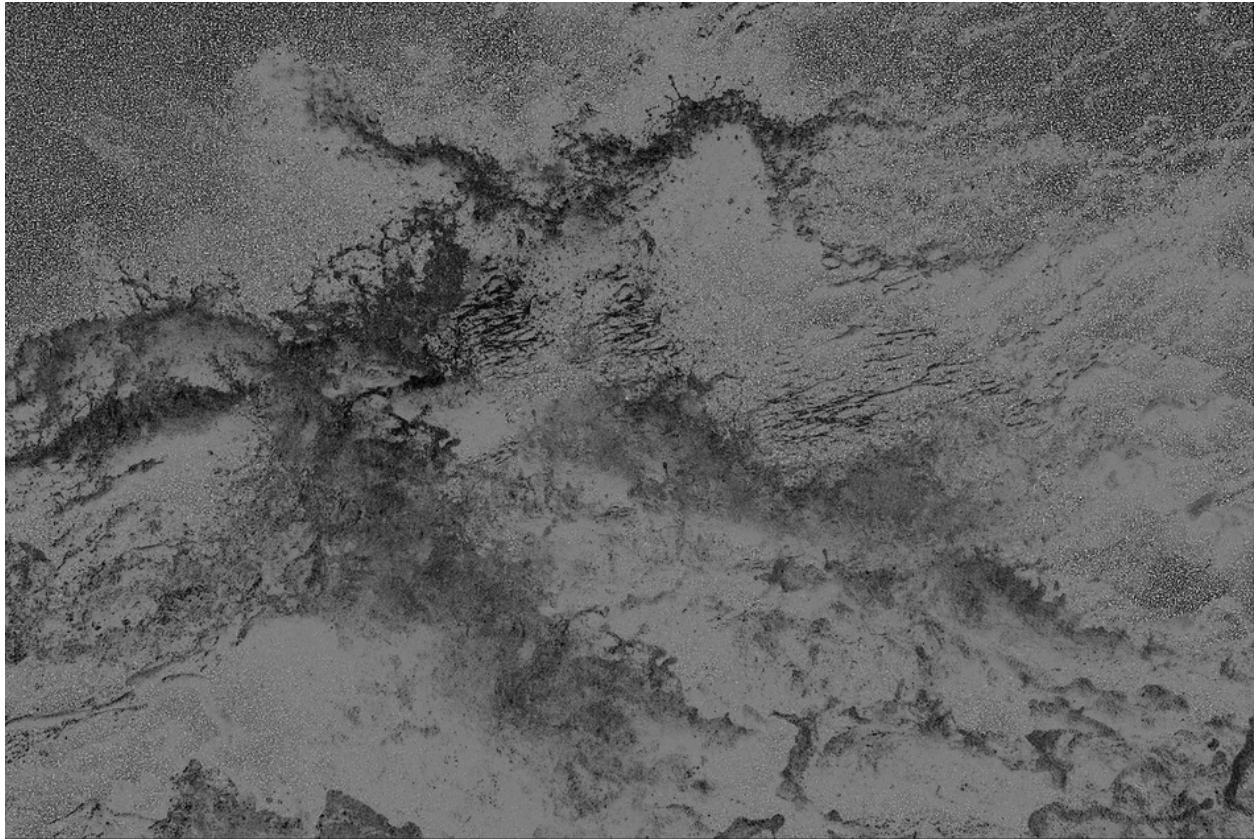


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A Brief History of Drone

The voice of the universe

Text: Florian Sievers



The first thing a human being ever listens to is a drone. A never-ending static caused by blood circulation and breathing: the soundtrack of the womb. In the imagination of the ancient Greeks, the luminaries moved on transparent spheres, grinding against each other and thereby filling space with an eternal chord, the “symphōnía.” For American physicist Brian Greene, the assumption that everything which exists is filled with a constant drone, wonderfully ties in with string theory. After all, the strings that make up the universe are swinging. Beehives, celebrating masses, the wind against the ocean, they all beam out endless sound streams.

In other words, drones are the voice of the universe.

As pure form, drones are indistinct – and eternal. They used to simply be a sound element. Nowadays, they’re a whole set of pop music genres and sub-genres depend on them: drone ambient, drone metal, doom drone, new age drone.

And yet, this all-permeating sound is highly divisive: Tones or chords without breaks, without melodies, arrangements or development. Really? Sounds that are almost fully stripped off everything that sets music apart from pure noise, and that only alter back and forth between dissonance and consonance? For some, this is pure boredom. For others, it's neither exciting nor boring, but a spiritual non-desiring, which relentlessly vibrates its way into the listener's subconscious. A blank audio canvas open to everyone's interpretation. An all-encompassing, universal principle.

„God is Sound, Sound is God“

Drones have existed in many corners of the world. For the most part they were embedded into instrumental arrangements, but they seldomly resonated on their own. For example, the “burden tone” served as the backbone to many folk music traditions, from Southern Italy to Scandinavia. And even in the middle ages, Europe and Byzantium sang over a foundation of static tones. Back then, all bigger cities in the Christian world hosted huge entertainment venues that showcased psychedelic light shows backed by endless drones and anesthetic fog: cathedrals, where choirs and organ players pushed their audience into ecstasy with what was then the loudest music imaginable, resonating from the walls with lots of heavy overtones.

But even in their purest form, drones connected people with a vibrating universe from early on. In many European places, they came out of the frenetic hurdy-gurdy, or, in the Scottish Highlands, from the mighty Pibroch-bagpipes, while in north Australia they got coaxed out of a didgeridoo. In the classical music of South-East and North India, drones came out of the tambura, which was built solely for that reason. “Nada Brahma,” that's how you sum up the all-encompassing, universal drone in India, because it can mean both: “God is Sound,” but also: “Sound is God.”

In Western modernity, however, the man-made drone has only recently come to prominence. Despite efforts by French painter and performance artist Yves Klein, who in 1949 created “The Monotone-Silence Symphony,” an orchestral piece whose first part consisted of an unvarying 20-minute tone, it was only in 1958 that American avant-garde composer La Monte Young wrote the first piece completely made up of static chords and steady tones without any melody or rhythm, “Trio for Strings.” It is considered the first modern drone piece, and a building block of today's dronology.

Young was only getting started: four years later, he and his fellow artist Marian Zazeela founded the Theatre of Eternal Music, a multimedia performance troupe, whose impact on the spreading of the drone gospel proved to be peerless. In the 1960s and 70s, members of the group included violinist Tony Conrad, viola player John Cale, trumpeter Jon Hassell as well as Terry Riley on organ and vocals. Although the Theatre of Eternal Music did not put out any music during their active years, they (due to their many members) massively influenced the drone-heavy works of composers like Pauline Oliveros, Charlemagne Palestine or Phill Niblock. It was here that John Cale discovered drones and took them over to The Velvet Underground, who incorporated the technique on their 1966 debut EP “Loop,” in form of a buzzing, drifting guitar

feedback. Meanwhile, Velvet Underground's Lou Reed was about to take the drone excursions to new heights on his 1975 double LP *Metal Machine*, whose recordings might have been essentially more noise than drone, but still very drone-like in their concentrated one-dimensionality.

„Tomorrow Never Knows“

As for the mainstream, the drone saw the light of day on November 27th, 1964. On this day, the Beatles released their single "I Feel Fine," which opened with a two seconds long drone feedback out of John Lennon's guitar. A brief appearance. But only two years later, the Beatles took a bigger chance when they featured a set of heavily-droning sitars on their 7th studio album "Revolver." They came courtesy of Indian musician Ravi Shankar, who had been releasing sitar-based ragas in the global North since the 1950s.

In Germany, the universal drone hummed to prominence in the 1960s and early 1970s via a group of young musicians embarked on a quest to find alternatives to the dominant Anglo-American tendencies in pop music. Their experiments later gained notoriety under names like "krautrock" or "kosmische Musik". Kraftwerk, for instance, filled up a couple of songs from their self-titled 1970s debut album with long, static chords and tones. Klaus Schulze's solo debut Irrlicht from 1972 consisted almost entirely of organ drones. And Schulze's former band, Tangerine Dream, released an early ambient-drone record called Zeit in the same year.

While Germans in the 1970s mostly generated their drones from organs, synths and sometimes flutes, post-punk, dream-pop and shoegaze bands returned to the guitar feedback of Velvet Underground. Cocteau Twins, My Bloody Valentine, Slowdive, or The Jesus and Mary Chain, but also Sonic Youth and Coil experimented with extremely loud drones as a tool to overpower and transport their audiences. Spacemen 3 even used a text by the pioneering La Monte Young in the liner notes to their 1990 live drone record Dreamweapon.

Later in the 1990s, Seattle-based band Earth tested out the obvious short-cut between metal and drone-power; drone metal differentiated into its own genre, whose undisputed kings, the 1998-founded band Sunn O))), also came from Seattle. And while experimental guitarists like Rafael Toral, Christian Fennesz or Oren Ambarchi honored the tradition of coaxing drones out of six strings, electronic music artist like Thomas Köner and Wolfgang Voigt (as Gas) explored the German drone-science further.

„If it's boring, do it again“

Listening to those musicians and their offspring today, it appears that there was something inherently provocative, almost obscene to their approach. In times where streaming platforms funnel down the structure of music to instant gratification, fast changes and spectacular turns, losing virtually all changes seems like a strong statement. Oh, so these poor listeners get bored

too quickly? John Cage said that if you do something and it's boring, then you should do it again until it becomes interesting. Cage, of course, took this to extremes: "Organ2/ASLSP" ("as slow as possible") started being performed in 2001 in the church of St. Burchardi in the Eastern-German town of Halberstadt. The performance will end in 2640, a time-lapse organ drone.

Complex drones can be full of micro-tonal events, tiny structures and shifts, only audible to those who come equipped with enough Zen – or, at least: time – to fully immerse themselves in it. That which seemingly sounds like the same thing over and over again can open up into different layers and elevations, full of complexity and depth. This way, a drone can allow the attentive listener to stay right in the exact moment – while simultaneously hint at deeper layers and hidden, non-tangible sensations; the sublime and numinous.

This works exceptionally well with heavy, distorted drones that dissect tones into an entropic noise. For George Bataille the sacred meant a total dissolution of the self – but at the same time also a feeling of nothingness and chaos. Drones can mirror both sides of this experience of the holy and evoke the full spectrum of emotions, ranging from meditative calmness to relieved jest and pure fear. In any case, drones change little of the original piece of music, but so much more in terms of the audience's actual act of listening.

They are wired to eternity. The sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan, who traveled to New York in 1910, writes in his classic book "The Mysticism of Music, Sound and Word:" „Every being with life comes to the surface and again returns whence it came, as each note has its return to the ocean of sound.“ The drone is the primeval soup. The point from which all melody stems from – and eventually returns to.