Burnt Friedman interview by Bob Baker Fish

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At a time when everyone was reaching for the laptop, for electronic devices all connected by a complicated mess of patch leads, when a live show more often than not consisted of watching someone toggle a mouse or twiddle their knobs, there was something refreshing about German artist Burnt Friedman's approach to the live arena.

We're in a stupidly cool inner Melbourne bar strategically hidden down a narrow laneway. It's close to full even though it's a Wednesday night, and, oh, it's about six or seven years ago. Slightly elevated, Friedman presides over a busy dance floor. He in turn is surrounded by a curious bunch of sound nerds, all straining to understand the secret to these lush jazz, dub, electronic, organic sounds. The looks on their faces are that of confused bewilderment, like they know they are being offered the keys to the kingdom but for the life of them can't find the door.

Pushing through, suddenly I understand why. Friedman is set up with five conventional mini-disc players, mini-discs sprawled casually around him, periodically stopping one, replacing the disc, pressing play and the music just continues seamlessly, this jaunty jazzy electronic groove where everything seems to have been reconfigured, yet still makes an inordinate amount of sense within its own universe. It's a mystery to most of us how he could be able to do this with such ease, or why he'd be trying in the first place. Where's the mass of leads, where's the gear that we can fetishise over, purchase and feel better about own art practice? Instead we've got something accessible to everyone that you can pick up for $50 from your local Cash Converters. And the music is incredible, whilst seemingly improvised there are also snippets of recognisable tunes from the recently released Con Ritmo and even, it turns out, some of his later recordings.

"I started using pre-recorded sounds and sequences on mini disc players as reaction to DJ turntable beat-mixing and entitled it Mix Your Own, because it contained self-made sequences," he says, suggesting that some of the limitations to the format were actually what attracted him – even ultimately influencing his compositional process.

"On stage, I played back 10 separate tracks (left and right are recorded separately), sometimes at once. Mini disc players do not allow synchronisation. In order to keep the timing I produced sequences with one determined tempo and pressed play whenever I felt that a sequence ran in sync to the previous one. As a side-effect, the cue-points of the sequences varied, and I realised that this was a benefit. These sequences became the blueprints for the records Secret Rhythms and Con Ritmo. They are still audible as percussive backdrop or rhythmic textures/noises."

2000's Con Ritmo is an intriguing release. Gorgeous swells of dubbed up, improvised electronic cocktail jazz, which were, according to the liner notes, culled from an incident-filled two week tour of South America. With fluttering vibraphone, high energy hi hat work,

hand percussion and, of course, ‘Humphrey X-34,’ their ‘bass-bot’, which reportedly offered a future of the man/machine intersection far beyond midi, it’s an album that demonstrates some of Friedman’s key concerns.

“It’s the case that with studio productions you create an artificial world that has nothing in common with the ‘live on stage’ situation. It’s almost logical to play about with the realities you’ve constructed,” he explains. “I was trying to simulate a dub band on Just Landed and a jazzy Latin ensemble on Con Ritmo, and I was sure I’d installed enough attributes such as extravagant liner notes or unplayable breaks, to make it clear it was my own fabrication. “

Yet with a live sounding gruff voiced introduction, crowd noise and a loose improvised feel, some of the subtleties were lost on people anxious to believe. To understand why he’d be interested in this kind of subterfuge, you have to go back 10 or even 15 years. Back when he was working as Drome and as Nonplace Urban Field, he was utilising programmed computer music and coming to grips with some of its benefits as well as limitations.

“As you can imagine programmed music sounds static, un-dynamic in expression and monochrome regarding the instrument’s nuances. During the ’90s I was trying to break that cliché as much as possible by investing time into these parameters, turning irony into simulation with the purpose to confuse prejudices concerning synthetic (cold) music. As a matter of fact, I quickly realised the limits of the pseudo natural sound. The range of expression remained limited to some extent, of course, but I also grew fond of the benefits. I was finally able to create quite monotonous patterns that sounded played.”

For Friedman, the fabrication in Con Ritmo is the logical extension of the recording process, which is evidenced most obviously in the post production of everything from an acoustic folk album, Jamaican dub or even your standard rock band. By way of explanation Friedman offers part of a piece he originally wrote in German in 1990 and had translated, wryly noting that concerns about authenticity and fabrication in music only seem to occur when sequencers are involved.

“Music is artificial in its reproduced form as soon as acoustic instruments are engaged for a sound recording. And the more so, the more appurtenances intercept the vibratory source (larynx and vocal chords, or the sounding box and strings of a guitar) and the

vibratory receptors (membrane in the human ear) to paradoxically satisfy the desire for authenticity and natural playback.

“The consequence of this desire is the accumulation of technological materials with the intention of making the sound of the instrument identical with its copy (sampling machines/ high-end equipment). The degree of technical free play in the recording techniques of music studios permits the engineer and composer an abundance of quality enhancements (dynamics/virtuosity through speeding up tempo/rhythmic precision through cut and paste), which do not necessarily correspond to the ability of the musician, but rather to the performance of electrical instruments (harmoniser/auto-tune/multi-tracking, and so on). In the event of such a trick’s application, the end product as a sound recording is no longer distinguishable from the assiduity of the soloist. To sound naturally reproduced, the use of electronic instruments whose sounds are from the start perceived only through the vibration of a loudspeaker membrane, is unavoidable. The technology is its most proximate field.

“These recordings may help discern the fictional aspect of reality itself,” he continues, back in the present day. “Listeners seem to be scared by hyper-reality, a concept where the fiction-reality is no longer distinguishable from the reality. I believe the machine concept is in our heads. Once I played an acoustic drum kit in a speed metal band and got told I sounded like a robot. They wouldn’t have said ‘robot’ if they didn’t want me to play wild and uncontrolled. As you may understand, they simply wanted a different kind of robot.”

Friedman though is one of those rare artists who has the potential to be various forms of robot. Charting his evolution over time demonstrates an artist who has increasingly refined his approach according to situational, technological and artistic parameters. In the late seventies, he was using the rubber-band guitar and toy instruments before moving to drums in 1982 shortly before the first rhythm machines came out. At the time he was influenced by the post punk/new wave scenes, Gary Numan, Throbbing Gristle, Gang of Four and Section 25, though also the early German avant rock scene like Tangerine Dream and Ammon Düül. In 1984 he enrolled in art school in Kassel, finding numerous like-minded performers.

“It was a friendships music collective incorporating the first cheap electronic machines, all kinds of found instruments, treating them with little knowledge about music. I believe these post punk pop groups had a precise vision about the stance, the philosophy and the final

product of the music, [rather] than having an idea about a musical language, which is a prerequisite for ethnic music. To me, ethnic music was a big influence around that time and I believe it was a major influence to the English industrial scene, too – for it being an intense, ritual experience, teasing one's perception beyond questions of taste. I remember very well the public music events that took place in our rehearsal room in Kassel, my hometown, in '82 when we would have 40 to 60 people invited to witness sessions that included total improvisation on electronic instruments, amplified guitars and voices, drums, but also screening and performance.

"We once were improvising to Kurt Kren´s 'Mama and Papa' short cut up film depicting Otto Mühl´s radical material events from the late sixties, known as the Viennese Actionism. Such an evening was totally open, anything could happen. Maybe everyone would start making sounds or one would play solo alone for half an hour, acting out somehow. There was a possibility of surprises and new experiences that provided us the magic and pleasure of that very creative, unintentional phase of music making."

Eventually those these collectives disbanded, the kit disappeared and Friedman's interest in production grew, devoting himself almost exclusively to multi tracking, sequencing and sampling, retaining his improvisatory and spontaneous approach though confining it to routing signals through the desk.

"'Dub' is what I call this method, since I use it on existing signals and rhythms etc. and it allows me to obtain constantly different results on the basis of the same material. The more pronounced the level of improvisation during the mix, the more the raw material, the original, is forced into the background and sometimes even maltreated to the point of being unrecognisable."

"The procedure allows you to highlight certain musical features of a song while wholly ignoring other ingredients – most likely foreground components such as vocals or instrumental solos. The resultant 'numbers' [pieces of music] come closer to my own perspective: they're de-cored, to put it figuratively, no longer have a centre."

Up until 1989, Friedman was not seriously seeking label interest, though upon a move to Cologne in 1992 interest in his work grew. First, Some More Crime was a duo that replaced lyrics by text samples, mainly cut from underground movies, news and interviews concerning the problem of violence in the US, then, two years later, with Drome and Nonplace Urban Field, the music emerged on international channels.

Whilst only recording three albums for the Incoming label between 1993 and 1996 as Nonplace Urban Field, the concept of the 'Nonplace' continues to remain important for Friedman to this day, choosing it as the name of his label, feeling that it is broad enough to encompass on a philosophical and emotional level much of what he and his collaborators are attempting to achieve musically. It's a term Friedman has borrowed from American architectural and social planners, referring to the city of the future, the gentrification of cities, the urban sprawl and the movement from a common understanding and identity into something else, a new unexplained form. To Friedman it's this new indefinable terrain that provides the most interest.

"To me nonplaces are so to speak 'grey areas', the superfluous space that's been neglected before they built containers, single family homes and so on, to speak visually. But what I mean is psychological. A primary state of enjoyment that isn't integrated to social life, not conveyable to a public. It's some kind of psychic automatism, because there

are no categories for it. It is like children playing a game, but the term game is incorrect as it implies rules. What I mean is a game that is improvised, once the rules are found the game is probably becoming competitive and predictable."

"The geographic aspects don't matter so much," he continues. "It's the music that contains too much diverse intercultural, universal or abstract ethnic components to be contained under a genre. Look, once jazz symbolised freedom, for individual musicians. It got to accommodate unpredictable artistic utterances that were mostly identifiable by the artist's personal name. Now, even jazz calls a stylistic palette and is not appropriate anymore for new developments, although these developments still take place. Unfortunately this progress isn't perceived under the term jazz anymore, simply because the ingredients that made jazz have been clarified (the rules to the game) by communication, media, marketing. Jazz can now also be appropriated easily by meaningless virtuosos. I mean, by knowing what jazz offers, that primary enjoyment of something new, that radical, experimental grey area has vanished with the immersion of commodities and the affirmative learning of Jazz by wannabees and sound-a-likes.

"To me as a dilettante, Nonplace is a free-formula. Sometimes I deliberately use significant clichés to ridicule their content (see: just landed- hyperreal dub band), but my interest is to overcome such clichés. This may have a bitter taste because the label releases also soothing and entertaining music. However, I know that it makes the marketing of nonplace products more complicated to save the music from one determination."

In 1996, Friedman met Uwe Schmidt (Atom Heart/Senor Coconut) at a festival in Cologne. Later in Chile they decided to create, in Freidman's words, "A cybernetic venture, a jazz trio, limited to the instruments, bass, Rhodes piano and drums, that should sound like future jazz templates, blurring borders that existed between real and programmed music in sound and structure."

Recording under the name Flanger, the resulting work Templates, released on Ninja Tune, did just that. Clearly electronic, it moved beyond dance or electronic formulas, tapping into the spirit of exploration that characterised jazz during the '60s.

"Our rule was to program four minutes of unrepetative – improvised – music per day," he continues. "We have never looked back and edited something - we only kept recording

from one step to another until day seven. I believe this is something you cannot repeat very easily, so we moved on, but also could have ended Flanger after the first release."

Since then they have released four albums, the first two created side by side in Chile, though for Inner/Outer Space the guide tracks were outlined separately yet finalised together and for 2005's Spirituals, the biggest change of pace thus far, they did the opposite outlining the tunes together and producing them separately.

"I always opt for a physical presence and know that every musician thinks that way, but sometimes it is just not possible. Besides, I quite like the effects of chance, when I am able to combine takes from different origin and time. In the end, it's all following the same core structure, so if played well they re likely to be compatible to each other."

Since spending the nineties holed up behind a computer in recent times Friedman has increasingly returned to collaboration, particularly with his most recent release, 2007's First Night Forever, which features his trademark arrangements over which various vocalists, including Steve Spacek.

"To me it seems like a logical development, from learning to understand the basics of rhythms and harmony to widening the productions up for real instrumentation, improvisation."

Thus he regularly works with a number of familiar faces who pop on successive releases, yet he has also sought out collaborative projects with the likes of ex-Japan vocalist David Sylvian under the guise of the much lauded Nine Horses and former Can drummer Jaki Liebezeit for their Secret Rhythms series in which they explore odd time signatures. In particular, Friedman is drawn to Liebezeit's cyclic repetitive and quite minimal approach, seeing links with his own electronic work. New Zealand ex-pat saxophonist/woodwind player Hayden Chisholm, who for a while seemed to be Friedman's right hand man, appearing on Flanger's Spirituals, Nine Horses, Secret Rhythms with Jaki Liebezeit, and also Root 70, has also increasingly become a driving force for his own projects, becoming a musical director in his own right. In fact, the most recent Nonplace release is Chisholm's Embassadors, a multinational collective with a Kenyan singer that taps into elements of reggae, bossa, and jazz and charts much of Chisholm's musical travels over the years. Friedman reports that for this release Chisholm came up with this quote that he believes fits firmly within the nonplace approach.

“You must take all these concepts that I use as substitutes and in each case resort to feelings,” he says. “Basically you can sum it up as it sweeps the intellectual heat away from the head.”