

Field Report

An Encounter with
Mr. Robert Spalding Newcomb

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This is a field report regarding my interview with Mr. Robert Spalding Newcomb from the Living Music Project for my Field Project for Music History. I met with Mr. Newcomb in his home and studio on the afternoon of March 31, 2009.

Mr. Robert Newcomb is a member of the Living Music Project and lives in Ann Arbor, MI. A composer, multi-instrumentalist, computer programmer, theorist, writer, and poet, Mr. Newcomb combines elements of various musical influences, cultural backgrounds, and musical disciplines to create a sound that is uniquely his own. Mr. Newcomb has explored a wide range of musical genres and prefers not to categorize himself strictly into a specific genre. His current primary instruments are the guitar and the Indian sitar, which he combines with electronic elements.

As a computer science major myself, I was interested to interview someone who had been Director of Technology in the University of Michigan's School of Music as well as a composer of electronic music. I was interested in learning about Mr. Newcomb's insights into the way technology impacts music. I also hoped to learn about his own personal history and how he found himself in the fields of both technology and music. I felt that Mr. Newcomb's insights into how the fields are related or may be merging over time would be invaluable. Lastly, I was interested in learning some background about electronic music, its different forms, and how it has evolved over time.

The encounter began with a very personal touch. Mr. Newcomb warmly invited me to chai in his living room and we began by looking for some common ground. I told him a bit about myself and my computer science background, and he began telling me a bit about his own experience in the field. He also gave me an overview about a software project that he had worked on in the past, which had been temporarily been put on hold. His aim was to achieve something that had never been done before: create a software program that could study streaming music and find common characteristics and patterns in order to generate improvised music consistent with the original style. I found an endeavor such as this to be quite fascinating. As the conversation flowed back to music, Mr. Newcomb told me a bit about his experience with the sitar and his fascination with traditional Indian music and electronic music. We found a common interest with Yo Yo Ma and

the Silk Road Ensemble and noted the wide variety of musical and cultural influences the project represented.

After chai, we proceeded to his home studio where Mr. Newcomb was able to present his equipment and instruments. The interview began with some personal questions about Mr. Newcomb's personal history and musical background. I asked him to explain a bit about how he first started getting into music and when he found that initial interest. Mr. Newcomb recanted his first experiences with music, saying that his earliest memories were when he was two or three years old. He remembered playing drums and banging on pots and pans and "doing music – what I thought was musical stuff." He had a baby drum set which his parents had given him, and jokingly he noted that he had no idea why they had done that. I asked Mr. Newcomb if his parents had then encouraged his early interest. He explained that his parents were both musicians, although not professionals. His mother had played classical piano, "in a very standard way" he noted, but her grandmother was what others called a prodigy and had performed at the young age of 11 or 12. His father was a singer who had done radio performances in his twenties, and two of his three older sisters were also pretty musical.

Mr. Newcomb's personal experience with music came primarily through his own interest and volition. He had opted not to study in college for personal reasons, but throughout junior high school he was involved in church choirs. He laughingly added that although he didn't understand any of the words, he had enjoyed singing. At the age of 15, Mr. Newcomb started picking up guitar very seriously and gravitated towards folk music, which he described as meaning in the US, "a kind of British Isles/Scottish/Irish dance music." He began playing acoustic instruments such as the guitar, five-string banjo, fiddle, violin, and the Irish pennywhistle.

By the age of 20, he had become pretty adept at memorizing and playing music but felt he needed to explore his own style. "It sort of seemed like I was impersonating other people, because I needed to figure out where *my* music was." That was the point where he began experimenting with improvisation. He started amplifying a nylon string classical guitar through a "rock amp" and began developing sounds that he found related to Indian raga music. He explained that at

the time, he had been listening to quite a bit of raga and noted some prominent artists including Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar and other eastern musical influences at the time. I asked him if he began composing music at this point or if he was taking music he heard and modifying it. He responded that he had begun with folk music and gravitated towards blues, rhythm and blues, and some serious jazz study. He described the jazz study as “a lot of theory, a lot of math... a lot of ‘jumping off’ points for structural gestural forms and improvisational stuff.” Meanwhile, he was doing a lot of freeform work, which he described more as “channeling” rather than memorizing. When those two streams eventually came together in his early twenties, he recognized that he finally began to create music that was truly unique and distinctively his own style.

In terms of technology, this newfound style brought in, for him, “a whole other layer of analyzing structure and looking for a kind of a granularity that you can get out of out of electronic synthesis and computations using a computer.” He felt that without the computer, he began hitting dead ends with jazz and freeform but that computers added a new dimension and allowed for a different perspective on music.

I pressed him to elaborate a bit, and more information about his musical software project came forth. “So would you use computers more for adding to the music or for modifying and fine tuning the recording?” I asked. “Yes, and more,” he responded. He tried to explain by delving into his experience in programming in New York to give me some insight into his technical background. He described how he worked on a team to design one of the first “trading-addict tools” for the New York Stock Exchange. As a programmer at work, he went home and started designing a computer- based music system. After eight years of working on the project, he was able to produce something that had not been attempted before. The software was able to mathematically analyze multiple improvisations that he made looking for similarities and differences in order to produce a detailed database. This database could then be accessed by his software and generate a new improvisation of it based on its knowledge of the previous recordings. Despite his work in the

software world, Mr. Newcomb insisted that he was an artist first and a programmer out of the need to make a living.

While working for 13 years as Technology Director at Ann Arbor's School of Music, he got into live performances. In the last 7-8 years he started doing some live performances using a lot of electronic equipment including keyboards and vocoder vocals and a lot of interactive software that allowed for real-time effects. In the past 4 years he began shifting his focus to sitar work and improvisations.

He briefly noted that with the advent of newer technology, his stage equipment has become increasingly smaller. He then explained that the shift has been away from hardware and towards software and explained that mainstream software currently has powerful capabilities. He demonstrated the software he uses, called LogicPro by Apple, which allows you to view tracks and instruments, then modify the music by choosing a type of amplifier, the number of speakers, and boost the gain. All these things had been manipulated in the past on the actual devices but was now possible through software. Other options he mentioned were the ability to modify reverberation time and create the sound as if it were broadcast in a "virtual room." Mr. Newcomb explained that a challenge will be trying to maintain the improvisational performance while also pulling in the software that he had written so that he could interact with it live. He would then simultaneously use software like LogicPro to modify the sound of his hardware-based music. He mentioned that he has indeed experimented with manipulating the music using software during performances with interactive tools such as floorboards.

I asked Mr. Newcomb whether he felt that the advent of electronic elements into music made it any less "organic" in his opinion. He noted that one of his goals in creating his software was to try to create something improvised and new. He felt that the more he listened to music, the more he felt that everything had already been done. He felt that the computer-based software solution would force the music to maintain its identity in a way that was consistent. He then took the musical output and pushed it through electronic-sounding timbres that couldn't be produced by his body but instead required hardware. "So that's kind of been my attempt to maintain a balance and take the best parts of technology but don't lose..."

me.” When posed the question of whether he felt more limited or empowered by technology, Mr. Newcomb responded that lately he has been feeling limited because he’s changing everything and having to re-learn things on software he knew how to do in the past using floorboards and a synthesizer. However he said that he’s always in search of the next most efficient and artistically-enabling technology.

When I asked about his opinion on the direction to which “the electronic music genre is moving,” Mr. Newcomb cut in. He had qualms with designating electronic music as a genre and spoke extensively about the fact that the type of music he plays is very difficult to characterize and lock into any specific genre. He said he didn’t feel that “electronic music” is necessarily a genre. “I think most people think of it as the sound of the product, not the nature of the process. And I sort of see it as both. Because I do a lot of what I would call electronic stuff but yet I’m sitting down with an ancient acoustic sitar that I’ve amplified and I’m just improvising a piece with genuine human emotions pulling through the music. And so is that electronic music?” “So could you think of it as more of a tool, rather than a category?” I asked. Mr. Newcomb agreed, adding that he has also done some music that he was targeting specifically as electronic music, including “over the top synthesizer loops.”

He then explained that electronic music is moving in every possible direction at this point. Pure computer music and digital sound synthesis, in his opinion, had a vast market in Hollywood and it has been that way for over 20 years. On the other hand Mr. Newcomb inserted a historical anecdote here, explaining that when the technology was new and entire symphonies of musicians started being replaced by digital music which in their opinion was terrible, they began picketing studios. It only went to show the benefits and drawbacks of the introduction of every new technology.

Recognizing that Mr. Newcomb plays a type of music that is not necessarily as widespread or popularized, one statement he said on the matter stuck with me. “Everyday there’s people doing stuff that is just utterly amazing. It’s just that there are teeny circles around these people that actually hear this stuff,” he mused. He mentioned that it would be interesting to see whether people doing more

experimental music will be able to get more airplay in the current digital age of downloading and the economy not doing well.

After our conversation, Mr. Newcomb proceeded to demonstrate the way a guitar sounds with and without the electronic equipment. The notes and the timbre are the same, he explains, but the “space” is different with amplifiers enabled. He also explained how a guitar has such a broad range of sound capabilities and that one little change in the software produces a completely different “music world.” He quickly demonstrated this by transforming the slow, classical/new-age sounding acoustic guitar into something you would hear at an Eric Clapton concert. He also mentioned that these features also enabled him to play a musical piece on a guitar and have the system generate notation for a cello or other completely different instrument. He said he believed that part of the artistry is changing the way the musician is playing based on the sounds that he or she is working with. The possibilities, as he said, were limitless.

One of the most rewarding parts of the entire experience was listening to Mr. Newcomb’s music. I was especially fascinated by his sitar work. He explained that the sitar has no sound hole, and that the sound comes from inside. It was quite beautiful, moving, and unlike anything I’d ever heard. It was a modern spin on traditional music, which made it all the more colorful and fascinating. The sitar, along with the use of synthesizers and amplifiers, was able to hit tones that were especially compelling, mystical, and surreal.

Mr. Newcomb was kind enough to give me a few of his albums and I have enjoyed experiencing them since then. The musical styles ranged from electronic music to new age, and incorporated both live music and computer music. All in all, this was an experience I won’t soon forget. Being both insightful and creative, Mr. Newcomb successfully opened my eyes to a whole new world of possibilities in music.