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Duane Pitre

Meet New Orleans's moshing minimalist. By Bill Meyer

The list of vital music forged in the crucible of New Orleans – jazz, R&B, Sissy Bounce – is formidable, but minimalism and the attendant advancements of 20th century concert music just aren't on the list. Duane Pitre knew this when he moved back there in 2009, 15 years after he left town to become a professional skateboarder. "Good luck finding enough performers to form a group that maybe even care the slightest bit about controlled chance," he says over a Skype connection. "They may know John Cage, but it probably stops there."

Feel Free, Pitre's first work since returning home, is more a system than a composition. At its heart is a Max/MSP patch that triggers random patterns of harmonics, which Pitre recorded from an octet of guitars tuned in Just Intonation. Players are encouraged to interact freely with these pitches, but according to rules that keep the music from collapsing into discordance. The program can run on its own as a sound installation; an example of this can be heard on Pitre's side of a recent split LP with Eleh. He can also play the piece solo, using a touch-sensitive controller to corral the patterns and stack up harmonics. He has also been performing it with an ensemble of East Coast based string musicians, including harpist Jesse Sparhawk and violinist Jim Altieri. On this version, which can be heard on the album *Feel Free* (important), bowed strings and electronic tones arc their way through the plucked and triggered harmonics. The piece's tuning gives each note a halo of shimmering decay, and the music has a spacious stillness more evocative of Kyoto's Ryoanji temple than Bourbon Street.

Still, the piece is as indelibly marked by NOLA as Pitre's previous albums were by the city where they were composed. Both *Origin* (Root Strata) and *ED09: Live At The Stone* (Basses Frequences) were written when he lived in New York, the cradle of American minimalism, and they're thick with slow moving,

massed string sonorities that stake a midpoint between Tony Conrad and Phill Niblock. By contrast, *Feel Free* is open and airy. "It fitted the soundworld that I was now living in, in New Orleans, which had more space and quiet than NYC. I wasn't as drawn to the constant drone; I guess I wasn't trying to drown out New York City."

Pitre grew up in a musically conscious home – his parents named him after Duane Allman – but he didn't start playing it until after he left town. His hometown's cultural heritage was something to rebel against. "As far as the traditional New Orleans music scene, I think kids like myself who were punk, skater or different in some way, we kind of ignored New Orleans jazz. It was everywhere, coming out of the car, coming out of the bar, and it was not what we wanted to be. We were looking for something different. Like skateboarding, which wasn't very accepted then... unlike jazz." Today skateboarding is big business, and American kids aspire to stardom much the way that others dream of being scouted by the National Basketball Association. But when Pitre first put foot to deck in 1985, it was a more underground phenomenon, albeit one in which the patronage of skateboard companies enabled teenaged daredevils to become professional athletes. Relegated by geography to outsider status even within skating's proudly nonconformist culture, Pitre fell in with the Alien Workshop brand, who first sponsored him in 1990 and later moved him to San Diego, California. At the time, the affinity between punk rock and skating permitted SST Records to score a widely seen skateboard video called *Speed Freaks*. That was where Pitre discovered his "holy trinity": FIREHOSE, Bad Brains and especially Dinosaur Jr. "They were what started the path of music that led me to where I am today," he comments. First he picked up a bass. "The bass eventually led to guitar. Gradually more and more of my interest

was on the music and it took up more and more of my mental space." Music replaced skating as Pitre's chief obsession, and he left the Alien Workshop team around the time he first hit the punk rock road.

Moving through a string of groups, cities and formats, Pitre quickly grew restless. "My legacy with all these bands was that I would quit. I just wanted to move on. Eventually I realised that meant I had to do things on my own, and I stopped playing in bands." What followed was a stylistic journey from rock to solo Ambient guitar to minimalist composition corresponding to an autodidactic listening journey that worked back from Dinosaur Jr, My Bloody Valentine and Eno to Terry Riley and La Monte Young. When he heard Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano*, he enthuses, "It really grabbed me. Initially I thought his piano was being processed in some way. I later found out that what was giving La Monte's piano that sound was essentially math." He spent a year hammering away at his new discovery's mathematical foundation. "I would study Just Intonation until three in the morning and get drunk. The whisky seemed to allow a certain focus in my mind: I could study more while drinking it. I've loved rye ever since." After his self-tutelage ended, Pitre compiled the CD *The Harmonic Series* (important). It drew a lineage from early Just Intonation pioneers like Lou Harrison and Pauline Oliveros to recent music by Charles Curtis and R Keenan Lawler, as well as his own work.

As rewarding as *Feel Free* is, Pitre is getting ready to move on again. Following his recent European performances, he plans to deal with the dearth of like-minded musicians in New Orleans in two ways: by developing more technology based music that doesn't rely on individuals, and by seeking out individuals in other towns for short-term collaborations. "I've been on this path for a decade now and sometimes it is like being on a deserted island," he confesses. "Well, more so lately." □ *Feel Free* is out now on important

