

Interview with Alan Vega and Martin Rev aka Suicide

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?: In this interview I would like to clarify some influences on your music. You started out in New York in 1970, and I understand, the minimalist composers, especially LaMonte Young, had a presence there...

Martin Rev: I heard of La Monte Young, but he wasn't an influence on me. I caught up with him a little bit later. Alan told me about him, and I knew other people who were influenced by him. We came from the same place but also from very different places, in a way. My basic loop influence was rock'n'roll. That was the first great loops there were. Little Richard - that is loop music. That's what I have been brought up on, that's my mother's milk. Suicide is basically a rhythm'n'blues band. An urban rhythm'n'blues band.

Anything more intellectual than that, like La Monte Young or Philip Glass, came much later. And by that time I had heard so much repetition, it wasn't anything new at all. It just came in with a little bit different attitude. They were saying: This is now classical music, or I am trying to fit this into the so-called classical realm. But the reality was, that Rock'n'Roll and the Blues of course, had influenced the times to such an extent, that even the classical composers, like Steve Reich or Phil Glass, had to make their peace with Rock'n'Roll. So they did something with repetition, because they couldn't escape the time they were in. As much as they wanted to create a form, that was considered "high-end" or "cultivated", that fit into the European tradition, they still couldn't escape the fact that their world was THAT. Repetition had to permeate their work. And that was why they created minimalism and so forth, because it was already there anyway.

Musically, if you heard the first twelve bars of a Little Richard song, you heard the whole song. And it doesn't get worse, it gets better, each time around. So, for me, that's the loop. And when I hear that today, it is as strong as ever. If I hear Little Richard today, I say to myself: That is great. That's what I've grown up on. I have to actually thank these people, like Little Richard, Chuck Berry. Musicians should really silence for a second every once in a while, and remember to give their thanks to cats like that, that gave the music. The blues guys, you know, they gave us something to work with. You know, generations. People say, that we, Suicide, gave them something, but they gave us something. It's carried on...

?: Little Richard song is 2 minutes long, you extended it to much more lengthy

Rev: Yeah, you can extend it that way, but it had to come from that reality. Now we can hear that we can take a loop for seven minutes and only change it very slightly, now Philip Glass can turn that into classical music – why? Because he couldn't escape his time from birth, because when the radio was on, that was what was playing. Before they would say: Oh, that's monotonous, you can't just repeat something. But now that you've been breast-fed on Rock'n'Roll, it is not monotonous, because you learned to hear all these things within these repeats. So, why not make it five minutes? Make it seven minutes? In some ways what these guys later did was more monotonous than Little Richard. Playing longer, they tried to extend it

?: You used different instruments than Little Richard: synthesizers, machines. Do you think that this had any effect on your music? After all, that's what machines do, they repeat...

Rev: Yeah. But the technology get used, hopefully, to express what you really want to hear and what you want to express. There is a reason why the machines have been used this way. They just facilitated being able go deeper into the repetition and make more out of it and continue the tradition of the loop thing, of the blues really. If people's head had been in a whole different place, they would have gotten those machines a created something totally different. And some people do. But loops made a whole lot of sense, because the tradition was set. There is a lot of material there, as simple as it is. If you are born, if you a three, four, five, six years old, like I was, when I was into Rock'n'Roll, you hear all kinds of things. Because like any kid, you're hearing all these sounds. Actually, if you hear something totally repeat and it doesn't even change, if you move your head like this or this (nods his head), you hear it differently. If it's loud enough, you hear it differently, just by moving your head. You don't even have to play anything. It can change. And for a child, of course, it changes all the time, because he is so attuned, he is so alive.

?: When you started out, did you use sequencers?

Rev: No, I never used sequencers at all. I played everything live. And we never got into sequencers, really, except for the rhythm stuff.

?: As a performer, does it get boring to play the same riff over and over again?

Rev: No, because you are never really repeating, you actually hear different things each time around. Each time you are repeating, you are hearing the slight changes in it. So when you are playing like that, that's what makes it more mechanical. Playing it is actually great. If you are using a sequencer it would be more boring to listen to. The human body will change these riffs, you know, it's the nervous system. You are actually expressing yourself in the riffs.

"Rocket USA" has two notes. It was totally boring, why did it work? Well, it worked for me. I don't know, if worked for other people, and I don't care, but I would like it to work for other people. I know it worked for me, because every time I heard those two notes, I heard more things. It's the way you bend those two notes, it's what you are hearing in those notes - so the whole piece isn't really finished, until you did like four, five minutes of those two notes, and than you heard a whole composition-like thing.

?: So even with these two notes, you are still expressing yourself?

Rev: It is VERY expressive. We are an expressionistic group. If anything, you could call us an expressionist, minimalist group, especially on the first album, to use those terms.

?: You did use rhythm machines, though...

Rev: Yeah...

?: Do you think that the music has developed out of this use of technology, too?

Rev: Yeah, it has, especially when I'm recording. Because when I am recording, I can really open things up. But I do not want to change the repetition for the sake of changing it. I want to change it when it makes musical sense to change it. Sometimes, especially if you play live, it might not make sense to change anything, until there was a rhythm for a minute or a minute and a half. And then you put a change in, and that change can be enough for another three

minutes. That's opposed to earlier or more developed kinds of music from the past where you make changes much more quickly. Like jazz, which is developed very highly: harmonically it changes a lot, but then again, rhythmically it doesn't change that much. Rhythmically it has a lot of changes on those basic rhythms, and drummers do a lot of variations.

?: That's your view as a musician and performer, but what do you expect from the audience as reaction towards that repetition?

Rev: I don't expect anything, except that – hopefully – they feel as good about the music as I do.

?: So there wasn't the idea to put people into a trance or make them dance...

Rev: No, not at all. I'm not into that behaviour stuff with the audience, or trying to change them, or make them do anything. Just to hopefully to let me finish doing what I do on stage (laughs), because I do it for myself – and for them, if they like it. If I do something that moves me, maybe it moves them too. If not, I am sorry. If they go into a trance or if they dance – fine. But I am not trying to change them or do a magic trick with them.

?: Your early concerts were legendary for provoking conflicts with the audience. Wasn't the point of your performances and these repetitions to annoy people or to provoke them?

Rev: No, not at all. Well, there probably was some provoking on Alan's part. Alan is very influenced by Iggy Pop, and there was a certain aspect of theatre involved in his performance. For the audience, seeing such as a thing as us, was so new or even shocking to them. When we started, they had nothing to compare it to. They were like, "If this is our future, we don't even want it." So to get anything out of them or to create an environment, where something would happen, we would provoke them. Cause the sound was already provoking, but the we never intentionally went out to provoke people...

Alan Vega (over hears Rev speaking): What? The whole point was to provoke people. I don't know what you were doing, but ...

Rev: Well, I basically wanted to play great tunes.

Vega: Oh, you were? I was out there to provoke people.

?: We were talking about minimalism, and the influence that people like La Monte Young or Terry Riley might have had on your music. How about you? Were you exposed to any minimalist music?

Vega: Oh, well, I just heard some record...

?: You never saw La Monte Young live for example?

Vega: No. I saw Phil Glass and Steve Reich live, but not La Monte Young. He still has a continuous thing happening. He has a place not far from where I live, where he has a continuous show going on. He's living there with his lady, who has this light show thing happening. But for some reason I never went down there. I don't know what it is. But I heard some shit, but I don't remember exactly when. I felt it was great.

Of all of them, I like him the best, because it is just one drone, nothing else. I used to do things like that on my own. I used to have a keyboard in my pad, and I would tape down one key, and just let it go for hours and hours. I smoked some pot or whatever, you know man. I used to like b-flat for some reason, and it just changed. Nothing was changing, but it WAS changing, if you listened for long enough. That was probably more outrageous than what La Monte Young was doing, it was just one-note things. I was just sitting there, and I was amazed how much it changed in the course of time.

I was coming out of school as a visual artist, painter, sculptor, but I always loved music. I did toy things, toy sounds, tape recorders, static from the radio. I'd have static along with Bartok on a two track tape recorder, or a toy band with a little toy monkey banging drums in the background. I was just fooling around. I had no idea I was gonna be a musician. I didn't think I was gonna be a singer on stage, I was too shy.

?: What does it mean for you as a songwriter, as a lyricist, to have this monotonous music to write lyrics for?

Vega: To me, it's not monotonous. You hear all those overtones; there are all kinds of stuff in the music. To me, it is very lush, and there are a lot of different sounds in it. It is a matter of how you listen. You gotta keep listening, and you gotta listen hard. Or get stoned out of your mind, I don't know (laughs).

Whatever it is, it is the music I love, so it is easy for me to be a vocalist. I just seem to sing very well to it. To me it's a groovy thing. The music I've been involved with creates a situation where I can do those lyrics - a dreamlike type thing, a made up on the spot thing. Rock'n'roll begs for verse and chorus. But the way I work, it begs for me to do it in this style because it's repetitive music and it's the sound of the electronics.

I always used to say, I could sing to a garbage truck. If you live in New York, you are subjected to all these kinds of sounds. After all those years listening to this kind of shit, it becomes part of your thing really. It's your nature. I grew in Brooklyn and it was all industry, trains, fire engines, police cars. I practically lived on the subway all my life. I used to walk around and listen to the buzz of the city. It's just never quiet. Marty and I let these things influence us.

?: I understand that you used to practise in the Mercer Arts Centre...

Vega: No, we never practised there. We would perform there though. We practised at this place called the Project of the Living Arts. We couldn't get gigs, so we'd practice there. We got a grant from the New York State House of the Arts. It was open 24 hours a day. It was a home for us.

?: So what kind of audience were you playing for at the Mercer? Was it an art audience?

Vega: It could have been. In fact the people that hated us most were the artists. We were insulting something about them. Kids would love it, you know, regular kids, rock'n'roll kids. But these artists' types hated us. And it surprised me, because I thought: Hey, you are artists; you should be like open to new shit. I don't know, I guess we were threatening them or something.

?: That was my idea, that you had this tolerant, open audience at an Arts Centre...

Vega: Yeah, you would think so, but it didn't work out that way. I thought, man, this is our audience, but – naw. It was hard for us to get gigs. We used to go for gigs and they'd actually have us up against the wall. We had a really bad reputation. We used to do these rehearsals in the Project of the Living Arts, and we'd wail. The rehearsals were like live gigs. It'd be three hours, and Marty and I would stop and go, "Are we insane? Have I lost my mind totally? Have I done it?"

Rev: That was the present for us. The past was just the music we loved and grew up with, which you can't escape anyway. It wasn't that we were in the future, it was just that everybody else was way behind. It made perfect sense. Everything else seemed kind of old-fashioned.

?: One other thing about playing with machines and loop structures is that it makes you very independent. Would you agree with this statement?

Rev: Right. I like to feel light. I want to be able to travel. I want to be able to play. It's like having a guitar. In the 70ies a lot of groups had all these keyboards stacked up. I never needed that much. I need that sound, basic sound, rhythm, and melody. Or non-melody, just rhythm. I just hear melody in the rhythm – you know, like when Alan was talking about overtones... So, basically, it's a Rock'n'Roll thing. It's like having a guitar and some drums, just stuff, that you can move. That is important to me on stage.

And then this way of creating music, where you have the machines do something – well, you work with them. You set the machines. I mean, they are not doing it without you choosing what they are gonna play. And there are different phases. With the first album, I played more everything from the bottom up. And now I let the machines do certain parts of it, and I chose what they'll do. And I change what they do, and then I play on them or with them. So it creates another way of writing music. We never actually sat down to write songs.

The ideal thing is to have something that you can work with and then you open that up, to make it as flexible and as plastic as possible, so you can express yourself in it. You can change it, when you need to. Nothing is totally set, you are not following the machines, you are following yourself. You are using them, you are moulding them, as opposed to another attitude, which would be to have them very automatically and independently doing their jobs.

?: Suicide is a duo. Would you say that this was a matter of the technology you worked with?

Martin Rev: Well, in the very early days, we were three. There was a guitar player who was an artist. After the first couple of gigs, he said, "If I stay with you guys, it's really going to be suicide." He quit and got married. We considered a drummer, but I had in the back of my mind a drum machine all the time. What we were doing with electronics I was hearing as a full thing.

Alan Vega: I remember the big day that Marty walked in with this ugly looking, shitty brown box. I couldn't imagine what it was. He just played this thing. Then we knew for sure.