

Spark #1.10 - Electronic Musing

- Henry Warwick

- 10/03/2000

"Shouting at the ground doesn't enable it to hear any better."

(the title to one of my favorite :zoviet*france: records.)

A thousand apologies dear readers for the delay- my wrist injury was worse than I expected, and ViaVoice proved to be of little use. What typing I could do had to be reserved for work at my Day Job. On that front, I decided that I was sick of commuting an hour and fifteen minutes each way to a job that I didn't enjoy, so, I found a new location for wage slavery. This is a VAST improvement over the previous servitude, as it is a mere 25 minutes from my house, and the better pay is a nice improvement. All in all, a good deal.

Also, I decided that it was time to do something with my work life, and have decided to go to Graduate School, and get an MFA in Digital Media. The sound of "Professor Warwick" lands nicely on my ears...

All in all- great changes are afoot, and I appreciate your patience in this regard, dear reader. I thank you, my wrist thanks you, and my cats thank you, just because they're happy kitties.

I'm back on the track of weekly musings, and would like to talk with you all about something that I've found true about how people look at music, and it isn't necessarily a happy thing.

First, I'll have to say, I'm prejudiced- I like electronic music. I make the stuff. To me, it's the folk music of the 21st Century — computers are cheap, and the software isn't that expensive. Anyone can make the stuff, and it seems everyone is. Which is good.

The problem is — anything that comes out of a speaker is, by existential definition, electronic music. I'm ruminating on this because of a discussion I had a few weeks back with a bloke I met in a bar.

It had been a very hot day- one of the hottest of the year so far. I had quit my job and had a few weeks off, and decided one afternoon that "Dammit- I haven't gone to a bar and gotten completely blasted in — well — Hmmmm. I don't even REMEMBER the last time. Now that's a long time ago..." So, I stumble into this bar on Haight Street, plant myself at the bar and order up a special punch they had made in honor of the beastly heat that had settled into the city the same way irritating relatives come to squander the sofa for a few days. You kind of don't mind it- the change of scenery is good, and they **are** relatives and have news/ gossip/ rumors/ innuendo of other branches of the family, but after they've shoveled some dirt, ate all your food, and hogged the bathroom for the better part of a week, you start wishing they'd just go away.

It was nice to have some real heat- women walk around in various states of disrobe, and it's nice to not need a sweater at five in the afternoon. But after a few days of this you've seen all the pierced navels

you care to see, and your sunburn is beginning to peel. So, this Rum Punch stuff the barkeep was hawking for two dollars a glass was a welcome relief and after two or four of them, I was in a really good mood.

Until I talked to Mr Wet Blanket.

Mr WB was one of these old hippie geezer boneheads who thinks the music died in 1977 when the "punk rockers" invaded his world of rock and roll, and ruined the neighborhood. Nowadays, he listens to "acoustic music".

HW: You listen to Acoustic Music? What do you mean by that?

WB: You know, jazz, some classical music, some world music stuff- anything that's played by live musicians.

HW: Wow- so you must go to a lot of concerts.

WB: Nah- I'm too old for that stuff- I just buy the CDs.

HW: So, lemme get this straight- you listen to music that's been sampled, enhanced, processed, and digitally encoded into a piece of plastic and aluminum foil, that is then read by a laser beam and turned into an analogue electrical signal that is then processed and amplified and sent along a wire to a crossover and speaker cabinet that then vibrates the air, and you call this acoustic music?

WB: Wull, yeah, man.

HW: dude- you're not listening to acoustic music.

WB: Bloney!

HW: Seriously- you're listening to electronic music.

WB: No way, man- I listen to Acoustic Music. Live performances by real musicians- none of that computer crap.

HW: What do you think your CD player is? A hurdy gurdy? No- it's a computer!

WB: It's a part of my stereo system, and it's a damn good one, too.

HW: Cool- wutch a got?

WB: I'm like totally into Hafler stuff. Hafler amps, preamps and speakers, but my CD player's made by Rotel.

HW: Cool- I have Rotel preamps.

WB: But man- I listen to Acoustic Music!

HW: No, dude- you listen to ELECTRONIC music. You might be "hearing" acoustic music, but that's just a trick of the mind. You're listening to air that's been moved by a vibrating box, not a real instrument.

WB: But it sounds like a real instrument, so it is a real instrument.

HW: Jeeez- man- I'm writing a review of an article about this kind of thing on www.edge.org. I suppose you think that computers can think, too.

WB: well, not now, but someday, and I betcha real soon.

HW: No no no no no. Computers can't think. They're machines. Machines don't think. They pass voltages. We interpret certain performances of this voltage manipulation as information, and so therefore we think the computer can communicate. It doesn't do jack. It's just a dumb box.

WB: But, man, like if it says it's thinking, how do you know it ain't?

HW: Well- BECAUSE IT'S A MACHINE. That's why. And that's why you don't listen to Acoustic Music on your stereo. You're willfully deceiving yourself into thinking that it's acoustic music. It's not. Anything that comes out of your Haflers is electronic music. You can even participate in the performance of the electronic music by dicking around with the bass, treble, and balance. John Cage and Lejaren Hiller proved that back in the sixties with HPSCHD.

WB: No man- it's acoustic music.

HW: No, man- it's not.

The discussion went nowhere. It was like shouting at the ground.

Remember, please, dear reader - glue this idea into your mind-

"Anything that comes out of a speaker is (fundamentally) electronic music."

Embrace the obvious. Make it your own. Once we can all see things as they simply are, we can move on to greater moments in music, art, science, and culture.