

Tim Olive

Canadian Tim Olive rejects periodic rhythms and tempered pitch in favour of improvisation and open forms, exploring the full sonic possibilities of steel strings, magnetic pickups and simple analog electronics.



Kyoto, Japan, 2012. Tim Olive, Katsura Mouri. Photo by Minoru Ikekita

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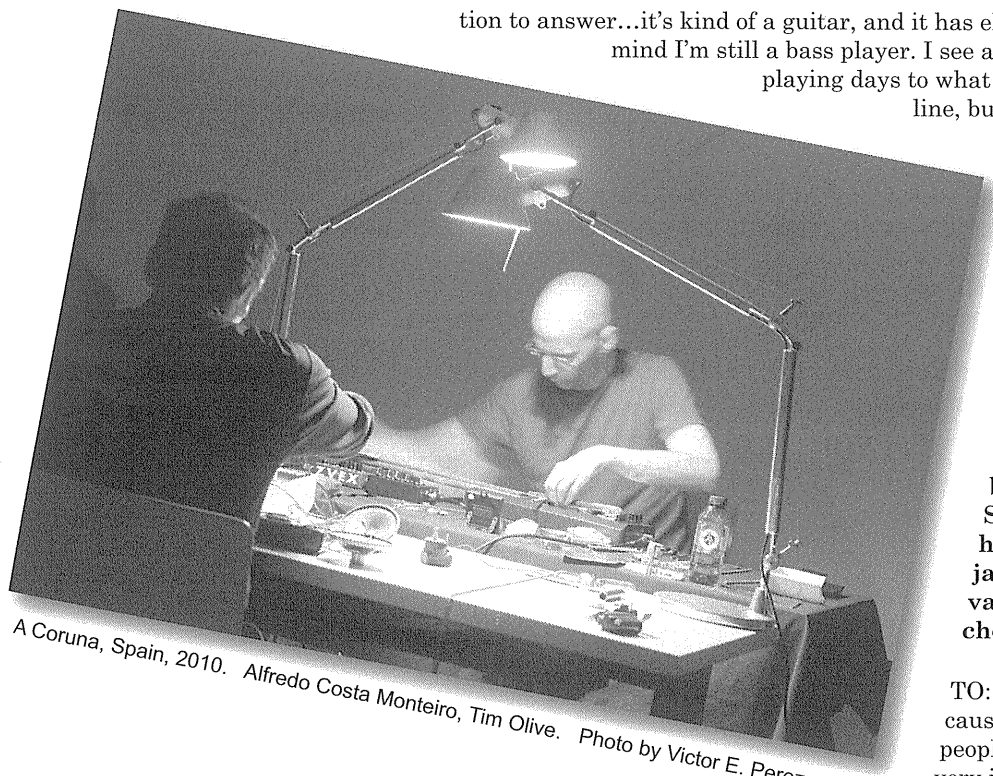
TSP: I’ve been hearing your music for about 12 years...my first impression was that your music was vaguely in the area of “lower-case” or “quiet improv” for a while, then around 2004 (e.g. the Buhsho Nisikawa records) things changed a little, the music becoming somewhat more loud, complex, upbeat and varied. Is that just my imagination, or did anything actually change for you around that time?

TO: My period of very quiet and sparse playing came about after years of playing loud, aggressive, big music. I was looking for something different so I slowly stripped everything back and it was extremely refreshing but after a few tours and CD releases I felt restricted again and it wasn’t so exciting anymore. It seemed like things were hardening into dogma. I started playing with Bunsho and we both wanted to rock a bit more, so that’s reflected in the CDs. Recordings seem to suggest sudden shifts, but in reality it’s more a situation of constant, gradual change.

TSP: Assuming you’re prepared to share trade secrets, please can you describe what instrument or instruments you actually play? I have a very muddled image of a stringed instrument of some sort, possibly home-made, possibly using preparations and interventions, and table-top methods. Preamp and pickups seem important also.

TO: I started off playing electric bass, but gradually moved away from definite pitch and steady rhythms. I found myself frequently playing with the bass in my lap, and eventually I realized that I didn’t actually need a bass, just pickups, and I didn’t need so many strings. So now I have an instrument with a small rectangular body, a short neck, and two electric guitar pickups. Sometimes it’s on my lap, sometimes it’s on a table top. I usually use one wound string, at very low tension, and a variety of metal, plastic and wood objects placed on or near the pickups, stimulated by bows, wooden dowels, metal rods, or manipulated the bare hand. It’s all very tactile and low-tech. I use an analog preamp, and that’s about it. A fuzz pedal sometimes, a reverb pedal rarely. I use springs and metal plates to make reverb generators which are very unpredictable. I like to wander around in hardware stores and 100-yen shops looking for interesting things to play with. People often ask what instrument I play, and it’s a tough ques-

tion to answer...it's kind of a guitar, and it has electric guitar pickups, but in my mind I'm still a bass player. I see a direct line from my early bass playing days to what I'm doing now. It's not a straight line, but it's all linked. The bassist's sensibility, to serve and support the music, is still fundamental for me. I'm usually listed as playing "electric guitar" but I reckon that's misleading. I just can't think of anything more appropriate.



A Coruna, Spain, 2010. Alfredo Costa Monteiro, Tim Olive. Photo by Victor E. Perez

TSP: When collaborating I've noticed you tend to opt for duo performances – never going beyond a duo if possible. Is this a deliberate ploy? So many contemporary players have what I would call the "I'll jam with any man in this festival" approach. Maybe you choose your partners carefully.

TO: I like playing duos, partly because it increases the odds of finding people who work well together. It's a very intimate configuration. I seldom play solo because, for me, the magic re-

ally happens when I play with other people. In a duo, for example, it's not just the sounds of the two musicians – another entity comes into play somehow. Something else happens, and I can move beyond myself. Playing with other people is more surprising, more fulfilling and more fun.

While it's true that I play duo a lot, I've had some great experiences in larger multi-player groups. Trios have been particularly good over the past two or three years, with Anthony Guerra and Makoto Oshiro, with Jeffrey Allport and Crys Cole, with Supertoque (my Toque duo with Kelly Churko, plus Cal Lyall). Some enjoyable quartets also, good nights with two separate duos playing, then an all four musicians playing together. I'm definitely picky about who I play with, but I think most people are. I like to feel personally and musically comfortable, but I also like being thrown occasionally into a situation where I don't feel at all comfortable. It's a fruitful challenge, to try to make good music in a situation that seems initially daunting.

TSP: How would you say your personal sound has evolved, and is it currently where you want it to be? Where is it going? It's very hard to trace the lines of thought in your pieces and I wonder how they emerge from you, what elements are shaping your playing as you perform.

TO: You mention "sound" and "thought" in your question(s) and of course they are closely linked. Not to say that what I do is conceptual and completely idea-driven, but I think a lot about what I want to do and why I want to do it, I think about what I don't like and why I don't like it. I doubt that anyone is ever completely satisfied with anything; I love what I'm doing yet I always use that element of dissatisfaction to go forward. Although I try to remain as open and accepting as possible, I have strong feelings, physical reactions at times, about what's right (and wrong) for my path. There are an unlimited number of routes up the mountain, and as long as they are true they are all valid, but I can really feel it when I am moving off my path, when I am not doing what's proper for me. In general, things have become louder, denser and texturally richer, in a wider dynamic range. But it all depends on who I am playing with. I still play quiet/low density music in some groupings. Every situation creates its own atmosphere and conditions.

As for "lines of thought" during performance, the music is created by the situation and the people in the room, including the audience. I don't start with a structure in mind, but I am concerned with structure as I play. I try not to impose too heavily on what's happening and I try to stay open to all possibilities, but there are definitely times when I try to move the piece in a certain direction through contrast in dynamics and/or texture, or by reintroducing material similar to what I've played earlier in the piece. Playing with or against what is going on. Or not playing at all. I try to find a balance between willfulness and being open to unexpected developments and possibilities.

TSP: Would you describe your music as "difficult"? Do you expect the audience to work hard?

TO: I don't think it's difficult, but it's not easy. There are no beats and there is very little pitched material, so there are no immediate hooks, but I'm not attempting to punish listeners who are looking for hooks, I'm just doing what I need to do, and I think it can appeal to some. It can be abrasive at times but also tranquil and non-abrasive. There is

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diversity in the dynamics, texture and density. It's definitely a minority taste, but I love it and I assume there are some people who will be happy to hear it. There are many musicians making "majority taste" music, and that's fine. Some people will appreciate what I play, and those are the people I play for. I'm not trying to alienate folks but I'm not interested in playing beats and using a lot of definite pitch. It's great for some musicians, but it's not right for me.

TSP: How was it for you working in Canada? Was it a challenge to find like-minded souls with which to collaborate? What was it like working with Jeffrey Allport? How does his musical viewpoint align with yours?

TO: I didn't start playing improvised music extensively until after I moved to Japan. I met Jeffrey when I was back in Canada on one of my tours with Nimrod. He eventually moved to Osaka and after I left Nimrod we shared a house with Jeff Bell, who I recorded the "Beauty Pear" CD with. Jeffrey and I started playing very quietly up in the attic, and it was very satisfying. At first we knew nothing about the Off Site scene or the quieter players in London and Berlin and other places, but that feeling seemed to arise spontaneously in many locations.

Jeffrey moved back to Canada after a few years, but we have continued to play together when we can, doing two tours of North America, one of Western Europe and many shows in western Canada. He's an excellent player, he has a strong vision combined with great sensitivity and he continues to play with a lot of interesting people. We don't play together as much as we'd like, living so far apart, but it's always rewarding when we meet. We've both continued to evolve but we always play well together. Friendship and mutual respect are the foundations of our musical relationship. We have done a lot of recording together but other than a few early releases we have never been completely satisfied with the sound quality, so we haven't released much. It's a shame, because it's a very good duo, but we only want to release something that represents us well.

TSP: What brought you to Osaka, and why have you decided to live there?

TO: In my early twenties I moved to Montreal, where I was happily playing in a few bands, including a group called Ant Farm with Ned Meredith, a really gifted singer and guitarist who recently passed away. Another of the bands was the first version of Nimrod, which rehearsed in the basement of a diner. My girlfriend at the time was offered a job teaching French in Osaka and she asked how I felt about moving. I'd never thought about living in Japan, but Zev Asher, the Nimrod singer/noise/video guy, had lived in Tokyo and told me some amusing stories about it, so I decided to go. Soon after I got to Japan I met Sam Lohman, a great drummer from D.C./New York, so I contacted Zev, he came to Osaka and the second iteration of Nimrod was under way. We recorded three CDs, and did some full-on North America tours. We had a good run and we are still close but we all moved in different musical directions.

I moved to Kobe early this year. It's close to Osaka but more peaceful, with waterfalls and wild pigs nearby. I'm quite happy living in Japan. My work is interesting, I get paid reasonably well and it leaves me time to play music with a wide range of players, Japanese and non-Japanese. I realized long ago that I could never expect to make much money playing the kind of music I love, and I've never wanted to play anything else, so my situation here is good. I can play the music I want to play and still buy new shoes when I need them. I've been here for many years and still see and hear things that amaze me.

TSP: Describe your current musical activities. Is live performance where you are best represented, and album releases mostly an afterthought?

TO: I love playing live, the excitement and the pressure, the push to do something new, the feeling of being part of something bigger than myself when the music goes well. But recording is definitely more than an afterthought. I'm now in the process of starting a label, 845 Audio. The first release will be a duo from Alfredo Costa Monteiro and me, studio recordings from



A Coruna, Spain, 2010. Alfredo Costa Monteiro, Tim Olive. Photos by Victor E. Perez

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Kyoto. I have other recordings in various stages of completion that will be out in the future, on 845 Audio or other labels, with Anthony Guerra and Makoto Oshiro, Katsura Mouri, Yukinori Kikuchi, Guilty Connector, Horacio Pollard, David Brown, Kazuya Ishigami, Bryan Day, Zev Asher, Kelly Churko and Cal Lyall, Jeffrey Allport, Alex Scarfone, Julie Rousse, and some sessions from March 2012 in Seoul with Ryu Hankil, Jin Sangtae and Choi Joonyong.

I play shows often here in Japan with regular partners like Katsura Mouri, Takuji Naka, Kelly Churko, Cal Lyall, and the Mustard Tiger (my duo with percussionist Jerry Gordon), plus a number of semi-regular groupings as well as one-offs with other Japanese musicians and foreign players touring in Japan. I'll be heading back to Seoul for some more shows later this year, and I hope to play in Malaysia, then back to Europe in the spring of 2013. I've never been to the U.K., so I'd really like to play there. Living in Japan is wonderful, and it's great to be relatively close to Australia, Singapore, Korea and other places with so many interesting players, but Europe and North (and South) America are far away and it's tough to get there as often as I'd like.

TSP: Assuming you even consider yourself to be an improviser, what is your aesthetic of improvisation? E.g. the Incus label and Martin Davidson insisted on some sort of purity of "documentary" recordings, so there seemed to be unspoken rules about no overdubs and mostly acoustic instruments too. Jon Abbey's aesthetic of EAI is different again.

TO: If you're asking about a set-in-stone approach to recording, I don't have one. I haven't released many live documentary recordings because it's hard to get a sound that I'm happy with. A number of releases have been studio recordings with minimal editing, and others have been distance collaborations with extensive editing and processing. I have no dogma. What's important is coming up with something that is good to listen to.

TSP: Come to that, what would you say about lower-case or "onkyo" music? How would you characterise these musical genres? Are there any musicians from these "scenes" that you would like to play with?

TO: The idea of genre is problematic. A great number of interesting things happen between genres, and I think that a lot of musicians don't recognize themselves as belonging to this or that genre. I assume that many of the people who were labelled "lower-case" or "onkyo" didn't want to be defined in that way. And many of those who were put into these categories have moved on to different things. Myself included. I don't want to limit myself to playing only with people from any one scene. I'm happy to play with anyone who is interesting and has something to offer. There are so many interesting players, some heralded and some less so, who I'd like to work with. I don't think I fit comfortably into any particular scene or genre, and I don't want to. Perhaps it's bad for my "career", but it's a more interesting reality.

TSP: What about your 1990s band Nimrod, which I would never even know about if weren't for Discogs. Noise? Rock? At what point did you realise this - by which I mean noise music, rock music, playing in a band - wasn't quite right for you?

TO: Nimrod was a strong band, a trio of bass, drums and vocals. Again, we didn't fit into any particular scene or genre. Keith Parry at Scratch Records said we were too weird for the rockers but not harsh enough for the noise folks. I loved playing in bands, the camaraderie and the intensity, but I became less and less interested in the centripetal pulls of tempered pitch and steady rhythms, and I got tired of playing songs, even though there was an element of improvisation. I just wanted something else. But I miss playing in a band. An improvising band would be great. That's the feeling I'm trying to get with my regular playing partners. Not just individuals playing together, but a band, developing together and sharing ideas and experiences. I think there are so many forces in our world that isolate and atomize us, and it's harmful. Working with other people can help to overcome that isolation. I don't want to be shoehorned into a genre, but I do want to feel like I'm part of a community. I want to play with people, to be a part of making something bigger than just myself. I have as much ego as anybody, but I want something more than that.



Winnipeg, Canada, 2011. Tim Olive, Crys Cole, Jeffrey Allport. Photo by Robert Szkolnicki

<http://timolive.org>