



It's fair to say that CGNY has seen a fair bit of live and experimental electronic music so it's not often we're left gob-smacked by something new but its lovely when it happens! ☐ Such was the case at the recent [Unsound Festival/ Sustain Release](#) party at [Good Room](#) . The whole event musically came together in a wonderful way but certainly for us

[Greg Zifcak's](#)

A/V piece stood out as a highlight. Inquiring minds want to know how it all works! So we had a little chat with the artist! See below!

CGNY: First of all I have to ask and I hope you don't think I'm being intrusive but are you an alien?! Because only an alien could do what you did on Saturday!

GZ: Haha! Well I guess I was going for something that feels like an out-of-body experience so I'll take that as a positive reaction.

CGNY: So let's talk about your introduction to this world of experiment audio visual technology. I know you were/are in Eats Tapes and worked out of Portland and San Francisco but what started you on this journey?

GZ: I started messing around with synthesizers when I was about 19, hunting for unknown treasures in pawn shops and newspaper ads before eBay completely homogenized the market. I took a MIDI sequencing class at Portland Community College and started sequencing this old pawn shop gear with outdated thrift store computers. I would read and re-read old articles in music tech mags and dance music mags trying to understand what they were talking about and failing to recreate the sounds I was hearing on records and out at clubs and raves, but learning a lot through experimentation. I got curious about modular synths and started building a few kits to explore that. There was a pretty active synth-DIY community online that was a great resource for learning how to modify existing equipment and start building circuits from scratch.



Video came a little later when I discovered camera feedback and started buying cheap video processing gear, some of which I modified to be able to interface with synthesizers using control voltages. In 2010 I did a residency at the [Experimental TV Center](#) that was hugely influential. I finally had access to full video synthesis tools, which were extremely rare before the current Eurorack explosion.

CGNY: So what were you using at the Unsound/Sustain-Release party? What machines and that thing with pipe!! How does that work?

GZ: That performance was based around an LED strobe light. I used telephone taps on the body of the strobe to translate the electromagnetic noise of the circuitry into sound that I could manipulate with my synth. So part of the sound was coming directly from the strobe, and some of it was from oscillators controlled by an envelope follower triggered by the strobe. The overall effect is that as you see the strobe light flash, you hear simultaneous noise that strengthens the disorienting effect of the strobe's flashes. I also had some lengths of wire connected to certain modules so that I could make some of the connections with skin and saliva.

CGNY: Sounds dangerous! Do you build some of your own machines? I'm guessing yes but what do you own/play?

CGNY: I build Eurorack format audio and video modules. I've also built a suitcase modular made up of a combo of PAiA and homemade circuits from a wide variety of designs. I've also done a lot of modifications to existing gear, too much to list. What I own and play is too much to list too but some of my longtime favorites have been the Yamaha RX5, Yamaha DX200/DX7, Electrix EQ Killer, Akai S612, modified Simmons SDS800, modified 909, modified Realistic Reverb, and in the past I relied a lot on a modified 707/727 hybrid. I also spent a couple years getting deep into Reaktor, building software instruments to use with Ableton Live, kind of the way Max is integrated into it now. I still use Reaktor for production in Live 7 on my ancient computer.

"The idea of using a synthesizer to solve an equation fit naturally with another topic I was obsessing about at the time: chaos theory"



Photo credit: Mitch Strashnov

For video I mostly use a small Eurorack system with some homemade modules, LZX and Brownsheesonly modules, plus a heavily modified Panasonic WJ-MX10 mixer, Videonics Video EQ, a bunch of cheap surveillance cameras, and old CRT monitors. I've also messed with generating VGA video from audio signals.

CGNY: You said the piece you performed you'd only done that before once in a gallery. So what makes you decide to do THAT one piece for that night?

GZ: The simple answer is that I was asked by the organizers to perform that piece. Thinking more about it, I see the club as a context with a lot of potential for experimentation. There are strong narrative threads overlaid on the experience of a night in a dance club. In ways that may or may not be obvious to various factions of the partying crowd, a club is also a highly politicized space. I think this has been on a lot of people's minds since the massacre in Orlando. It was definitely on my mind that night. The potentially assaultive sound and lighting systems in a club are powerful tools for making people feel their bodies in a way that can shift subjective identity. That can be taken to be politically symbolic, although my main attraction to perceptually intense works is more obviously about the immediate thrill of losing my subjective grip. The performance was originally supposed to be a collaboration with FlucT that involved choreographed dance and touch-activated sound. Unfortunately they had to cancel but I feel like where we were headed with it was certainly informed by disturbing recent events as well as equally disturbing long-standing power structures, though the planned performance didn't overtly explicate those issues. As it happened, the piece felt like a nice jarring interlude in the middle of an otherwise slowly shifting long-form club experience, and I was happy to see people responding so ecstatically.

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CGNY: Orlando was very much on my mind that night too. I definitely had some dissociative experience – I completely lost track of time while watching it. I couldn't tell (until Zara told me afterwards!) that you performed for something like 10 minutes. It was like the movie "Contact"! I felt like I'd been gone for hours!!

Talk to me about the whole math/music connection because I'm fascinated by that. I love math - but I discovered that I did after the fact, not in school! If math was taught in school and shown

the amazing applications of it in real life I think a lot more people would be interested in it! Especially when combined with music.

GZ: Chaotic Equation for Modular Synthesizer was a piece I did in grad school at Mills. I never got very far with math in school, and have never considered myself good at it. I've learned to apply it in situations that call for it, like circuit design. What got me thinking about math in terms of music was seeing synthesizer functions reduced to mathematical equations, coupled with having heard modular synths described as analog computers. The idea of using a synthesizer to solve an equation fit naturally with another topic I was obsessing about at the time: chaos theory. Chaos theory demonstrates richly complex, seemingly unpredictable results from basic deterministic initial conditions. I saw that I could setup a simple recursive algebraic equation on a modular synth and that I should be able to calculate chaotic sonic results. It worked very well after I overcame one big hidden stumbling block (for the nerds: the ring modulators I was using to multiply were also dividing the resulting voltage by 10).

CGNY: Wow! Fascinating! So on an average day how much time are you spending with your machines making music?

GZ: Speaking of chaos, I'm a freelancer, so my schedule is all over the place. Sometimes I go weeks without a day off and can't use my studio at all, and sometimes I go weeks without working and I'm in there all day.

"I like experiences that shift my awareness of my body and its functioning in space. Music, light, and video are great media for that."

CGNY: What makes you start to work on a piece - a feeling, waiting for inspiration to strike or perhaps "it's been 3 weeks since I was in the studio" kind of feeling? Also this kind of music would appear not to have the standard approach or does it - with regard to recording it?

GZ: A lot of my inspiration comes from exploring the behavior of a given system. It could be hidden unintended quirks in the functionality of a device that were not intended by the designer (listening to a strobe light would be an example), or artifacts of technological limitations that are not supposed to be a meaningful part of the output (using extreme compression to find sounds hiding in the noise floor). Sometimes I find seeds to start with by digging deep into fiddly old

menus on a particular piece of gear, sometimes its serendipitous interactions between several connected devices. Brian Eno's thoughts on creative process and use of tools resonate with me. Sometimes it's a more typical impulse to make something that sounds a certain way or has a certain mood before I even start. I find that more difficult because the abstract idea is so easy to lose once I try to translate it using devices that are essentially pretty stubborn and limited when it comes to intuitive expression.

CGNY: In terms of a personal artistic satisfaction, what gives you the most pleasure? Is it playing out or working on a piece in the studio or both?

GZ: They're different types of satisfaction. Working in the studio allows me to take my time and be a perfectionist about certain things while ignoring the potential effect on other people. But playing live is great because of the instant feedback from an audience. Especially doing dance music, where you're riding the energy of a room, whether you try to ignore that or not. It's always nice to get hear people's reactions afterward too. Most of my studio activity never gets heard or seen by anyone else, and when it does it often doesn't get a response that I can see.

CGNY: Do you take psychedelics?

GZ: I've tried most of the common ones I think. I'm a sucker for novel experiences. There are definite threads through my work that deal with perceptual disorientation, or maybe re-orientation. As I alluded to earlier, I like experiences that shift my awareness of my body and its functioning in space. Music, light, and video are great media for that.

CGNY: What other artists in any field past or present that you admire or inspire you?

GZ: Outside of club and 'pop' music I draw a lot of inspiration from structural film and early experimental video art, minimalist music, minimalist and conceptual art, and artists using automatic and algorithmic processes. Recognizable names that come to mind include Tony Conrad, Laurie Spiegel, Alvin Lucier, Paul Sharits, Laurie Anderson, Nic Collins, Forcefield, Maryanne Amacher, David Tudor, Joan Jonas, Scott Stark, Steina and Woody Vasulka, John Whitney, Eva Hesse, Grace Jones, Conlon Nancarrow, the writings of Manuel de Landa, James Tenney's Meta-Hodos, Terre Thaemlitz on club culture, Ta-Nehisi Coates on race, Werner Herzog on the jungle, James Fei, John Bischoff and Maggie Payne at Mills, evolutionary theory,

biology and science in general. Also some of the most crucially inspiring moments for me have just been watching other people work and explore, seeing how peers and mentors think differently about media, problems, systems, and potentials. I've been lucky to witness so many vital local music and art scenes, and to have been inspired by so many artists whose names will never be recorded in books.

"The other aspect of New York that I find a lot of value in is living, working and interacting with people from a huge variety of cultural and economic backgrounds"

CGNY: How long have you been in NYC and how does it compare to Portland/San Fran for the kind of A/V performance you do?

GZ: Four years. Having toured the US and Europe extensively with Eats Tapes, I'll say Portland and San Francisco definitely have relatively receptive audiences. New York has been great in that there are just so many people to engage with. I'm consistently surprised by how much is actually going on, and glad that I have the opportunity to check out unfamiliar music and art pretty much weekly. I don't perform here more than a few times a year, but overall there are lots of opportunities. The other aspect of New York that I find a lot of value in is living, working and interacting with people from a huge variety of cultural and economic backgrounds. People elsewhere have been proclaiming New York to be dead for decades if not centuries, but these parts of it are still here, and still pretty vital, for now at least.

CGNY: [Bossa Nova](#) on [July 9th](#) - what can we expect? You said it will be a live set. Looking forward to that!

GZ: Bossa will be a dance-oriented set on a few fairly inexpensive grooveboxes. I like fighting with those things to see how much I can squeeze out of gear that's often dismissed as not so serious or respectable. It's a return to Tunnel Vision, a night I used to DJ every month with Ital and Lori Napoleon. It will be fun to be back in the booth there again.

check out www.gzifcak.net

Greg Zifcak

Written by CGNY

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and occasionally on [Facebook](#) !

[Bossa Nova July 9th](#) - the experience starts at 10pm!