into my world of improvisational music. I have more been trying to blend it with my music and use the computer as a tool. My use of it in the past years has been on the periphery of the mainstream of music tech folks. I think the main thing is the speed of the processors has been growing tremendously. The hardware defines what the software can ask. The power of the software allows to artist to extend the conceptual boundaries. My own thing is to somehow find the time to bring in some of the analytical stuff I wrote in software in non-real-time and bring it into the improvising that I do today in real-time a setting. I want to bring in a lot of sampling things and increase the pallet again. When I was working in midi-studio mode I had a limitless pallet, which diminished the guitar-esqeuness of my sound. The tools are there but they are all complex. With too much plug-and-play I think you end up with a lot of beautiful similarity.

AK: Do you think that it's scary that an artist can create an entire album just on their laptop?

RN: I don't think that's scary but I think it's scary that the artist might not realize that that isn't the only choice. That's almost as scary as thinking that you have no tools or only one. I mean scary in the |

evolutionary sense of music.

AK: I find it interesting that you have an interest in Indian music because that seems to me quite different than the technological things you do. What about the music appeals to you?

RN: It's a big answer. I don't think that Indian music or what has come to be known as "world music," I don't think of it as a polarity to high-tech. I think of it as incredibly rich as a source for using technology. It's not folk music, I'm not interested in it, it's all nice and has a cultural place and so is its celebration of it. But I don't find it (folk music) intellectually stimulating. What's stimulating about Indian Classical Music (ICM) is that their thought systems and the level of intricacy in their emotional gestures really get to some parts of artistic expression that a lot of the West has not yet gotten into. In some ways it's due to the instruments, which are all very unique. The music is changing but as it came out of the palaces in India in a strange European way, it was patrons who supported the better artists. This has elevated the art of it and improvisation in particular. Technologically you can do modeling based on knowledge databases, which you can fill with any kind of knowledge. So if you want analyze or replicate a particular style of music or data structure, you really have to understand the content or substance of the music and then turn it into mathematics to work with it. I have found that by listening to a lot of Indian music in my formative years and then trying to translate it to my instrument the guitar, when I recently picked up the sitar, it felt totally alien in a tactile sense, but felt completely attractive and familiar musically. I heard something in the instrument that I felt the need to explore.

AK: I think it's interesting that you are trying to take something like sitar and translate to something technologically because that seems like it would be very hard to do. Have you had success with it?

RN: Well, I don't think I have achieved everything I wanted to achieve. What I have been doing in the past 5 or 6 years is weaning myself of the dependence on structure generators, which is what the software today often does. It goes back to the scary thing we talked about because the software has become so powerful and I think a lot of people use it without really understanding it. In trying to cross-pollinate music, say between jazz and classical or avant-garde and minimalism, I'm running into things that can easily be called algorithms, but they seem embedded in a rich tradition. I mean, playing any instrument is using technology. The next achievement for me will be to somehow merge these tools.

AK: What do you use to write music, do you use a computer?

RN: I don't write anything down now. I stopped in the early 1980's when I started using the guitar to play things that I consider non-notatable. And basically I started using different objects to play the guitar with. I kind of went through a phase of going from standard notation to very extended graphical notation. I need to post some of these one-page pieces on my website because people don't believe that I wrote them back then. I soon realized that the recording was the notation. I never do note-for-note memorization sort of things. I might be working on 5 to 6 compositions which may all sound similar at first but will later blossom into their own distinct pieces .

AK: Do you think that the ease of the technology today - do the benefits outweigh to potential negatives? Is it worth it?

RN: It's definitely worth it. It's a simple answer, but I think you have to start granularizing it a little bit. Music notation is not music it's notation and audio recording isn't music it's just air pressure samplings. Hopefully you're linking the two together. At this point I do a lot more audio editing than notational editing. Years ago I did more code editing on software based on this artificial intelligence world of algorithms. I think the state-of-the-art thing right now is the real-time signal processing, which I have not gotten into too much because the technology didn't exist when I was learning. Back to the scary who's-gonna-do-what with the powerful tools - there will always be people who are going to take the cream right off the top of the tool, and they may make beautiful art from it. But some people want to dig down into the guts of it and that's where they do their art. I think that it's great that there are so many tools to use. Their artists/users can't always talk to each other but they can collaborate.

AK: Out of curiosity who do you like to listen to?

RN: Right now, I rarely listen to anyone without the explicit goal of acquiring a skill. By listening to a lot of Indian music I wanted to conquer the intricacies of the music and especially sitar. I find the most interesting stuff today in film scores. The budgets and the musical pallets are gigantic so there's always room to find something interesting. Lately I have enjoyed going to student recitals because they start out way ahead and after a few years they start looking for extended repertoire to discover more freedom. Since I didn't go through this conservatory-type environment I can see what I missed or what they are missing. They can get trapped or they can be given a lot of freedoms and witnessing this is always a learning experience for me.

Researcher	Andrew Kotarba
Researcher Email	kartarba@umich.edu
Reaction	I thought that Mr. Newcomb's ideas about the role of technology in the modern music world were very interesting. Considering his experience with music technology I was surprised to learn that most of his current music is aimed at avoiding the dependency on technology. The background that he provides into the evolution of sound technology is very interesting. His outlook is generally positive but he is also cautious about music becoming too similar because of tecnhology.
Keywords	improvisation, sitar, technology, digital, analog,

Contact Information:
Professor Mark Clague
E-mail: claguem@umich.edu
Phone: 734/647-9416
Fax: 734/647-1897

| CONTRIBUTORS | UM SCHOOL OF MUSIC | AMERICAN MUSIC INSTITUTE | FACULTY |

UM.SiteMaker Home   Configure this Site   Upload/Manage Files for this Site