

Noise

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“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE.” Nick sounds like a baby being cut apart. I crank a knob and deep thunder shakes our equipment. Nick makes a hand motion and we stop. “Sorry, my tone generator fucked up. I think I’m going to try running it off the batteries.” Hey, we’re still learning.

I discovered the art of noise in 2005. I was walking through the streets of downtown Victoria one afternoon in May with a pack of friends. Every street corner has a pole littered with posters advertising upcoming concerts. One stood out, outside Mac’s convenience store, with a giant picture of a six-fingered hand in vibrant red and a proclamation: “Noise!”

“What’s that, like, metal or something?” asked one friend.

“No, it’s different.” I felt a little clueless as to what exactly noise was; I just knew what it wasn’t. The poster advertised an informational movie viewing and a separate concert.

Three days later, I hovered outside the Fifty Fifty Arts Collective with a single friend I managed to convince into coming. The sun was relentless. My clothes felt like they were melting. Outside the glass door, we eyed a mob of four people in their thirties, smoking and looking generally nihilistic. “Let’s just go in,” I said.

We sat in steel chairs for a documentary titled *NorNoise* and a selection of noise music videos. Through the documentary, I learned that noise was just literally that:

noise. It focused on musicians in Norway and Japan who abandoned rhythm and treated harmony and melody in the most basic and primal ways possible. I already knew about the classical musicians who embraced electronic dissonance: John Cage, Iannis Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen, from my university classes. But here in the documentary were ordinary people like me who grew out of the grassroots punk scene. The viewing ended with a startling video presentation of Ssskull, a buzzing ten-minute video of a pixelated skull accompanied by analog tape distortion techniques. I went home, hot and tired, but brimming with ideas of new musical possibilities.

At a party in 2006, my attention became drawn again to the world of noise, in a bedroom with three others who had retreated from the drunken wildness. I struck up a conversation with an old high school acquaintance, Cory. I mentioned that I did a radio show at the university. “Nothing crazy. Just some hardcore, punk, whatever I want as long as it’s not on other stations.”

“Yeah? I’m into pretty harsh stuff,” he offered. This could mean anything. Kids these days were calling a lot of things harsh, even pop rock. I pulled out a handful of CDs from my backpack.

“The Locust? Sunn O)))? You know, you might be into some of the stuff I make,” he said.

“Yeah? What kind of music is it?”

“Noise, dude. Skull-fuckingly harsh noise.”

The Victoria noise scene is wild and not openly advertised, especially when compared to the hardcore and indie rock shows I’m used to. Most of the shows are free,

involve only a small gathering of people, and occur at some public space. These are the guerilla noise shows, “Oscillostomy Incursions” of Victoria. They’ve happened in parks, parking garages, tunnels, street corners, and even the concrete breakwater extending into the Pacific Ocean.

Cory invited me to come to one of these, relocated to a house’s basement due to the rain. Ten people were inside the dirty, dim space. I shyly introduced myself and sat at one of the couches. The performance space was being filmed and projected onto a wall across from my couch. I made small talk and saw two performances.

Cory’s, in particular, startled me. He announced his act, “Brutophilia.” Then he slammed his hand down onto an effects pedal to activate the prickling distortion and screamed through a microphone. He deftly moved his hands to create further metallic layers. His set ended in five minutes. I had to leave the house in an embarrassing hurry, to catch a bus.

After later seeing Cory perform alongside the band Wolf Eyes, I decided I had to form a noise band. I had a habit of collecting instruments and electronics for my budget recording studio. In the dark candlelit brick wall atmosphere of Lucky Bar, I approached my friend Nick Gibas with a proposition. “Want to start a band like that?”

“Sure dude. Let’s do it.” Nick was already in black metal and grindcore bands, but talked about starting a project of our own.

I arrived home at 3:00 a.m. and surveyed my situation. I gathered up relevant equipment in my basement. A mixer, a Nintendo, a keytar, a phrase looper, some effects

manipulators, a microphone, and a pile of cables: patch cables, power cables, and RCA audio cables. That seemed to be enough.

Our first jam session started off as a disaster. I hauled my equipment to Nick's in a backpack and guitar case. After unloading it, it took an hour to set it up, and another hour to set it up properly. "I don't know how I'm going to be able to do this every week," I told Nick. It was more complicated than plugging a guitar into a guitar amp. Once I was able to get signals from my mixer into our amplifiers, the fun started. I laid down a dull rumbling texture. Nick screamed into the microphone and it came out a series of echoes. I built walls of screeches. Wow, we could do anything. No need for rhythm, melody, or structure. Just sound.

We hadn't really made many connections within the small noise community during our early practices. I know a guy who books punk and hardcore shows in Victoria and he was wondering if we could hop on the bill for his next one. Nick and I agreed, we could do it. Then we came upon the problem that plagues nearly every new band, from naïve preteens to seasoned veterans. We needed a name. I let Nick pick it. I didn't really care. He went with the nearly impossible-to-pronounce "Verisimilitude" – meaning the appearance of being true or real. It sounds intelligent and kind of like "viper" and "militant," I suppose, although I never questioned the choice.

Our first show was at the Camas Anarchist Bookstore. We borrowed two large bass amps and flooded the store with a soundscape of earthquakes and synthesized glitchy swirls. I kneeled, keytar (keyboard held like a guitar) strapped to my body, intent on what I was creating. Across from me, Nick leered over his pile of electronics. In my

peripheral vision, I could see a sheet of attentive listeners. After our explosive cadence, the lights went on. People came up to us, genuinely interested in what we were doing.

“What is that man, a Nintendo?” “That was so loud. I mean that in a good way.”

Outside the venue, we ran into the guy who organizes nearly all the noise shows in Victoria. He’s aloof, arrogant, and always distracted. I asked him what he thought of our set. Somehow he dodged the question without saying anything positive. He complimented my selection of gear.

Five days later, we got an email invitation to play Noise Fest.

Noise Fest 2008 is at Open Space on Fort Street, a giant room with white walls. The table at the entrance has all the bands’ merchandise: seven-inch records, three-inch CDs, photocopied zines, t-shirts, and other oddities. Between performances, musicians share the stories behind their gear and approach.

I’d like to say that the act of playing in Noise Fest was the most exciting part of my experience. But that’s not true. The excitement came when I discovered that I could create whatever I wanted in those earlier jam sessions, and just learning about the oddities and inner workings of the noise community. The experience of Noise Fest 2008 was much more celebratory. The grotesque B-movies movies projected onto the wall, the vastly different musicians sharing their interpretations. It was a celebration of the most brutal nature, reeking of sweat and beer. Twenty-six noise bands came from all over the United States and Canada to perform for free.

I’m sitting in a chair, watching a scene of a goddess riding the bloody pulp that used to be her victim’s penis. My ears must be blistering. Sharp screeching and

deafening blasts destroy the room. Forty others stare forward, raising their beers and hooting at the climaxes. At the front, a wiry bald man leans over a table of electronics, wires looping in and out of various circuitry. He goes by Flatgrey and is the centre of attention, master of the room. I'm grinning like an idiot.

After Flatgrey, Sealion performs. He plays with only two microphones, moving them around and controlling the feedback. He positions one microphone cable along each side of us, the audience, and rounds us together. I press against the people around me and embrace the chaos.