A Song Without Music or Music Without Song: Noise Music and Lexington’s Modern Avant-Garde

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Cover Page Footnote
Acknowledgements: I would like to thank all of the artists who provided interviews for this project: Ben Allen, Robert Beatty, Daryl Cook, Matt Minter, Paul Puckett, and Trevor Tremaine. I would also like to thank Dr. Ron Pen for his guidance and support.

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From the Author: I am a May 2012 graduate of the Arts Administration program and carried an emphasis in Music History. I graduated with Honors and a degree in Economics from the University of Kentucky in 2003. During my time at UK, I was the General Manager and Programming Director of WRFL 88.1fm, the General Administrator of EnVaGe (the Ensemble of Variable Geometry), and have been a central organizer of WRFL’s Boomslang Festival since 2010.

After graduation I intend to continue to program and support the musical arts in Lexington. I believe that promoting a unified, holistic view of music and the arts is worth the effort.

I am also a local musician and avid music collector. I have been a student of the enigmatic E. Eugene Maupin since 2010 and have worked as a Manager at CD Central since 2007. I played bass guitar in the University of Kentucky Bluegrass Ensemble and assisted in organizing and programming the 2011 Kentucky New Music Festival. I am married to my lovely wife Ashley who provides me fantastic support and doesn’t mind the noise.

Faculty Mentor, Dr. Ron Pen: Matt Gibson was enrolled as a student in American Musical Expression (MUS 506) in the Fall semester 2012. The course had a fieldwork component designed to bring students into contact with community people engaged in some aspect of music production. The project was designed to inculcate a research methodology of documentary oral history rather than archival work.

Matt chose to investigate the “noise” community, a small, but vibrant nexus of thought, sound, and creativity associated with an enclave of people working “below the radar” in Lexington, KY. Following the lead of French economist and writer Jacques Attali (author of *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*) Matt situated himself at the jugular of experimentation in which musicians and audience were engaged in music as “the public forum for the negotiation of ideas.” The ideas being debated in sonic format included freedom, personal expression, community, society, culture, and popular media. The grey line dividing music from noise is a thin membrane of intelligibility and audience perception. Order is in the ear of the beholder.

Matt participated in performances of this musical genre to gain an awareness of the style, and subsequently he gained access to a number of the more prominent creators of this style. This led to insightful interviews that revealed the development of the style, the community, and the thinking processes that created this innovative and challenging musical expression in Lexington. The oral history presented by Matt Gibson in this Kaleidoscope essay represents the first substantive research concerning this vital nest of creativity in our community.

I am delighted to endorse Matt’s writing, thinking, assessment, and research. I believe this to be an articulate expression of the original research that he carried out in fall 2012. His transcription of the interviews
is accurate and revealing, allowing the subjects’ own voices to carry the narrative.

“A Song Without Music or Music Without Song.”
Noise Music and Lexington’s Modern Avant-Garde

If one were to consider all various genres of music and place them into a continuum based on their musical component parts, it would create a continuous spectrum of styles, moving from slower tempos to faster ones, from monophonic textures to polyphonic, from the origins of human sound embodied by the voice to the epitome of ensembles illustrated by the symphony orchestra. One could develop a sense of progression, of connectedness between genres. But where in that logical progression would one place a genre that rebukes and defies all that had come before it? How does one use these common musical terms to define a music without any recognizable tempo or melody, constructed with homemade or intentionally-destroyed instruments, seemingly without song structure, possibly lacking the concept of “song” all together? One could only imagine that if this music were placed in the hypothetical continuum, it would have to be at the end. I have heard the end of music, and it is called Noise.

From a ground-level view, Lexington, Kentucky is a fairly ordinary place. There is a modest downtown business district, a strong focus on the University of Kentucky, and profuse, sprawling, and unremarkable suburban life. From a ground-level view, it is business as usual in Lexington, much like any other comparable college town. But below the surface there is a thriving underground music scene; experimental and noise music is happening in apartments, warehouses, skate shops, garages, dive bars, and literally underground in one basement after another. There is a subterranean subculture of self-defined freaks and weirdoes nodding along to arrhythmic squall and rejoicing in the antagonism and self-expression of a scene without structure and a music without rules. Noise and experimental music in Lexington are driven by individuals who cast off all traditional definitions of what is or is not “good” music and have created a community that values expression, participation, and above all, freedom.

For a time I was vaguely aware of what was happening in Lexington’s underground music scene, but my real jumping-off point came when I saw a flier headlined “Women’s 09.” I could not quite make sense of what it meant: the concert was not on the 9th of the month, it was not 2009, there were not nine bands performing, none of the acts even seemed to be composed of women. What did this flier mean? So I went to Arts Place, the community arts center, to find out.

I searched the building for the concert and finally found it in the basement, at the end of the hall, by the emergency exit – “Women’s 09” was room number 9, the women’s restroom. It was no concert hall and with an attendance of 20 people was already nearly full. The attendees were of both genders but of a narrow age range of about 18 to 25. People filled the benches that lined the walls and had begun to sit on the floor with their legs crossed. The performers set up in different spaces in the small room – a duo sat on top of their amplifiers near the door, one performer squeezed himself into a small recess for a window, and a third performed from within one of the bathroom stalls, straddling the commode backwards with a board of pedals and effects rested on top of the tank. It could not have been less glamorous or more glorious. The tight, unconventional space captured the energy from the crowd, melded it with the sounds from the performers, and heightened the communal sense that we were all in this together.

The guitar and bass attack of Kraken Fury was chaotic and disjointed, both musicians creating great sonic disruptions, sometimes seemingly without regard for the other. Bassist Thad
Watson adorned an extra instrument cable worn over the top of his head, dividing his face into two hemispheres, with the metallic tip of the cable dangling just in front of his mouth. Periodically he would reach out his tongue and touch the cable’s tip, creating a buzzing feedback that jumped out of the cacophonous mix.

Up next was Ben Zoeller of local psych/drone/acid-beat trio Caboladies. Zoeller posted up in one of the stalls, door open, back to the audience, and tweaked and twisted knobs creating shifting soundscapes of electronic textures. There was no clear structure to the performance, no breaks for beginning or ending of songs, very little repetition of ideas. It would be considered through-composed, if composed at all, but in comparison with the explosive melee of Kraken Fury, Zoeller’s controlled minimalist approach seemed much more intentional.

Robert Beatty closed the event with a set using one of his more consistent pseudonyms, Three Legged Race. Beatty contorted his tall, lanky frame into a small window nook near the ceiling of the room, just enough space for himself, a micro-synth, and a sampler. The music was a semi-rhythmic progression of electronic beeps and blips, sounds played and then twisted, layered one upon another. Much like Zoeller’s set, all of the timbres were very synthetic – no acoustic instruments, no vocals – this was pure manipulated electricity. Again, much like the other two acts, there were no breaks to define songs, just one long jam that covered all of the musical ground that Beatty was to explore that evening.

In October of 2011 I had the opportunity to sit down with four of the key figures in the Lexington noise/experimental music scene to discuss their origins, ideas, and motives in participating in this curious work. Present in the first conversation were Robert Beatty (Three Legged Race, Hair Police, Eyes and Arms of Smoke, Ed Sunspot, Resonant Hole), Trevor Tremaine (Hair Police, Attempt, Eyes and Arms of Smoke, ARA, Jeanne Vomit-Terror) and Ben Allen (Arcane Rifles, Benstances, Cadaver in Drag, Caves, Wretched Worst). A few days later I caught up with Daryl Cook (Walter Carson, Wretched Worst, the Kentucky Wildcats). Below are excerpts from those interviews that illuminate the perspectives of individuals who have thrived in and driven the activity of the Lexington scene for the past decade.

**Matt Gibson (MG): What was your first introduction to noise or avant-garde music?**

**Trevor Tremaine (TT):** We grew up in Nicholasville [KY], so whatever we knew about avant-garde music we knew from WRFL [88.1fm, the student-run radio station of the University of Kentucky] or Wire Magazine. We lived in such an isolated place that our connection to the outside world was, like, catalogues; you would order CDs or 7” records from a catalogue with your five dollars that you made from mowing the lawn, and you’d wait two weeks and you’d get it and maybe it would be awesome and maybe it wouldn’t, but you’d keep it anyway. So we just kind of latched onto anything weird, you just listened to anything weird because everybody else was just listening to country or alternative rock.

**Robert Beatty (RB):** There were definitely starting points, more popular bands that had elements of something that seemed really interesting.

**TT: (coughs) Sonic Youth**

**RB: Yeah, but also like the Flaming Lips or Beck always had super-weird noise stuff going on in their music. You would be like “I want to find something that sounds more like that.” It was always a constant search to figure out where this was coming from. Some sort of “I want to know what this is and I want to know where to find it.” We started shopping at Cut Corner and CD Central when it was new and met a lot of people who helped us along the way.**
TT: And then instead of going to college we just started DJing at WRFL, and then from there it was just like a fucking avalanche of meeting all the weirdoes. There was a pretty deep scene of freaks that were a little bit older than us but had a really deep knowledge of weird music.

RB: The appetite for crazy out-there music that we had…it comes from all kinds of places. I first got into more experimental stuff through electronic music, like Aphex Twin and Squarepusher. There were parts of their records that were just crazy synthesizer noise for extended sections. And I was always trying to find more stuff like that.

TT: By the time you heard [Japanese noise artist] Merzbow, it was just a logical extension of all of what all these other people were doing, and then lo and behold, Merzbow is really into free jazz drummers and would do stuff with techno guys. It all made sense; it’s all going to the same place.

Ben Allen (BA): For me it was a little bit different because there’s the compounding upward way of getting into avant-garde music, but there’s also the breaking down way that it happens. I grew up in a small area too, in Cynthiana, so by the time I moved to Lexington to go to UK, I had already gone down several roads and then come back to the same place. In eighth grade everybody was listening to Nirvana and Pearl Jam and Smashing Pumpkins, but in high school that broke down for me into getting into Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin and then that wound up breaking down to where I’m in my senior year in high school and I’m playing weird guitar jams with my friends in the basement and listening to Sonic Youth and we’re breaking all of it apart.

Then for like two months I’m going down the road of Nine Inch Nails into Psychic TV and Throbbing Gristle, and then for another two months after hearing Daft Punk I’m getting into electronic stuff all the way back to Kraftwerk and listening to stuff like that. Eventually I’m getting to UK and all these roads have led back to “Well, what is there now?” I went through every post-punk band I could find for a while, listening to them over and over again, but that would lead further down a road and then all the way back again. Even just playing, I bought my first guitar and amplifier right before I moved to UK, and I just figured it out from what I could hear, how things sort of worked. And then learning some songs, I guess. But more often than not I’d just be in my dorm room with my headphones plugged in just going djurg, djurg, djurg. After about two years of that I went out to California for a whole summer to study, and that’s where I found things like the Stooges and [Miles Davis’] Bitches Brew and things that just kept getting wilder and wilder as I got more stoned. It all started breaking apart for me when I started playing with friends every day. We would just play and it would be a mash of whatever the hell it was.

The very first time I really fell into noise was when I was living in a dorm room in Berkeley and nothing was really going on so I went up to the top floor of this dorm and went out to the balcony and made feedback as loud as I could for about forty minutes, and that’s all it was. At that point I was listening to Silver Sessions and weird stuff that Sonic Youth was doing, and I remember coming down to the front desk after I was done, and they were all in a flurry; they had called the fire department because they thought that one of the generators had blown. So after that I was like “Okay, that makes a lot of sense.” But it took me a while, and it still is weird, thinking about noise.

TT: Anyone’s real first exposure to this music is when you’re tuning between stations on a world-band radio or plugging an amp into itself. What’s not special is your institutionalized introduction to it on a record, it’s just when you hear a mistake and it’s awesome.
Daryl Cook (DC): The first time I heard experimental music was about eleven years ago. That was when I started hanging out with Trevor (Tremaine) and Robert (Beatty), who I had known when I was a junior, and they were freshmen [at UK]; that was around 2000. They were into all kinds of that stuff. It was really then. At the time I was into all kinds of Dischord [Records] punk. And I still love that stuff a lot, but it really grounded me in this one particular way of thinking about things. And listening to that stuff (Wolf Eyes) reminded me of listening to jazz for the first time. It really broke through in a way that jazz didn’t. To me it held that punk promise. Hardcore at that point had become so stultified. It was, and is, just a set of signifiers - that’s not wholly true - but for a lot of people the genre died in 1985 and became so militant and full of jugheads. I really loved hardcore, but it seemed like to even do that I had to have all of this stuff; it felt so restrictive. But with this [noise] stuff, there were no rules whatsoever. These guys are out there scrambling together sounds out of all this junk, half of it they rewired themselves. So even though I had no idea how they did it, it was a mystery to unlock. There was something really alluring about that.

Like I said, the first time I heard jazz I didn’t understand it whatsoever, [I thought] “what was the appeal of this?” I was so used to verse-chorus-verse, and I still love that a lot. If you can construct a really great, catchy pop song…it’s not as easy as people think. But at the time, I was just so tired of it; I wanted something new. And this stuff was new and wooly and sometimes it was painful to listen to, but it was interesting. It was like a flame under my ass.

I then inquired about delving into the performance of experimental music, beyond just being exposed to other artists’ work. I wanted to know what level of musical training was involved in developing a style that eschewed traditional musical values. What I came to realize was that part of the attraction to this music was the authenticity of it all. It was not an imitation of experimental music with a predetermined outcome that would sound “experimental” – it was an actual experiment. The musicians genuinely did not know exactly what would happen when they began to perform. The variables of the live experience are vast, creating a different feeling and different sound each time. Even when trying to recreate something intentionally, the chance operations of modified or circuit-bent electronics would intercept the predictable.

So the fact that it is experimental is honest- at least for the innovators. But it is also honest in the regard that these are not trained musicians who have an established background in music theory. The music that they create is very much of themselves, and it has the potential to be a very raw, gritty, and powerful reflection of the artist’s thoughts and emotions. Each works from his own intuitive sense of sound. Each makes his own rules about melody, harmony, rhythm, and structure – or perhaps decides to make no rules at all. These are the sounds of (non)musicians making music without uniform instruction, instrumentation, or notation. This is what happens when there truly are no bounds. Anything can happen. Anything is possible.

RB: I’ve never had any musical training in my life. There’s something liberating about being able to do something like this. I remember when I was in seventh or eighth grade and having a toy keyboard, and we were trying to put an output on it so we could run it to an amp, and then we touched something on the inside that totally changed the way it made a sound. And I thought I had totally stumbled upon something that no one had ever thought of before. Years later I found out that people had been doing that since the sixties. But that’s the thing, we were just bored kids.
I’ve always loved music, but I never felt like I could play in a band or anything. And then all of a sudden I found something where I was like, “yeah, I can play in a band.” There’s so much freedom involved. The freedom aspect of it, you could have something that was a pop song one minute and then a crazy noise tape collage the next, and we were just doing that thing forever. That was what came naturally to us.

DC: I found other people who had an almost painterly approach to playing guitar. Cecil Taylor, the pianist, regards playing the piano as something like 88 tuned drumheads; he treats it as a percussion instrument, and I somewhat treated the guitar that way. So this version of rock that we were playing lead to even more degraded musical things. When I wasn’t playing with Trevor, I would go home and hook up my guitar to a delay pedal, put a distortion to it, you mess with all these different layers that you can hook up to it, and it progressed from there. It’s like “Okay, I don’t have a synthesizer. I don’t have what they have, but I have what I’ve got, and I’ll use that and figure out what to do with it.” And I wasn’t always happy with the results.

MG: And eventually at some point you even lost the guitar, right? You started doing no-input stuff.

DC: At some point I figured out…people had been doing no-input for years, but when I discovered it, it was a real eureka moment, because I had no idea. It was a total mistake. I was just bored one day and started making sounds. I said, “wait a second, I can construct sounds with this.” But the thing is, no-input can be so unwieldy: what worked a couple of hours ago might not work now. It’s a very chaotic thing. I can’t explain the technical aspect of it, but it’s completely unreliable. Sometimes I’d go to do a show, and I’d have a great practice the night before, but then I get in there and it’s this horrific shrieking mess. Now most people’s ears probably couldn’t discern the difference, but I could, and it was really frustrating. So I kind of lived with that for a while, and then I came to this impasse where I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t sure where to go after that. But that’s cool because I just abandoned that and started playing guitar with Wretched Worst. In playing with Wretched Worst, Matt (Minter) wanted me to do electronics, and I had this microsynth that someone had sold me. I hadn’t done much with it before, but then I started messing around with it, and the stuff that I did in that band led to a breakthrough where I realized I had another direction.

MG: Did you feel pressures to play a certain kind of music, to maintain a “noise style?”

RB: I know there was a period when we started doing Hair Police where it was weird to be listening to bands like Pavement. I stopped listening to techno because I felt pressure to be a certain way.

TT: There is a certain institutionalization of any scene, but it’s especially surprising in a world where you think there would be all of this freedom, where you’re just like “fuck all the rules, we’re going to do whatever we want.” But it’s like “No. We’re all going to agree on black – everything’s going to be black. We’re going to spray paint things…” Yeah, one or two guys did that because that’s what they knew how to do, but then everybody starts doing it because it’s a scene. That’s when a lot of us start to lose interest in it and go do something else. But I feel like those [originators] are the ones who will be surviving in the next twenty years – the guys who are just doing what they want to do, following their original passion.

BA: I think one aspect of it is, like Robert was saying, is the freedom. It breaks down things that you would think are necessary. I think of folks that don’t do music thinking that being in a band requires some sort of mathematics or photographic sort of [memory]…when really it changes all the time. It has to change all the time, or else it just stagnates and stops. Some
people like that because then they can just sort of jump into it and buy into the photograph and the mathematics, and say “Okay, now I have the book and I can just read it and keep doing it over and over again.” But the idea with this is that you’re reaching for something else. You’re reaching for the availability to take whatever is in your head and do that. Fuck what you’re supposed to be doing. I think that’s a big part of it.

**MG:** **So when it comes to the scene, and the pressures to do or not do things, how do you feel about Lexington and the scene here?**

**RB:** I think that Lexington has always been the opposite of that.

**TT:** Yeah, it’s always been fucking awesome.

**RB:** As much as there is a scene here, it’s a small enough place that everyone’s doing just exactly what they want to be doing. You have a bunch of people doing noise or experimental music, but it’s just all different. When Trevor and I started doing Hair Police we were touring and meeting people and then booking shows for the people we were meeting on tour. We started just doing shows at our houses. But then it started getting bigger than just people we knew. There were times when we would do shows, and there would be 100 people at a house show. And that’s the thing, it’s exciting when you stumble upon something like that. It gives you some sort of motivation to keep doing it and try something else and see just how far you can take something before it gets old.

**TT:** Part of the incentive to do this is because people like it, but I feel like once upon a time there were a few years when I thought Hair Police could be my job; that passed. There was a moment when I was like, “this fucking rules,” and maybe this is something that comes when you get a little bit older, but I feel like my prospective audience, when I’m recording, is shrinking; now there’s like 3 or 4 [people]. I’m thinking of specific people that I really want to hear this song. I feel like I’m just making songs for people now. I don’t know, it’s kind of awesome. I feel like that’s what’s going to keep me going, making these little presents for people…that also make me happy.

**RB:** There’s the Andy Warhol quote where, “[in the future] everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes,” but this guy Momus, who’s like a big indie-pop singer in the 90’s, he had a quote where, “In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen people,” which I think is way more appropriate than the “famous for fifteen minutes.” Cause that’s the thing, I think we have dedicated fans who are lifers. Hair Police can play in any city in the world, and I think there will be 30 people there.

**BA:** So that would be one way to look at it, that if what you do makes that kind of an impact on people who witness it to the point where they would want to see it, even if you haven’t played in ten years.

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No survey of Lexington’s experimental music scene would be complete without examining the influence and success of the Hair Police. World-renown torchbearers of the flame of uncompromising extremity, the Hair Police are the anti-authoritarian face of Lexington noise. After achieving local notoriety for their loud, terrorizing sound, Hair Police broke onto the national music scene by attracting the attention of Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore. Moore invited the trio out on national tour in 2004 along with fellow noise rockers Wolf Eyes (who subsequently incorporated Hair Police guitarist Mike Connelly into the fold in 2006 after Connelly moved from Lexington to Chicago). Hair Police have also been a staple act at the New York-based No Fun Fest, an annual three day experimental/noise/improvised music festival. The group has performed at No Fun Fest four times since the festival’s conception in 2004. Hair
Police were also invited to perform at the 2006 All Tomorrow’s Parties festival in England and embarked on a tour of Western Europe and the United Kingdom in November of 2009. For the small number of Lexington’s rock and popular music acts that have gained widespread recognition outside of their home city, Hair Police have done much better than most.

To listen to the Hair Police is to invite sonic assault. The band takes no measure to promote listenability or to court a mainstream audience. Sinister waves of harsh noise screech from speakers, drenched in static and feedback. Robert Beatty’s oscillating pulse underpins Mike Connelly’s heavily distorted guitar. Connelly plays the electric guitar with both hands, though rarely with both hands at the same time. The other is either clutching a microphone or balled into a fist, pumping in the air. Trevor Tremaine’s drums rumble with irregular free jazz rhythms or drop out all together as Beatty’s layers of delayed synth create their own hypnotic throb. Heavily manipulated vocals sound like channeled spirits emerging from a tortured afterlife, hissing and wailing with echo and reverb. Everything stops… and all three men simultaneously explode again. The sheer aggression of the music is undeniable; Hair Police represent a new nihilistic standard in sound creation.

In November of 2011 I spoke with Lexington visual artist, Wretched Worst front-man, and former Auk Theater and Hair Police member Matt Minter about his musical experience, the precursors to Hair Police, and ways of being involved in the music scene despite a lack of formal training.

Matt Minter (MM): The band Hexose was probably the thing that started it all. That was with Mike Connelly from Hair Police and a guy named Ross Wilbanks, and we all went to UK together and all worked at the WRFL radio station. That was probably the warm-up to Hair Police. There were different things that spawned from that. I did another thing with Mike Connelly called Frankenstein With Knife and that was really weird, harsh noise. But anyway, after Hexose broke up Hair Police was born, and after I quit Hair Police, I started doing Auk Theatre with Irene (Moon).

MG: I thought it was interesting that with Auk Theater there was this theatrical performance happening in the context of a music show; it was definitely outside of what someone would expect at a concert. How did this performance art and theater end up in the context of a musical concert?

MM: Irene was really into the theatrical element, and she had been doing that before she moved to Lexington. She had her show that she still does called “Scientifically Speaking” which is her lecturing about insects but combining music and costumes and weird theater elements. She started doing Auk Theater after she moved to Lexington. Working with Irene gave me an excuse to do art and music again. It was easy for me because I had played with a bunch of noise bands, but I’m not a musician. Musically I’ve never really done anything. I’ve always just been the guy who just makes a lot of noise, whereas the other musicians may actually do something kind of musical. So Auk Theater gave me an outlet. Irene handled the music, and eventually I started making the props. We would come up with ideas and she would give most of the visual art duties to me: costumes, props, things like that. I guess to answer your question, it gave me a reason to be in a band but not really worry about the musical element, at least for a while.

MG: One Auk Theater performance that really stands out to me was at the Icehouse with Mudboy. There was a sound element, and there were visual transparencies on an overhead projector…I had no idea what was going on.

Laughs
MM: It was about 50/50 between me and Irene. I think Irene had the idea of doing some sort of a medieval autopsy and she wanted to do something where somebody’s face got removed. So I did all the makeup for that, I was the corpse. I had an open wound going down my stomach where she was pulling out the different organs. And while she was pulling out the different organs, she would lay out a transparency…

(pauses)

Basically, the gist of that was that Irene was a surgeon and she was removing my organs. Eventually she cuts off my face and I have a flesh-less face underneath, and that’s when I become reanimated. I get pissed off that my face is missing. So I sneak up behind her and take her scissors that she was doing the surgery with and I stab her from behind and reclaim my face, put it back on, and that’s the end of the scene.

MG: What was the main motivation for doing Auk Theater?

MM: (pauses) I think Auk Theater was mostly just for fun. I guess to a certain degree I wanted to freak people out or gross people out, because once I started working with Irene, I started adding a lot more horror elements like blood and death, and to a certain degree that was all for laughs. I think when I started doing Auk Theater with Irene, that was me experimenting and trying to find out what I wanted to do as an artist at that point. The type of art that I was doing was turning into stuff that was more macabre and horror-oriented. A lot of the stuff I did with Irene was just for fun, but it was me trying to explore what I wanted to do creatively on my own.

In 2007 Minter formed what would be Lexington’s subsequent most-extreme noise rock band, Wretched Worst. Relying on wild, distorted guitars and simple, pounding rhythms, Wretched Worst pursued the dark and demented with real blood thirst.

MG: How about Wretched Worst – it’s kind of a hardcore band that operated out of the noise scene. You were there from the beginning of the band…

Daryl Cook: It was Mikey (Turner – Warmer Milks, Cross), Ben (Allen), and I from the start. We all could agree on three things – it was going to be fast and chaotic, it shouldn’t last very long - which we didn’t stick to at all - and that we wanted Matt Minter for the singer. When we started it was a lot more street-punk sounding, more traditional. But then Mikey left, and we were left wondering what to do. We ended up scrapping all of the old songs and brought in a drum machine at one point. For the first practice after Mikey left we used the drum machine, and it was the worst, most god-awful shit you’ve ever heard. I’m glad we didn’t go with some of those ideas. So we paired it down, and Ben, who had been playing bass, switched to drums, and I don’t think he had ever played drums before, and I hadn’t really played guitar in a long time. Matt’s not a classically-trained singer, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.

(laughs)

That band was a process of us learning to write songs, however elementary they were. It was us taking these really simple building blocks, Matt would say, “I’ve got an idea for a drum part that goes ‘doo, doo, doo, doo, womp, pshi, pshi, pshi’ and Daryl you go ‘whoom, plackow, shhhh.’” It was really rudimentary, basic, Cro-Magnon rock. It was a really fun process of getting together with those guys and just hammering it out.

MG: When you guys were putting the band together, did you have any concept of who your audience would be?

DC: Unemployable loners…alcoholics, you know…heshers. We knew we’d end up playing to our friends, I think. We never discussed it.

MG: So Wretched Worst now is not how it originally started…
Matt Minter: No, I’m the last original member of the band.
MG: What is the impetus behind that band? There are elements of hardcore and punk rock, you play shows with hardcore bands sometimes, but there’s also a lot of noise and you play to that scene as well. Wretched Worst seems like a mix of those things, and that mix has shifted over time. Would you call it a rock band?
MM: That’s what I tell most people. That’s what I tell the people at work, that it’s a rock band. (Both laugh.) They’re like, “well, what kind of rock?” And I say, “I can’t explain it; you’ll just have to hear it.” Wretched Worst is a simple idea. It’s called Wretched Worst so you already know what it sounds like. All the songs fit with the name Wretched Worst. When you see us play, I try to look like I’m really gross and puking the whole time. It’s just a simple, fun idea.
MG: What do you think that Wretched Worst does that other bands don’t do?
MM: I don’t think we sound like any other band in Lexington. It’s hard to describe. When I think of ideas for songs I usually think long and hard and make sure that it doesn’t sound like something else that I’ve heard. I throw a lot of ideas out at the rest of the band and have them try it out. If it sounds like its just normal rock or normal metal, then I say “let’s not do that.” But if I throw an idea out and it sounds really weird, like “what the hell is going on?” then I say go with it.
MG: You’re the main songwriter for Wretched Worst, aren’t you?
MM: Yeah, I come up with ideas for all of the individual members: bass, guitar, and drums. I try to describe them the best that I can, and if I think that something needs to be changed, I’ll suggest something. I’m definitely not a dictator about the way they play; I let them do their own thing. If they come up with something on their own, we’ll build a song around that, but I’m the main songwriter. I bring a lot of the ideas to the table as far as how the band should sound.
MG: So when you come to the band with a guitar part, do you show it to them on guitar?
MM: No, I just make the sound with my voice. That’s probably why Joey (Tucci)’s guitar is sounding dumber. It’s cool that Joey is in the band now, because it’s really easy for him to adapt to stuff. Whenever Daryl (Cook) was in the band, he’d pretty much just go nuts, and he’d go nuts on every song, so I never really came up with any guitar parts. Now that Joey’s in it, the band has definitely changed. I’m not saying it’s better than when Daryl was in it, but it’s definitely helped the band change. It’s fun for me to be able to come up with guitar parts and for Joey to be able to do them. I’ve never been able to do that before.
MG: Whenever you’re doing Wretched Worst, are there any considerations for audience, for who will come to the shows or buy your records?
MM: Maybe early on I worried about that stuff, but nowadays I pretty much know what I’m going to do, no matter what. We definitely don’t alter our performance based on who we think the audience will be.
MG: What do you hope to get out of Wretched Worst?
MM: To get some records out; it would be nice to go overseas. Those are the only major goals of the band: to tour as much as possible and get some records out, maybe make some more videos.
MG: When it comes to the Lexington scene in general, in the different kinds of performances you’ve done, what’s the general reaction from people who come to the shows?
DC: If somebody asked me what I do, and they had no concept of 60’s electronica or Wolf Eyes or the stuff you guys do (Everyone Lives Everyone Wins), I would probably say – well, I used to say “jazz” – but now I’m a little bit more honest and describe [the music Cook makes as ‘Daryl
Strawberry’] as “generally kind of ambient, but it’s not new age, kind of soundtrack-y. It’s formless ambient electronic thrum.” [The response] is generally fairly good, but with stuff like this, unless you’re in a real big city, unless you’re in Brooklyn or Berlin, basically if you’re in a small town like Lexington, it’s going to be marginalized. So I never hoped to get that much out of it. I generally just like to play, and if the audience is receptive, that’s awesome. And if they’re not, that can be great too. It gives you different perspectives. Sometimes you don’t want to play for your friends who are just going to say, “yeah, yeah” (claps).

MG: Sometimes it’s hard to trust the quality of the feedback you’re getting.
DC: Right, right. I don’t worry about it, but yes. But I’ve never had any negative feedback – I’ve never had anyone get mad. I’ve had that happen when I played records on WRFL. I’ve had people call and say, “this is nonsense,” but never personally. I’ve gotten confused and quizzical responses, but generally they’re just kind of curious. I’m not trying to antagonize anyone, I’m just presenting: Hey this is what I do. I hope you like it.

MG: Do you? Do you hope they like it?
DC: If they’re into it, that’s great. I do want them to like it, but that’s the difference - I’m not going to tailor it. I’m not going to think like “oh, here’s a carrot to bring them in.” I have to be happy with it. If I’m not totally happy with it…well, I’m never totally happy with it, but you see what I mean.

Cook’s perspective on the non-consideration of audience during performance and composition raises the issue of audience. How are audiences cultivated for often difficult, listener-unfriendly, fringe music? Minter employs his skills as a visual artist to create fliers which either entice or alert potential audiences to the content of these shows. His images are grotesque black and white drawings of strange, morphing faces and twisted anatomies. Some of the pictures are very arresting, and they all support the curiosity that continues to attract audiences.

MG: The horror theme seems to have perpetuated itself into some of the art you do now. Why do you think that is?
MM: I don’t know. I was always pretty fascinated by horror from a very early age, probably because I was denied that stuff as a child. I would go to video stores and look at the VHS covers of “Friday the 13th” and stuff like that. I’d look at the back at the still shots of the worst stuff that was in the movie. Watching that stuff now, none of it is really that horrifying, but as a little kid your imagination runs wild. I scared pretty easy as a kid, but I was definitely fascinated by that stuff. There’s something about blood and death… there’s definitely a fun element to it all. A lot of the stuff that I do has a sense of humor about it. It may be dark or grotesque, but I think that everything is funny to a certain degree.

MG: I know the visual aesthetic on your fliers really captures people's attention. They think, “what is the event associated with this crazy image?”
MM: It seems like so few people make fliers nowadays, it’s cool to make a flier that really stands out. Even if no one goes to the show, it’ll be hanging up somewhere for a while. Some of those fliers in the radio station have been there for a few years. People check them out and think “Oh man, what was that? It must have been a weird show.”

While sometimes the majority of an audience will be comprised of other musicians performing at the concert, there are non-participant audience members as well. Amateur sound engineer Paul Puckett has been among them for the last decade and has worked to document live
performances and provide low (or no) charge studio recording time. Because of the improvisatory nature of most performances, Puckett’s recordings are very literally one-of-a-kind. We shared an exchange on his perspective as an audience member and his participation in the underground scene as the unofficial go-to sound engineer.

MG: As longstanding attendee of noise/experimental/improvisational music performances, what is it that keeps you returning?
Paul Puckett (PP): New experiences. With n/e/i/ performances more so than with traditional band music I never know what I may see/hear/experience. That's not to say n/e/i shows can't suck, but when you feel the urge to heckle a guy that's rattling a saber around an industrial fan, it's at least a little more interesting than to do the same thing to some faceless band on a stage riser. Plus, I tend to meet more interesting people per capita at n/e/i shows than listening to rock band #972.

MG: I know you listen to lots of kinds of music, how does noise music compare to other types, rock and roll, for example? Why do you listen to it at all?
PP: It's not the genre, necessarily - it's if the performer is THERE. It's an old joke that you don't play metal, you live metal. More of the n/e/i performers, on average, seem invested in what they're doing for the sake of doing it as opposed to other performers in more traditional genres and media that are trying to make a career out of venality. If you're excited about driving hundreds of miles to play for less than ten people in a moldering basement night after night then you've probably got something going on that I'd be interested in giving a spin. Of the n/e/i records I have, the thing I enjoy about them that might be different from other genres is texture. Nihilistic textures, contemplative textures, breezy textures, sandstorms to soft rains. Good stuff.

MG: You have played a unique role in the scene as audio documentarian, how and why did this come about?
PP: When I began going to shows, I don't recall the groups/artists having much, if anything available for sale. I began recording shows just because I didn't know where to get this stuff. And if I had known, I wouldn't have known how to shop for it. Still don't. So I started recording. I'd make a copy for myself and for the band, if they were interested. The gear was small enough (cassettes, minidis) that it was no problem to carry it to the show. I did it for a while and had fun with it and now have some great "postcards" of quality times with quality people.

MG: You are also the go-to soundman for lots of local groups, how did you develop your skills as an audio engineer?
PP: Whatever skills I have are from experience and the library. Recording live shows was fun but I wanted to monkey around with multi-tracks so, like a lot of folks, I grabbed some mics and a cassette four-track. Some friends were kind enough to let me work with them and it's progressed from there. Every session is a real opportunity. An opportunity to work with interesting people, learn new things, experiment with new ideas, and hopefully come away with something that everyone is happy with. Being able to hear what a band/artist is doing and hopefully capture the excitement is a real thrill.

For years Puckett drove in from nearby Winchester to attend experimental music concerts in Lexington before moving to the city in 2010. Other audience members come to Lexington to attend the University of Kentucky and get connected to the underground music scene through
WRFL, the student-run radio station at UK. All of the artists I interviewed had some connection to the station, either past or present. But along with producing the artistic personnel that drive the scene, WRFL helps organize events and provide information to prospective audiences. The station acts as a constant in what can otherwise be an unpredictable set of circumstances.

**Trevor Tremaine:** The idea of there being a noise scene in Lexington is really ethereal. These shows would be full of punks and indie rockers and weirdoes of every stripe. There wasn’t an agreement on a noise fashion statement, because there wasn’t one.

**Ben Allen:** A lot of people, me included, were doing just pretty straightforward loud rock music and just being as wild as I could in that idea, but then there’s curiosity in seeing something that was really much more free than those constraints… I think a lot of people go just wondering what is going to happen. And the artists too, they’re getting ready to play and they’re wanting to see what’s going to happen. It makes it much more immediate than your standard, “Oh, I’m an audience member going to see a band play on a stage. They will be facing me for about an hour and I’ll pay [the cover] and maybe have a few drinks and go home…”

**TT:** (sarcastically) “We’re going to clap between songs and we might get an encore if we clap loud enough…”

**BA:** This would be in someone’s living room, surrounded by people, not really any kind of performance area or anything, and all kinds of things would be going on.

**TT:** It would be crazy because you would have this impossible cathartic moment where all these people would be moshing to sine waves, you know? It’s impossible to describe, but it made total sense in the moment. Looking back on it, that probably would have looked crazy to a casual observer.

**Robert Beatty:** I think the funny thing is too that a lot of people think that you have to be fucked up on drugs in order to enjoy this music. I’ve never really done drugs in my life. People are often shocked to find that out based on the art that I make and the music that I listen to.

**TT:** Psychedelic is a mind-state.

**RB:** You can just lose yourself in that kind of environment. There are all these people who are just there to see what’s going to happen. There’s this energy about it where you can get high on that moment. It sounds cheesy to say, but it’s totally true. You just let go and have a good time.

The venue for this kind of performance is of principal importance for both the artists and audience. While this music is occasionally performed in bars and traditional concert halls, the more preferred venues steer off the beaten path. We continued our conversation by discussing the environments where noise happens.

**BA:** Some of the best shows I’ve seen have happened at a really weird time, on a weird day, in a weird place.

**RB:** There’s just weird, spontaneous stuff like that that happens. There’s all of the weird stuff that we used to do at Art’s Place, like in the bathroom. It’s a women’s bathroom in the basement of the underused arts building that the city owns, and how did that even happen?

**TT:** If you want to say that there’s a cultural thing about noise, that’s a perfect example. It’s about being resourceful.

**BA:** That’s what it’s all about.

**RB:** There were a couple of shows we did in an abandoned parking garage. It’s just wherever there was power and a space where we thought we could get away with something…
TT: And have a really magical experience.
RB: There are a lot of places where we’ve done a show once, and then there are other places like the Frowny Bear, the Charles Mansion, and the Fact House that were pretty long-running, doing shows for a couple of years. It is cool how that happens. I feel like it doesn’t happen that much anymore, but it goes through phases. Sometimes there are tons of shows and tons of places for shows, but I feel like now it’s just a slow period. It’s weird how there’s always a next generation around the corner.
TT: We’ve been spoiled by it because for the last ten years that’s been true. Every couple of years there’s always been a new generation, and it’s been rejuvenated. There’s a new house and a new bunch of twenty-year-old weirdoes who take it there. There’s always a next generation. But maybe there won’t. Maybe [the Coxtop guys] were the last ones.
RB: Who knows? We’ll see. We gotta find some weird kids with a crappy house that they want to wreck.
MG: It seems like having a reliable venue makes a big difference in the scene.
RB: It does, for sure. I won’t even book any shows for a lot of people right now because there’s not a place to do it. I could do it at Al’s [Bar], but bars aren’t really the ideal environment for stuff like this.
BA: In fact, the traditional venues kind of take away from what you were talking about, like what happens at an improvised spot. It sets up the staging too much.
TT: I agree, and that’s why when I hear about more funding for the arts I’m like “that literally does not impact what I do in any way.”
BA: But really, that’s one thing that with the traditional venues that it’s always about, the bottom line. With these shows, all we do is pass a hat around, or a basket, or a coffee can, and that’s it.
RB: And the money always, always goes to the touring band.
TT: Yeah, because it’s just your house. And there were some gigs at the Frowny Bear where they made some dough. It was like a good show for them on the tour. The people who come do not come there to be seen, they come for the music and they’re willing to pay for it. They buy some merch and are actually psyched.
BA: It really pulls it down to a real level, where there aren’t go-betweens or interplay. It just is what it is.
MG: When you take the financial aspect out of it, when people aren’t doing it to make money, then what defines a successful show or a successful set as a performer?
TT: We’ve had amazing shows where there were just four people there. It really is just the vibe that goes through the room.
RB: If there are people there who enjoy it, and it’s a positive environment, I feel like that’s all it really takes.
MG: That line of thought kind of extends to making records and doing recordings, where there is a financial outlay to get this material thing created. So what are the purpose and aspirations for your recordings?
BA: The most prolific I’ve ever been was with Wretched Worst, and that was the whole idea. Not to just keep making and making more and more stuff, but by virtue of having it at shows, generally, you’re going to get a donation from the crowd, but you have something to show them. And it’s something that you’ve crafted, not something you’ve sent off to be made. It makes it very vital. There’s a vitality to the things you create.
RB: It’s a different aspect of the same thing. A lot of times the recordings we do with Hair Police are very different than the way it is live. It’s either more subdued, a lot of it is improvised, so it’s never going to be the same.

TT: But Hair Police do multiple takes. In a lot of ways it is like a conventional band. It’s just about getting the vibe right.

RB: And the recordings are often, from one to the next, pretty different. And that’s the thing, I don’t like repeating myself – ever. I even feel weird doing the same set more than once. You don’t want to do that. Trevor and I had a band called Eyes and Arms of Smoke, and we never played the same set twice.

TT: Which was really kind of irritating because it was really hard to learn the material, but that’s just how insane we are about that shit. I guess part of it too is that we’re playing in Lexington and we really want to make people excited and give them something. It’s like every show or performance is a gift. That’s really the way I feel about it. There’s almost nothing worse than being a local rock band playing the same fucking set list for five years. It’s so depressing.

MG: I agree.

TT: That’s why we do this instead.

RB: And I can understand how it’s frustrating for the audience in a way.

TT: You want the hits.

RB: They want you to be consistent but where’s the fun in just doing the same thing over and over and over? So that’s one thing, the records are there as something that people can listen to more than once and it’s not going to change. But it would be cool if there was a way to make a record that changed every time you listened to it. We should figure that out.

MG: So how do you feel about the live shows being different every time, but then with the recording you’ve made a definitive statement of “this is how the song goes.”

TT: We approach recordings a little bit different. That’s the basic premise of putting out cassettes and CD-Rs. Here we are at this point, here we are at this point, this was just a concept we wanted to explore, and every record is just “this is our version of ourselves this year.” It’s a document. It’s like an annual report. It really is, it’s the best you can do, until we come up with this format that Robert was talking about that changes every time. I don’t have any problem with it. Every cassette and every record is going to be a little different, even if they’re made of the same material. And, this is getting psychedelic, every situation that you listen to it in is also going to alter your relationship to it. There is no definitive statement. It’s all part of the same flow.

MG: All of you have solo projects but have come up with surnames for these projects, what is it behind that?

RB: Now we’ve really gone over the top with it, especially now with this Resonant Hole stuff. I’ve always really liked some kind of element of artifice, be it in performance or in the way you present things. People know that it’s the same person, but the way you present it, the name you put on it, the style of music that you’re doing totally changes, and I think it’s nice to be able to recognize that and present it that way. Sometimes I play shows under the name Ed Sunspot that really aren’t that different than what I do with Three Legged Race, but I feel like doing things a little differently and people are starting to expect something different.

I like to confuse people because I find confusion to be really exciting. I like it when I watch a movie or listen to a record and say, “how did they do that?” There has to be some kind of cloud around things where you can’t really tell what’s going on. I think that sometimes people look at
that like hiding behind something, but it’s more like a way to control the way people see things. You can never control how people interpret your art. People see it the way they see it and from their perspective. Some people might think that it’s totally pretentious that you’re playing by yourself and using a name that’s not your name.

**TT:** I think it’s more pretentious to tell people like, “This is Robert Beatty. This is who I am.” No matter what, any time you’re performing, any time there’s any kind of interaction with anybody else, you’re putting on some kind of performance. It’s not quite the construction that you have in your head of what you are. It makes sense to have, or at least be honest about, all of these characters that you play.

**RB:** It’s cool too because it gives you a choice. Nobody chooses the name that they’re given. It’s about control. You pick, it’s a choice that you make.

**BA:** For me, when I was doing Caves, once you’ve sort of birthed a name out…literally put a project that was in your head out, and you give it a name like that, there was a comfort in being able to go into that mode and do that, so I could see what would happen. But it wasn’t who I was. It was just a mode of who I was, a way that I could explore a certain part of what I wanted to do with just sounds. At the same time, if I’m going to do it, I have to be responsible to it. I’m not going to go in and just do whatever, like showing up to band practice to just play the same five songs again. There was a responsibility to it, if I’m going to really explore this part of myself and be vested in it to a certain degree, then I have to actually go there with that, not just pay it lip service through some sort of literal concept. If I’m going to do that, then I should just write a paper and see if anyone would read it.

**RB:** To some extent too, it’s about the freedom thing. You create something that you don’t necessarily know what it’s going to be. A lot of times I know that something I’m going to do will have a limited lifespan, so I start these projects, and I do it until I figure out what it is, and then it’s time to do something else. I think it’s cool finding out what something is in the process of doing it. You just do it, and maybe things will become clearer over time with what it’s about or where it came from.

**TT:** So much of what we do is informed by the subconscious. It comes from dreams and fucking nightmares or these moments of neurosis that I have. All the Resonant Hole stuff, sometimes we had a name for the band before we had the thing. Like the Jeanne Vomit-Terror thing, I never thought I’d do that again, but then I came up with some more songs so I had to do it again.

**RB:** A lot of people dislike this, but I think that with any kind of art, the artist’s statement is the biggest load of crap ever. It’s always so forced and so contrived, that I feel like you’re much better off just doing something and letting people interpret it the way they want to. I’ve played shows and had experiences where I’ve done vocals live and somebody misunderstood what I was saying and then told me what they thought I was saying. I was like, “Whoa, that sounds way better than what I was saying.” And I’ll take that and turn it into the song. It’s a transformative thing. You do something and rather than hard-line “this is what this is,” you let the circumstances dictate what direction it goes in and what it means to you in the end, what it’s all about.

**MG:** In the creation of new projects and that drive to keep doing stuff, where does that come from? If this started when you were 17 or 18 years old, why are you still doing it?

**TT:** It just gives me pleasure.

**RB:** Honestly, for me, I don’t know what else I would do. I know what I’m good at, so that’s what I try to do. I don’t want to do the same thing over and over, so I’m always trying to do new
stuff, to be doing new things, and that keeps it interesting, keeps it going. Maybe someday I’ll say “you know, there’s nothing left in me,” but the well hasn’t run dry yet.

Overall I found these artists to be in love with the mystery and potential in their marginalized work. Lack of an audience or a dearth of financial compensation are non-factors in their continuous production of art in an almost indescribable drive to explore their creative possibilities. They are content with their artistic freedom and accept the mainstream consequences of pursuing the curious, of pushing the boundaries, of seeking out the fringe.

I learned that when the confines of traditional music theory are lifted, there is literally no way to tell what might happen next. It does not take a formal education to be able to express oneself and connect with other people. The connections that are formed between individuals in the presence of art and music are some of the most beautiful things about the human condition, even if the art and music that brings people together is not striving after beauty.

The underground music community in Lexington is a mutually-supportive environment of self-identified outcasts who, despite their differences in aesthetic choices or technical skill, realize that their respect for one another as artists is what makes their scene possible. The freedom to express oneself without fear of condemnation or criticism is the freedom to take risks and breach new domains. To the man who said, “There is nothing new under the sun,” I think he was right – if you want something new you have to dig, to go underground, to explore uncharted territories where the sun has never shone before.

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