

NOISES OFF

JJ Jeczalik: Art Of Silence

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People : Artists/Engineers/Producers/Programmers

JJ Jeczalik, one third of '80s sampling pioneers Art Of Noise and erstwhile 'Mr Fairlight' has sold his Series III and bounded into the '90s with an Akai sampler and a brand new album of dance music. PAUL TINGEN finds out why no noise is good noise...

Jonathan Jeczalik is a man of extremes -- in his musical life, his opinions, and his sense of humour. Take, for example, his involvement in some of the most noteworthy, heavyweight muso-sessions that this country has ever seen, featuring the likes of Kate Bush, Godley & Creme, Paul McCartney, Yes, and many, many others. Most of these sessions happened during the '80s, and JJ, as he is known in the music industry, was there to man the Fairlight -- the pioneering Australian sampling machine that was sprung upon an unsuspecting world in 1979. Even though JJ had once studied clarinet and piano, he revelled in calling himself a "non-musician" at the time, stating that he was just "mucking about" with technology, and was proud of the fact that he couldn't tell an upbeat from a downbeat. JJ also professed utter disdain for studio holy cows like sound quality, openly pleased by the fact that samples made by the Fairlight Series I and II sounded as though "they were being put through a 100W Marshall amp", and maintaining that he sampled at 15kHz with the Series III, rather than the machine's standard 44.1kHz sample rate, to "make things sound dirty and distorted, and rock and roll."

It was with the same radical, punk-influenced outlook that he made his mark on the music of one of the most seminal hi-tech bands of all time: the Art Of Noise. Much of the weirdness and incongruity of Art Of Noise music was the result of JJ's disregard for musical and studio conventions. Art Of Noise transgressed many of them, going out on a limb with sonic innovations, and spreading their musical net over pastoral, ambient pieces like 'Moments In Love', to upbeat hits like their collaborations with Duane Eddy, in 'Peter Gunn', and Tom Jones, in their glorious reworking of the Prince song, 'Kiss'. JJ, meanwhile, gradually moved on as his musical career unfolded, mockingly calling himself "a man of some musical experience" when I last interviewed him in 1992 at his Monsterrat Studios in Berkshire. The name -- typical of JJ's sense of humour -- is a pun on the famous Caribbean AIR Montserrat Studio which was flattened by a hurricane in 1989.

LIFE AFTER NOISE

At the time of our last interview, JJ was playing around with various post-Art Of Noise projects, the illustrious ensemble having folded the year before. One of these projects involved one of the original Art Of Noise members, producer Gary Langan, and JJ didn't rule out the possibility that the third original member, Anne Dudley, would also return, thus sparking an Art Of Noise reformation. It was not to be, but now, four years later, one of JJ's many

projects has finally borne fruit. This summer will see the release of a CD called *artofsilence.co.uk*, which is really a JJ solo album in all but name. It was recorded, mixed and produced by JJ in collaboration with well-known engineer/producer Bob Kraushaar (who's worked with the Pet Shop Boys, amongst other name artists) at JJ's Monsterrat Studio, and features, true to form, some hair-raisingly extreme music. Yet completely contrary to what the name suggests, Art Of Silence is not an ambient version of Art Of Noise, but instead features lots of heavy-duty dance music. The track 'West 4' has already made inroads into the rave scene across the country, and other tracks feature lengthy and relatively tuneless explorations of relentless electronic dance beats. Just to throw in some contrast, the last two tracks, 'Fear No Malice' and the majestic 'Some Other Dream', explore some of the more melodic and ambient territory that the Art Of Noise was so well-known for.

ACID TEST

It appears that JJ has, true to form, taken a rather radical musical left turn -- high time to find out what all this is about. One gloriously sunny June afternoon JJ sits down in the garden of a beautiful old English pub not far from his studio, ready to answer questions in his typically ebullient manner. It seems *artofsilence.co.uk* started as his attempt to come to terms with what was happening in the current dance music scene: "Initially, when the really high-energy stuff was prevalent, I couldn't relate to it at all. There wasn't anything that I liked. But about 18 months ago, when the bpm's became a bit more understandable from my point of view, when grooves slowed down, I started to take a serious interest in what people were doing in the dance field. I tuned into Kiss FM a lot, and although I initially listened from a technical point of view: 'why is that working for them?', I eventually ended up really getting off on it.

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"My brief for myself for this album was to turn it into a groove and theme-orientated album, the idea being to create a CD of dance music that I would enjoy listening to in the background at home. That was very much the acid test. The main influence is dance, but nothing too hardcore, nothing too seriously full-on. I can't handle that kind of stuff. And you must remember that this is not really such a great departure for me. Some of the early Art Of Noise tracks were big club hits in the States, so working in the club music field isn't that unusual for me. I'm also still using the same equipment and recording methods as before, so that hasn't changed either. What has been a surprise, and a very pleasant surprise, is the fact that it has become so popular in the clubs. There was no guarantee that it would. I was just making my own judgements about whether I liked things or not when I was making the music. But it's been very rewarding, and a lot of the promotional energy that has to do with the album is now directed towards club territory."

JJ was about to go off on a two-day rehearsal for a 4am gig in a Manchester club. Not the kind of stuff middle-aged fathers are generally supposed to be doing, but JJ was clearly having fun with it anyway, explaining how he, and

album collaborators Eddie Kulak on keyboards and Paul Robinson on beats, will be playing against CD backing. The invitation to play in clubs came about because of the aforementioned clubland and vinyl success of the album's opener, 'West 4', a crafty collection of a relentless four-on-the-floor dance beat, full-frontal piano arpeggios and riffs, lush string themes, and general rhythmic synthesizer mayhem. JJ explained that the track, like all the tracks on *artofsilence.co.uk*, started life as a collaboration, in this case with keyboardist Blue Weaver, who is resident in Chiswick, London, postcode W4 - hence the title. Two other tracks, 'Fear No Malice' and 'Messenger Of Heaven', were started by JJ and Kulak, and the remaining tracks with Bob Kraushaar, with the exception of the magnificent, ambient 'Some Other Dream', which is the only track with real musicians as its starting point, and sees JJ playing keyboards with a session bassist, guitarist and drummer.

GIANT WITHIN

JJ is co-credited for keyboards on all the tracks on the album, and synth programming on most of them too. When reminded of his "non-musician" declarations of the past, he smilingly acknowledges that he's even graduated from the title "a man of some musical experience" now. Though stopping short of calling himself a musician, he observes that "when you spend enough time fiddling with keyboards, you get better. I feel more comfortable and more adept with keyboards, but still wouldn't call myself a keyboard player. There are thousands of people who are way better than me. It's not really where I'm at. But I played a good proportion of the stuff on the album." In the same breath he is keen to stress the collaborative nature of *artofsilence.co.uk*: "It wasn't just me. It isn't a solo album, it's me and my mates. But Art Of Silence is an ongoing thing and I'm the one point in it that's going to remain the same. So, for the next album, I'll be working with a whole bunch of other people." Credit should be given where it's due, but the fact remains that *artofsilence.co.uk* is more JJ's brainchild than anybody else's. This is also exemplified by the titles and underlying themes of the album, which tell something of JJ's personal journey of the last few years. In typical JJ fashion they tell a story that juxtaposes markedly with the album's impersonal and mechanical dance grooves: it appears that JJ, for years the happy owner of a cynical sense of humour capable of mercilessly cutting through bullshit -- and also people -- has been touched by the positive-thinking attitude that underlies most of the current self-development movement. 'New Agey' themes and concepts are lurking closely beneath the surface, as implied by the copy of *The Celestine Prophecies*, James Redfield's barrier-breaking international New Age bestseller, that I spotted lying around in Monsterrat Studios. On the album itself, this feeling is evident from track titles like 'Who Are You?', 'Giant Below', 'Giant Above', 'Giant Within' and 'Messenger From Heaven'.

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JJ explains where he's coming from: "I think I've changed. This album is as much about that as about anything. It has a lot to do with learning to rely on

the inner self and inner balance, and learning to appreciate all the great things that are in the world, rather than stomping around and thrashing other people's efforts, or even thrashing your own, which is what a lot of people do. The poor opinion many of us hold of ourselves and others is often ego-related, and can be very damaging. So I try to view what I do and what people do in terms of how uplifting and how full of energy it is. You can't just come in arrogantly and say that something someone has been working on for months is a piece of shit. You need to be able to control yourself and look at yourself. So the album tells a story, with the 'Giant' trilogy being the centrepiece, of us getting in touch with the giant we all have inside of us, the ability to do many many things, and not be impressed by the seemingly threatening giants below or above us."

SILENCE SESSIONS

As already explained, most of the album was born of collaborations between JJ and other people. The sessions largely took place at Monsterrat, and were initially recorded to JJ's trusty Fostex B16 half-inch, 16-track tape recorder, which he regards as his "scratchpad." He has a typically incongruous reason for working with 16-track tape, rather than ADAT or hard disk: "The B16 is very venerable and reliable, and I like the fact that it takes 10 minutes to rewind to the top of the track, because it gives you a 10-minute break! You don't get time for breathers with all these hard disk recorders."

Sound sources used were JJ's trusted Fairlight Series III, plus an array of rented analogue keyboards, such as a Roland JX8P and JX10 Super Jupiter, Minimoog and Memorymoog, Oberheim Matrix 1000 and OB8, ARP Axxe, and a Roland TR909 drum machine. The material recorded onto the 16-track was assessed on its merits, and the good bits were sampled off tape, and/or looped or re-sequenced on JJ's Atari Mega 4 with *Logic* software. JJ comments: "I prefer working this way to recording everything into sequencers. When it's on tape it's physically there, you have something tangible to work with. The thing about sequencing all the time is that it's a bit of a movable feast: with a couple of clicks of the mouse you can transform the whole thing, which means that you never know exactly where you are. But with tape, you can relax a bit and think about what it is that you like about something. It's more solid. It's for the same reason that I always print out my email. I like paper. It's a different thing reading it inside a PC. And when you write, it's not until you print things out that you really see whether it makes sense, and what mistakes you've made. Likewise with tapes and sequencers."

JJ's main tool for re-sampling and looping material from the B16 was his trusted 1987 Fairlight Series III. The drums on the album are a mixture of programming on the TR909 and loops from the Fairlight, lifted off sources that he preferred to be vague about. Although virtually everything passed through the Fairlight at some stage, JJ emphasises that the TR909 was often run live during mixes, because it sounded better like that, whilst analogue keyboard parts that couldn't be sequenced, because of complicated filter manipulation, for example, were played live onto the B16: "A lot of the fun was twiddling knobs and exploring new areas -- I'd never worked this much with analogue keyboards before. Because we switched a lot between Atari sequences and tape recording, and ran both in tandem during mixing, flawless synchronisation was essential. I used Emagic's Unitor in Monsterrat, with the

Friendchip TCR1 timecode refresher. The latter is a great box. It regenerates timecode and sorts out all possible messes. I haven't had any problems with timecode since using the Friendchip."

GRUNGE

JJ's master keyboard for the *artofsilence.co.uk* sessions was the Technics KN550, a home keyboard with sounds that are "so bad, they become good". His preference for low-quality sounds has also long been exemplified in his dogged determination to stick to a 15kHz sample rate with his Fairlight, but this proved impossible for the Art Of Silence project, because he's upgraded his Fairlight for use with optical drives, and the new software doesn't have an option for 15kHz sample rate. JJ comments: "They called the software an upgrade, but as far as I was concerned it was a downgrade, because I now had to find other ways to emulate a lower-bandwidth effect. So I had some secret tools instead that gave me a similar effect. My main weapon was the Roland SDE2000 delay, which I'd set at twice the delay time so that the bandwidth was halved. This resulted in the required rock and roll grunge effect."

An Apple Mac computer has now replaced the Atari Mega 4 which was used on the album sessions, and JJ now runs the Mac version of *Logic* for sequencing. He explains: "The Atari with *Logic* was very reliable and worked well with my Soundtracs PC MIDI desk, operating functions like muting and program changes. It even had a very crafty flight simulator program on it that gave me a lot of pleasure! But in the end it became too slow, and *Logic* on the Mac is amazing. Things like drag and drop, copy, and being able to create an arrangement, moving things across the page left and right in a completely intuitive way, is just great. It's more intuitive than the Atari version, and I like the graphical representation and the colours."

MINI FAIRLIGHT

Any moment now, *artofsilence.co.uk* will hit the record shops, released on JJ's own Axiomattic label, housed within Permanent Records. The single, 'West 4', may or may not be climbing the charts when you read this: whether JJ's desire to cross over between the club dance world and the more mainstream charts will be fulfilled remains to be seen. The music on *artofsilence.co.uk* may be too biased towards dance for that to happen. However, there's one little detail about the CD release that should be of interest to many readers of this magazine, regardless of whether the music on it is their cup of tea or not: the first 2000 copies of *artofsilence.co.uk* will contain a "rather sexy" piece of sampling shareware for the Mac called *Sound Effects*, or *SFX*, on an accompanying 3.5-inch floppy disk. Those who cannot get hold of one of those first 2000 copies can download it from JJ's web site (see box 'SFX: Share & Enjoy' for more details) for a registration fee of US\$15.

Computer and multimedia technologies appear to be at the forefront of JJ's activities at the moment. Aside from his web site, he's also started an interactive production company and label called Touch Music Interactive with video director Will Oakley, that will be "looking at developing titles for CD+ and CD-ROMs." Having started work already on a second Art Of Silence album, JJ's activities appear to continue at a frenetic pace in various different

areas. And whatever he does, whether good, bad or ugly, appears to be at the cutting edge.

SAMPLING AFTER FAIRLIGHT

Amazingly, after 16 years of faithful service, JJ recently sold his Fairlight Series III, having used it for the last time on the new album: "Someone made me an offer that I couldn't understand, and couldn't refuse. And the Fairlight was very big, consumed tons of electricity and was getting unreliable. When I was offered loads of money for it, I looked at what I'd done with the album, concluded that I was moving towards analogue synth sounds and away from samples, and decided that an Akai could do the job, and that I could invest the rest of the money into modules and synths." Thus JJ is now the proud owner of an Akai 3200XL, with 32Mb of memory and CD-ROM drive. In 1992 he complained about the fiddly little LCD screens on the Akai. Four years on he thinks the machine's interface is still a drawback, but has found ways of coping: "It's simply not ideal. But a couple of guys come in once in a while and give me tutorials. And I've also invested in *MESA* software so I can edit the Akai via my new Mac."

SFX: SHARE AND ENJOY!

The press release for *artofsilence.co.uk* explains that *SFX*, a shareware program that's being given away with the first 2000 copies of the album, allows "Mac users to sample any audio program, convert those sounds to the AIFF standard, and then use them in multimedia programs." It also adds that since it only takes up 170k of memory it can be stored as a utility program, can sample at any rate up to 64kHz, and at any resolution from 1 to 32 bits. JJ got excited about the program because *SFX* allows users to be their own DJ: "I found it on the Internet and was completely wowed by the thing, because it's like a mini Fairlight. But rather than costing \$50,000 or something, it only costs \$15 and you can get into fairly serious sampling from your desktop. My idea was that the album provides ambience and grooves as a backdrop, and that people can use this software, which also has a keyboard on the screen, to groove along and have fun." That explains the presence of the groove-only sections (some up to several minutes long) on *artofsilence.co.uk*.

JJ's web site also has facilities for people to download ever-changing selections of samples, and they can send over their *SFX*-treated 'remixes' of the album. Visitors to the web site (address below) will be able to hear these latest 'remixes'.

W <http://www.art.of.silence.co.uk>

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