

Crouton

Interviewed by Jon Mueller

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www.croutonmusic.com

When did you begin playing drums and what did you like about them?

I started playing the drums relatively late, at the age of 21. It would be really hard for me to say what I liked about them and why I was drawn to playing them. I was going to clubs a lot at that time--which was the era of punk--and the drums always seemed to make the music for me. It always looked to me as if the drummer was having the most fun. When I had the chance to sit down at a set of drums I had an immediate affinity with the instrument. Of course, it was somewhat hard to coordinate my hands and feet, but the general principle of how to play the instrument just seemed so apparent. But what really grabbed me was the depth of sound in each instrument of the drumkit--which means the toms, the bass drum, the snare, the cymbals. What really appealed to me was the fantastic wealth of sound--the overtones, the resonances--emanating from this really simple instrument. OK, a guitar is also really simple--strings vibrating against a body of wood--but I tried to play the guitar and for the life of me I just couldn't make "music" with it--which is to say, with the drums I was keeping a beat pretty soon after starting to play and able to get a sound out of the instrument without having to learn a lot of technique (like I imagined it must be with a saxophone or piano).

Talk about the different methods you've studied and how they've affected your playing.

Soon after starting to play the drums I moved to London for a year. There I studied snare technique with John Taylor. For some people, learning drum technique would seem like a bone dry chore--all these paradiddles and flams and ratamacues, etc. But for me, I just zoned out playing these patterns. It was like a kind of light meditation. Years later I had the pleasure to hear Jaki Liebezeit play. He too stuck to really repetitive rhythms and sticking patterns which reminded me of my early experiences practicing on the snare drum.

I especially liked the snare because it was the one drum which had for me the most sound possibilities. I was fascinated with all the minor adjustments and how these could dramatically effect the sound. I became focused on this one object and years later this obsessive approach would play a large role in my music.

After London I moved back to Los Angeles and started taking lessons with Billy Moore, who was a Motown and Hollywood session drummer. With Billy I studied jazz and latin polyrhythms and more snare technique. It was good to study with him because he explained how certain rhythms were being played--which on my own I couldn't always discern. He also opened up the world of polyrhythms to me, which I'd only had a cursory introduction to when I studied African music with N.J. Nketia at the University of California at Los Angeles. With Nketia I came into contact with the music from more of an academic, analytical point of view; with Billy Moore I was playing the music.

I studied with Billy Moore for around two years and for the next years after I pretty much just learned on my own, playing in bands and practising as much as I could. During the 80's in Los Angeles I was usually playing with three or four bands at a time, which meant a lot of gigs and touring--and this was really important because it made me learn how to tune the drums for different spaces; and how to play the drums for these different spaces. I began to perceive the room I was playing in as the hidden instrument of the band, because the acoustics of the concert space played such a great role in how the music was played and how it sounded.

I moved to Berlin in 1989 and came into firsthand contact with Turkish and, to a lesser extent, Arabic music. In the neighborhood where my rehearsal room was (Kreuzberg) one couldn't walk down the street without hearing some Turkish music blaring from an apartment or a passing. Although I was playing mainly free improvised music at this point, which didn't exactly focus on groove, I was still really interested in rhythm. I was basically immersed in this Turkish street cul-

ture and going to techno clubs. So rhythm was really vital to me (which may seem like an obvious thing to say, but from my experience playing in the free improvised music circles I often had the feeling rhythm was at times to be avoided at all costs).

Two of my favorite drummers have always been Jaki Liebezeit and Charles Hayward--I loved the crazy asymmetrical rhythms they played. I later read an interview with Liebezeit where he cited a lot of ethnic music as his inspiration. This coincided with my interest in Middle Eastern music and so in 1994 I began studying daf (framedrum) for one year with Syrian oud player Fahran Sabbagh. He just taught me the basic technique of the instrument and many folk and classical rhythms from the Arabic musical diaspora.

Playing the daf took the concept of the snare drum's simplicity one step further, as here was a drum with just one skin and no snare, played with the hands--in fact, the oldest drum design in the world. Learning the rhythms Fahran taught me really focused my playing on repetition and an attention to beat placement--much more so than playing the drumset, as this seemed at times too diffuse to me (feet, hands, all those drums, etc). What I wanted to do was learn these Arabic rhythms and then transpose them for playing on the drumset, substituting the "dum" (bass tone) and "tak" (the sound of playing the edge of the daf) of the daf for the bass drum and snare of the drumkit.

In 1995 I received a grant from the Berlin Department of Culture to study tombak (an Iranian drum similar to the darabouka, but made of wood and played mainly with the finger tips) in Paris with Madjid Khalaj. I was interested in Iranian music because it seemed to me like a bridge between the Middle East and India--I was interested in the long quarter note beats of the classical Iranian music, which for me nearly approached the idea of the tala in Indian music. Tablas never seemed an option to me--like the trapset and the daf, the tombak just seemed like an instrument which spoke to me. The first time I heard the tombak was on an old solo recording of Djamhid Chemirani--fantastic! I knew that I had to learn to play this instrument. I had a similar experience the first time I heard Ed Blackwell on an Eric Dolphy record, "Live at the Five Spot," where I was completely knocked out by the sound Blackwell got from his instrument--it was like the proverbial lighthouse in the fog and I knew, "that's how I want my drums to sound!"

Learning to play the tombak was a really important step for me in discovering how to bring the most subtle nuances out of a drum--this was because the tombak is played mainly with the fingers and not very loudly (compared to a darbouka or conga). To a certain extent, the daf is also played with the fingers, but not like on the tombak, which is really almost entirely about the axis between the wrist and fingers, with emphasis on press rolls and ghost notes. Unlike with the drumset, there was no stick between me and the drum--just this really direct and sensitive contact to the skin of the drum through my fingertips. In a way, learning the tombak helped me discover a simpler and quieter side of playing the drumset.

You've lived in various places around the world. How have the different cultures influenced your outlook on music?

I'd have to say that growing up in Los Angeles, especially when I became old enough to drive a car and escape the suburbia where my family lived, I came in contact with really very many cultures and their music. Of course, all these different ethnic communities are more dispersed than, say, Manhattan, for example; but there was in Los Angeles at least the same range of diverse cultures: which meant Latin, Black, Asian. As I grew older I came in contact with more of these different ethnic groups and realised what a culturally rich place Los Angeles was to grow up in. In a way, this array of different cultures whet my appetite for musical discoveries which were to come later.

Living in London in 1981-82 really inspired me to pursue music as a way of life and not just as a passtime. Seeing groups like Rip Rig and Panic, Gang of Four, Blur, Pigbag, the Fall really motivated me to get involved with forming bands, touring, making records, etc. The scene was so vibrant and the energy so positive that I couldn't wait to start my own group and play around. Los Angeles, too, at the end of the 70's, beginning of the 80's was also extremely interesting for live music, with many small clubs, independent record labels and a wide diversity of musical

scenes--so this, coupled with my stay in London, really inspired me to play music.

I lived in Berlin from 1990 to 1998. Aside from the contact with Turkish and Middle Eastern music, which I described before, the advent of techno had a really big impact on me. And this for two reasons: the first was, of course, the music. Here was a music almost entirely based on rhythm. Of course, it often lacked much of the syncopation of, for example, African music, but it still really grooved and reminded me of the many hours I'd spent practicing patterns on the snare drum. This isn't to say I found this to be "trance" music (which for me is a completely different idea) but certainly a "mesmerizing" music. Mostly when I went to clubs I found myself dancing less and listening more. I was fortunate to have some close friends who were DJ's and producers, so I usually got steered in the right direction.

The Berlin record store Hard Wax was at this time a great place to go and hang out and listen to the newest releases. I had friends working there and consequently spent many hours at that store listening to new electronic music. Hearing all this early techno and learning the Middle Eastern rhythms definitely took my music in a much more rhythm-focused direction and gradually pushed my interests away from the classical European free improvised music scene.

This early phase of techno was also inspiring for me because it was happening at mainly a grass roots level: people starting their own labels and their own clubs. I love this d.i.y. spirit as I feel it fosters more communication between the "audience" and the "musicians." And, of course, this was also an important element in the whole punk movement, which was my first contact with live music. I like the idea that anyone can start a band, anyone can start a label, make a record, book a show. This is vital for me.

I'd like to add as a side note to this whole techno experience, one drummer in Berlin who was very inspiring for me, especially in the context of improvised music: Peter Hollinger. He was integrating many elements of techno (repetitive beats, grooviness) in an improvised music context. Of course, he didn't just lay down a beat the whole evening, but he did manage to somehow subvert the music with a new feeling, also using many found metal objects (as another favorite drummer of mine, Z'ev). His way of playing definitely made me aware of a different and more fresh approach to improvisation.

Another aspect of living in Germany which opened my eyes up to cultural rhythmic perception was the idea of the "backbeat"--something people in North America certainly take for granted. But what I found in Germany was, at live concerts people clapping along with the band (in a rock, jazz context I mean) inevitably clapped on the "1" and "3," and not on the backbeat, the "2" and "4"; which I found fascinating--I thought, "how can they not hear the beat?" And then I realized, well, beat is so relative (which might sound obvious, but obviously this is not the case...). And I thought about German and how speech inflections tended to accentuate the first syllable of a word; and how we in America tend to focus on the downbeat, which is to say the second syllable. This became a great lesson for me in the connection between language and rhythm and also in the cultural context of how people perceive rhythm. And out of all this it also became clear how techno could become so popular in Germany--four on the floor: no confusion!

I'd like to mention Tokyo as one last place I've lived which left a lasting effect on the way I approach sound. I'd toured Japan three times, and after the last tour I decided at some point I'd like to stay longer--which I did one year later, living for three months in the center of Tokyo. Where I actually lived was very quiet--kind of like the eye of the hurricane. But the rest of Tokyo I found incredibly loud. Of course, I'd noticed this before on my brief visits there, but actually living there and making my way through the city on a daily basis, revealed to me just how incredibly loud a sound environment Tokyo has. I think this, more than the obvious Japanese cultural aspects of Zen, made me re-think my approach to silence in music; and, incidentally, made me understand so much better the phenomenon of extremity in Japanese music (absolute screaming ear busting loudness; microsound, stillness--invariably never a combination of the two). I think that growing up in such an extreme sound environment could easily push one to extreme sound expression as a means of somehow coming to terms with this daily sonic input. I don't think this happens in a conscious way--as with me, coming from the west and actually thinking this out--but more as a subliminal undercurrent to musicians and sound artists there.

How would you describe your playing currently? What do you hope this approach communicates? What satisfaction does it give you?

These days my focus in music is really more sound-oriented. OK, this might sound obvious: music is sound; but music is also about other things: for some it is a kind of sport, for others a kind of theater or performance; for others a way of earning huge sums of money--and, of course, all these practices don't preclude sound, per se, but in my case I really feel that what interests me now is concentrating on the sound of the instrument I am playing. This means, the theatricality and gesture of much improvised music no longer interest me; and the hours of motoric training practicing for better technique (which doesn't, in my opinion, always lead to a better ability to get a good sound out of an instrument or to a better awareness of sound) are also of no interest to me.

With the drums, for example, I am really trying to focus in on what for me percussion (meaning drums and metals) as an instrument offers: resonance and overtones. I want to really get to the bottom of these two aspects of percussion. I find that using electronics (which can mean a computer or just a mixing desk) helps me to magnify and amplify resonance and overtones; and to exploit them as a departure point for my playing. I am still interested in rhythm, but not so much in the form of "beats" (unless, of course, one means the beats occurring when two nearly-similar tones sound together), as in rhythm moving slowly over longer periods of time as waves--ebb and flow. In this way of playing I often find myself playing as well as observing how the sound evolves around me. I am creating the sound but in another way I am initiating a process which runs of its own accord and which I can contribute to or only listen to--and for me listening is equally important to making a sound.

I don't hope or intend my music to communicate any message (in answer to your question) but I am pleased when people catch on to what I am doing and, like myself, during the course of my performance concentrate on the sound. My music is not about a melody or a rhythm or a text (and I have absolutely no problem with any of these elements in music) but about sound evolving. There are in fact many details in my music but on first listen one might miss them; and so in a live situation it is really good to take the time, be it only for thirty minutes, to have a good listen.

This is not to say that I demand to be the center of attention and my music played to like in a religious service--actually, I find the whole concept of giving a "concert" with two speakers, left and right, rather didactic. I would be much happier playing off in a corner somewhere in a situation somewhere between an installation and a music performance, with speakers dispersed throughout the space and sound output going through more than just two channels. This would not mean the people attending could not still listen attentively or not talk--I saw in India how both of these activities could somehow coexist. Some of my favorite sounds are those which seem to hover on the edge of consciousness--refrigerators humming, a crackling light, the drone of a large city at night-- and which, unless one really focuses in on them, can disappear just as quickly as they appeared. In a way, this is how I would like my music to be--not exactly Satie's "wallpaper music" but also not an in-your-face-this-is-a-concert situation, either.

The satisfaction all this gives me is being able to finally pursue in a relatively concentrated fashion the aspect of the drums which first attracted me to them--namely, the sound of the instrument. Using the computer I find that I can dig deeper down into this sound, finding its source, so to speak, and then recombining it with the acoustic source, both as reference and adjunct. I am not interested in making "electronic" music or even "electronic sounding music," but in pursuing the sound of the drums on both a concentrated level of acoustic playing and a more microscopic approach using current digital technology.

What music did you like as a child? Are there any connections to this interest in your playing today?

As a child my first musical experiences were with AM radio pop music. I was born in 1960, and so the Beatles were my first favorite group, and perhaps even my first memorable musical experience.

I moved from New York to Los Angeles with my family at the age four. Los Angeles is a car city.

One gets in the car to go anywhere, be it across town or around the corner to the supermarket. In my mom's car car radio was always on, tuned to KHJ, which was then the number one Top 40 AM station in Los Angeles. I spent a lot of time in my mother's car listening to pop music. This had two important and lasting effects on me: first of all, I developed a real ear for melody. Even as a very young child, I could go around for days singing the melody to one of the current hits. I loved the fact that such a short song (under three minutes was certainly at that time the ideal pop song length) could have have such a profound emotional impact on me.

Secondly, driving around hearing the car radio always placed music within a certain context of time and place. The time was either fleeting by, as on the freeway, or at stillstand, caught in a crosstown traffic jam. And in each case, music had the function of driving us on or making our entrapment somehow bearable. The context of place meant for me the sound of a certain song (or group) at a certain time of day, or season, or weather condition. It should be of no big surprise that groups like the Beach Boys virtually defined not only a way of life (which they themselves in fact were virtually not a part of) but a certain feeling--and this feeling was, for me at least, that of a summery Southern California day, at best driving through one of the Santa Monica Mountain canyons on the way to--surprise!!--the beach (and I too was no beach boy, but the Beach Boys' sound still remains for me).

Of course, the connection between pop music and the music I'm making today would seem a mighty long leap, at best, but I'm convinced--and many reviews of my recordings bear this out--that I still have a strong ear for melody and that this plays a major role in my music. I'm not writing any pop songs, but the resonance of metals and drums contain in themselves a wealth of tone and melody, and I am sensitive to this. And I still love a good pop song.

How big of a role does both improvisation and composition have in your work?

The eternal question: improvisation / composition? Where does one start, the other end. What is what? My first two solo recordings ("Drums and Metals" and "Analogues") were pretty much thoroughly composed recordings. Which is to say, when I played pieces from "Drums and Metals" live they would sound relatively similar (aside from length, tempo, etc) to the studio recording; and what I prepared beforehand in my rehearsal room for the actual recording is what went onto the CD. The point is, the compositions arose out of me improvising around on the drumset or, in the case of "Analogues," on the sampler. I didn't just sit down with a pencil and paper and start writing out a score. I can't do this.

With my third solo recording ("Plurabelle") everything was improvised live in studio. When I got home and listened to the tracks I was astonished to hear how much of what I played sounded composed--as if I'd gone into the studio with fixed pieces in mind; which I didn't. I'd experienced this phenomenon playing improvised music--this was where the boundaries between "improvisation" and "instant composition" became blurred. And, in fact, I think a good improvising musician is always "composing," whether they are conscious of this or not (and some say they are never conscious of form, movement, motif, etc; while others seem to keep this somewhere in the back of their mind as guiding factors when playing--I tend to be one of the former).

For me, though, music doesn't have to be one or the other--improvised or composed. Both approaches can be interesting and rewarding and, in fact, some of my favorite music was playing in Arnold Dreyblatt's Orchestra of Excited Strings, which was pretty much start-to-finish composed music.

Talk about your work with metal as percussion. What have you discovered about the tonal and performance qualities of these opposed to manufactured drums?

I first became exposed to metal objects in the context of percussion with the music of Z'ev. Of course, he wasn't necessarily banging out rhythms on steel oil drums (he did this, too); he was also throwing chains and large metal objects around a room and recording this. Which especially appealed to me as I had to ask myself, "music?" And not long after I had the chance to hear a performance of Varèse's "Ionization" as well as some of John Cage's early works for percussion. Metal objects just seemed like a natural addition to drums (much as the computer also now

does). But my first experience with "irregular" metal objects was not with brake drums or sheet metal, but with Turkish cymbals ("K-Zildjians"). These cymbals were at the time made by hand and each one had pretty much its own unique sound. This quality appealed to me and seemed best to work with drums which, at best, resonate with very imprecise (read "noise," in the classic Helmholtz sense of the word) frequencies. And this, then, raises the whole question of what we mean by "manufactured" or "found" objects. Later I did start to collect metal objects and began integrating them into my playing, both as part of the drumset and by themselves--a piece for amplified oil drum, for example.

One of the things I like in music is unpredictability--and this doesn't mean for me not knowing if the gig will be cancelled, etc. but more not always knowing what kind of sound an object, be it a drum or a tin pan, will produce. Especially with non-mass produced objects or pieces of "junk" there is always the possibility that one will discover a new sound, a new place on that object which really sounds great (or really sounds bad); and this provides for me a great chance of discovering something new.

With mass produced cymbals, though no two cymbals ever sound identical, there is still less of a chance of deviation away from the norm. And this I tend to find boring. I am now these days using a pair of Paiste orchestral sound discs, but these are untuned and come closer to found pieces of brass than actual cymbals. I have over the years gradually cut back my use of metals because I feel it more a challenge to work with less and try to get maximum sound out of minimum material.

How broad do you see the term "percussion" being? What do you think the possibilities are?

Well, in my case percussion can also mean an implication of percussion, addressing those sound elements which I feel contribute to the idea of percussion: resonance, rhythm. For example, I am still using a drum when I perform (a floor tom) but it mainly serves as a resonating body; and rhythm occurs, and even "beats" occur, but not in the sense of 1-2-3-4; more as pulse and harmonic beats layered upon each other and the pulse. Polyrhythm still occurs, but a long way off from what I was studying years ago with Billy Moore.

It is difficult for me to say what the term "percussion" could actually mean, as practically any object can be percussive; and in nature there are certainly many phenomena which I would term as percussive: thunder, ice cracking, waves breaking, rain falling...endless.

And in terms of electronically produced sound I often hear static or sine waves serving a percussive role. Although my main focus in music has always been the playing of conventionally understood "percussive" instruments (i.e., drums and cymbals) it is hard for me, especially today, to not think of what I am doing as just "generating sound." This is often done with "percussive" instruments but can also mean using computer-generated sound, an analog synthesizer or field recordings.

In a sense, I am still a "percussionist" but much of what I am doing has moved beyond the normally accepted notion of what I have generally understood "percussion" to be.

Talk about some collaborative experiences you've had and what you've learned from them.

My first great collaborative experience occurred in the 1980's playing in a band called "The Universal Congress Of." We played a kind of music somewhere between the energy of punk rock and the stylistic orientation of harmelodic music. This was really a band, which is to say, we practiced like crazy, hung out together and did really long tours where we came home nearly broke but which left us only more hungry to do it all over again. The reason this was a great experience was it taught me about what it takes to develop a "group sound." And for me, this especially meant subsuming a certain modicum of ego in the pursuit of finding a sound which encompassed all the strengths and weaknesses of the different players of the group. It also meant learning to play together under the most adverse circumstances while still allowing this group sound and the chemistry of all the different personalities in the group to shine through. I was constantly surprised by the depth of energy and sense of purpose (our pursuit of a certain sound) which the group

possessed--sometimes we'd arrive after a 600-mile drive dead tired in a two-bit town playing on a Tuesday night to ten people for, if we were lucky, a beer and, maybe if we were really lucky, a hamburger (ok, maybe I'm exaggerrating a bit here, but point taken--read Eugene Chadbourne's book "I Hate the Man Behind the Bar") and still create some really inspired music. It was as if the sound of the group became an entity in and of itself, something which we fueled with our playing and inspiration but which also existed outside the laws of rational explanation.

Playing with the same people so long and in so many different situations also made me very sensitive to the spaces we played in. I recently read an interesting book ("Hörspiel für Architektinnen" by Ulrich Troyer, available from <http://www.mdos.at>) where blind people are interviewed about the way they perceive sound in relation to architecture. One person interviewed was a musician and he spoke about how at a certain point when one is playing--be it alone or in a group--the room suddenly "opens up"--which is to say, it "sounds." The musicians come into accordance with the acoustical properties of a space and the music starts to sound, starts to work--the space opens up. And this was an occurrence which I experienced many times on tour, where suddenly, unexpectedly, everything started to sound good, as if the instruments could play themselves (which is also what I meant by the group sound in a sense being an entity in and off itself). This made me very aware of the connection between different architectural spaces and sound--not only from a sound standpoint, but also in terms of light, smell, temperature; all the elements which also came into play years earlier when I sat in my mother's car travelling around Los Angeles and hearing AM radio in different environmental contexts.

Who's recent work do you admire and what about it affects you?

I've recently really enjoyed listening to the work of Kevin Drumm, whether it be solo (like his new recording on Mego) or in collaboration with others (like the Selektion CD with Ralf Wehowsky). Whatever Kevin does always seems for me to convey a certain resolution to find his own sound, and this often a sound which encompasses so many different elements (and by this here I definitely do not mean "eclecticism") and which I admire for the precarious balance of all these different elements--when I hear his music I often have the feeling everything could collapse at any moment; which means for me he is often putting the pursuit of a certain sound just beyond his reach, and in grasping at this sound he is taking a lunge, a shot in the dark. I admire this, putting oneself on the line and taking risks. It's like his new CD--totally full on. He did something which probably few people who don't know him or his musical interests would expect. Every recording he does is like this for me. I really get the sense that he is striving to discover something new for himself--which makes my experience as a listener also a discovery.

In a broader, more subjective sense, I admire his music because it hits me in the gut. It is visceral without being heavy handed and intelligent without being clever. For me, so much music these days is driven by pretense, even in so-called "experimental" (I know, bad term but I use it very loosely here) circles. Kevin's music is refreshing for me in its honesty and conviction.

Some other music which has really effected me lately, and which is not exactly new, are the early recordings of Scott Walker. It may be embarrassing to confess this here, but up to around a year ago I didn't know Scott Walker's music. I was introduced to this by Dan Burke. I had organised a concert for Illusion of Safety (with Kevin Drumm, incidentally) in Zürich and after their set Dan put on some music. Suddenly I heard something which I'd never heard before and which completely knocked me out. Dan was laughing, "Oh you don't know Scott Walker?"

I've since bought Scott Walker's first four solo CD's. It's a great thing when even at my age I can still be lucky enough to discover a music so inspiring. These recordings often achieve an atmosphere so astonishing in their breadth and depth of emotion, that I can scarcely believe the studio musicians could hold it together long enough to get the takes onto tape. Like with Drumm's music, Scott Walker's early recordings hover on the brink of disaster, precarious and vulnerable. I love when a music can transport me to a different time and place. And this Walker's music does for me, time and time again.

What projects do you have planned/in the works?

In September I will be recording a CD with Steve Roden for the Staalplaat sub-label, Brombron. I will also be releasing two new CD's on my label, cut: the fourth CD from Repeat (with Toshimaru Nakamura), entitled "Pool" and a solo CD from Jason Lescalleet, with the title "Mattresslessness." I'm also finishing up my fourth solo recording and will be touring around in the fall, playing in Greece, Portugal, Holland and France. One live solo project of mine lately has been playing to a film by Jean Genet, "Un chant d'amour." I am also doing sound installations in Zurich in September and Berlin in October.