

## Coil: The Darker Side of Sampling\*

Long before the verb was coined, Coil keyboardist Peter Christopherson started sampling. As the tape player for Throbbing Gristle (a proto-industrial group whose music mixed boom-chuck machine rhythms, perky melodies, and mordant lyrics), Christopherson used a jury-rigged one-octave keyboard to trigger Sony stereo cassette decks. With it, he added shadows to such TG tunes as “Persuasion”, in which taped voices of kiddies at play underscore flatly intoned lyrics about a man who’s “got a little biscuit tin/to keep your panties in”.

“It was a box that [TG synthesist] Chris Carter made for me, to my design,” Christopherson recalls, “that basically switched on tape recorders—six cassette machines, the output of each going to a different key. Many of the machines I used in TG were cassette machines that were stripped down and altered to play backward and forward and four tracks at once, the speed variable by flywheels. The very first sampling device there ever was, as far as I know, was manufactured by Mountain Hardware for Apple computers. It was designed to reproduce voice samples, and had a very limited selection of pitches. I was using that onstage in ’79 or ’80, which was before the first Fairlight was used commercially. So I’ve always had a soft spot for sampling.”

That soft spot popped up in Christopherson’s work with Psychic TV, after TG split up, and has become almost a *raison d’être* in his current project, Coil, which formed around 1983. Strictly a studio band, Coil comprises himself and lyricist John Balance, who sings and plays Chapman Stick and some keyboards. They get an occasional hand from Steven E. Thrower, who mainly plays drums and brass.

Coil’s latest, *Horse Rotorvator* (Relativity), hodgepodes Fairlight brass, sniff-clank percussion, Gregorian choirs, and lyrics about death, sex, and divine cannibalism. The real star, though, is Christopherson’s sampling. “In *Ostia*,” he informs, “there’s a recording of some grasshoppers that we made at Chichen Itza in Mexico. Chichen Itza is a pyramid that was used for the sacrifice of young men. Blood flowed down the steps of the pyramid and made it impossible to climb up.” The murmuring insects add atmosphere to the song, whose jumping-off point is the life and death of Pasolini, the Italian film director who was murdered by a “rent-boy” in Ostia, Italy.

The story behind the background scuffles and squeals on *The Anal Staircase* is equally odd. “A tape was sent to us by a gay who’s sort of a fan of ours,” Christopherson says. “It’s the sound of him playing with his son. But because of the title of the song and the rather explicit nature of some of the lyrics, we thought it would be interesting to counterpoint the tape’s harmless sound with a lyric that had other overtones, to see if it would change the listener’s perception of this little kid laughing and saying things like, ‘My legs are starting to sweat.’ Immediately one begins to think that there’s something going on, some sort of torture scene.” As if that weren’t weirdness enough for one song, Christopherson adds with a chuckle, “the basic loop is a section of ‘The Rite of Spring’ backward and upside-down, and at a quarter of the pitch. Somebody actually once told me that they recognized it.”

Making Stravinsky turn backflips might sound a little theatrical, but that’s just the point. Coil strives for what Christopherson calls “a ‘big movie theater’ ambience”: a spacious, symphonic sound that echoes to the sound-tracks of Arthurian romances, biblical epics, or old

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Steve Reeves movies. “We’ve always like movies about Turkish prisons and Roman galleys,” Christopherson says. “Most contemporary music draws its imagery from the past 30 years, going back to the ’50s. But there’s a whole wealth of imagery from earlier times that’s fascinating to draw from.” Such Coil songs as *Slur*, *Ostia*, and *The Golden Section*—with its clapping horses, voiced-over narration, and chanting galley slaves—are straight out of Cecil B. deMille.

Balance’s lyrics are also cinematic. Some songs were pieced together imagistically, like movie storyboards—such as *Blood From the Air*, a musical evocation, Christopherson says, of “something John read about a schizophrenic who lived in Alaska.” The song was “constructed by us just imagining a film in our heads about somebody walking through a very cold landscape and occasionally having mental attacks.”

Theatrics aside, Coil’s music has some decidedly down-to-earth aspects—namely, the hardware Christopherson uses. “Apart from the guitars and brass instruments and some live strings mixed with Fairlight III strings, everything else on *Horse Rotorvator* is artificial,” he notes. “Quite a lot of those sounds were created using an [Emu Systems] Emulator II function to destroy the original sample and produce something else. I used the VCAs and VCFs to do real-time modulation of the original sample.” The Emulator II also played a starring role in the songwriting. “The initial sequences consisted of multi-tracked sample combinations done on the Emulator,” he explains. “In most cases, what I did was download those sequences into a Fairlight by means of the MIDI output. You can edit much more easily on a Fairlight than on an Emulator.”

To avoid the android stiffness of sequence-based songwriting, Christopherson and company “try and con the machines into doing what we want, even though sometimes the machines weren’t even designed to do that.” For *Horse Rotorvator*, the conned machines include a Fairlight II and III for sequencing and editing, Emulator II as the main sound generator, Yamaha DX7, PPG Wave 2.2, and an EMS Synthi for the heavy, distorted sounds. “The Synthi,” Christopherson says, “was like a portable version of their VCS-3 from ’72. It has a collection of VCAs and ring modulators. The way you connect the oscillators and filters is via a matrix board, where you put pins in to make the connections.” Additional artillery included “a few old Woolworth’s-type flangers and distortion pedals.”

But don’t be fooled by all the bits and bytes. Coil are not master musicians. “I can’t really play properly,” Christopherson asserts blithely. “None of us can really play in the conventional sense.”

For once, that old hokum about players “painting with sound” rings true. An artist whose bread and butter comes from the directing TV commercials and pop videos (spots by The Firm and The The are among his recent credits [in 1988 he also produced videos for Erasure -davE]), Christopherson composes Coil songs visually rather than musically. “As long as I can remember, I’ve approached music from a visual point of view,” he says. “Any technique that you can apply to a film, you can also apply to a piece of music. Our tunes that start off with a sort of film script or filmic picture are much more successful than the songs that start with a riff or bass line or conventional musical cue.”

Let other bands write songs. Coil makes ear movies.