

MASHED UP IN THE MACHINE

A DECADE AGO ONLINE MUSIC COLLABORATIONS, INCLUDING LIVE VIRTUAL JAMMING SESSIONS, WERE BIG NEWS. SO NOW THAT WE (FINALLY) HAVE SERIOUS BANDWIDTH WHERE ARE WE AT NOW? MOD FILMSÍ MICHELA LEDWIDGE INVESTIGATES.

ANCIENT HISTORY: RESROCKET, DASE AND MIDI SHARING

In 1995 London musicians Will Henshall (Londonbeat) and Tim Bran (Dreadzone), released a free software download ResRocket. Essentially a hacked text adventure game system, ResRocket's innovation was that you could have a music jamming experience within a MUD (Multi-User-Dungeon). You went into a virtual room, plugged in your electronic instrument and played along. Sequencer (MIDI) data streamed between room-mates. The results were recorded. Much was made at the time that celebrity musicians, like Dave Stewart of The Eurythmics, were opening their own rooms. The buzz grew around networked performance space.

However, as with web3D, the first generation couldn't match expectations. You could link musicians in Seattle, Sydney, and Sao Paulo but you couldn't match the atmosphere of your average garage. Dial-up bandwidth made synchronisation painful. Despite valiant attempts to nurture a community, usage dwindled. There were social problems. Some players fretted that precious MIDI data was being ripped off by strangers.

ResRocket rebranded itself as Rocket Network, and focused on professional music industry services, but real-time MIDI jams faded away as a novelty pursuit. In 2003 the Rocket Network sank from view as the technology was acquired by Avid/DigiDesign.

A few other projects kept the online jam alive, notably the DASE network sequencer (created by Sydney artist Kenny Sabir and supported by the Powerhouse Museum (www.soundbyte.org/main.php?s=articles&artid=135), but no subsequent project has reached the profile that ResRocket had in its day. While researching this piece I expected to find some successor in the midst of a thriving web community but online jamming has not so much evolved as retreated. Rudimentary (and more reliable) forms now operate out of fragmented academic and artistic communities. Behind closed doors, the technology has evolved and network collaboration intensified. But out in the public Web, little trace of the excitement of a decade ago remains.

THE NET IS A MESSY PART OF A MESSY WORLD AND THAT WILL ALWAYS BE THE KEY TO ITS CHARM. FOR THOSE WHO VENTURE PAST CORPORATE WEB PORTALS AND EMAIL, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE NEW IDEAS, SOME SPREADING AT AN UNPRECEDENTED RATE. BUT THE FLIP SIDE IS THAT STUFF CAN GET LOST IN THE JUNGLE. ONE IDEA THAT FLARED UP IN THE '90S, BEFORE BEING BURIED, WAS THAT YOU COULD USE THE NET FOR JAMMING, IN THE MUSIC SENSE. AS THE DEBATE ON MASH-UP CULTURE AND FAIR-USE MEDIA CONTINUES, IT'S TIME TO TAKE STOCK.

THE PRESENT: DOWNLOAD/SAMPLE/MASH/UPLOAD

ResRocket failed to sustain a business around real-time MIDI jamming but that was never going to be the end of the story. Jammers took to the Internet like ducks to water and have never left, even if their profile has never been that high. Software products like Max/MSP with strong communities have made tools for networked performance (typically for LANs) more affordable. The Open Sound Control, a successor to the venerable MIDI protocol, has grown in usage. Online communities like revusa.net now showcase the results of video jams, as well as audio.

People simply routed round the technical and political problems. Jams are recorded offline, between established contacts, and the net is used primarily for distribution. With the explosion of P2P networks, file sharing of jams has sky-rocketed to unprecedented levels along with copyright violations. You can now jam with a Hollywood new release (using VJ software), let alone hack a humble MIDI sequence. We are in the midst of a new mash-up era with the ability to take what exists, and re-contextualise it as consumers. For those that want to, media takes on new

personal resonance.

And while this power is taken for granted by those in the know, mainstream media continues to largely keep its head in the sand. Whether you think of re-mixing in terms of playlist creation (your jukebox), title creation (a hit single) or media asset creation (the breakbeat riff from Track 2), the mechanics are invariably the same. So is the required software.

The commercial interest in online jams died a quiet death in the 90s because of the legal pitfalls. The resurgence of interest is largely due to the legal landscape changing dramatically, in a way that threatens to permit legal sampling and commercial re-use as mainstream activities in the next generation. Creators, whether they be

writers, musicians, artists of any kind have emerging choices regarding creation and distribution. Condoning mash-ups remains an issue for big media business (where All Rights Reserved remains the refrain) but there is movement at the station.

FRESH: INNOVATION/APPROPRIATION

Picasso wrote that "a bad artist imitates, a good artist steals." It's all about context. Away from big business and the established party line on copyright, artists have always built on the past. It's a warm comforting feeling that nothing really changes. People innovate and then people copy innovation. What was innovative becomes mainstream. And the cycle re-commences. Allowing new art to evolve has become an art in itself. Mash-up culture is about re-contextualising existing work, re-packaging and re-formatting to give things new life. It excites and upsets people. It gets a reaction.

The ARPANet crowd probably never envisaged that their cold-war network re-establishment scheme would come so in handy as a tool for disseminating new visions and sounds. The Internet 2 crowd (busy designing the sequel) have a better idea of what's in store. At some point soon we will be able to look back to pin-point when the next chapter of mash-up begun. The mash-up scene is having ramifications far and beyond the cutting edge. Next-generation TV will not be immune to its charms.

Without knowing who is truly to thank for starting the modern ball rolling on remix culture, Walt Disney's legacy is clear. Disney Corporation in 2004 may fight tooth and nail to retain its stranglehold on Intellectual Property law and zealously guard its content but some public good has come out of this. In 1928 Walt made his name with a fan film called

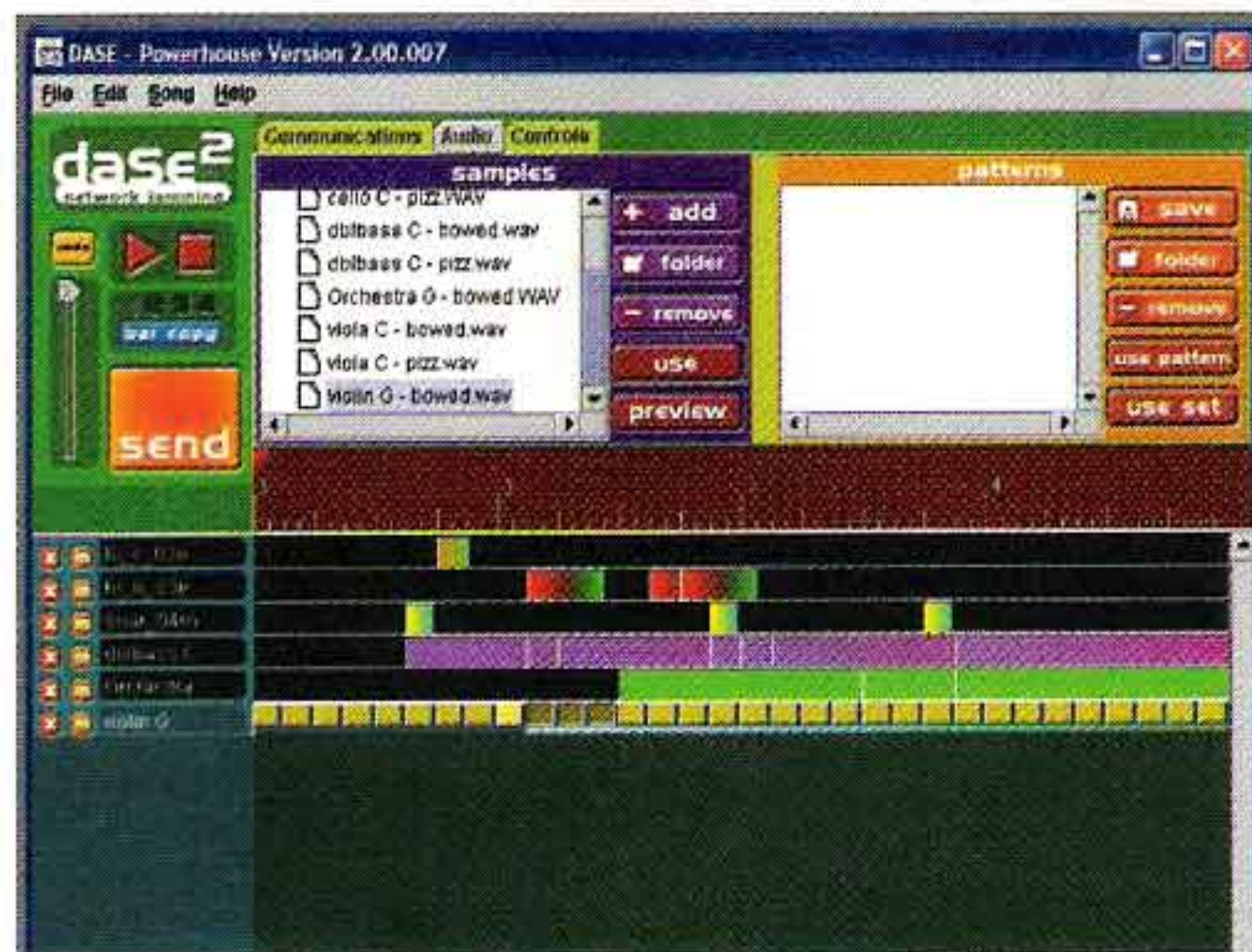
"Steamboat Willy" (based on "Steamboat Bill Jr" by Buster Keaton). In 1998 the

Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act (otherwise known as the Fairness in Music Licensing Act of 1998) allowed Disney to block any re-use of Mouse

House properties for at least another generation. This

hypocrisy so angered fair-use-of-media advocates around the world that they spawned the Creative Commons organisation. A group of influential IP

lawyers got together to devise a set of online licenses that could enable artists to share work



The DASE network sequencer, created by Sydney artist Kenny Sabir and supported by the Powerhouse Museum Sydney



LINKS:

DASE network sequencer
<http://www.soundbyte.org/main.php?s=articles&artid=135>

Centre for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics
<http://ccrma.stanford.edu>

VJAMM
<http://www.ninjatune.net/coldcut/vjamm>
<http://vjammpro.com/vjammpro/>

Coldcut
<http://www.ninjatune.net/coldcut>

Revolution:USA - Coldcut/Nomig
<http://revusa.net>

Monolake
<http://www.monolake.de>

Ableton
<http://www.ableton.com>

NetworkSound
www.networksound.com

Gibson Digital Guitar
<http://www.gibsonmagic.com/digitalguitar.html>

CyberSimps
<http://ccrma.stanford.edu/groups/soundwire/cybersimps/>

more easily and get lawyers out of the loop. In so doing, creativecommons.org (and spin-off sites like creativecontent.org) now provide a safe environment in which mash-up projects are not only recognised but can flourish legally.

Before 2002 a content creator had two options: keep all rights for themselves, or give them all away. Copyright law was never designed with the flexibility and ease of Internet distribution in mind. It makes it bloody difficult to share stuff. The music industry is still grappling with this. Having been forced to work out how to make money out of sampling, the major labels still have difficulties coming to terms with the validity of audience meddling. Departments are now devoted to the mining of commercial sampling value but the selling of fixed product (a one-way relationship) is still the basis of business. Mash-up culture challenges this relationship.

When artists like The Beastie Boys, Peter Jackson, Mike Moore, and David Bowie invite the audience to meddle with the final cut of their work you have an interesting situation

developing. Admittedly not everyone's motivation is the same. Through acclaim for contributing a track to Wired Magazine's Creative Commons Samplers CD, the Beasties almost get away with shipping DRM (digital rights management) software that auto-installs itself on their latest CD. Critics have also sniped at Bowie for trying to cash-in on mash-up culture by inviting fans to re-mix his classics (without any claim to the resulting work).

Creative Commons is a pragmatic contribution to the ongoing culture war. This is a war of ideals where our relationship to media content creators is going under the spotlight. The idea that the audience is empowered to re-mix for themselves is invigorating and horrifying for many established industries that rely on the distribution of static immutable media. There are other ways to satisfy the demand for content. As in William Gibson's novel "Pattern Recognition" (which supposedly samples the real online community history of the max-msp mailing list), readily manipulated media is becoming an obsession.

Who's who: online music icons



CHRIS CHAFE

Chris Chafe is a Performance Artist and Director of the <http://www.ccrma.stanford.edu/> Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University (California).

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— Chris Chafe, Director CCRMA, Stanford University

Q&A: ONLINE MUSIC JAMMERS

Michela Ledwidge: How long have you been using online networks for collaborative work and performance?

Chris Chafe: Our first concert was in Spring 2000, connecting two stages with unidirectional (broadcast-style) works. It was almost like layering one audience on top of the other. The music was designed to take advantage of the contrasting sound ambiances.

Robert Henke: The first Atlantic Waves performance was in 2002 between Berlin and Montreal.

Matt Black: About eight years.

Michela: What was your last performance?

Chris: Last month we demo'ed at the AES convention, Nov 2004. This was a 300 square-mile recording studio in which 9 musicians of a Mariachi were split into three Bay Area locations.

Robert: The last network performance was a special case: Scott and me have been in the same room but working as we would do while thousands of miles apart. The audience could follow both our actions on video projections. So it was a LAN network concert.

Matt: London-Belgrade Coldcut link, 11/01 was the last major gig. Electrofringe with Newcastle in Australia a few years ago was great. Our current collab AV remix project is at revusa.net.

Michela: Do you work in a group or as an individual?

Chris: Both ways. My own musical contributions are sometimes solo, sometimes ensemble and up to now have involved a lot of improvisation which is something I do alot.

Robert: Both, I did release a bunch of solo works, and I also

worked together with various people under Monolake.

Matt: A group.

Michela: What technology are you using at the moment? Bespoke or off-the shelf?

Chris: Totally homebrew. Our code is built on open source platforms: Linux / PlanetCCRMA and is being ported to Mac OSX. More recently, we've started to work with non-PC, network appliances developed at NetworkSound, developing the networking parts for the Gibson Digital Guitar (which uses ethernet instead of analog cables).

Robert: Former Monolake member Gerhard Behles started his own software company (Ableton) which I joined, and I use the software we develop there. This is a commercial software (Ableton Live) but since we create it one could say we only use our own tools...

Matt: All, especially PC software.

Michela: What are the main difficulties you face doing your thing online?

Chris: Every test, every concert has had some configuration difference so far. In general that's been due to IT setups that cross firewalls. Cooperative administrators are crucial. No roadblocks once you reach the right people.

I don't generally try to ship video alongside the audio. It's certainly possible and we've done it with help from colleagues, but there are still things to learn about immersive audio that I find really interesting. When you're playing together and it's only aural cues, your minds join in a space which is between the physical locations. It's the same space that you reach in tight ensemble

MATT BLACK

Matt Black is a 16-year veteran of cut-and-paste culture, DJ (Digital Jockey), half of the multimedia group Coldcut, co-founder of the UK Ninja Tunes label, and co-author of the VJAMM real-time video software. He is currently a Project Director of the Now! Film-making collective.



(The future of online music collaboration is) "Simultaneous world wide party jamming to praise the Creator, make a joyful noise, save the planet ; with Marshall Allen from SunRa Arkestra leading and Coldcut mixing it!"
— Matt Black, Coldcut/Ninja Tunes

playing and it's entirely aural. Dress codes are secondary. Of course, you need to rehearse starting cues, etc. One engineer we've worked with at Internet2 termed it "audio teleportation."

Robert: Setting it up technically. Once it runs fine everything is just fun. But if something does not work out because of firewalls and misconfigured routers and you only have another half an hour for soundcheck and no one at the venue is prepared for such a situation things can get really stressful.

Matt: Bandwidth, lag and lack of physical contact

Michela: What has been your most satisfying use of the Internet so far for your work?

Chris: Making music with excellent musicians whom I've never met. A good one was the Point25 performances at Stanford / Stockholm last June. We had a quartet split into two venues and in this case lots of video and film imagery for the audiences to watch along with the performances. Audio was great, the meeting place turned out to include common musical minds, and the spirit of collaboration was an inspiring thing.

Robert: The very first concert between Berlin and Montreal, where I was in my studio with a bunch of friends and Scott was on stage at the MUTEK festival. The moment when Scott wrote "Everyone is crying now!!!!" on the chat screen and we could imagine how it would be there with the music which we just created was extremely cool.

Matt: After 9/11 my partner Jon didn't want to fly to Belgrade for a Coldcut gig. But b92, the radio station that helped bring down Milosovic had put a lot into the gig happening. I was there already; so we hooked up a link to London and he played the audio mix from there; I received this and jammed the AV samples over the top. His head was on a webcam monitor and we communicated by chat. It was excellent.

Michela: What advice can you give to people starting to explore this space?

Chris: Find collaborators who are interested in doing this for fun. The intersection of signal processing, synthesis, etc. within this context isn't just a wire, it's a computer that makes music, too.

Robert: For a good show it is essential that the audience has a chance to understand what is going on. This is why we made this interface which allows people to follow our actions. In general I believe that the more simple a solution is, the more fun it can be since one can react fast enough. Often people try to achieve too much at the same time and the result is complete loss of control and this is not desirable in a jamming situation. The more choices technology offers, the more essential is it to focus on one particular thing.

Matt: It's fresh so it's exciting but you're on your own. The rule book hasn't been written yet.

Michela: Is your work available online?

Chris: Some clips are at <http://ccrma.stanford.edu/~cc> Also see CyberSimps

<http://ccrma.stanford.edu/groups/soundwire/cybersimps/> for a theater improv teleconcert which was a riot.

Robert: <http://monolake.de>

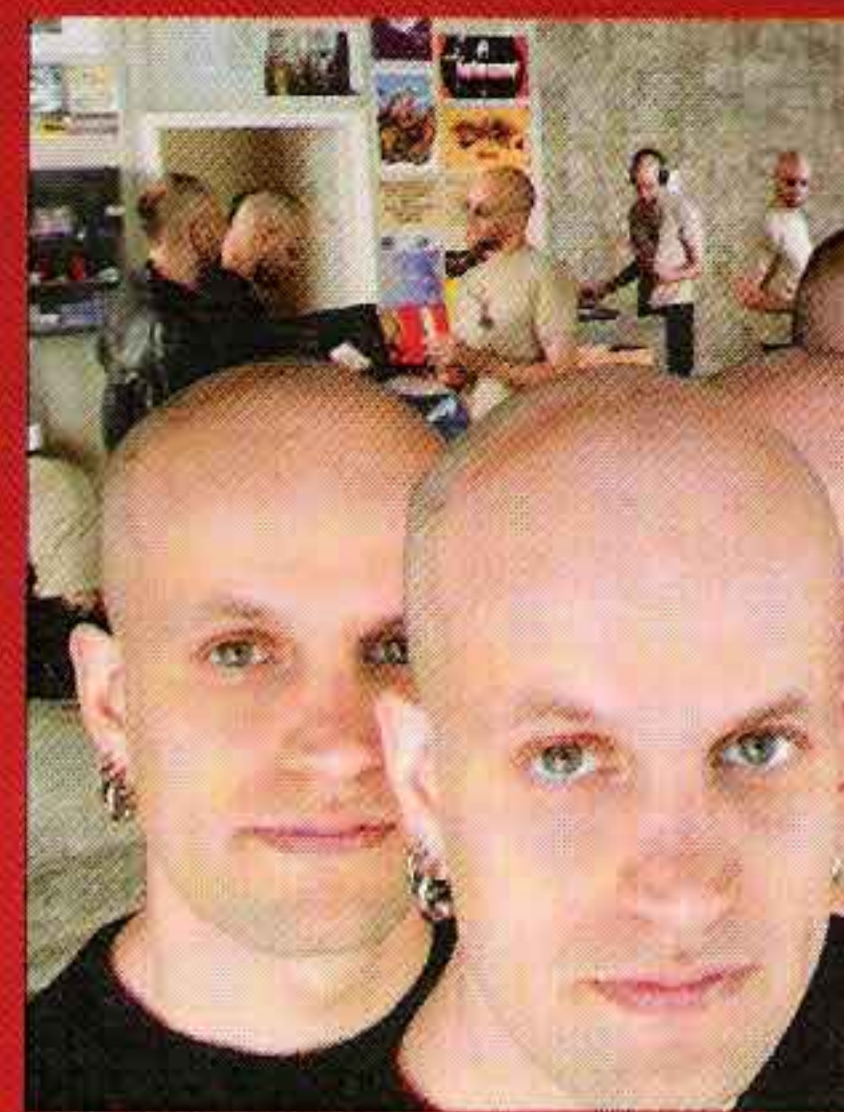
Matt: Check soulseek or kazaa. You'll also find ninjatune.net, revusa.net, nowthemovie.org, piratetv.net, vjamm.com all have plenty from me.

Michela: What is your position on sampling and re-use of online digital content?

Chris: Go for it. Let's hear the results. The stuff I'm talking about treats the Internet as a commons.

Robert: I almost never use content from other people, not even synthesizer default sounds. The first thing I always do is erase presets and start from scratch. I find it much more exciting to create my own sonic universe. Re-assembling "known" samples can be a great form of art but it all becomes difficult if a mix is

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—Robert Henke,
Monolake &
Conception at Ableton



ROBERT HENKE

Robert Henke has the role of "eConception" at Ableton (Berlin), and produces his own solo projects through Monolake including Atlantic Waves, an interface for networked music performance.

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Matt: Party with what you like but don't be too greedy. Where there's a hit, there's a writ.

Michela: Did you ever use ResRocket in the 90s?

Chris: No — more interested in real real time.

Robert: No.

Matt: Yes, I was closely involved with resrocket. Ahead of its time. Had a lot of fun there. I think the time is ripe for resurrecting the ResRocket idea as high speed connections are now much more common and machines have caught up.

Michela: Do you find collaborators through online communities or just work with people you know offline?

Chris: Mostly through direct contact at this point.

Robert: I only work with people I know offline.

Matt: Both. nowthemovie.org is a good example of the new type of net community

Michela: What do you see as the future of this kind of expression?

Chris: Kids in bands. At that point it'll be more like IM — I'm hoping opportunities for musicians to meet and make music goes up exponentially in our culture.

Robert: Projecting a real-time high definition video stream of some interesting part of this planet on my kitchen wall, just like these 70s photo wallpapers, but real-time and moving images.

Matt: Simultaneous world wide party jamming to praise the Creator, make a joyful noise, save the planet; with Marshall Allen from SunRa Arkestra leading and Coldcut mixing it!

Michela: If your bandwidth was unlimited, what would you do with it?

Chris: Ensure adequate quality of service for excellent pro-audio transport and make it possible on commodity internets. Make it accessible outside of academia. Second, add video.

Matt: The bandwidth of telepathic music consciousness IS unlimited. This means you.

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