

Seriously or not, Seth Horvitz, who records some of the most paradoxical techno out there as the anagrammatically-challenged Sutekh, is out to strike fear into the hearts of DJs, random listeners and clubbites via both his own recordings and the elaborate rhythm structures defined by his singular Context imprint. By tobias c. Van Veen

## The Context Gardener



*I am now going to attempt to write to you while simultaneously listening to a radio commentary about Bush's state of the union address...  
—Samples from Sutekh, via email*

You could strike sparks in any direction, along wires and circuits that bleed into highways and Silicon Valley, from the towers of the Embarcadero out to the warehouse districts in Oakland, dilapidated houses and cement environs stacked with dot-communists, tier upon tier of programmers by day, art-freaks by night, as rents accelerated into downpayment digits. San Francisco in the late 90s was a very special time, for it was also the time when art, fuelled by electronic music at the nexus of Burning Man and a certain ironic reinvestment in an electrified counterculture, fought back against the dot-com invasion at the same time that it rode it for all it was worth. Techno ran roughshod over the foggy city, it echoed across the Bay in dub, it imploded and screamed and sang in broken beats and feedback and noise. It was the age of the electronic producer.

*The "electronic music producer," in the general sense, has been in existence since the invention of electronic musical instruments in the 50s, so I don't imagine it will disappear. But it will continue to splinter into different directions. I don't expect experimental electronic music to ever be completely subsumed into the art world either. In fact, experimental electronic production techniques seem to be incorporated more and more into commercial music, don't you think? Electronic production in films, video games, and music, is more prevalent than ever. Also, I think it's becoming harder and harder to separate the "experimental" from the commercial, when the most advanced and ground-breaking spatialized sound research is being used for video games and film. I find myself more impressed and inspired by a video game like "Katamari Damacy" than by a lot of what is called "sound art" or "multimedia art." Uh oh, I am bound to start contradicting myself here eventually...*

San Francisco is quietly on the rise once again. Mathew Patterson Curry (MPC), better known today as Safety Scissors, has returned from Berlin to live once again with Sutekh. Joshua Kit Clayton pops over to work on music in the studio (yes, Clayton might be poised for a long-awaited return). And San Francisco experimental techno, freak-out IDM and electronica mangle music, as it connects the West Coast longitudinal of Seattle and Vancouver, finds itself at the forefront of a global resurgence in psychedelic and organic minimalism. Richie Hawtin's Minus Records has just re-released SF's *Actual Jakshun* project from 2000, and Sutekh, née Seth Horvitz, finds six years of his remixes released in two double LPs on Leaf (*Born Again, Vols. 1 & 2—Collected Remixes 1999-2005*), with a series of new projects on Soul Jazz (*Micro Solutions to Mega Problems*), while his Context label hums away with new work from its owner, having amassed early debuts from now well-recognized artists in a rather unassuming fashion (Murcof, Twerk, Ben Neville, Portable, MPC, etc.).

Horvitz, a former radio-art host and university student who once went AWOL to India for a year ("I wanted to experience a radically different way of life. At the time, I was also more interested in spirituality and mysticism than I am now"), has ever since been dubbed Sutekh, after the Egyptian god of war and storm, the desert and chaos, but also of thieves and evil, murderer of Osiris, the god of death, and sister of Isis. Sutekh protects the Sun: Ra. Sutekh is also a resampling of Seth.

*...Technology is more a part of our lives than ever, it's just that we take it more for granted now, there used to be a big hype surrounding it, because it was new, but the influence hasn't diminished...*

Sutekh's work has always been struck through with the trace of the technological apparatus: feedback and noise, hum and circuitry, whether as the engine to the track—such as his first dancefloor destroyers, *Influenza* (Dropbeat, 1998), *Of Sarcasm and Exhaust* (Cytrax, 1999) and

*[Double Entendre]* (Context, 2000)—or the subtext found in the organism of his Soul Jazz releases, featuring, for example, samples from Jamaican Studio One records and Boulez for the *Hands on Feet EP* (imagine bending Boulez over backwards to reinject rhythm the nasty way). The *Two Vireos EP*, both sides but especially "Red-Eyed," signal a shift change into maximalism, ambient, full techno and a certain Detroit tinge, even in the arborescent percussion on the stormer "Black-Capped," a track that Sutekh reminds me is nonetheless "one of the more 'industrial' sounding techno tracks I've produced," though perhaps "industrial" in the sense of Test Dept., not unlike a certain Carl Craig as it pivots squelching feedback and staccato female lyricism over a thundering bassline.

Sutekh's also been known to strip tracks down to a minimalism rarely heard outside of Windsor or the Elektro Music Department (in particular, *Every Dot and Title*, the era of *Periods/Make Sense*, Force Inc., 2000). His first album, released with Twerk, *Deadpan Escapement* (Belief-Systems, 2000), and its abstract remixes on Context, featuring the telling array of SF regulars as well as Mick Harris, Jake Mandell and Phoenicia, betrays the depth to which not only a transversal approach to genre girds Sutekh's inspiration but also the degree to which industrial technologies infiltrate the theosophical beast known as Sutekh.

*...What did you just call me?...*

In fact, along with his cohorts, Sutekh's work in many ways predicts and predates the current resurgence of complex software-driven minimalism. An early adapter of Max/MSP (like many in the SF scene), Sutekh possesses nonetheless an impressive analog studio. That his earlier works are predominantly (and still) analog monstrosities ought to give current laptopheads pause when composing their ketaminimal microedits, for they all follow in Sutekh's shadow.

Furthermore, his current interest is the piano.

*I think you may be aware of my relatively recent obsession with piano and music theory. My studies have led me to discover so much amazing music that I was never exposed to before. Rather than getting caught up with the latest and greatest, I've been looking into the past and finding so much that inspires me. It's a strange place to be in, starting piano studies at age 30, but all I know is that I love playing, and as long as I do, I'll keep at it.*

Sutekh is a man of silence and shadow, possessed of a slicing wit and a vicious sense of humor, practically unstoppable when he piles on the sarcasm. Yet his works betray a desperate sense of beauty, such as the ending of *Fell* (Ortholomg Musork, 2002), with the feedback storm as it swoops over the expanse of "Wings Over Kansas," which is, in a word, epic ("I've always been interested in a mixture of organic and synthetic sounds. Even *Fell* takes the majority of its sounds from acoustic sources"). It is perhaps even cinematic; it conjures visions, and reflects his recent turn toward music theory and film.

*Studying piano and music theory has led to more of an interest in film music as well. However, I think my stubbornness as an artist will prevent me from ever breaking into Hollywood... I've now completed music and sound design for two films [pathogonmovie.com, doctorisland.com], which I have enjoyed immensely. I'm definitely in a time of transition, which is why it's been so long since I've completed a solo album. But the film projects have given me some distance to reflect on my other work.*

This other work, his new work, has yet to be heard. Though the Soul Jazz releases are now three years old, they already mark a distinct break in Sutekh's sound (he has discussed releasing two albums in the future, one under a new artist name, to encompass these new directions). This break is that of construction and composition as he considers the sample as a whole. "I'm doing less processing of those sounds and trying to focus more on their intrinsic nature," he writes, "as well as trying to compose more with notes in mind, something I avoided in the past. I don't want to rule

anything out—I'm just trying to expand on my compositional methods and knowledge."

To a degree this effort is found throughout the "pigeon funk" aesthetic heard on his collaborations with MPC on Onitor and Proptronix, in a move that plays ping-pong with microhouse. In his work with MPC as Moron, this takes the form of a dub approach, such as on (*Neo*)*moronics* (Tekite). And his track "Clawing Your Eyes Out Down to Your Peedy" on Boniato reveals much of its blues-era, swing-low sample. The same can be said for his reworking of o.lamm, *Six Residua* (Active Suspension, 2004), which lets loose clouds of harmonica-like liquid sculpture. Like Murcof and Jan Jelinek, a turn to inverting the appearance of the sample so its richness in relational position (its composition) comes to the forefront rather than its extreme mashing into unrecognizability.

This inward turn (he is considering returning to university to study music and art) reflects in his outward concern with the political disaster of the world (just check context.fm). A demeanour in which wit and wile clash in sound:

*I spend a lot of time thinking about the politics/music relation, but when it comes time to actually create the music/sound, the end result is usually more interesting if I refrain from imposing a conceptual framework on it. Highly conceptual music/sound art can be wonderful and inspiring, but I prefer to complete the work first, then sit back and try to figure out what it means (or let people like you do it). It's a tough paradox, I want the music to have meaning, but thinking too much about meaning during the actual creative process tends to limit the possibilities of the creation. I try to stay informed and aware of the issues surrounding the work, yet retain the ability to forget about them when necessary, if that makes any sense.*

Perhaps this too amplifies "Wings Over Kansas" and its beatless feedback implosion that weathers the test of time, leaving *Fell* as an assured masterpiece of brooding techno-driven electronic music. Or consider *Two Rhapsodies*, his first release on Context since 2000, quite literally a "Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini, Variation 17" or the "Pathétique in D Minor." Here, the thematic rotates relentlessly while a dip-and-swing beat, much like his earliest work on Belief Systems, grinds cybernetic gears. While the former is an uplifting, Glass-like invocation of spiraling realms, the B-side is a warily moment of mourning that marks all that has passed in the world. Piano drifts in and out of both.

Techno is too confining a word for Sutekh. His new work moves in many directions, from the cinematic and the (de)compositional to the exposed, while his tonic of potent techno-beatism lurks around devious corners. Secret MPAs divulge waltzes reminiscent of Wendy Carlos, a tuba-infused tribute to the Beatles' "Piggies" that is perverse (Sutekh sings!); a round of synthesized bells in three sections offset by 12th notes; improvisational piano reminiscent of Feldman, feedback textures siphoned from flamenco guitar (in the closing scene of the *Doctor Island* film); melodic salsa-beat with vocals and lyrics by Ana Machado from Pepito, slated for the Leaf 10 year anniversary compilation; and a maddening, nearly insane happy hardcore slammer rendered avant-garde for Tigerbeat6. His listening habits these days orbit Erik Satie to Bach, jazz to soundtracks, and his piano lessons have begun with Debussy, Chopin and Philip Glass. As Sutekh considers:

*An interesting thing to ponder is that 99 percent of the most influential avant-garde composers went through rigorous classical training. Had they not undergone that training and spent years trying to "unlearn" it (as avant-garde/experimental composers are so fond of claiming), they would never have reached the conclusions they did. This seems to be changing in the 21st century, for better or worse, with so many experimental musicians managing to completely evade academic institutions altogether. I'm doing things backwards, I suppose, but somehow it feels like the only way to keep moving forward.*

To cite Sutekh, perhaps simply consider the Context icon—[.]—and judge as you will. ■