

JOURNAL > SITE 1: LOGIC GATE, THE POLITICS OF THE ARTIFACTUAL  
MIND | 2017

## **Atmosphere and Architecture in the Distributed Intelligence of Soundsystems: Glass Bead in conversation with Lee Gamble and Dhanveer Singh Brar**

Lee Gamble,

Dhanveer Singh Brar

Music is artifactually constructed in the collective interaction of perception with action on material structures; from the instrument to the ear, from the soundsystem to the dancefloor. This psycho-social technical elaboration happens in and across localities with specific histories, social structures, urban architectures and politics. Music can then be thought of as not just capable of expressing and creating atmospheres but as a distributed intelligence that crosses perception, affection, and cognition and engages in their politics. Dhanveer Singh Brar's brilliant account of the ecologies at play in the emergence of Footwork in Chicago inspired us to put him in conversation with Lee Gamble, whose experimental techno is deeply engaged with exploring the ways in which music interfaces with atmosphere, architecture, and intelligence.



Screenshot of the documentary "I'm Tryna Tell Ya" (2014) by Tim & Barry. Source: youtube.

Glass Bead: You are both interested in the psychosocial aspects of music, the ways in which the *nervous system* of the technological infrastructure of music is ramified in the cognitive dimension of the experience of music as well as its social determinations. Dhanveer, you have described Footwork as a mode of redistribution of the logic of the 'grid' (the cartographic organization of the scales of racial difference within the city of Chicago) working through the disruption of its *urban ecology* (the combination of the geography of its built environment, lived experience, and the psycho-social-political determination of its territory).<sup>1</sup> Lee, the conceptual grammar as well as the phonic materiality of your most formalistic, rule-based works are characterized by operations such as sedimentation and construction through decay, and in that, they seem to emulate the prime task of the human auditory system: the organization of perceived frequencies into signifying patterns, making the act of listening similar to the work of a cartographer producing atlases of the auditory scene by working through scales of abstraction and prediction. In both cases it seems you mobilize the aesthetic impact of music and sound as artifactual generators of cognitive and social experimentation, as vectors of production of a *distributed intelligence* (between technician, technology, listener or crowd). In what ways can we understand music in terms of such a socially and artifactually distributed intelligence?

**Dhanveer Singh Brar:** I do certainly try to think about how music is made and its qualities in terms of what might be termed its ‘ecologies,’ or perhaps even thinking about music as an atmosphere (as in something which is the result of and generates atmosphere). By using those terms, I am trying to reach for a way of thinking about the innumerable, unstable, generative and potent ways in which some of the music I tend to have a preference for needs to be understood as a kind of socially crafted sonic field, or an atmosphere emerging from the pressures of a specific social environment, and the way technologies are used to modulate that environment into an atmosphere. I guess the most obvious way to think about this is through the continuum of soundsystem culture, both in its Jamaican and diasporic guises. The soundsystem, as far as I understand it, is a kind of feedback device. Musical styles such as rockers, dub, digidub, lovers rock, ragga, jungle, and many more, are not simply ‘genres’ that ‘reflected’ a social world existing around soundsystem culture. Instead, these musical styles are more akin to technologies that use the entire soundsystem operation as an instrument that can shape a mood or an environment. What soundsystem culture does, when it is in the process of producing say, a new genre, is take something of the social and physical energy compressed into the populations who gather around it, as well as the immediate physical environment of the city, and maybe even some of what is going on in a given historical moment in time (politically, economically), and transform that accumulated information into a new sonic field. On initial hearing, this new genre sounds kind of alien and weird, but when pumped back into the dancefloor, people respond and the material effect of the sound starts to reorganize desire, which then compels the soundsystem to push that process even further to generate more innovations. Steve Goodman has a much better account of this as “vibe.”<sup>2</sup> So too does George Lewis, who calls it “a power stronger than itself.”<sup>3</sup> The thing that interests me most, especially in terms of *distributed intelligence*, is that from the late 20th century onwards, the most sophisticated experiments in sonic ecology or atmosphere, of the type I have tried to really poorly describe, in the Global North have been crafted by those who face the full brunt of race, class, and sexual violence. Musical systems such as Chicago House and Jungle have been amongst the most potent instances of distributed intelligence, in my opinion.

**Lee Gamble:** I think all my music really has something of what you could call an emergence inside. Some of my early computer music work was really concerned with what the computer itself as an object could offer sonically. I was not interested in the computer as a virtual studio, with a conventional musical keyboard attached as it has now become, but more what it sounded like itself, with its limitations and its extensions.

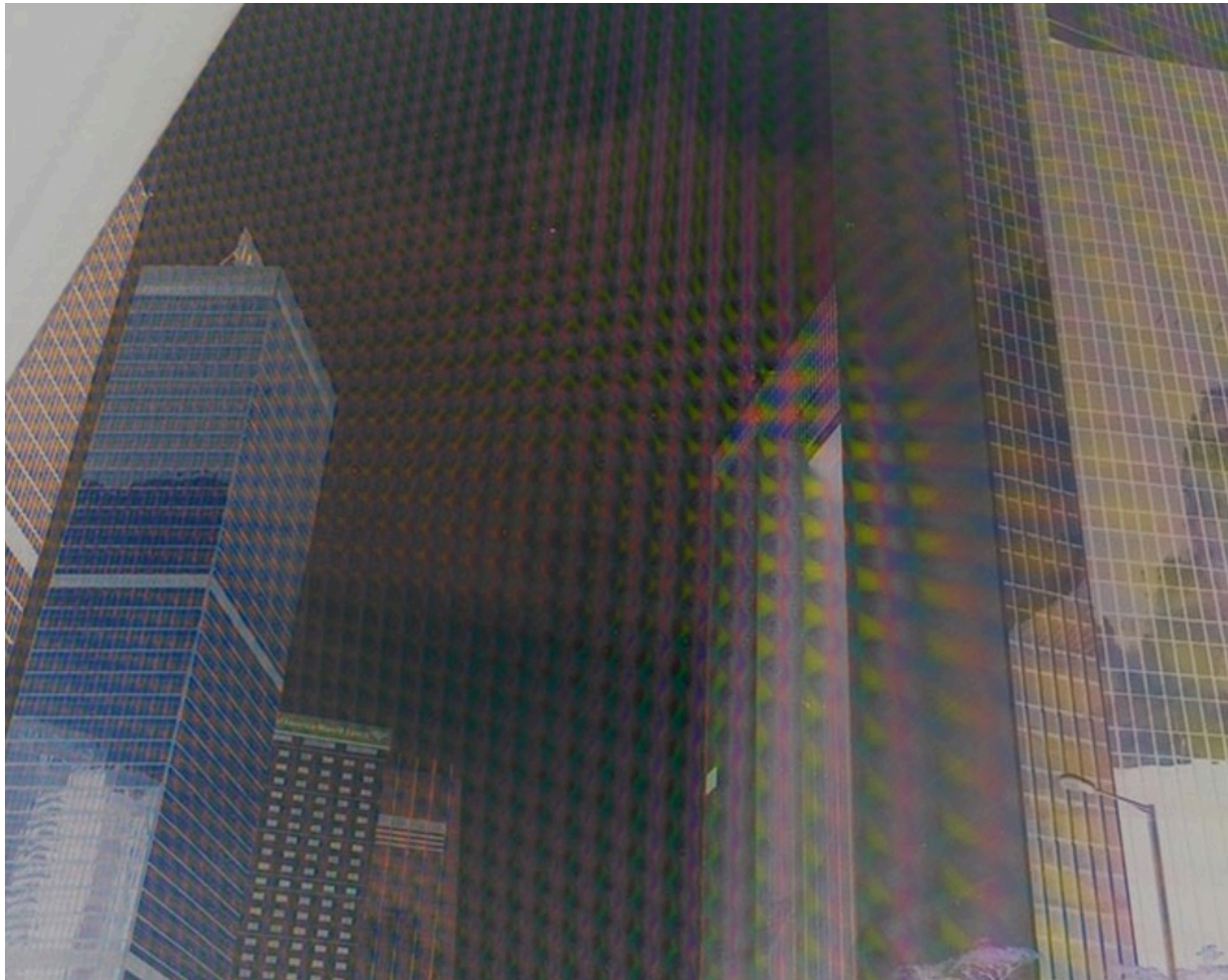
I was strict about particular compositional methods, about not using soft synths. So, mostly I was just running lines of code, recording the result and arranging them on a single stereo channel, trying to kind of get at the bones of the machine, wanting to hear what the computer had to say, as it were.

This became an exercise not necessarily in a musical idea, but more an architectural or sculptural one. The sonic architecture of digital sound is kind of ‘infra-microscopic.’ The idea of splitting sound became intrinsic, and I often ended up working with these streams of particles—this symmetrical concept of splitting a sound in two, then splitting that sound in two, and so on. Then finding out at which point you do not hear anything anymore. I think this bifurcation point—when sound is inaudible but still divisible—is when sonics reveal themselves as mathematics (again). This feels something like decay as a form of composition. It also felt very digital. The computer allowed this process to go from a materiality (physiological) towards mathematics (abstract), from the physiological constraints of the human auditory system and into to the strange infinity of pure maths. The architecture of data that in reverse results as sound and/or music.

Dhanveer, I read your piece “Architekture and Teklife in the Hyperghetto,” and you use the term “phonic materiality” to describe “other forces” inside Footwork. One aspect in all the music I’ve made is how to kind of get around not knowing music in its notated form, or as an instrumentalist. So, I am always interested to work on other ways to structure sound, and when that happens it feels to me that it opens up lesions in my music that other things (forces) can sit inside and infest; [this] is when I find it most interesting really. So, I really feel connected when you talk about grid systems appearing in Footwork, and how the body’s capacities—its limitations and its abilities—find themselves writing patterns into the music in a really direct way. Like, if the body could move even faster, then the bpm would increase, the snare patterns could become increasingly complex. So, what we see and hear with Footwork is an amazing symbiosis of almost the limit of where dance music is at the moment, and that in this form it also relies directly on the body for its sonic design. It is a type of hyper-specific, material system of composition.

And yes, I agree on these hyper-innovative movements in music appearing to emerge from the societal issues you mention. In a way, it is here we find the ‘experimental’ in music. Where certain other musical forms sit, and appear to stay almost the same (classical music, folk music), electronic music is in constant reinvention under this weird spell that makes it fidgety and elastic and open formed. Of course, it is in part due to technology, but I think they are also born from more broader social systems of organized

innovation too. I am thinking in the UK of the 'Hardcore Continuum,'<sup>4</sup> and the UK as this repository where many influences collide, the geographical position of it (Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*<sup>5</sup>), its colonial history. The fact that it is an island also geographically gives it this sort of boundary for influences to enter, but then also feed back into themselves, perhaps infinitely. And I think that, yes, there is something to be said to think of this as an idea of not just influence, but of a shared intelligence, dialectics, materialism. A system like this is inherently social; it displays this expansion and contraction, this continuum, and its flux is what drives its emergent properties.



Screenshot of Lee Gamble's "Mnestic Pressure" website ([mnesticpressure.leegamble.net](http://mnesticpressure.leegamble.net)), 2017. All rights reserved.

GB: Both of your practices seem intended to navigate a path out of the theoretical caricatures to which music is often reduced. On the one hand, music is often thought in a disembodied sense as this ethereal quality experienced in the mind of the listener, particularly within the classical tradition but also even in popular culture where it is all too often separated from the elements that surround and inform it (race, gender, class,

political economy, drugs, dance, fashion, technology, etc.). On the other hand, music is often just as badly misunderstood when it is conceived in purely bodily terms, as if it had no power to think but only to make bodies move, or when it is thought of as so inseparable from its sociohistorical context as to become a deterministic expression of the epoch. How can we think music beyond these misinterpretations, and understand it as both a form of reasoning and an embodied affective practice?

DSB: I think Lee already mapped out something like a response to this question in his previous comment. I was really taken by the way he opened up a way of thinking which is able to encapsulate something which we might call an abstract practice (his work with computers as instruments in and of themselves, or to be more accurate his work at the speculative limits of the computer as an instrument), and the importance he places upon creating lesions in his music which allow for something else to be unleashed through those very carefully crafted techniques he puts together. I think he shows us here already that supposed distinctions between rigorously conceptualized techniques and 'real-world' material forces, do not hold up and should not really be respected when it comes to the constantly inventive production of electronic music.

To speak to the question directly, the way I understand it is that the first tendency speaks to a kind of caricatured high-modernism, and the second tendency describes the often very lazy and dangerous language used to respond to music which are generated by those operating under the greatest racialized/gendered/class pressure. The first move, as I said, is a caricature, or a kind of distorted image of how "serious" music should be consumed and discussed. The second move is often carried out by those who claim to be admirers of the music in question, but are really fetishizing it, and refusing any notion of critical reflection on the part of those who make or dance to it.

I see something like these tendencies converging and animating the way dancefloors operate at present. (I am speaking as punter here, and one who tends to go out in London, so I am sure Lee can correct me on a lot of this with his much wider range of experience). But I think there has been a development whereby, yes, electronic music has been taken seriously as an artistic, intellectual (and in some senses political) project for a number of years now, yet what this seems to have brought in is some of that caricatured high-modernist (or what I call Adorno-bro) tendency. It seems that modes of behavior have begun to shape dancefloors whereby reservation and sobriety have begun to pass for attentiveness to the performance/DJ set. Now, I have no wish at all to police or compel

people's behavior (they can do what the fuck they want as far as I'm concerned—if it bothers me I'll just leave or go dance somewhere else on the floor), but I think there are some troubling logics at work here which I am trying to get my head around.

Let me perhaps try to explain this another way via a story: A few years ago, I was at Notting Hill Carnival and was at the Aba-Shanti sound on their usual spot (the corner of Southern Row and Middle Row in London). The session was fantastic, all that you would expect from Aba at carnival, yet in the middle of the session one of their engineers hauled himself on the top of the huge speaker stack to make some adjustments to the tweeter boxes. He did this because either he, or someone else in the Aba crew, could hear something in the cacophonous intensity of the session that was not quite right, something marginal or minute which required immediate attention. Now clearly, if I had not seen this, I most likely would not have noticed any audible difference to the session, and I imagine most of the people in the crowd did not see it at the time, and so similarly it passed them by too. But yet there was an adjustment made, because someone in the Aba crew felt it was important enough to affect the dance in this way. I was totally fascinated by this, and have not stopped talking about it since!

LG: Interesting, because this is where I think about music in the absolute opposite way to how I was thinking about music in the first answer (systems, concepts) and honestly, not trying to (or at the risk of!) sounding 'new-agey' here, but it has a magic(k) at play in this sense. I really feel this when I'm making an album. I have just been through this process with my new one "Mnestic Pressure."<sup>6</sup> It is this process of having a bunch of ideas, concepts, drawings, notes, thoughts—all really amorphous and disembodied and un-grid-like, scattered—and then somehow forming them into an object. So, it is a gradual movement to and from abstract concepts to physical object to live show, etc. I am also comfortable here. As much as I like and work with the idea of systems of organization in music (as we talked about before), I have no interest in purely reducing music to scientism. Similarly reducing it to a purely (political?) statement isn't enough either. Sound has this 'magic', this ability to engage itself, to represent itself morphologically, as color, as system, as mathematics, as abstraction, as politics, as change, as a mirror, as time, as a library, as language. It is this malleability that provides it a unique non-place where it travels easily between embodied materialism and vapor. I am always sat on these junctions, really; I say it all the time in interviews, that I want all these things in my work but really do not expect a listener to have to engage with them all. For me, concept in what I do is not something that I want to add after, to fill out the work. It is the reverse; it is this spell part, the part that is disembodied, that is driving the

whole thing, and ‘concept’ is made up of all these unconnected parts, these interests. Then there is a morphological process from here to engaging with systems (organization, potential reduction to scientism) and to materialization to object (through labor, engagement with materialism). And that final object contains all these things. Then it is up to the person engaging with it to pull it apart accordingly to their preference (use it in a DJ set, delve into its vapor, just listen as background music).

I guess these are also notions of ‘ghosts’ inside, like how retroactive interference works on memory and that this physical object (the record) is subdividable: it sort of flips back on itself, then, from container to map to amorphous babble.



Optigram design for Lee Gamble's "Mnestic Pressure", 2017. All rights reserved.

GB: Procedures for automating musical composition have a fairly long history (at least since 18th century *Musikalisches Würfelspiel*), but algorithmic music is now fairly common, and more recent advances in recurrent neural nets have triggered a surge in AI-based analysis and composition. This often prompts the question of the potential obsolescence of human composers, and (just as chess and now Go have fundamentally changed since Deep Blue and Alpha Go) is mostly answered by rethinking composition as a human-machine collaborative process, though we could say music has always been mediated by technologies (or artifactually constructed). This clearly has political implications even before any supposed ‘singularity’ point. In an interview in the previous issue of Glass Bead’s journal, Mat Dryhurst claimed that “algorithmic music is a



distraction,” and that “liveness” is its key feature.<sup>7</sup> What do you think about the impact of AI on music, or more generally the question of the future of music given accelerating technological change?

DSB: I will let Lee deal with AI/algorithmic aspects here, but I have to say, I tend to experience a combination of suspicion and perplexion when asked to consider questions of the future/futurity. This only intensifies when it comes attached to questions about music. My immediate response is: “Well, whose future(s) are we talking about here?” and as part of that, “whose music(s)?”. I am happy to admit this may be due to a deficit of imagination on my part, or rather, following Mark Fisher, it might be that my lack of affective response when it comes to the question of the future in music is a product of that very possibility having been destroyed by operations of contemporary capital. But I would say the following: more than the future, I would rather talk about the way in which music can get involved in the reorganization of desire. That is what I am interested in. And it requires a careful, sensitive, collective work, to not only make music that takes on this task, but to listen once again to some of what has already been produced, or is currently being produced, as a series of innumerable *re-engineering-desire* projects, rather than corral them into a preprogrammed sense of futurity. In the settings I usually move through, I hear such a task being undertaken by the likes of Klein, Dean Blunt, Jlin, and Actress, although I am sure there are plenty of frequencies I am not even tuned into as yet.

LG: Sure. Firstly, I agree with Dhanveer here in his suspicion! Personally, I am confused when it comes to this idea of ‘modern’ or ‘future’ or ‘present’ or ‘past’ in music. What do those terms even mean? Or more worryingly maybe, what they suggest? Who’s ‘future’ in this case? I have the same confusion relating to ‘nostalgia’ in the reverse. Like ‘who’s’ or just ‘what?’ I am just not sure these terms have much use. I am really always interested in the receiver-of-my-work’s interpretation anyhow. I am not convinced the artist is entitled to be the judge of what their works mean or where they sit on some timescale of future/past/present for instance. All I feel is that the past and future are contained in the present. Other than that, we dip into really speculative areas, so I think this is best left to personal interpretation. It seems to allow the work to be so much more that way. Thinking more broadly though, the idea of linear time is problematic. It would presuppose that as we move forward into it, we learn, we leave behind poor ideas and find new and better answers, and that does not universally seem to be the case right now—not just in music, I am talking generally.

I guess art is just a form of re-engineering anyhow, and in part it should strive not to travel on human-centric maps like time. Its function can be to fuck directly with constrained anthropocentric things like these. Also, it does not have to only display human capabilities. An architect developing amazing (and *useful* hopefully!) structures from natural geometric forms is great. I would say that this is more a display of the incredible abilities of the emergent properties of the universe, not of the architect only. He or she is displaying a method of design, a re-engineering of nonhuman geometrics. So, I do not think it is odd that AI outsmarts humans; the world outsmarts humans, cars outpace humans, planes outfly us, spiders make stronger material than us, etc. I think an airplane displays more about physics as a phenomenon of the universe than it does the human. In art though, computational engineering, generative systems, algorithmic music, machine learning, or AI can allow us to move from some human (physical) limitations. I do not think that is a bad thing per se. That can be its function in this context. It is the difference here which is important, too, the ability to think outside of ourselves, to continually move away from anthropocentric models is useful. To be honest, I have not kept fully up to date with what is going on with AI, but instinctively I have this sense that it could be extremely homogenizing, could become a utilitarian commodity sucked up by big corps and sold back at us as ‘futuristic,’ convenient, new, or whatever. It is not a stretch of the imagination to envisage capitalism taking something as amorphous as the creative output of the human brain, rebranding it, and selling it back to you—AI-generated music becoming a strange ostentatious hyperreal affectation for us to buy! Again, as with anything like this, artists need to have some control of the technology. Inside capitalist markets, the potential for the reduction of technology and ingenuity into a mean average (more sellable) product is always there, and the usual suspects (educated dominant males) will attempt to own this technology. However clever AI becomes, fundamentally it is still going to display and be owned by the ‘intelligence’ of its researchers and creators, right? So, in representative terms it is limited, and fundamentally in music, its style and intersectionality that make it and us so unique, so that is an aspect of it we could do with holding onto.

Interview conducted for Glass Bead by Vincent Normand and Inigo Wilkins.

---

## Footnotes

1. Dhanveer Singh Brar. “Architecture and Teklife in the Hyperghetto. The Sonic Ecology of Footwork.” *Social Text* 126 (34/1) (March 2016): 21-48. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Print.

2. Steve Goodman. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010. Print.
3. George Lewis. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Print.
4. See Simon Reynolds' series of essays exploring musical genres such as Hardcore Rave, Ambient Jungle, Hardstep or Speed Garage. "Simon Reynolds on the Hardcore Continuum." *The Wire* 300 (February 2013). Web.
5. Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. Print.
6. See Lee Gamble. "Mnestic Pressure." (HDBCD037). 20 October 2017. Bandcamp. Web.
7. Mat Dryhurst, Holly Herndon, and Alex Williams. "Re-engineering Hegemony." *Glass Bead. Site O: Castalia, the Game of Ends and Means* (2016). Web.

---

Lee Gamble is a British experimental musician and electronic producer.

---

Dhanveer Singh Brar is a scholar of Black Studies, as it intersects with Cultural Studies and Critical Theory.