

The Music Folder #2 William Basinski

Interview by Francesco Tenaglia, Milan 1 October 2018

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FRANCESCO TENAGLIA: It's an honour to be with William Basinski once again. We'll have a conversation about music and I wanted to start from the first time I met him that was on the occasion of the release of probably one of the most famous of a long series of works which was called *The Disintegration Loops* series. Back then I was pointed to that by an Italian guy, Giuseppe Ielasi, with whom I had a label and we've made a lot of money...no.

WILLIAM BASINSKI: Really?

FT: Not really. The first time I've heard William's music and I thought it was very beautiful but with the passing of years I think that it defined for me a form, let's say, like a wall dividing what was perceived to be the standard in electronic and experimental music because, back then, much of the style was process based, software based, non-personal, aseptic. I mean I love them; this is not to be judgemental. Whereas I individuate in William Basinski's work a finesse, a shift somehow in which there's more of a focus on personal feelings, remembrances. Somehow, also a mourning, if I may say that, towards a past which was true, which evolved into an overall culture of melancholia, nostalgia. It was not very clear for me at the beginning, but then it was clear to me that it became one of the milestones of an era that lasted at least 10 or 15 years. I don't know if you share these kinds of feelings.

WB: Well, it certainly was a moment in time and I was damn glad I had the tape recorders going and the CD burners going, because it was, you know, simply a process of archiving old tape loops, and these tape loops. Well the tapes themselves were old when I got them at a junk store in 1978, when I was 20 years old. And so by 2001 when I had finally gotten this new technology CD burner, I found these cases and cases full of the old loops and I started with this one little container and it was at sort of a very low point in my life: I had closed my shop I had for three years. At the turn of the century, I hadn't had much work, I was pretty broke, I was about to be evicted and I didn't know what I was going to do. But, it was a beautiful day and I was freaking out and so I pulled this little Alan Watts' *The way of zen* book out and sat in July summer in New York in my beautiful broke loft and read it and I thought "Duh, use the time you have to get to work back in the studio and start where you left off". So, I showed up for work and something amazing happened. And then these tapes, these six different loops disintegrated in their own way, in their own time over a period of two days recording session. You know, through the process, when I first started, I was making a new composition, this first loop, which became *Disintegration Loop 1.1*, was so grave, so stately and so beautiful that I just "Boy, I need this now, this is amazing!". So, I fired up my very rare analog Voyager 8 synthesizer and tweaked out a really cool, random "arpeggiating" almost like French horn sounding countermelody. It was going really nice with the loop and so I started recording. Fifteen minutes in, I start realising "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Something's changing". I'm looking in the tape, there's dust, it's obvious the tapes are disintegrating. So, I knew I had to be very careful and make sure I'm recording and monitoring, you know just paying attention. And it just did the most incredible thing. So then, I put on the next loop and got another little [...] going. I didn't know it was going to do it again. The reason I was archiving these old tapes is because this is what happens to old tapes. I wanted to have been able to continue working with these things. The particular thing about this series of loops, that became *The Disintegration Loops*, is that when I was 20, 21, when I was making all of these loops that are in my archive and that I had been using as my patches throughout my career, so when I first started, of course, I wanted to be very involved in the work. I made all kinds of sample, little bits of muzak off the most powerful radio station in New York, at the top of the Empire State building. You could hear those thousand and one strings coming in through the wire we had running around our loft whether the radio was on or not. I loved the strings, I wanted a Mellotron but I couldn't afford one so I thought maybe I can make one. I grabbed a little bit of these strings and slow it down and see what you get so. I started getting amazing results pulling music out of the air, you know, something

from nothing, but I wanted to work with them, I wanted to mix them, and I started doing stuff with [...] radio, pulling atmospheric sounds from in between stations out of the universe, and mixing the loops and doing this kind of thing. Some of these, when I was in my sampling mode, there wasn't even a word called sampling then, I didn't even know what I was doing but I knew I was getting results I liked, so I just kept going. But sometimes, I would grab something, slow it down and it would just be this unbelievably beautiful eternal perfection that, you know, "Oh, we could just listen to this forever, this is perfect". And I had enough composition training to know "Well that's done", but I didn't have enough confidence to know if I could call that my work at the time. So, those kind of got set on the side and so the six different loops that became the *Disintegration Loops* were once set on the side and they all came up together on that day in the studio.

FT: In the same day?

WB: Yeah. One after another and they were released just exactly the way they came up.

FT: The *Disintegration Loops* are an example of the way you worked: studying, relistening to your own older compositions from another era and editing them and releasing them, making them new again and available for a new public who wasn't exposed the first time. When you hear that music, what are the feelings, do you recognise yourself there in the process, in the work? Because you are a self-archivist in a way.

WB: I don't listen to it that much anymore, but I love those pieces so much and they're fascinating. The thing about the type of work I do, I mean I made this work for me, for myself and I do these long eternal kinds of things. A single would be 45 minutes because I've decided for a cassette and then maybe I turn this cassette over if it was really something, if it was really working and go ahead and go on the other side so you could have, I think we had an auto reverse cassette back then, so we could get this thing go forever and ever and ever like *The River* for example, or something like that, that was my first long masterpiece, I think I can say and I knew it at the time. We knew it when it was happening, I was tiptoeing around, I had to go to the bathroom, I walked past [...] studio and he was like "Wow!". That was a magic moment! That's what I need in the studio with my work, if I had to write down every note, I would be so bored.

FT: This is funny to me because when I went to the studio William had in Brooklyn, it's not there anymore, called Arcadia which was a beautiful place where there was culture, a stage, maybe you had happenings and events there and there was always music playing because I came there twice and there was always music playing and I asked you why. You said: "Because sometimes I don't remember what, you know, and I keep on playing and there's a point where I know that it's a good time".

WB: It's a good time, yeah. To see if it's good enough. Twenty years, yeah, it's good enough, you can release it now – laughs – let the kids get a job, for God's sake!

FT: So, my idea was how does your music relates to space? Is there a particular condition in which you think that your music is best experienced, for examples looped around in a house or a concert hall? Do you have this in mind when you release new music?

WB: No, not really. I try to create the space within the music so that you can be in that space wherever you are. It doesn't have to be in a particular kind of room or on particular kinds of speakers, equipment or anything like that. I mean, what's wonderful about touring is that when I go to a place like this, wonderful, magic auditorium with all these fantastic technicians and sound arrays, I can get a chance to resonate a new space and hear the piece in a new way, instead of just out of two speakers at home. Also, every space is different. When I come to a space where I have the chance to have a sound check with technicians for each particular space, every sound system is different, and get a chance to try to find how the room resonates and how the piece resonates in the room, and then we have to adjust things. With no one in the room, knowing that when all the human beings are there in the room, it's going to sound better because of all the water and blood in the bodies, it just always makes things nicer. So, yes, that's part of the touring.

FT: Alright. Just for people to know: what is your background on composition? Did you study music?

WB: Yes, I was trained on the clarinet. I come from a family of five children and my parents encouraged us all to study music and when you got into the seventh grade, junior high school we call it, there's an option to go into the choir or band or whatever like that. My mother wanted me to go into the choir and I was like "Noooo! I'm already getting beaten up because I'm such a flamboyant queen – chuckles – please don't make me go into the choir!". So she took me to the band director and he was terrific and he saw something in me and he just decided I was going to be his first chair clarinetist and student conductor and so this gave me something that kept me out of trouble, concentrate on and I really liked it. I didn't have the best teacher and she let me develop some kind of bad habits, but then we moved again and we moved to Dallas when I was starting high school. The music programmes in Texas are off the charts, just incredible at the high schools. This high school had three thousand students and the marching band had 300 people in it, and there were two symphonic bands, the first one and the junior one, and there was a symphonic orchestra and a jazz band. So, I played in the symphonic band and we were playing Hindemith and *The Pines of Rome*, all the very big pieces, we had a very bombastic band director who was terrifying and rigid and I had an amazing private teacher there who was like the former dean of Indiana University, which is a very big music conservatory in the United States. He was the sweetest man and he got me to correct these bad habits that I had. He also was working a side job repairing woodwinds at this music store and I had been mowing lawns and saving some money. He found me a 1930s Conn Pink Lady big band tenor saxophone and fixed it all up for me and I think I paid with my own money 250 dollars or something for it. My teacher wanted me to be first chair clarinet at the New York Phil or something like that and I wanted to be David Bowie. That wasn't going to happen. But I played the saxophone and when I was a Junior we toured the symphonic band tour all over the country, won all this contest and everything. When we got back and the band director wanted me to audition for my own sit the next year and I was terrible at auditioning, I never won any all state things because I was such a nervous wreck. So, I screwed up the audition and I was like "Okay, put that idiot first chair, let him do all the work and I am going to play in the jazz band". He was furious about it and then we won all the prizes that year so. After that I went to North State Texas University which has a big band at school, very famous for its jazz, particularly big band jazz. A couple of years before I was there, there were eight lad bands starting at one in the afternoon going to eight at night and the o'clock was the top one, monster players. A lot of them professionals coming off the road from playing in famous big bands, just one in two chill out, get stoned in this little town and play killer music and not have to get stupidity tax because their shoes on shined and stuff. So, I didn't get in any of those bands because I screwed up at the audition but that's where I switched my major to composition, where I started learning about John Cage and all the options that he opened up for someone that wanted to be a composer but didn't know. 'Then it was like oh radio, you could have silence, we learned how to listen, how to really stretch your ears: so that got me started.

FT: In fact, I would say that normally if I listen to your music it's very easy and of course minimalism comes to mind, it is a good definition to talk about. Minimalism is either connected to some form of spirituality, which I still am very detached and ambiguous about it, I mean I loved Terry Riley, I love older music. But, the under current ideology I would say, I don't know, California...

WB: Do you mean new age music?

FT: Right.

WB: No.

FT: Counter-culture, or either reaction to that like Phill Niblock who said "ok what is the most material thing that I can do and it's repeating itself. It's people working and I am going to do a video [...].

WB: Phill Niblock?

FT: Right, correct.

WB: I love Phill Niblock.

FT: You do not feel in either categories, and I would say to me, I'm not sure if you agree, you'd be more like something that has an emotional side, a narrative side.

WB: Yeah, I'm a romantic.

FT: What would you say are your peers? Who would you recognise as your peer musicians or composers?

WB: Oh, now you're going to put me on the spot. Well, I think someone who is terrific, extremely prolific and sadly under recognised is Richard Chartier, a good friend of mine, he also runs a very sophisticated sound art label called *Line* and he has a terrific side project that he does call *Pinkcourtesyphone*. He's terrific, we've done a couple of records together, I love Richard's work. [...] in Montreal is also extraordinary. Do you know her work? I love her. Lawrence English from Brisbane, not only a fantastic composer but with also a Doctorate of Philosophy, brilliant polymath, a brilliant guy who also has a label for twenty years called Room40 that releases all kinds of my peers, such as Francisco Lopez. I mean you named him, this guy has pretty much released everybody that's sort of in my field. There are so many more and I get to meet these people on the road and we become friends: Tim Hecker, Carsten Nicolai, who's absolutely brilliant, and the stuff he's done with Sakamoto is so good. Did you hear *Glass*?

FT: Yes, I did.

WB: The improvisation they did live with a small audience at the Glass House in Connecticut is a beautiful record.

FT: How would you say that composing-wise, technically-wise has your composing changed or adjusted to new technology or are you curious or are you still using the same that you were in the early 2000s? In which ways has it changed or is it changing?

WB: Well, I'm an old dog, you're "The Diamond Dogs", 1958, and we don't learn new tricks but I have an incredible young engineer that I work with now, Preston [Wendel], who knows all the new tricks and he knows what I like and he knows how to get what I want and so he's been invaluable help to me the last couple of years. I've never been a gear head, I know how to do what I need to do to do what I want, he can really help me like trying some different things, and show me some tricks and I'm like "Okay, just do it! That sounds good" – laughs.

FT: Are you not intrigued, are you not curious to get in that zone?

WB: Not anymore. No but, I am curious in the way that when it's time to do a new piece, it's like "What am I gonna do?" Although I have my techniques, my processes and things, I don't always do the same thing. So, it depends on what the first spark is and "where is this going to go? Okay we make this, do something".

FT: Okay, great. So, what I think is going to be the last question for me is: would you mind expanding a little bit about this project you are presenting tonight?

WB: *On Time Out of Time*...I don't know, I didn't see the catalogue. Is the piece described in there?

FT: I don't know.

WB: I don't know what I did with that. I might have to read it because it's...no it's in Italian. This piece started out as a collaboration with my dear friends, the brilliant art-science couple, Dmitry Gelfand and Evelina Domnitch. They were working in Los Angeles at Caltech on a new project they were doing, exploring liquid

dynamics, I don't know how to talk about what they do, they talk about it beautifully. They find ways with their installations to show things like black holes, like how you can see in this one piece they create this wave machine, they create two diametrically opposed whirlwinds, vortices in the water. And you can see how they connect underneath, like a wormhole, for example or something like that. They wanted me to create some music for this installation at this big art science exhibition at the Martin Gropius-Bau, last summer I think it was. And so I did, and then their scientist friends they were working with were involved with the laser interferometer installations in the U.S., it's called LIGO, I don't remember exactly what it stands for. But basically you have these two huge vacuum chambers underground, the largest in the world, one's in the south-east and one's in the north-west, and they're listening to see if they can hear a gravitational wave, which is a rift in space-time. They woke up one morning and they had gotten something on their tapes, and it was basically the sound of two massive black holes colliding 1.3 billion years ago and it got picked up into this interferometer. They manipulated the recordings so you could hear it and they gave me some of these recordings to work with because Evelyn and Dmitry and the curators of the show wanted me to do a concert also, beside the installation. So, I got to start with these incredible really like clicks, you know, and then I just imagined using my techniques, my sense and my loops, my stuff. What to me was like very romantic, a love story; I mean these lovers created a rift in space-time and I think the amount of energy released when they fucked, was basically more than all the stars in the universe. It's pretty big, pretty big love. Anyway, this piece starts up very kind of obscure and "droney" but then it opens up and it kind of gets very romantic at the end of the second part called *The Lovers*.

FT: I thought the others asked you something, this is very egotistical of me, because it's my curiosity but I have to ask. Since you said you wanted to be David Bowie, but then you did the record on David Bowie after his death, what was your relationship with him? Just because it's a period I'm obsessing over him, I keep on listening to him all the time.

WB: I know, why do we have to live in a world without him? At least we have his music. Well, I met him once.

FT: Really?

WB: In 1983 I was playing in an English rockabilly band, they were on RCA, they were called The Rockats. Now, they kind of flamed out shortly after that, and the Stray Cats came in and kind of took that new wave rockabilly thing that went with it, but they were more professional, I think his dad was in the music industry or something like that. Well, The Rockats were English boys, they dressed apart, they would be beautiful, they were really good but I think they might have had some drug problems or something. Also, they were with RCA and RCA wanted hits and they weren't writing original hits. MTV had just started and some college buddies of mine called me out of the blue wanting to know if I wanted to be in a video for this other English pop star on RCA. I played the saxophone in keys, lip synching and etc. They basically had 5 bands coming through the sound stages, 3 cameras got to go through twice, you did your own hair, make up and costume and then the next band came on. So, when I was there with these guys, The Rockats were there and I had seen them in San Francisco a few years before and I loved them. I went up to talk to Smutty Smith, he was this beautiful bass player, the first person I ever saw that had all sleeves of tattoos on his arms, really pretty. He was really nice, I was doing a rockabilly look at that time too, I had a big black quiff, he was helping me with my quiff, and we were talking and I said "You know, Smutty, you're a rockabilly band but you don't have a saxophone player. Hello, here's my number, I'm your boy". He was like "Billy you're right, let's go talk to Dibbs". So, we went to talk to the lead singer, and they took my card and they eventually called me. They were going to do some shows, big places in New York, Peppermint Lounge, The Ritz. So, I went to a rehearsal, learned their stuff and so I was in. We did these shows and then, in August that year, I got a call at this store I was working at, a little Italian jeans shop called Ciccibello: they had all these cutest, most colourful denim in the 80s and yeah, I used to sell that stuff. It was Jamie and he said "Billy, call Smutty, here's the number". "Billy, do you want to go with us to Hershey Pennsylvania and open for David Bowie?". I was like "OH YEAH!! Really?" Patti Smyth of Scandal was going to do it but she got sick and so they called The Rockats. So, we got to go down there, thirty thousand people, and they had a chain-link fence under the stage because they were throwing shit. Nobody wanted to see an opening band for Bowie, come on! But once I did my big saxophone

soloist stuff, they cheered and that was nice. Then we got off, I had recently done shortwave music and had a cassette with me that I wanted to try to get to Bowie somehow, so I was talking to his manager and he was real nice and I said "Would you even give this to Mr Bowie? Maybe he could listen to it on the plane or something. I'm sure he'll like it". "I'm sure he's gonna love it. Would you like to meet him?" and I was like "Yeah". "Alright, he's coming on, stay here, he's coming on in a minute". So, I stood there with my saxophone and here comes David Bowie, the yellow suite, the yellow pompadour, *Serious Moonlight Tour* in 1983, "Hello Billy, wonderful sax work, mate! I could hear you back in the dressing room, sounds great! How are you doing?" "Okay" – almost a whisper – "Well the boss is waiting, gotta get on, get to work. Would you like to watch from the wings?" I was like "Yes, please" – in a pleading, but excited voice. So that was my meeting with David Bowie and he was just this lovely and sweet as everybody says he was.

FT: Nice. And he is a saxophonist, so he knew what he was talking about.

WB: Yeah, yeah. And he is not a very good saxophonist, but he could do a couple of things, you know. I was a better sax player.

FT: Nice.

WB: I mean he's David Bowie, forget about it, Jesus Christ.

FT: This is all recorded.

WB: I know.

FT: Okay, so thank you William, thank you for the talk. I invite everybody of you to stay for the gig, which is going to happen at nine o'clock here: Valerio Tricoli is opening and then William Basinski. Thank you very much.

WB: Thank you.