

Interview with William Basinski

????: Why did you choose to work with loops?

William Basinski: I found them a way to begin to have an understanding of the way the mind works, how memory works, how time seems to work. As a young experimenter with a lot of confusion in my mind, it helped me to understand myself better. To get some of my feedback loops resolved in a way that allowed new loops to form.

???? .What is the attraction?

Basinski: I liked it when loops are seamless, when they are really just this eternal thing, that has no beginning and no end. They are meant to last forever.

With the nature of loops, the cyclical and endlessly repeating nature, you can find your own space in them. If I listen to the loops that I recorded a long time ago - they still blow my mind. They're just organic. They're from another world. I don't know... they just do *something*. They always do. I can just fall into them.

????: Why did you get involved in working with loops?

Basinski: When I left the university in 1978 and moved to San Francisco, I had been exposed to John Cage and his idea of chance elements, and that really opened a lot of possibilities for me and the possibilities it opened up. And then hearing the early works of Steve Reich and his early work with loops like “Come Out” and “Drumming” and his masterpiece “Music for 18 Musicians”. And then Brian Eno’s “Music for Airports” and a bit later on, being exposed to Robert Fripp and all the German electronic musicians through my friend Jamie, who was a big record collector. There’s one album [*Discreet Music*] where they have a diagram on the back and show how Frippertronics works. So I went and got what was available to me at the time — and cheap. Old tape decks and tapes, from all the junk stores, and I went home and just started cutting things up, and recording things, trying things out. Just fooling around, seeing what I could come up with. That’s how I got started with that.

I began buying old tape decks and used tape in junk stores. It was very cheap, something I could afford, and then I began to experiment to see what I could create with tape. The old refrigerator we had in our place in San Francisco had this amazing sound with these beautiful overtones. If you taped it and looped it and slowed the tape down... Oh my god! I started to record everything: my piano, my saxophone – you name it. I was living in San Francisco at that time, and San Francisco has an incredible rich ambient sound, which fascinated me. The water, the fog horns, the clicking electric cable cars, a beautiful, rich soundscape. I made loops out of these sounds, and started to get interesting results and just kept doing it.

????: Were these works published?

Basinski: Many of these works were eventually released, but not until the last ten years. “Nocturnes” is the title cut of my new album, that is coming out in June, and it is a very early piece with prepared piano and tape loops. I am touring some of this work at this tape. Also, the “Melancholia Works” and “Variations for Piano and Tape” are from that period, and also the loops that became the “Disintegration Loops”. I created a huge archive of loops in the late 70s and early 80s, when I moved to New York. And I still work with them.

????: Did you perform live with these loops?

Basinski: Yes, but there wasn't really a lot of opportunity. I performed a little bit in New York.

????: Analogue and digital

Basinski: It gets harder and harder to find these old machines that I use. But I recently bought two old small lightweight German Uher recorders that I am travelling with. So I still am using a combination of tape and digital loops for backup, because sometimes the machines malfunction, especially when it is like today with air travel, with the security and all that kind of nonsense. Right now, I got one machine that is acting funky. The different venues try to provide me with one machine, but usually they are too fancy for me.

????: What is the difference?

Basinski: It's more fun for me to play with these spagetti. It is very tactile and it can be kind of random and you never know what exactly is going to happen. With the computer, it is not so interesting. But it also has its function.

????: But could something like the "Disintegration Loops" be done with digital?

Basinski: I wouldn't know how to do it digitally. The glue lost its integrity on these old tapes as the tapes were going around and around on the machine, and so the iron oxide turned to dust.

????: What was the source material that you used for the disintegration loops? With some of the sounds, I wouldn't be able to guess what you taped originally...

Basinski: Neither would I, Tilman (laughs). I tell you this, though: In New York, we had this big loft and we had wires running all around and I had my studio in the back. There was a very powerful radio station on top of the Empire State Building, that played so-called "American Popular Standards" - string versions of well-known pop songs.

????: That sounds like Muzak.

Basinski: Yes, exactly. The station was so powerful, that it leaked into everything with all the wires running around in the house. I always wanted to have a Mellotron, which is a 70ies-area string synthesizer that was like a big white spinet piano that had tape loops with string samples in it. It had a beautiful sound, but I could not afford one. So I started to experiment with recording snippets of loops, I recorded and looped beginnings and endings of songs. I put my Philips tape on Speed 5 and recorded a measure and then played it back with the speed turned down and see what I got. If I got something great I set it aside.

At that time I was very interested in being very bold in my composition process. I was mixing different kinds of loops, working with radio static, all that kind of loop. Occasionally I recorded a loop that was so flawlessly eternal, that it would scare me a little bit. I thought: "This is gorgeous, but can I call it my work? It does not need anything added to it." Sometimes these would get set aside on the dead plane tree that came from the park across the street. I had it in my studio to hold all the different strips of tapes so that I could hang the loops in sections. It looked kind of like a big brain. I marked them and wrote on them, to have some kind of clue what they had on them and hung them in sections: "These might go together, these might go together." I moved on to other things, and I forgot about these tapes. I found them again a couple of years later. At that time, I had a CD-burner, and I wanted to archive all this material and I started hearing them again. I thought: "Wow, this stuff is really great."

That's when I met Carsten Nicolai, who was in New York for his residency at PS1. He was staying downstairs. We hit it off, and I played some of this stuff to him, and he was the first one to release some of this material on his label Raster-Noton. I had been waiting for this for years.

Back to Disintegration Loops: When they came up in the cue for the archival process, I did not remember them at all. They came up one after the other, and they got recorded in the sequence that they appear on the album. Each disintegrated in its own way, in its own time as they were being transferred.

????: For what purpose?

Basinski: At first, I wanted to do a new piece. You can still hear that on the first piece, Disintegration Loop 1.1. It was so grave and gorgeous, and I wanted to play a counter melody that sounded a bit like a French horn with my Voyager 8 synthesizer. I started recorded, but about 15 minutes in I started to realize that something else was going on, and that it was doing its own thing and that I really needed to pay attention. Make sure I was capturing that and not stand in the way and let it happen.

With the second loop, it happened again. I set it up, I started to play with it, but again, the tape deteriorated with every revolution of the loop. So I said to myself: You have to let it do its own thing. So I just stood aside and let happen what had to happen.

????: So how is your work? One could look at it as a case of a malfunctioning piece of technology that created its own piece.

Basinski: Yes, right. (laughs) It's the ideal situation. You just let the machine do the work and record it.

????: Link to 9/11.

Basinski: The work happened in the late summer of 2001 in two days. All of a sudden, I had this five hour cycle. I had no idea what I would do with it, but I knew it was quite something. I called everybody: "Come over here, you won't believe what happened." I spend the next month listening to it, and thinking about it, kind of being mind-boggled. And then, the world change, everything changed completey. On September 11, I was supposed to go to a job interview at the World Trade Center for Creative Time to be an administrative assistant. I was about to be evicted. When I woke up, the planes had just hit. My friend banged on the door, and he screamed: The towers are on fire! My friend said: "Billy, its going." We ran up to the roof, and saw the top of the south tower coming off. We watched as the second tower disappeared in slow motion. It was just utter shock. It was weeks of almost everyone was falling into their own disintegration loops, loosing their minds in strange ways. We were the lucky ones, the survivors. Everything changed that day. I borrowed a video camera from my friend, and I recorded that last hour of daylight of the smoking ruin in one static shot of downtown Manhattan. The next day, I watched the tape and I put it in iMovie together with the first Disintegration Loop. I thought, this has to be an eulogy. Over the next few months, I decided to release it. I could afford to release a boxed set on my own label, and I knew that nobody else would do it. So I released the albums one at a time with four different frames from the video going from light to dark.

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Basinski: Look at what happened in our world in the last ten years. This was not how it was

supposed to be. The world has been cascading into destruction. What is going to happen next, if we do not change our ways.

The Disintegration Loops themselves cannot be performed. Except they have been transcribed for orchestra and have been performed by live musicians. I am gonna perform the first piece from “Nocturnes” and then some tape loop stuff after that.

????: video from James Elaine

Basinski: there will be some video from James Elaine. It is a natural phenomenon, and it kind of relates.

????: Berghain?

Basinski: I don't know, I have never been there. I am sure it will be fine. Every place is different. In Krems, I performed in a decommissioned cathedral, yesterday I was in the beautiful 1968 Modern Art Museum in Kopenhagen. Very nice resonant sound. You do what you do, and you go where you go. Usually, my audiences know what to expect. So far they were great, very quiet and concentrated. They know what to do. They chill out and fall in. You do not even have to look at the video. But it adds a little something, and it might help people, like training wheels.