

= STEVEN R. SMITH =

Regular readers of the Terrascope may have noticed one of many threads running through the pages these last few years. A thread running to here from San Francisco and back again and gaining great praise in the process. The names to look for are Mirza, The Knit Separates and the Autopia label. Linking them all is Steven R. Smith.



Smith's dark sound and home-made instruments give his solo work an atmosphere of brooding hard to find anywhere else. When I first heard Steven's solo work I remembered a review written about (fellow San Franciscans) Quicksilver Messenger Service in the Village Voice which said, "*The group raises images of white Spanish missions with red tile roofs in old California, of Wells Fargo, of 1865 San Francisco political corruption, and 1965 purity still intact. QMS is a musical mental movie of the west.*" Mirza have been compared with QMS before, though Steven claims not to be directly influenced.

The way his music draws unconsciously on traditional sounds and knocks them off-centre is truly fascinating. Brand new at the same time as it is as old as the hills, his cinematic sound taps into a huge well of American music and simultaneously forges ahead with fruitful experimentation, clearing new ground. Mirza, whose 'Iron Compass Flux' rightly gained critical respect on release, have Steven as a member. As occasionally do the Knit Separates, who's first two vinyl outings also got rave reviews at Terrascope towers. Steven has started work with a new band, Thuja and his own output shows no sign of slowing. We thought it was about time we dug a little deeper into the mind of this prolific innovator. . .

How did you first get involved in music?

Like a lot of kids my world suddenly changed upon hearing the electric guitar. I spent an inordinate amount of time hanging round the corner liquor store to listen to the theme from some video game that spewed out a hackneyed Led Zeppelin rip-off whenever someone put a quarter in. I wish I could say I was real hip and listening to the Velvet Underground and 13th Floor Elevators at age 8, but alas it was the first few Cheap Trick records, Led Zep, Queen, Sabbath etc. The standard 70's fare recommended by a friends' older brother. Not bad to start with, could've been worse. Eventually I wasn't just content with listening, I had to make those noises myself. So fast forward through badgering my parents for an acoustic guitar, a year of lessons, the

first electric guitar, high school bands etc. It seems like I have always been in some sort of band. I finally wound up in San Francisco and we started Mirza with members from Santa Cruz bands where we all previously lived. This was '94/'95. Somewhere in there I bought a 4-track to do other stuff that we weren't exploring with Mirza and that's where the solo music started. I think I mostly wanted to do soundtrack stuff, so I figured I should try and do it on the 4-track. That's what the first cassette release I did was about. ('Log the Man Dead.') It wasn't supposed to be a release but more like something I could use to con a film maker into letting me score their work. I naively thought that was all it would take. Of course, it never happened but the tape did end up getting around and got some reviews. And I've just kept going, trying to get it right.

Mirza has a different, less pastoral and cinematic, (though equally dark) sound. How does your work with Mirza and the Knit Separates relate to your solo stuff?

The main difference is that with the bands I'm only one part of the whole. Although we started by trying to play worked out songs, Mirza quickly turned into an improvisational band 'cause we had a hard time learning parts. No-one had much interest in taking the time to learn them and count them out, it was just too restrictive so we just gave up on it and figured out how to do it another way. Because of this set up every member has an equal voice in how the music progresses. So there is no one great vision. Mirza's music is different from my own and sounds much more like a band exploring instead of one person doing it. There's less ego involved with Mirza than most bands which has been an added bonus. Also, there's quite a wide group of influences. From 'Bathing at Baxters' era Jefferson Airplane to Henry Cow/Art Bears stuff to Coltrane/Pharoah Sanders, to Crime and the City Solution. I'm more interested in pastoral or cinematic music because that is how I naturally write and it's harder to do that with a band. Mirza certainly thrived on getting loud and just pushing the song until it collapsed on itself. But we all have lots of ideas that aren't necessarily going to work with Mirza or even in any other band. Hence we have all these various projects. Everyone in Mirza is involved with other pursuits so it seems to work out. They don't seem to interfere. Actually Mirza's been on quite a hiatus and I don't know where things will go from here, if anywhere. The last record ('Iron Compass Flux') was, for various reasons, not the easiest record to make and now at this point it's real hard to get everyone together as we don't all live in San Francisco anymore. Mark Williams spends half of the year travelling and is currently staying in Spain. Brian Lucas was living in New York for a while and has just moved back here, so we'll see. Glenn Donaldson and myself have been working with Loren Chasse (from Id Battery) and Rob Reger in a group called Thuja that I'm really excited about. A record should be out in early 2000. This stuff is a bit quieter and all improvised, based around some piano, a bit of guitar, found sounds and objects, tapes and other oddities. It's a great record. Hopefully we'll get out to do a couple of shows in the near future.



How did The Knit Separates come about?

The Knit Separates is something else entirely different from the open freeform situation in Mirza. It is basically centred around Jason Honea (who we first met when he answered a “singer wanted” ad for Mirza years ago) and Glenn (also from Mirza.) It’s mostly their project and they get various people, including myself to help out when needed. They’re both really into 60’s pop and AM radio and the Byrds and that whole 12-string guitar freakout. As well as later stuff like the Fall, the Legend and the Television Personalities. So that’s where their aesthetic is coming from. They’re really great and sound like no-one else. The live shows have been a lot of fun, we played with Nikki Sudden and the Jacobites a while back. In fact they just got back from a short tour of Germany and Holland which I wasn’t able to go on but I heard it went pretty well, chaotic actually, playing in burned out bunkers and squats. They toured with some performer who ate glass and burned compact discs in his mouth, performance art weirdness, strange things . . .

Your music has an eerie quality hard to put your finger on. Could you tell us a bit about your influences and musical tastes?

Influences are hard to talk about but there are bands who either ripped apart or renewed my interest in music. The Birthday Party, Leonard Cohen, The Velvet Underground etc... I still hear a bit of that in what I do. One thing that drew me into Cohen’s music is not his lyrics at all but his arrangements. No-one ever seems to talk about this and I don’t know if Leonard did them himself on those first few records or it was a producer or something. Songs like ‘Sisters of Mercy’ and ‘That’s No Way to Say Goodbye’ - all that weird stuff in the background: Toy pianos, children’s choirs, glockenspiels, cranking noises, really subtle strings, I remember hearing that with those melancholy chords when I was younger, it was (and still is) great, gets the chills going. That sensibility has had an affect. The sparseness, little textures buried beneath the song structure. What else? Film music obviously. Popol Vuh, Pink Floyd’s early film stuff, Ennio Morricone, ‘The Sargossa Manuscript’ by Penderecki, strange film too, ‘The Wickerman’ soundtrack is pretty good. But for all the good music out there, there is so much horrible, vapid music which in some ways is just as helpful in getting you to figure out what you don’t want to do. I get really angry about some of the crap I’m forced to listen to at the store, commercials, movies, it’s terrible, that shouldn’t be underestimated. I guess my main goal is to just make music as honestly as I can, in total disregard of what’s currently going on, just following my interests, seeing where they go.

You have invented some of the instruments you've played, in true Harry Partch fashion. Could you tell us a little about that? Are you aware of, or into Partch?

I'm a fan of Harry Partch and am definitely a fan of who he was, his imagination and concepts, his instruments. In that respect I think he was a bit of a genius and someone who was truly on his own personal quest, which should always be admired. The photos of his instruments are truly inspiring. I like his instrumental stuff as opposed to his vocal pieces which don't do much for me. I appreciate his story more than anything. He certainly inspired me to start building instruments myself. When you get tired of the guitar and you're hearing these sounds but can't find them- and synthesizers can get so tiring. Most of the instruments I've built look absolutely retarded, so much so that I'd be embarrassed to play them in front of people. Harps made from desk drawers, guitars from gourds, marimbas from driftwood, a xylophone made with spoons, springs, saw blades, pipes, light bulbs, wine jugs etc . . . but they get the job done. I do wish I was more skilled in the art/sculpture aspect of them so they looked better. Some of Partch's instruments are just beautiful, but I get impatient and in the end it's purely functional anyway. I'm not a circus act, I use normal instruments as well, violins, pianos, guitars. Whatever works.

I think limitations can be a route to uniqueness or originality. John Lennon thought his untutored playing helped him develop his own way. Your records also take this theory one step further by constructing physically unique instruments.

I do think limitations can be helpful, frustrating as they are. The instruments I've built aren't really versatile. They have 2 or 3 songs in them, after that you repeat yourself. For instance, when I start thinking about recording, I decide I want something percussive, but bell-like. Somewhere along this road I'm looking at a spoon and suddenly decide if I mount different spoons they might make the same kind of sound. I go to a thrift store and check out a bunch of spoons and look like a derelict as I hit them to see if they ring out or not. I find a batch that resonate. I figure a way to get them mounted with nails and rubber bands. Of course when I play it the notes aren't really in key with anything else and it's gonna be hell to mike up, but since I've spent all this time on it I'm going to have to go for it. Some of these instruments just aren't compromising at all, they dictate what's going to happen. In the case of the spoons that was 'Footfalls Stitched Among Others' on 'From Ashes Come.'

It sounds great too, it has an almost oriental feel. In a review a while back I quoted Conan Doyle: "It is my belief, Watson", said Holmes, 'founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.'" I instantly

associated this with your work after hearing it. It's in the pastoral/threatening aspect. Would you agree?

I certainly agree, appearances mean nothing... one can find violence within the most picturesque scenarios and vice versa, beauty in the most debased situation. And neither is any better or worse than the other. I really enjoy the juxtaposition of the two, I think they work perfectly with each other and I guess my favourite music contains those elements of beauty and darkness working within. That goes for everything from Skip Spence to Zoviet France. In relation to what I do I can see a fixation on expressing some sort of sense of longing, a nostalgia for things that have ended or are ending, a kind of melancholy. I'm also trying to get a sense of beauty in things ending, the positive side, rebuilding anew.

So what for the future Steven, how are you building anew?

Well, there will be the Thuja record early 2000 as well as a new solo record, 'Slate Branches' that should be out in March or April 2000. The Knit Separates have a record in the can, so I guess we've all been pretty busy.

DISCOGRAPHY

SOLO

'Log the Man Dead' (Cassette) Autopia
'Gehenna Belvedere' (LP) Autopia
'Autumn is the End' (CD) Darla
'From Ashes Come' (CD) 3 Acre Floor
'Death of Last Year's man e.p.' (7") Autopia
'Slate Branches' (CD/LP) 3 Acre Floor/Little Brother

MIRZA

'Mirza e.p.' (12") Autopia
'Anadromous' (CD/LP) Darla
'Iron Compass Flux' (CD/2xLP) Darla

THE KNIT SEPARATES

'The Memory Relaxer e.p.' (7") 3 Acre Floor
'Maybe in Time I Could Change e.p.' (7") 3 Acre Floor
'Swords, Then Diamonds' (CD) 3 Acre Floor

THUJA

'The Deer Lay Down Their Bones' (CD) Autopia/Unique Ancient Tavern