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NewMusicBox

Deerhoof in conversation with Randy Nordschow

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I was the only kid on the cul-de-sac who was tinkering with synths in junior high. Because I had a couple of keyboards and black boxes, other kids would ask me to play in their garage bands. Yeah, I played "The Camera Eye" and "YYZ" with some much older seniors, but I rarely accepted any of these offers. When I got a new Tascam Porta 05 four-track recorder and a Roland sequencer for Christmas, I couldn't be prided away from my gear. I spent the next two years in my bedroom.

It wasn't until 1998 that I made my real rock band debut. It wasn't even close to how I imagined it would be when I was younger. Instead of Neil Peart's mega drum setup, which included everything from two kick drums (why?) to tubular bells and every breed of cymbals known to man, the drummer used three simple pieces of bottom-of-the-line gear: a kick drum, a snare drum, and a ride cymbal... on occasion he used a bungee cord to attach a tambourine to the head of the kick drum—that was as fancy as it got. Together with an electric guitar player and a commanding lead singer, I rounded out the quartet with my amplified trumpet. This was Deerhoof. Well, at least for that one gig anyway.

Right now Deerhoof is singer/bassist Satomi Matsuzaki, guitarists Chris Cohen and John Dieterich, and Greg Saunier, an extraordinary drummer who proves you can do great things with two shabby drums and a cymbal. I met Greg while studying at Mills College where we were both composition majors, and John was in the electronic music program. Since Greg and I both leaned towards writing notes on manuscript paper (a rarity at Mills, believe me!), we talked insatiably about music. And while he writes for guitars, bass, drums, and voice, and I write for flute, clarinet, cello, and whatever, we're still doing the same thing. Just coming off a grueling tour, Deerhoof has become an indie-rock critic favorite, so why is it that some of us in the new music community feel that rock music, or whatever you want to call it, is somehow lesser-than? This seemed like a good time for us to rekindle our conversation.

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Leaving Preconceptions Behind

Randy Nordschow: It's not unusual to hear something in a rock club that sounds a lot like some of the more adventurous stuff that is happening inside concert halls, and vice versa. It makes you wonder why there is such a divide. A band like Deerhoof seems to defy these contexts. I've seen gigs, say, in a bar where you guys performed a large-scale improvisation before segueing into one song—that was your set. A lot of folks in the "classical" establishment, and even some folks in more experimental scenes, tend to think that people that go to rock shows don't know about or haven't had any kind of exposure to this kind of experimental/improv world. The band that played before you at

North Six on Friday night was using electronics, amplified bassoon, and that sax player was circular breathing like nobody's business...

Greg Saunier: Yeah, he's a [Braxton](#) protégé. He went to [Wesleyan](#) and now he's at [Columbia](#).

Randy Nordschow: Goes to show that you can be exposed to anything inside a club, but do you like to play with the assumed contexts?

Greg Saunier: I don't know if I've ever been asked that question or really thought about it. The thing is, I think I don't assume any context. Some people are going to "know experimental music," but I think I just don't believe in that idea. What does that mean—to know experimental music? Maybe you bought the record. That doesn't qualify you for anything. Just the same as if you own [Sgt. Pepper](#), it doesn't qualify as knowing pop music. Everybody's idea of what [Sgt. Pepper](#) is is different. It doesn't appear that way because it's written about so often. It's used in that iconic way in conversation so it seems like we all agree on what it means. The same with [John Cage](#). But when you come right down to the actual experience of listening to it or playing it, of course everybody's experience is individual and it depends on a lot more things than whether or not you were "trained in it." It also has to do with what mood you were in, what acoustics you heard it in, what you had for dinner, all that kind of stuff.

I have to admit, on the one hand, there is a part of me that does want to deliberately play with boundaries between genres and maybe wants to subvert the idea that there are distinctions where this style means only *this*. Jazz is only meant to be listened to as cocktail music, rock is about drinking and partying or machismo, and classical music is for old ladies. Definitely part of me is thinking that I want to deliberately and subconsciously subvert that idea because it could also be possible to make very sublime statements using rock music. It's possible for 13-year-old kids to like classical music or jazz.

At the same time, I don't want our music only to be about this intellectual subversion of genre categories. I also believe that somebody who's never heard any John Cage or [Beethoven](#) or [Rolling Stones](#) should somehow be able to connect to our music anyway. I don't believe in these distinctions the way they're normally defined, because the way they're normally defined is: rock music is something that is easy for everybody; experimental music is something that is difficult for everybody, and the especially cool people have managed to learn how to like it. The thing is that everybody knows if you get a room full of kids and start doing some John Cage-influenced pieces they'll have the time of their life. And there's no actual barrier. It's just that historically imagined barrier that causes people to think they won't like experimental music. They're just trained to thinking that.

Randy Nordschow: The people who promote music say just don't call it experimental music because it scares people...

Greg Saunier: And it goes the other way. It's just assumed that rock is low culture, degenerate. I don't mean to be insulting, but a lot of time it's in music journalism where things get categorized. We're at [Bard College](#) and we're about to play a show for a whole bunch of students in their late teens and early 20s. And the history that even you and I know, being only 15 years older, doesn't exist for them. They've never learned that they're not supposed to like experimental music. They don't have the memory of that turn off. I think that when it really comes down to it, each person reacts to music in a personal way. It's not because it conforms to some pre-conceived idea of what music they're supposed to like. I have more faith in people.

Defining Deerhoof

Randy Nordschow: How would you describe Deerhoof?

Greg Saunier: Well, if you're reading this than that means you have a computer that has an Internet connection so it wouldn't be at all difficult to simply go to [our Web page](#) where we've got this [whole big pile of free MP3s](#).

It's funny because this question of crossing over boundaries or is there a line between this music and that, and to say, "How do you describe your music?", that already starts in on that whole Pandora's box. I guess I could say I can often describe it after the fact, after it's been done. Once we've recorded something, for instance, and the recording is done, and we've gone through whatever very imagination-involving process that we went through to make it, then I can say, "Well, now it occurs to me that geez, you know this sure sounds like a rip off of such and such." [*laughs*] You know, then I can describe it.

Randy Nordschow: So you don't really have any preconceived...

Greg Saunier: Definitely not beforehand. I wouldn't make a description before something exists of what it's going to sound like. It's hard to understand how anybody doing music or almost any kind of art could feel any differently. If your ideas come from your imagination and your imagination is as hard to control as what you dream at night, then the idea of a preconceived idea of what your music is going to be before you've written it is...certainly not bad—I would applaud anybody who would be able to do that—but I can't understand how somebody could. I actually really kind of respect people who do have the ability to decide that they're going to write music in a certain genre. We've talked before about soundtrack composers. To me it is absolutely fascinating because they're making music on order. The movie is already done, it's sitting there, we know exactly what mood this music is supposed to be for this part, we know exactly how long, and we know it can't be loud when this person says this one line of dialogue or something. The idea of being able to create something with that much of a preconceived idea is a fascinating ability that I guess I feel like I don't really have.

Randy Nordschow: Going back to your music and Deerhoof. These tunes that you write, a lot of the songs have really simple melodies. They have a childlike naïveté. They

sound like the songs that children sing to taunt each other on the playground. Even [The Wire](#) has labeled Deerhoof as "cute brut." Why do you think these cutesy, childlike themes find themselves reoccurring?

Greg Saunier: That's also a really good question. I'm sure that maybe to most people listening to Deerhoof it's simply a matter of "O.K. They're doing childlike music." To me, of course, being in the band and struggling through the process of making these songs and recordings, it feels a lot more complicated than that!

Randy Nordschow: Maybe people can't get past the ducks, bunnies and pandas!

Greg Saunier: But even there I guess I feel ducks and bunnies and pandas are cute but... Sometimes I think that a certain tone that we adopt in our songs is child-related but not necessarily child-like. The tone that Satomi and the rest of us use is more akin to the tone of somebody speaking to a child. Sometimes when you're speaking to a child, you use a higher voice or you simplify your vocabulary. You don't want to use words the child doesn't know. Maybe you don't think about it so much, it's instinctual. With a baby it's even more extreme. You don't even use words. You just start in on the baby talk. It's incredible—throughout history, every adult seems to have this instinct to start making these sounds with babies. I think we actually do use that kind of a tone in our songs, but I wouldn't describe it as us being childish so much but as if our audience was children. You can take that in different ways. You can take that as a condescending insult that we're treating everybody like babies, but at the same time a big part of our fan base is actually babies and young children. A lot of young parents seem to be playing Deerhoof for their children which makes me really happy. And they like to sing along. It does seem to click with them.

Randy Nordschow: You're certainly securing your fan base for the next 20 years!

Greg Saunier: Sometimes what can seem cutesy: using humor in the songs, using extreme contrast...to me this is something that I really related to in Beethoven's music. In his case it doesn't seem like it was intended to be funny although sometimes it does make you chuckle a bit even when it's so earnest just because he's using such extreme contrast. It just seems so over the top sometimes. I really like that aesthetic idea—combining something that sounds really chaotic and abrasive with something that sounds really quiet and calm.

When Satomi first joined the band that was one of the things that instantly clicked when we started playing together was that our original guitar player, Rob, and I had been working on playing our instruments, drums and guitar, in a way that was as exaggerated and over-expressive as it could possibly be, speeding up and slowing down, making the dynamics as wide as we could. It had a really desperate and extreme mood to it. Satomi came in and I would suggest a melody for her to sing and she would sing it in the most plain way, no vibrato, no dynamics, totally flat. This was everything I ever wanted in a singer singing a melody I came up with, and the contrast was really neat between the instruments and the voice. Maybe her voice sounds cute because it's set against a backdrop that's extremely harsh a lot of times. It depends on the context. A lot of people

say we sound like random noise. If the simplicity of the voice wasn't as extreme as it is, people might not think our music sounds so abrasive.

It's a very traditional idea, but my dream would be to make music that's like a fairy tale in the sense that if you're a little kid and you hear the story it means one thing to you. You follow the story, you like the characters. As soon as you become a little bit older, you start to see another side to the same story. It starts to mean something different. And then at different stages of life, that same story actually means something different than it meant to you before. As far as that whole child thing, I would love to make music that did mean something to a child. But then, my parents are going on 70 and they like Deerhoof and they get something from it. That's something I really feel proud about—trying to make music that can somehow mean something really real to people of different ages and different backgrounds...

The Unusual Power of Influence

Randy Nordschow: When I first met you, and John as well, you were both at Mills in this academic program studying with [Pauline Oliveros](#), [Alvin Curran](#), [Fred Frith](#) and the like. Do you think that time influences what you did later with Deerhoof?

Greg Saunier: Actually, yeah. I mean, it did in my case. I think I had a very strange experience at Mills. At least among people who deal in academic music, Mills has a reputation of being the [John Cage](#)-aesthetic stronghold. The people there are always doing the wacky music or the experimental music as opposed to say, something more professionally viable. It's a lot of free improvisation, a lot of [laptop music](#)...

That's the weird thing, because I went to Mills with this idea that that's what it was going to be—and in fact that is what it was—but I had this really odd experience. I ended up taking a seminar on the music of [Beethoven](#) and suddenly to my utter surprise that was the total eye-opener for me. It just completely changed everything for me when I took that class. I had never particularly gotten into Beethoven's music that much before. I mean everybody knows [sings opening of Beethoven's Fifth] but to actually study it closely and just basically to be forced to listen to quite a few pieces in depth, it got me really excited. Ironically looking back, that was the thing that had the big influence on me from Mills. And the Beethoven aesthetic in many ways is like a deep philosophical clash with the John Cage kind of aesthetic because Beethoven it's talking about doing things deliberately. It's determinacy and it's using musical logic and it's constructing things very deliberately. It's also about expression and it's not random. A lot of what was happening at Mills, not that I think it was bad at all, but I did feel like everywhere I turned people were doing music where in the hierarchy of important musical parameters, sound was at the top. Timbre was like the coolest thing about everybody's piece. "I've never heard that sound before," you know. Somewhere down there was pitch, rhythm, you know, stuff like that [*laughs*] and obviously that represents an inversion compared to Beethoven where pitch is at the top, that's the first thing that matters.

Randy Nordschow: Speaking of Beethoven, I remember a student-organized concert on which a piano piece of yours was played. In a way it sounded very Beethoven-esque.

Greg Saunier: I was listening to it so much I couldn't help it. *[laughs]* I was listening to it non-stop.

Randy Nordschow: And then there was another concert where you did a piece that was kind of like a **Schubert** song, and you sang through this little toy megaphone that had different settings to alter your voice, like "robot" and "baby," which as I remember is the setting you chose. Both of those pieces ended up as songs on *Holdypaws*, "Great Car Tomb" and...

Greg Saunier: That's right. And "Satan." *[laughs]* That kind of was exactly my point, because the irony is that I think I was influenced almost negatively when I was at Mills to want—in a more extreme way than I ever had before—to write music where sound was completely unimportant, where timbre was just like, I didn't care, you know what I mean. You could just look at it on the page and enjoy it. It doesn't matter what it sounds like.

Tearing Through the Walls

Greg Saunier: A lot of the music that I come up with—I say I come up with it, but a lot of times it just comes to me and I think probably does for a lot of people. You hear music either in dreams or maybe you're just walking down the street or something and you just start humming to yourself just very unconsciously. A method I use all the time is putting on some music really, really quietly so that you can't really hear what it is, but you hear just enough that your mind starts filling in the gaps. Almost inevitably what you end up filling it in with is different from the real thing and lo and behold you've started to make some new music that's actually kind of your music. Sometimes I end up making a song that way. What I'm getting at is that kind of music where the important thing is not the actual surface of the sound but that it's just this idea, something that isn't really real. A lot of times it's in your mind, for instance like in a dream. You're hearing music but there's not actual sound waves happening anywhere, it's only in your imagination. I like the idea of trying to put the ideas for the song, at least the musical ideas, at the top, or whatever, and feeling like it doesn't matter if it's played on electric guitar or piano or if it's voices. It doesn't change anything.

Randy Nordschow: But I'm going to be devil's advocate for a second, with the two guitars in the band there's a lot of timbral interplay...

Greg Saunier: Well, the thing is there's no such thing as something that doesn't have timbre, and once it does become real then there it is. You've got actual waves.

Randy Nordschow: You're talking about ideas that exist only in your head. Do you write them down?

Greg Saunier: I do, yeah. I mean, Satomi never had any, not only musical training, but any musical experience whatsoever before she joined the band—was never in a band, never played music before at all. She doesn't write it down when she has an idea. Sometimes I'll write it down for her, but I'm the only person in the band who actually tries to remember stuff by writing it down. Sometimes people record it onto tape or something like that.

Randy Nordschow: Now that these ideas, which may have been formed via dreams or some subconscious echoes, once they are written down or fixed in a recording, how do you feel about them at that stage?

Greg Saunier: My fantasy is that I go back and look at the whole list of them and that I loved every single one and it strikes a chord, but of course a lot of times I go back and I look at these notebooks of things that I've written and maybe one out of ten means anything at all to me anymore. And the other ones I'm like what was I thinking, I must have been really sleepy when I wrote that down because that doesn't strike me at all. There are only so many hours in the day and there are four people in the band, so I try to go through and pick some stuff that I think might work before I start showing it to everybody.

Randy Nordschow: Are you the only one in the band that writes?

Greg Saunier: No, all four do and everybody has a different approach. One thing I can say that all four people do listen to all kinds of music. Maybe not *all*, but hey, we listen to a lot of kinds of music, and yes on both sides of the line or whatever, if we're going to put a line between rock and classical. And at the same time all four when they come up with songs it's always really intuitively, and that combination produces music that you know seems to have the possibility of echoing music of a wide range of possibilities. So sometimes a song might sound a little bit more like classical music or another one might sound a little bit more like jazz, but it's not necessarily on purpose. You just sort of write things naturally.

Randy Nordschow: When's the last time you went to a new music concert a la Stockhausen?

Greg Saunier: I have to think about it for a second cause I feel like we did not too long ago. What was it? I feel like Satomi and I went to one in the past few months.

Randy Nordschow: But it's not like you're adverse to going to new music concerts.

Greg Saunier: No, no, it's just that their kind of rare, you know. San Francisco is better than most places. I mean, you're in New York so you've got everything, but basically I don't go to that many concerts, period.

Randy Nordschow: Do you still feel connected to that new music world, because you were a part of it while you were in school?

Greg Saunier: Even then I don't think I ever felt that connected. I mean I love it and of course going to concerts is extremely fun and as will be obvious to anyone watching this I love to blab and blab talking about music. But as far as feeling connected or feeling like you belong to a certain...no, I don't think I ever felt that way. Nor now that Deerhoof is very busy and we do tours and release albums, but I feel no more of a sense of belonging to some rock scene than I felt I belonged to the new music scene when I was at Mills. That's not meant to sound mean or rude or disrespectful to any of the people that I've made friends with in either situation. This might just sort of be my personality or something. I sort of resist the idea of wanting to join up. What can first seem like just sort of a fun aesthetic club but can soon turn into...I'm sort of over sensitive about it turning into kind of an army or something dogmatic. [For me,] there always has to be that idea that whatever you're doing, there's still other possibilities. You can't ever have finished, you can't ever have decided, "I'm now finally singing with my correct voice," and "I've found the right style and I know I'm doing the right thing now."

A Few Words on Collaboration

Randy Nordschow: I've talked to Greg for a while, but now I'd like to focus on the collaborative aspects of making a Deerhoof song. How does it go from nothing to something?

Chris Cohen: Someone kinda goes "mmmm..." and Greg kicks in with a drum beat. That's pretty much it.

John Dieterich: Everybody in the band writes songs.

Greg Saunier: One way that groups that are considered rock bands normally write songs is they get together and jam. They just improvise together until they come up with something they all like. I think what happens when we improvise together, we never come up with anything we like, so that tends not to be a method we use. A lot of times, one person has an almost finished song that they've written on their own. A couple of times we lucked out. We have a song called "Panda Panda Panda" which might be fun to describe because that was one where Satomi had an idea already finished and Chris then had an idea that was already finished.

Chris Cohen: My idea was just made up on the spot...

Greg Saunier: It was!? You're a wiz, dude! Really, you made up all that...

Chris Cohen: It wasn't really a song. I just had the chords...

Greg Saunier: He had some guitar ideas, not really finished, and somehow we figured out, these two things, you put them together and suddenly it just felt like a song. A lot of times each person may make up his or her individual part once the general idea for the song is in place. But sometimes somebody will come in and they honestly have every

single part figured out for every single person. I know there are some songs that I have written like that.

Randy Nordschow: Let's get back to [Beethoven](#) for a second...The idea of the lone composer toiling away at the great idea, this isn't what you guys do. Do you think that concert music composers have something to learn from your process?

Greg Saunier: I guess it's really funny for me because we have done interviews before, but mostly it's been with rock 'n' roll press or people doing fanzines. This idea that we don't rule out the idea of a single composer toiling away at the great idea for our rock band is the weird thing to say. Normally, that's what I have to make a persuasive case for, that that's an idea worth not throwing in the garbage can. But, in the case of the way you're asking it, it seems obvious to me. There are four of us here with very different backgrounds and different musical tastes and that causes the end product to be a lot better than it would be if it were any one of us by ourselves because it has to be approved by all of us. Each of us has to find a way to make it work. We can't have a song in a concert or on an album that one person in the band simply doesn't like. It helps to insure that we have something that might communicate something to a lot of people rather than just a specialized audience of people who are obsessed with one idea. The collaboration is so fun. The idea that there are people who would even care what idea I might have come up with yesterday and they would want to participate in turning that from an idea into something you're actually going to do in real life is fun. If I've got an idea from the deep recesses of my subconscious, you might think that it means it's going to be so separate from an idea that John has inside himself—but it can come out in real life and be shared and combined together into the same song, which is a mind-boggling thing.