

## **Chapter 8**

### **Digital Loopers**

Digital looping has seen the emergence of many individual voices who have each contributed something unique to the movement. Digital technology has also allowed Live-Looping to make its way into many differing musical genres from popular music and film music to contemporary classical music. Within this chapter I intend to discuss the work of Pauline Oliveros and David Torn. This is because more than anyone else these two artists have pioneered the use of digital Live-Looping in new and important ways.

#### **Pauline Oliveros**

In 1983 Pauline Oliveros acquired a pair of Lexicon PCM42s and began to use them in her work. Oliveros became interested in the new possibilities for control that the Lexicon offered her. It was possible to change the delay time, mix, feedback and capture parameters all via a foot pedal something previously not possible with tape-delay systems. Oliveros would go on to push the limits of human control even further with her EIS (Expanded Instrument System). EIS was the name Oliveros gave to the collection of technology (multiple delay processors, microphones, mixer, and controllers) she used to process her accordion (and additional performers' instruments) with. Using the EIS Oliveros sought to increase the performative possibilities for interaction within Live-Looping. In early configurations Oliveros would be accompanied by an assistant who would control the signal routing and parameters of the looping devices that could not be accessed by foot pedals. This would progress later with Oliveros in collaboration with

others looking at the possibilities of multi-speaker diffusion. This work resulted in two compact discs: *The Roots of the Movement* (1987) and *Crone Music* (1988). The EIS system later went on to explore the possibilities of computer control using the Max programming language.

Oliveros's work with the EIS, looking at intelligent computer systems and new ideas for performance interaction, has shown definite foresight. With the EIS she has pre-empted many of the ideas that are now commonplace in the work of programmers using Max/Msp for Live-Looping. It is therefore entirely logical that Oliveros herself now performs with specially programmed Max/Msp based Live-Looping patches on a Macintosh powerbook.

### **David Torn**

David Torn began experimenting with looping in the summer of 1975 with synthesist Andrew Schlessinger. These early experiments were described by Torn as "Very ambient, very spacious" and were influenced by Torn's fondness of Terry Riley's work and Fripp and Eno's *No Pussyfooting Around*<sup>1</sup>. Once Torn had taken these early steps in looping he saw the creative potential and felt there was no turning back. Throughout the eighties Torn established himself as a prominent artist with an original voice in the looping world (through the jazz-fusion arena). In 1981 Torn acquired a Lexicon PCM42 that would become the foundation of his looping set-up. Torn combined masterful integration of looping and signal processing technology in performance with incredible guitar technique to form his trademark sound. I believe it would be wrong to think of Torn primarily as a guitarist who carries out Live-Looping, Live-Looping is an

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<sup>1</sup> Milkowski, Bill 'Neo-Psychedelic Renegade' *Guitar Player* May 1991 p70

integral part of Torn's musical aesthetic and allows him to transcend the boundaries of his instrument. Probably his most significant record was the 1987 recording *Clouds About Mercury*. This record represents one of the most fully realised visions of looping in a band context. Torn has evoked different textures and sound-worlds via his skilled guitar technique and highly processed guitar sound. The beautiful introduction of the piece *Suyafhu Skin* shows how Torn has successfully created a style of guitar playing that takes advantage of the possibilities of looping, using it to heighten the listener's awareness of the new textural sounds he is able to coax from his instrument. The album contains almost no overdubs, instead it uses looping and harmonization to create multi-layered instrument effects. Torn not only uses looping to create huge washes of sound but is able to use it with rhythmic material within a more conventional structural relationship on the track *Network Of Sparks*. On the record *Clouds About Mercury* Torn clearly redefines the capabilities of Live-looping within an ensemble environment.

Perhaps Torn's greatest contribution to Live-Looping has been his ability (through his highly developed use of the guitar as a sound source) to take the use of Live-Looping into so many musical contexts. Torn's guitar/technology style of sonic mayhem has seen him become in demand from many differing musical areas. His trademark textures have been used on numerous feature film soundtracks including *Traffic*, *A Knight's Tale*, *Three Kings* and *Heist*. He has also appeared on the albums of many popular music artists such as K.D.Lang and Me'Shell Ndegeocello and on adverts and sample CDs. Whether people realise it or not most western people will have heard Torn's looping work. Through this work Torn has brought the music of Live-Looping to the ears

of millions. In fact so popular has Torn's sound become that he has become one of the most sampled musicians of our time.

Torn's incredible sonic versatility raises questions about where Live-Looping may be headed. Torn's Live-Looping approach has become so advanced in terms of digital processing that in some sense it is now almost impossible to distinguish its use from that of other studio activities. This is a crucial point, that once the medium of Live-Looping ceases to have an identity i.e. ceases to be recognisable as a process then in a sense the uniqueness of it as a compositional aid ceases and it becomes a device that can be used to emulate other forms of composition. This I believe has been one of the developing trends of Live-Looping, the amalgamation and advancement of the technology to allow the performer to access the sound worlds of other forms of studio composition. With the advancement of digital technology, making looping achievable in most musical contexts, so the character and individuality of looping has been absorbed into a bigger picture. Digital Loopers can now do structures like verse, chorus, verse, chorus and repeat in a way that would be problematic with analogue tape-delay equipment. The removal of limitations from Live-Looping devices has seen a loss of the individuality of the sound of Live-Looping replacing it with the flexibility to allow much greater integration into other musical forms.