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The Theory of Mixing

an inventory of Amsterdam free radio techniques

By Geert Lovink

Since the early eighties, Amsterdam has boasted an extensive collection of free radio stations. These pirates work non-commercially out of squatted buildings and are grudgingly tolerated by the authorities. They operate in the margins of the squatters' movement. Now and then stations are raided, but they return to the air as quickly as they left. Involved in squatting and other radical movements in the beginning, in the mid-80s the stations went their own way and began to experiment with the medium itself. After the squat movement vanished from the scene, the radio culture continued to develop. The result was the evolution of a tradition with a sound all its own, which adds up to more than the sum of its ethnic and experimental musical ingredients.

After countless mergers, closings, name changes, and secessions in the direction of legal local radio, three stations were finally left. The smallest is activist radio De Vrije Keijzer (The Free Keyser), which delivers exclusively political information. It's the one with the most staying power. The Free Keyser started broadcasting at the end of 1979 out of the endangered squat De Grote Keijzer, and along with the squatted complex of canal houses it became a symbol of the people's determination. The Keyser served for years as an assembly point for highly diverse (neighborhood) radio groups, until a schism developed in 1983 and it began specializing in activist news. Ten years on, it broadcasts just once a week and is run by four or five people with a soft spot for squatting and the "autonome" movement.

Radio 100 broadcasts seven days a week, from five p.m. till deep in the night, and encompasses the whole spectrum from African and industrial music to doo-wop, house and reggae. It is Amsterdam's largest pirate. Although the police did a massive raid in 1991, confiscating all the LPs and equipment and arresting 15 people, many consider the still illegal Radio 100 an established institution, not open to new ideas and with its back turned on experimentation. The punk and hardcore station Radio Dood (Radio Death) was the forerunner of Radio Patapoe (Radio Patapoe), Radio 100's younger and wilder sister, which with its hundred different programs has grown into a genuine multicultural institution. After years of being virtually unknown, in the 90s Patapoe has grown steadily, managing to attract more and more of the out-of-the-ordinary underground.

These three stations are associations of programmers who have their own shows. There are no central editorial or directorial boards. The dedicated have all the say. The aversion to meetings is strong and chronic; the majority of the colleagues know each other slightly or not at all. The free radio stations run on financial contributions by the programmers themselves, benefit concerts and profits from their own bars. Most participants get their income from Social

Security, so there's no pressure to provide wages. Those desiring to work for money can go to an commercial station.

The information content here is notably low; very little paper is involved. The reporting/documentary genre is conspicuously absent. The strength lies in the "live" aspect, the capricious character traits of the radio makers and their passion for music, not in professional equipment or journalistic technique. Along with homemade FM transmitters they use run-of-the-mill consumer electronics. In contrast to TV or video, radio need cost virtually nothing. It's all done according to the maxim, "They have all the money, but no time. We have all the time in the world, but no money." This makes carefree experimentation with sound possible. Along with indie labels and world music, radio plays and shows with drop-in guests, the mix shows provide the most distinctive sound of the Amsterdam stations. They represent nothing and no one. Mixers create their own sound universes, infinite in length and breadth. They bob about in an ocean of free time. Duration is the essence of their concoctions. If the mix is subjected to a time constraint, then it turns into a live scratch or rap, making do without the glamour of a performing artist. These live performances bear traces of genius. A fleeting masterwork is born on the spot only to evaporate into the ether afterwards. A careless attitude to copyright is a not unimportant precondition. Rummaging in the world media archive is not on good terms with the constitutional state. But the latter excludes free radio. As opposed to the spirit of the times, which zooms in in order to distill a trend out of the musical arsenal, the mix chooses the maximum aperture. Any sound, any music can serve as material. The mixture is not a specialized genre dished up for a small group of fans. It is an expedition to the innermost recesses of radio. The penchant for mixing represents the transition from alternative media, which still try to fill a lacuna in the existing supply, to sovereign media, which have detached themselves from the potential listening audience. They do not see themselves as part of bourgeois (anti-)openness or the smorgasbord of media choices, which at most they observe from outside. Things broadcast by others are merely potential ingredients. News is one archive among many. Sovereign media are fallout from the "emancipation of the media", and abandon the communication model. Vendex from Radio Patapoe: "I believe in chance listeners; I'm one too. Patapoe doesn't have an audience that has to be supplied with the truth. We never act like we're the only ones providing the listener with information. Patapoe is not a forum or an alternative; it's a goal in itself." Amsterdam's sound blenders don't see themselves as part of a techno-avant-garde. Playing around with expensive toys for the sake of form is seen as elitist. The point is not a rejuvenation cure for art, but airwave pollution that makes use of the normal media's overproduction. Unlike a dandy wanting to suck up to the ruling class or the underworld whose eccentric decadence is a question of identity, the sovereigns dedicate their tribute to all things happening, to the wallpaper which determines the decor in our media space. They don't warm up samba, soul or schmaltz as the latest cult item or golden oldie for playing on the collective memory, which so likes to be refreshed. They don't

practice audio history, trotting out near-extinct musical styles to get them interred in pop history. They collect and examine material for its alienation potential. Trash is taken along on the trip and treated with a certain respect, like a foreigner one passes the time with during travel. Processing is not an act of violence. The point is not ritually driving out some demon thought to reside in the media. The mix shows us that we must travel through an immense empty space before we arrive at a new meaning. Sovereign media, in hard- as well as software, are hybrid through and through. Old and new, popular and obscure, trivial and heavy, all is forged together into a stunning total mix. The mixmasters connect discarded tape recorders to high-tech samplers and lace a cut-up Bush speech with a language course, barking and a dance orchestra. This ironic use of media knows no subcultural equivalent spreading through the streets or the clubs. Sovereign media build on a parallel universe that no longer intersects with the classic space of the polis. The junk collectors move unobtrusively through the unofficial reality of shopping centers, flea markets and garbage boats. These European otakus are no longer wandering through the readable city; they're moving in a new space, where the imaginary mixed cargo of the 20th century is piled up. Culture carriers once tossed into the trash for their oddity are nimbly assessed at a glance for singularity; you assemble your own program in movie theaters, video shops, used record stores and antiquariats. Mixers are the vultures and parasites of audio-visual society. Their recycling has nothing to do with economic considerations, but comes from an obsession with recordings that have escaped real-time mode. They lose themselves in the galaxy of everything that has ever been recorded. Hammond organs, animal noises, fairy tales, non-stop hits a-go-go, speeches by John F. Kennedy, Dutch cowboy music. Arjan: "I almost never buy new records. I find them on the street or in little out-of-the-way shops and get them from people that would otherwise throw them away. I never pay more than 3 for a record. I also make music myself and get demo tapes. It's like being an archeologist or an archivist. You find tape recorders on the street, and answering machines with the tapes still in them, and before long you'll find CD players too." At free radio stations the equipment is not a tool, but a toy for passionate play. Although the official media are reporting more and more frequently on "the media", their own equipment is not allowed to be seen or heard. In those circles engineering is still a hindrance which needs to be surmounted. The promise implied by high-tech is that one day static and noise will be banished. Vendex: "If you put a signal through 40 km of copper wire, I think you should be able to hear that. That expensive equipment that normal stations use just produces more silence. The VU meters on real equipment work down to -50 db while a regular deck only goes to -20 db. They're quieter than quiet. The loud and soft sounds are pulled farther apart. Why should you have a right to so much silence?" Media don't become any more credible by showing more of how they work. "I think it's very healthy to doubt the images being administered. Showing the cameraman really doesn't make it any more convincing." Vendex is glad Patapoe doesn't get any attention in the media. "If we want to say something, we have our transmitter for that. We

don't hand out compliments to other media and we're not dying to." Patapoe's slogan is "Stand up Better to a Young World". Unlike Radio 100, Patapoe likes to veil itself in mystery about its existence and its intents. The 1990 manifesto says only that Patapoe came forth out of "the increasing demand for social deficiencies." Readable elsewhere: "Patapoe draws boundaries where others don't suspect them. Thanks to our professional monopoly, what no one wants has been proven possible." Patapoe calls itself "multirational". It desires to be more than multicultural and multiracial. "Those words don't indicate any solution; they don't go any further than toleration of others. But that still doesn't work, because everyone thinks they know best, and blame others for their narrowmindedness. Like, they have some kind of flaw so they don't have the same enlightened insights as I do. Multirationality goes against this attitude and aims for the acceptance of various rational conclusions, which can all exist at once."

The emancipation of the listener has been the clearest articulation so far from the defunct punk station Radio Death, with its credo, "Listen or Die". Vendex: "At Death they used to scream into the microphone, 'Turn your radio off nowwww! I wish my voice could kill.' The average listener with his bourgeois norms was told to jump out the window. 'Throw all your records away!' But the television slaves in their one-family residences with their living room ensembles didn't listen anyway, because punk seems to be unlistenable for the non-initiated. It was just a little joke, because the punks that listened didn't feel it was directed at them. If someone bellowed 'Turn your radio off now' that made it extra cool. You only turned the radio off if they shut up. 'Are you a listener? Get lost!' Some people thought it was sick. You're not supposed to abuse the luxury of being able to do radio. But it attests to a realistic view of the medium to say that if you don't like it, you should just turn it off. We're playing our music here and I could care less what you think of it. And doing the greatest shows meanwhile; that was the art." At Death the mess had a system. The programmers as well as the many guests hanging around the studio were usually stoned and drunk. Punk's characteristic indifference was unleashed on the medium itself. There was none of the respect for engineering or fear of spreading out over the airwaves which still characterizes alternative radio. Vendex: "People liked to do a sloppy job. You'd hear them messing up all the time. I have a tape of the 'Overplayed Top 20,' the most overplayed punk and hardcore records of 1986, presented by Tuft. By number five people were already leaving the studio. By number three Tuft got so sick that he left the studio and a chance bystander had to take over the Top 20. Other stations would go crazy if people blew things off like that. We could never become real radio, that bunch of wayward punks." Death consistently took place in the red. Overmodulation and feedback were part of the show. Crackling faders, broken-down microphones, decks that ate cassettes and awful cuing capability weren't a flaw that needed covering up, they were a property of the final signal.

For Bart Radio Death was "a vague period in my life I don't remember too much of - hash use rose to unprecedented heights."n Bart played new hardcore. He

does still remember how the studio looked: “The first one was in an old john, a two-by-three meter closet. There was a wood stove that leaked. You had a choice: either starting up the heater and getting poisoned by the carbon monoxide or opening the window across from the door and freezing from the cold. You couldn’t turn your ass without kicking the table and making the record skip. Later we moved to a place where you could at least walk around, with chairs you could sit on and take a look outside. The most important studio was on the ground floor, above the cellar which was permanently filled with water. There were doors on the floor to insulate it, with some rugs over them. Everything was filthy and covered with graffiti. We had a mixing board without enough channels, but it did have a switching capability and people who wanted to play a tape after a record constantly forgot to hit the switch, and then couldn’t hear anything and didn’t know what was wrong. There was no heating and this was in the hard winter of ‘86-‘87. People were doing shows at -15 C. There was a hole in the floor where you could see the block of ice. You couldn’t roll a joint or your fingers would freeze.”

Doing a hardcore show is hard work since the songs are so short. Vendex: “If you work by the book, song-talk-song, to keep it interesting, you’ll go crazy. So it’s better to make a compilation and come back in after five songs with ‘Now that was punk!’, ‘That was a great pogo,’ ‘Now throw your chairs out the window.’ The late Bronco Shamblebutt found a great format for his hardcore show. As soon as the microphone opened there was a huge feedback and he screamed over it what the next record was and then put the record in loud as hell, totally in the red. That whole show was in the red. He was always really stoned. According to an anecdote he once fell asleep. For a half hour you could hear the runout groove, till someone ran into the studio and woke him up.”

Radio Death’s achievement was that it went deeper into a musical genre than anyone else. At Patapoe, Death’s successor, diverse musical styles are on offer. But preference is still given to “bad” music. Vendex: “We’ve always had the luxury of having an alternative radio station that plays the newest independent releases. As far as I’m concerned that alternative structure can bleed to death. The most important for us are Frank Valdor’s Non-Stop Hits a-Go-Go records, he’s a German like James Last who did medleys in super-commercial arrangements. They recorded a party crowd with it. The songs begin and end with cheering. That music isn’t nearly as bad as it seems. They’re vilified, but of course no one listens to them. They could be the house of 1996.” As with the feedbacking hardcore, the point here is scaring people away: if you’re listening to this, turn it off. Radio Death introduced a unique media connection: radio broadcasts of complete feature films. Vendex: “To keep the transmitter stable, we kept it on 24 hours a day, but we were only broadcasting four days a week. To while away the night it’s fun to play a horror film, because they’re grisly and they have such good sound. I find the pictures superfluous. The special effects are laid on so thick that they’re fake. Most of the pictures are ugly and fake and don’t convince me. It’s such a waste to depict something as so-called realistic; it’ll never work anyway. You believe your ears, but you distrust the picture.”

The strength of listening to film and watching radio is in the suggestion. "As far as sound goes, Evil Dead is one of the best, and of course Texas Chainsaw. Or one of those bad sci-fis where a woman is screaming all through the film - really disgusting. Or Inframan from Japan, a cross between science fiction and a martial arts film. Every monster in that makes a different sound. Every movement Inframan makes has its own special quality. German cop shows like Derrick and Tatort are good too. Film and TV sound more natural on the radio; they're less artificial than a radio play. You can fantasize what pictures go with them, just like when you read a book. That's strengthened more by all the details you hear, a cup, shuffling, rustling. Films can capture that in a very refined way." Impressive radio also uses the power of suggestion. Vendex: "Every three minutes you should get the idea, I've gotta keep listening to this. I like to start making promises right during the intro tune, ones that probably won't come true. Things you've always wanted to hear: 'What do naked women think about?' The phone rings 'Hello?' They've hung up. Did someone call or was that a fragment from a broadcast from three weeks ago? I want it to be subtle, with ticking clocks and creaking doors, sound that's barely there but determines the atmosphere." The group STORT (Dump), who besides radio also do performances, video and music, had a program called Vox Christiana (the Pope's record label) on Radio Dood. They were in favor of "uncoordinated radio terror". "We said things we didn't believe. We posed as converted Christians. Everything we got hold of we smashed, pulverized, dessicated. An orgy of sounds, wonderful to bathe in. It can be served raw or be pre-treated. Our cut-ups are a ton of work, 20 minutes for two minutes of sound. Our shows have no feedback capability, but when we play our music in public, all hell breaks loose. There's a riot. It's very easy to translate universal feelings into laughter. But just radio is less crude and shocking; the audience isn't present and can't react directly. People don't know where the station is, so attacks aren't a consideration." STORT get most of their material from TV. "We isolate the text from the picture. On the TV news the ideology is often in the text. The idea about what the pictures mean comes out more. When you hear the TV, that instantly evokes images. TV is a better source than radio, because it often presents things very simply. A familiar fragment carries a whole context with it.

Some broadcasts are so bad, they're just screaming to be misused." STORT now

do a late-night show on Radio 100. One of their sources is their own music, made on synthesizers, samplers and computers. Dark, apocalyptic tones are alternated with Doris Day and Frankie Lane. "We're interested in the contrast between one word and another. When you make a cut-up you make a new

story. But it stays linear, because we don't keep rewinding and fast-forwarding. When you just turn two decks on and off with the pause button, it's all up to chance. The backgrounds we use are mostly heavy and dark. The end product of the mix is unpredictable. Quality is not guaranteed. We don't reuse previous programs. Our noise doesn't have to change the world, but it is an commentary

on the media. Someone like Bush appears a lot in the media, we come across him a lot and what he says isn't insignificant. We have no respect for the media; maybe you can call that political."

STORT does not like to be lumped in with industrial music. "That would be opposed to the ideas behind it. Soundscaping offers space, and it refuses to be reduced to a genre that easily." The history of mixing is quickly written: the detournement techniques of the situationists, musique concrete, Burroughs' cut-up, John Cage...

STORT: "Of course we're futurists, dadaists and surrealists. Even the futurists were already conducting similar experiments. As soon as there were tape recorders, people started cutting sound into pieces. The first montage record is from '48, by Pierre Henri, who you could easily put next to an industrial band like Etant Donnés. We use the same grotesque exaggeration as the surrealists, and even more the carnivalesque, which we evoke in our orgies. The avant-gardes have become an integral part of culture, and you can freely draw on them. So you don't have to explicitly acknowledge you belong to any of these movements, or even know anything about them." Indeed, the Amsterdam school of mixing unconsciously places itself outside of the art/historic discourse, which will wearily remark that everything has already been done. STORT: "We try to avoid the classic model of postmodernism. We do a lot of quoting, but disagree with the context postmodernism puts the quote into. We don't have any fin de siècle feeling; on the contrary we're very optimistic, without getting prophetic. Everything that comes our way, we want to control it by using it. We want to keep the power for ourselves. You won't be a victim of the media as long as you use them. That's why we revel in the media, in a Rabelaisian way. To us the signals aren't immaterial, they're tactile. We wallow with great pleasure in the media mire." Their own history also remains unknown, so there is no baggage to carry. The grandfather of Amsterdam mixing, Radio Rabotnik, which designed audio landscapes with the help of tape loops, has disappeared behind the horizon of the twilight of the gods. For Arjan from The OK Show, the mix is not an attack on the listener, as declaimed by punk. To him, it's about creating an atmosphere: "I have no musical preference whatsoever. My only criterion is that it does something for me. Making a program is such a strange experience; maybe a thousand people are listening to you and maybe not even a dog. The listener becomes an abstract concept. You're a listener yourself too. So you hear if something's well put together. If it's going good for me, it will be received well by the listener too." In the philosophy of The OK Show, the art of mixing is noiselessly breaking up an atmosphere which has been constructed. Arjan: "My mixing consists of music, spoken word and background noises. I always walk down the street with my walkman and tape things. Or you use the sound from the person before you, and maybe you play it backwards. The last groove of an LP can be really nice if you let it play for five minutes. I'm not asking you to understand how I jump from one thing to another. Radio should give your ears a massage. However kitschy a record might be, there has to be feeling in it. I'd rather rape accessible music; over muzak I play a guitar solo or

a trashy story. You can't take a course to learn how records flow together nicely. You do it often and have an ear for creating a good atmosphere. With Public Enemy, you can hear that they have a way with that, while it doesn't work with other rap bands." The OK Show uses techniques like playing with the speed control on the cassette deck, finger-spinning an LP, or playing two identical records on two turntables with a slight delay between them. Arjan: "In the beginning we cut up commercials, the weather and the news. A recurring item was 'Uncle Bob's Stories,' where the entire history of the world was mixed together - Jimi Hendrix in Holland during World War II is something that's totally impossible, but we tried to make it as plausible as we could." For a while Arjan worked with Miss Akira and Dr. Videodisk. "He records voices and always has his walkman with him and makes tapes in the grocery store. When he likes a sentence he writes it down on a piece of paper and notes the time. His whole room is full of them. When he wants to make a story he sets them all in order, which is a very labor-intensive way of working. He puts the background music on a tape loop and then sticks the voice fragments together. With Miss Akira I did spontaneous plays. You just put your brain in neutral and everything flaps out by itself."

Arjan now does a late-night show on Patapoe. "It starts at midnight and can last three or four hours, and then I'm usually busy winding down till 5:00, gradually telling the people goodnight, in musical terms. I play long pieces of mind-broadening music from the sixties, mixed with psychedelic records from the thirties, like Cab Calloway. Those might have been hits then, but they're really weird."

Arjan picked up a lot of techniques from DFM Radio-Television, who did live mixes at Radio 100 for years and now do performances under the name ARTburo.

"DFM was critical towards established radio, and created disorder inside Radio 100 as well. They'd crash the studio, hijack a program or go to the transmitter and directly interfere with the signal coming from the studio. DFM went all Saturday night starting at midnight and then presented a breakfast show out of Radio 100's cafe. For other DJs it was unreal." DFM combined the mix with a show element. The group members were continually assuming different identities. When it got boring, they invented a new name and a different formula. That immediately created the impression that a whole media mafia was at work. Chris from DFM: "We had to have a network orchestra. It consisted of a handful of tapes. A lack of guests? No problem, there are always several alter egos around. Radio is the most intimate of all media and this is especially true in the nocturnal hours. With a couple of friends and a nice atmosphere in the studio you can easily fill a couple of hours. If there's a telephone response from listeners, you get to hear their interpretation of what you've made. Those reactions were taped and broadcast again, but first cut or mixed to preserve the deformative aspect." Deformation doesn't just mean reusing fragments made by yourself or others. It also indicates the degree to which the listener is swept up in the new product you've made. Only when this happens has that person been

deformed. At DFM deformation is not a reformation of the current information. The two are equal. Chris: "In the remix parts of what was previously made are used as raw materials for deformation. These are extracted from all media. An old program can be the basis tape for a new program. Read half an article from last week's paper, add a dash of advertising, stir well and hey presto!" Vendex from Patapoe is for the subtle approach. "At DFM quite a bit of patience is expected of listeners. These days I think short suggestive radio plays are better than a web of sound where you mix four different sources together at once. But the mixers can't do anything in under three hours." He and his colleague Dan Kerwell hit on the idea of mixing sounds without rhythm. "There's no percussion in classical music, in contrast to most other mix material." So Cafe Bartok was born. "It's inspired by the cafes you find nearby the opera hall, that radiate a yuppie twit aura and play classical music in the background. We didn't and still don't know a thing about classical music. We made beautiful discoveries like Mahler's Sixth, which goes well with Mussorgski. We couldn't tell which record was which anymore; they completely slid together. Or Erik Satie on 45 crossed with Chopin on 45, which sounds brilliant. Then the radio plays about composers came naturally. We bring them together, especially the less well-known ones. Handel, Grieg and Brahms sitting at a pub table in 1882 in the town of Grand Qualle near Arles. They're always drinking, always broke and selling their opuses to each other. We use heavy words to give the story weight, like mother, bread, stone, death. And Albert Schweitzer always keeps popping up. He brought the brothers Telemann from Indonesia to Vienna to study music. He's a merchant and has a monopoly on composers' paper." Hearing a symphony at the wrong speed sends chills down your spine. But Cafe Bartok is a parody of classical stations which have declared the music holy. Vendex: "It would be punk to start with a fragment of classical music, and then scare the listener to death with noise from hell. But then they'd turn off the radio. It's more fun to irritate them for longer."

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