Aphex Twin: How Shaping Technology Shapes Us

"Miniaturization has changed our experience of mechanism" (Haraway, 1991)

In 1997 Aphex Twin (aka AFX) claimed he wouldn't have toured for live shows had he not acquired a laptop in the early 90s. AFX continues by admiring the amount of power that can be harnessed within such a small black box…

It's not that big (the lap-top) and you can still make more noise than any fucking band. It's simple. You got to these festivals and you see these bands that are shit, just making noise. But you put this in and it's ten times louder with more bass. It makes loads more noise. (Gross, 1997)

"It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. … Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others." (Haraway, 1991)

AFX describes using computers as an integral part of the process for his music. The computer becomes more than a device for recording and playback in the hands of an electronic musician. Creating software and utilizing electronic sequencing allows the computer to become an instrument in its own right, and like any instrument, those that practice enough can use the device as an extension of themselves and their ideas…

"In the conventional sense, I love the programs I make. It doesn't involved any sort of interaction- you just put it in, press the button and it goes. That doesn't involved much interaction and that's quite hard to get the balance right. If I'm using a sequencer, I don't find it difficult to use it to get what I want into the music. I don't find the equipment to get into my way then. If I did, I wouldn't use it." (Gross, 1997)

"There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of the technical and organic."
(Haraway, 1991)

Ontology: a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being
Ontology deals with abstract entities. (via Merriam Webster*)

In other words, there is no distinct way of separating ourselves from the technology we make use of. We don't simply use computers, we embody ourselves through them. AFX creates work that could never exist without the symbiosis of man and machine.

Looking at Aphex Twin's 2001 album Drukqs, we can see a couple distinct ways sequencing techniques were used to create songs.

First we have breakneck beat programming that AFX is widely known for in *Cock/ver10*. Taking cues from both Jungle and Acid genres, Aphex himself cites his own inspiration back from his days in the rave scene.

"For years, I could listen to jungle and nick things from them, but they didn't know I existed. It was a separate world. But that world doesn't exist any more. It's all merged into this global Internet world." (Sherburne, 2014)

We immediately transition to the calm of his renowned piano piece, *Avril 14th*, which was made using a modern player piano. This technique is reminiscent of the Automatons described in the documentary, *The Android Prophecy*.

"Avril 14th' was recorded on a Yamaha Disklavier: a standard Yamaha acoustic piano rigged to accept MIDI data, meaning you can write on computer and have an acoustic piano perform it. As Scott Wilson writes in his guide to Aphex Twin gear, "the result is something that sounds human but not quite" (Horner, Al, factmag)

We can clearly tell, using computers shapes us and our work, but how does it go the other way around? Technology is nothing but an invention of our own, so surely it is influenced by us in equal measure. Working with pre-designed systems of technology can influence us to behave in ways according to its will, or more accurately, its creator's intentions. By modifying and or making our own renditions of technology, we can shape tools to fit ourselves. AFX has a history of modifying music technology, which in turn shapes the work he is capable of.

"'You've done some tinkering and reworking of the keyboards and electronic equipment you've used. Did you find that what they could do wasn't good enough?'
AFX: 'Yeah. I knew that there better keyboards that were out there but it was costly. I really enjoyed doing working on them though. It's really taxing on your brain, making circuits. It's satisfying to make your equipment and then to make music with it as well. It's really nice.'"
(Gross, 1997)

Aphex Twin has already taken his spirit of experimentation to the next level by collaborating with both synth manufacturers Korg and Novation. Along with Korg, AFX oversaw the implementation of microtonal scales which allow the user to load and modify custom scales to pitches of any choosing. (Wilson, 2016) Together with Novation, AFX conceptualized a new mode for sequencing where individual keys can

play separate patches. (Wilson, 2019) **Both of these collaborations added new ways of interacting with the machines, expanding any users' potential sonic capabilities.**

Analyzing someone as prolific as AFX makes it easy to realize the most intriguing aspect of shaping technology is how it opens up new possibilities to us. What we choose to do with the potential is entirely up to the individual, which is why even the most powerful technology can mean nothing in the hands of the inexperienced. Understanding the importance of interaction between man and machine, we can hear the direct link between biology and technology throughout the album *Drukqs*, let alone *Aphex Twin's* discography in its entirety.

"The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment." (Haraway, 1991)

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http://www.furious.com/perfect/aphextwin.html
When James began programming faster, jungle-inspired breakbeats in the mid-1990s, he named friends and fellow musicians Luke Vibert and Tom Jenkinson as influences

PSF: You've done some tinkering and reworking of the keyboards and electronic equipment you've used. Did you find that what they could do wasn't good enough?
Yeah. I knew that there better keyboards that were out there but it was costly. I really enjoyed doing working on them though. It's really taxing on your brain, making circuits. It's satisfying to make your equipment and then to make music with it as well. It's really nice.
^ Regarding implementation of AFX mode

PSF: What kind of programs are you working on?

Things to just get more new sounds and sort of twist my brain as well. It's that complicated. I really love it. It's really technical. That's what I'm interested in basically-really technical music as well as having it be emotional too.

^ Regarding SampleBrain program released in 2023

If I'm using a sequencer, I don't find it difficult to use it to get what I want into the music. I don't find the equipment to get into my way then. If I did, I wouldn't use it.

https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/reader/aphex-twin/

In a 2014 interview, James said of jungle that "I still think it's the ultimate genre, really, because the people making it weren't musicians," and noted that "for years, I could listen to jungle and nick things from them, but they didn't know I existed

Pitchfork: One interesting thing about the record is how every song keeps morphing—I don't think there are two bars that are identical in any track. It's like an organism.

RDJ: It can be quite impenetrable for most people, because you can't latch on to something. It sounds quite random at first. I'm an erratic person: From setups to actually when I'm doing a track, it's just turning and switching and changing all the time. But there is a method. People just have to take time to work it out.

https://www.factmag.com/2017/04/14/aphex-twin-avril-14th/

It felt like a perfect embodiment of the line James constantly treads between the mechanical and the human"

Avril 14th' was recorded on a Yamaha Disklavier: a standard Yamaha acoustic piano rigged to accept MIDI data, meaning you can write on computer and have an acoustic piano perform it. As Scott Wilson writes in his guide to Aphex Twin gear, "the result is something that sounds human but not quite"

https://usa.yamaha.com/products/musical_instruments/pianos/disklavier/e3_series/index.html

^ Yamaha product page.

- Link aphex influences to jungle
- Link Jungle to tracker music
- Link tracker music to electronic performance (class articles)
- Link trackers to sequencers and synth features

Instead of chopping audio in some other pre or post production process, sequence it to change sounds in real time

Drukqs use of MIDI sequencing piano similar to automatons presented in "The Android Prophecy: Are Robots a Threat?"

In this discussion I'll be talking about the influences electronic mediums have on music and the ways Richard D. James' Aphex Twin has used them. In particular we'll be looking at his 2001 album Drukqs and its use of sequencing, in a couple of ways.

The contrast between downtempo MIDI piano sequences and hectic drum-breaks made akin to the genre of jungle complement each other immensely. We're given chaotic arrangements that feel like you have to hold onto something to get through, even when there's nothing to grab, followed by the tranquil harmony and approachable sound of a single instrument.

Cock/ver10
First we have the sequencing inspired by jungle producers of the 90s