

THE POLITICS OF HNW

THE ROOTS OF WALL-RIDING

BY SAM MCKINLAY

Wall Noise:

A massive, seemingly unchanging harsh noise 'wall' of electronic distortion, crunch, and rumble. "Powerful minimalist deconstruction of the harsh noise object."

In the last few years, one topic of debate within the harsh noise world has been the defining factors that have built up around what is now known as the sub-genre 'Wall Noise.' Power Electronics discussion used to dominate areas of disagreement, contrast, and arguments over stylization and content, but as of late, I have witnessed even longer, more in-depth discussions/arguments over the tonal qualities and supposed purpose of Wall Noise. This facet of harsh noise has been met with violent opposition from some artists, as the tonal statements it presents can put some people over the edge. Wall Noise is seen as a threat to some, as it can disregard themes that some harsh noise fans feel need to be infused in harsh noise, such as drama, story, entertainment, etc. But does Wall Noise actually ignore the standards that previous harsh noise classics have achieved? Is the motivation behind this style of noise completely different, or is Wall Noise part of a healthy and creative growth pattern of Harsh Noise that simply carries the form to extremes for fans of heavy noise?

Before we get into this further, I should discuss in plain English the developments of Wall Noise over the years. Sound artists have obviously meditated over themes of minimalism in tones and 'noise' for the last century. Even a cursory overview ranges from the Futurists' examples of violent engine sounds, to Philip Corner and his 1962 work 'Black Hole' (from *Oracle*, an electronic cantata on images of war: strike week version — a piece which scarily sounds a lot like contemporary Wall Noise works), to LaMonte Young's minimalism, the immense volume and snapping violence of Zbigniew Karkowski, Francisco Lopez and his soaring works, all the way through to something like the minimal and quiet works of Bernhard Günter. The range of noise study is long and surely accomplished, some works being examples of noise for noise's sake, and others acting as examples of stages of tonal and sound study, as an artist like Chop Shop would display in his levels of study and experimentation. The academia behind the works of sound artists of the past century plays a critical role in the establishment of Harsh Noise into the late 1970s, '80s and '90s, as projects like Merzbow, Hijokaidan, The Haters, Incapacitants, etc. took form with acute knowledge of the past techniques and ideologies. But Wall Noise took a very different path of influence and workmanship, which is one of the most important aspects of the sub-genre. Rather than sound art, Wall Noise has grown from the roots, sound, and mania of the 1990s 'Americanoise' culture.

First of all, in subtle contradiction of what was just stated above, Wall Noise is nothing new. It has indeed taken some forms of harsh noise to new levels of study and heavy interest, but most wall noise artists take their influence from very defined past works. Japanese harsh noise obviously has its prime

examples of massive cascading walls of noise with projects like Hijokaidan, Incapacitants, and Monde Bruits, each taking different aspects of harsh noise generation and layering them into mountains of sound. To a lesser extent, Merzbow's stylizations can be evaluated with many of his studio works, but his live works have been focused in the past on massive layers of continual sound. The Japanese had a major influence on the harsh noise movements of North America (for those not already acquainted with something like The Haters or early U.K. Industrial projects) in the 1990s, perpetuating the popularity of American projects like Macronympha, Skin Crime, Richard Ramirez, Black Leather Jesus, Taint, etc. Something that one notices almost immediately about 'Americanoise' (the term used initially to describe the heavy and dark distortion-laden Mother Savage Noise Productions cassette compilation from 1995, and then used frequently to describe the North American harsh noise style of the 1990s) is the style, the sound. American harsh noise back in the 1990s was noticeably dirtier, concentrating on the crunch and rumble a lot more than the squeal and jolts of some Japanese artists with their cleaner feel. American harsh noise was representative of something a little meaner and more dangerous, and this instigated a new way of interpreting the harsh noise form of the time. The culmination of this 'sound' can be heard in Joe Roemer's (Macronympha) side project OVMN, which stands for 'Optimum Volume Maximum Noise.' OVMN is a virtual avalanche of harsh noise that is purposely the harshest possible, culminating in massive walls of sound while representing the American noise ideal with its grit and darkness. Contemporary Wall Noise artists are the children of the 1990s Americanoise, with a strong interest in the characteristics of the genre as a whole. The Incapacitants and crustier Japanese acts such as Cracksteel and M0*TE are also driving influences, but it's the cassette culture and sadism of the North American sound that you can really hear in the heavy distortion lines of modern Wall Noise artists.

The American project Skin Crime was/is also at the forefront of the US harsh noise style. With varying source manipulation, violence, heavy building and crashing, Skin Crime has an amazing feel for the dynamics to be found within full areas of harsh sound. Patrick O'Neil of Skin Crime was one of the first of four people to whom I posed the following question:

"When you work with a static tone, or an 'unmoving' or even swelling/moving textural line of noise, how do you contemplate the spaces and 'dynamics' that lay within the bits and pieces that are concentrated to achieve the so-called 'white noise'? Along with your work with the different movements and breaks in your tracks, what, to you, is the driving quality and endearment of the 'static' or 'crunch' that you strive for and appreciate?"

PATRICK O'NEIL / SKIN CRIME:

"Usually when I record, I try and listen to what the other people I'm playing with are doing, and the sounds I make are a response to what they are doing. Sometimes it's not the sound itself, but the results of the sound breaking down when being overloaded with too much information; the conflicting signals overload each other. The results are the broken remains of the sounds more so than the actual sounds being fed into the mix. It's hard for me to put into words my methods because a lot of what I do is a reaction to what's going on, rather than a conscious decision on my part.

A lot of the reason why most of the Skin Crime ma-

terial is recorded live is that it gives the sounds a lot more freedom to take on a life of their own, whereas doing things in a studio or multi-tracked things are more rigid and controlled. Most of the time we don't plan anything out, we don't say 'this part is going to be loud' or 'let's do a more quiet track,' things just come together on their own. Also, a lot can depend on who I'm playing with at the time, because each person has their own methods/sounds, and the sounds I'm going to be making and using will differ from person to person."

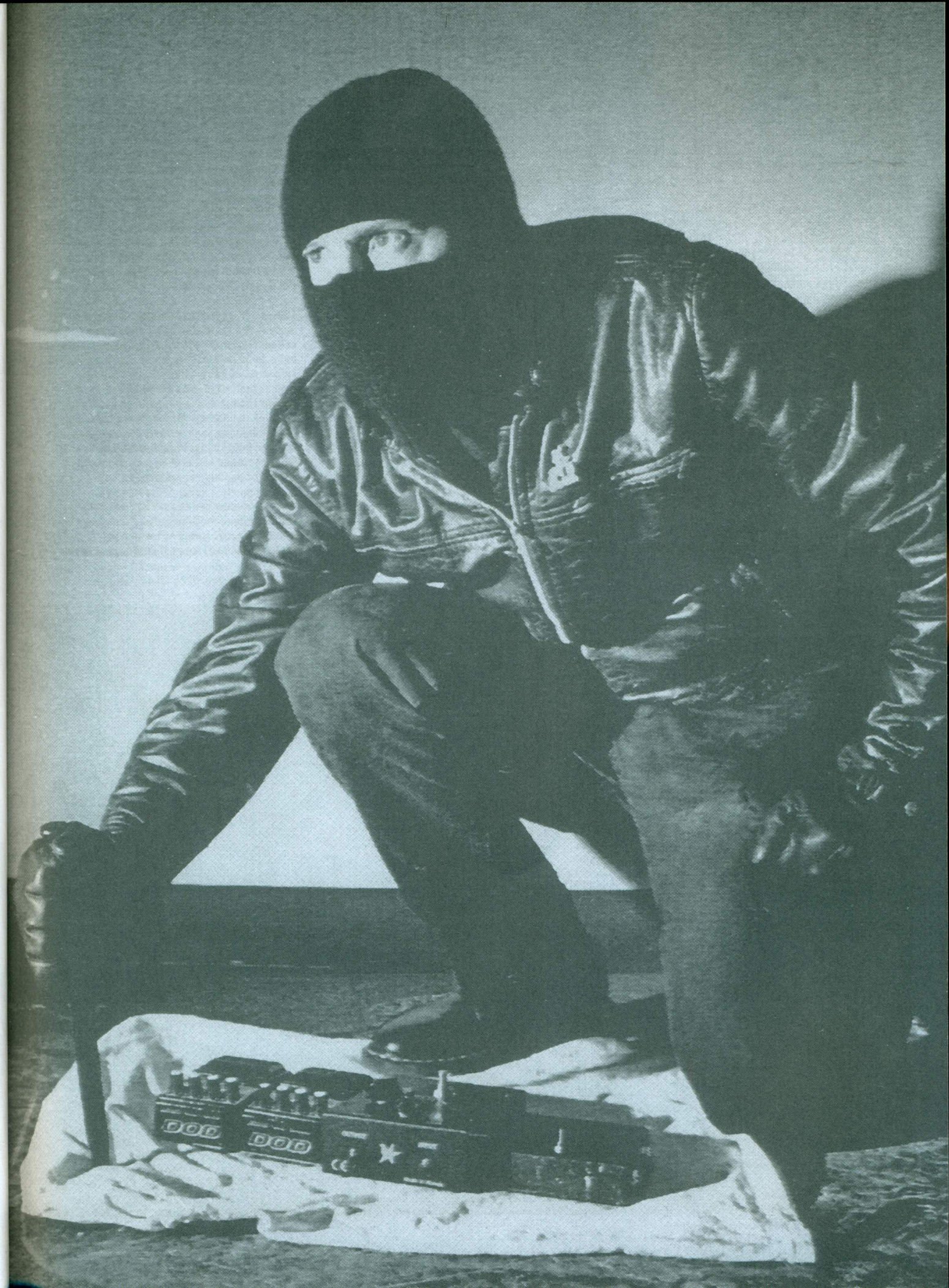
Patrick's descriptors indeed fit with the sound that is evident in his pieces. Patrick doesn't think of himself as a 'Wall' artist, but the harsh noise techniques and results that he produces with Skin Crime are among the most crucial inspirations and models for a lot of the Wall Noise ideology, taking from the 'overloaded' mountain of sound that he can generate and the logistics behind the tower of violence that he builds and deconstructs.

One of the most important artists to influence the styles and constructions of the contemporary Wall Noise artist is Richard Ramirez. Richard's dedication to the frequent tones and crackles of the harsh noise object is astounding. All one has to do is listen first to the 1993/1994 release *A.N.T.I.*, and then to a very recent release of his side projects Crash at Every Speed or Werewolf Jerusalem, and one will see that the changes in the crackling and crumbling are subtle, but also powerfully different in their study, focus, and dedication. Richard's project Werewolf Jerusalem made very major steps in the Wall Noise sub-genre, as it forced harsh noise listeners to contemplate the violent act of crackling and crumbling distortion as an act of drone, or 'static drone,' as Richard would describe it. This is very exciting, as now-classic visions of electronic 'harsh' noise purity are put to the test, the air between the crackles of static put to the magnifying glass; the power is apparent in the sound shifts and layered cuts. The sound isn't 'intense' and violent per se, but the sounds and tones are made up of the same features of violent Americanoise, but with a strong motive of minimalist deconstruction.

RICHARD RAMIREZ / WEREWOLF JERUSALEM:

"My work (*WEREWOLF JERUSALEM*) is to take old radios (from the '70s/early '80s) and abuse them to the fullest. I push the volume to a complete buzz sound. I sometimes drop the distortion level to give just a hiss sound or airy feel to the pieces. Then I'll return the levels to the highest distorted possibilities. The 'crunch' sound simply comes from a certain radio that I use. It is an old sports radio that I got as a child. It gives it that crunch sound. It always feels like it is on the brink of being destroyed. I also used to toy around with blown speakers. I would mic them facing each other. This would create a feedback that would also give a crackling sound to my pieces. My main effects are distortion, delay, & reverb. My set up is very minimal and basic, but I feel it gives my work its signature sound.

I like the subtle movements in texture in some 'Wall' compositions. It does not have to be chaotic, and it does not have to be a bore. I listen to the piece that I am working on at the time as a whole; the changes do not always occur during the initial recording. Most of the time it does. Most of my work is done in one take. I am not a perfectionist in any way. Sometimes I'll go back and rework an area by simply running it through my equipment again and making changes were I see fit. I enjoy the density of some noise works because it creates a mood for me. It's relaxing. I do listen to pieces that



go on for a lengthy period of time. I don't get bored with it. I tend to get bored with the more chaotic/dynamic works than the 'Wall' pieces, but that's just personal taste."

Again, Richard's longtime focus on the qualities of crackle, static, and distortion is unfathomable. The subtleties he can generate are even more appreciated when one has the opportunity to listen to a large quantity of his noise releases, not unlike staring at paintings by the minimalist artist Ad Reinhardt. His two paintings, *ABSTRACT PAINTING NO. 5*, 1962 (1962), and *ABSTRACT PAINTING, NUMBER 33* (1963) are very alike in their dark squares against darker areas of space, but the subtle differences create the violent shift and the power behind the studies/paintings. Richard's works are reflected in some of the more extreme contemporary Wall Noise artists, such as Vomir (France) and Taskmaster (Canada), as they rely on subtle shifts and changes over solid blocks of sound to achieve the essences of the works. Important also is the texture of the work that Ramirez intensifies with his noise pieces as the air between the crackles and static can also create the inner dynamic of the noise being generated — whether the harsh noise is moving or not, the air in the 'crackle' spaces is the violence of the recording. The violence that is apparent is growing from the roots of the same dirty and crumbled crust harsh noise of the 1990s, but with a magnifying glass — for some, a study to determine why we even like these sounds.

Skin Crime and Richard Ramirez are still at work

today, but there are obviously more contemporary noise artists that reflect the style of Wall Noise and are the primary result of much of the rampant discussion regarding the subject and its tendencies. One of the best of the contemporary harsh noise artists that you can describe as Wall Noise is Pat Yankee and his project Paranoid Time. Paranoid Time material is harsh and violent, but still carries the primary stylizations that are studied by the likes of Ramirez, as Paranoid Time's sound is heavily saturated with suffocating abrasive crackle. The overwhelming sound that is generated by Pat's chain of Pro Co RAT pedals (if that wasn't cool enough) is a cacophony of distorted sounds and sources that gel into a mountain of heavily scratched and cut distortion, all the while having some variance and shifts that create violent and fearful cliffs for the listener.

PAT YANKEE / PARANOID TIME:

"When dropping a large static log, I find that the spaces and dynamics lurking about the crunch pile will often take care of themselves without a lot of pre-planning on my part. I put trust in, and lay responsibility upon, the Process. Randomness and chance up to a point, right? That being said, it is important to initiate the Process with a carefully cultivated batch of sound sources. For Paranoid Time, that often means making use of recordings that feature dynamic clacking machines in their natural settings. Sometimes that means placing 20 plastic Harding's bags into a grocery sack with a mic and working that out for a half hour or so. Whatever the fuck works. I know the RATs will do

their job in the end, but I have to feed them the right cheese.

Some of my earliest memories involve feelings, sensations I would get while just sitting or laying somewhere, zoning-out in kid world. I used to be able to do this thing with my brain where it felt like I had ants crawling all over the inside of my head. A real, physical sensation of thousands and thousands of those things scooting all over, under my skull and across my lobes. It was soothing. They also made a sound...like a sharp crinkly crackley with loud pops and snaps, kind of like a campfire, but in 4-D and LOUD. Man, I haven't gotten anywhere near that yet, but you know who has? Hum of the Druid, that's who."

The notion of 'static drone' (a term mentioned earlier) is apparent in Pat's words above. His concentration on the overwhelming sound is the main focal point of his work, causing the overall sensation of being almost hypnotized by the vicious wall of distortion. The sense of being overwhelmed by harsh noise was one of the original goals of some of the 1980s and 1990s artists: create such a high-volume wall of white noise and sound that the listener (and in most cases the artist as well) goes from cognitive interest to just staring blankly into space, physically overwhelmed.

Pat also mentioned the noise project Hum of the Druid, artist Eric Stonefelt. Hum of the Druid mixes different forms of harsh noise techniques, such as building, deconstructing, and shocking

Macronympha. 1992



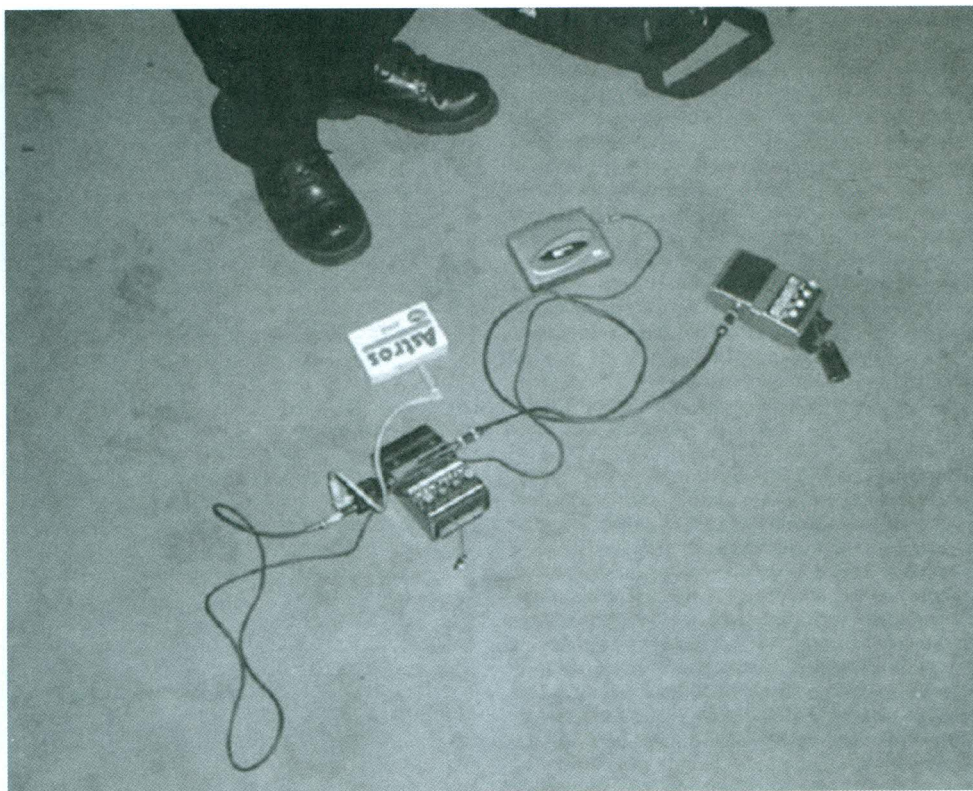
violence. But Eric also has a keen sense of fear in his noise, almost always carried out with an incredibly organic feel to the sounds. Listening to a Hum of the Druid piece is like running through a dry forest, listening to the insects scampering and the sticks cracking underfoot, but all of a sudden you step over a cliff, roll down with the rocks and boulders that pulled free, eventually landing in a different area of the forest that is on fire. There are definitely subtle and not so subtle changes and drama in the works, but all make use of techniques and tonal qualities of crumbling Americanoise that have been mentioned above. Eric's works have a gritty and fearful tendency afforded by harsh noise and its capabilities via 'Wall,' deconstruction, and otherwise that not many can accomplish, due to his microscopic tonal/crackle fascination and how they can meld and also fall apart.

ERIC STONEFELT / HUM OF THE DRUID:

"Whether a sound is monotonous or fully dynamic, I expect the result to have a natural quality. Effective crunch and cracking is suggestive of some sort of organic movement or acoustic presence. Even if the source is entirely electronic and the goal is something mechanical or industrialized, I'd hope to hear some natural space, or at least some form of soundscape, no matter how abrasive the aesthetic. Static in these forms of music can be cheap and not like the white noise of reality, so while my recordings should always be surreal and removed in some way, I don't usually like to hear anything that has too linear a relationship to its own limited means. It's more interesting for me to hear how different timbres relate, each with their own nuances and texture, than it is to listen to a microscopic study of only one source, though that study is of course an important part of the recording process. Similarly to 'traditional music,' as if that term means anything, you should be able to appreciate the individual components, as well as the collective meshing that is the larger sound or 'song'."

It's obvious that Hum of the Druid is not pure Wall Noise, but I think that Eric's sensibilities toward the harsh noise object are examples of what make up the foundation of Wall Noise's fascination with layered and deconstructed tonal and crackle qualities. The essences of what Eric looks at within his works are the same qualities that a focused Wall artist will look for in the varying forms of heavy static; how they can manipulate each other or how they can be studied as their own whole.

Some people are scared by the possibility that Harsh Noise is falling into too many sub-genres, and that a sense of freedom and creativity is being lost within the genre manipulation. Wall Noise is one of the genres that has perpetuated this belief, just as many contemporary Harsh Noise artists have taken the root of focused and pure harsh noise. What I see in the contemporary focused and linear movements of Harsh Noise (and Power Electronics, for that matter) is contemporary Harsh Noise REALLY looking at the qualities and interior motives of the harsh noise entity by studying and evaluating what they are obsessed with within the scope of the genres. The blanketing term 'Harsh Noise Walls' (HNW) has become such an entity that there are many contemporary projects that are focused primarily on the slightly shifting or unchanging walls of noise; embracing the inherent thematics behind the sounds, which include anything from heavily antisocial tendencies to dark neorealist semantics. The immediate tendency from some fans of Harsh Noise is to dismiss the qualities of some of the projects due to the seemingly confined 'regulations' that drive the noise, but many of the projects are, again,



Werewolf Jerusalem. 2010

a sincere magnification of the vicious details of Harsh Noise and how the different manipulations of texture can further shift the tendencies of the sound. Some recently recognized artists that come to mind that exemplify the contemporary qualities mentioned above include Remlap, The Slasher is the Sex Maniac, Infirmary, Indch libertine, Griz+zlor, Tissa Mawartyassari, side projects from the mind of Richard Ramirez such as the amazing An Innocent Young Throat-Cutter (a project whose first release was in 1994, but escalated in popularity after its more recent releases in the realm of highly textured HNW), and many more. Wall Noise is the 'bastard son' of the 1990s cassette-era style, where an artist will listen to anything from a M0*TE, Monde Bruits, MXM, or Macronympha release all the way over to a work by David Gilden, Taint, or Sickness, enjoying the different qualities of the works, and then trying to understand them, tear them apart, rebuilding the pieces as they see fit, or staring into their already inherent qualities. Not unlike painting, 1990s Harsh Noise is to Abstract Expressionism as contemporary Wall Noise is to Minimalism -- two very strong creative entities that are both parts of development and both concerned with the power that can be achieved with the sheer strength of harsh noise and its variances.

"I think it's safe to say, you can never have enough Militant Walls. Unvarnished harsh purity. Mass of unrelenting, whole brain consumption. First order filth. Call it what you want. This is noise as it was always meant to be." - Jason Soddy/TADM

• SELECTED PLAYLIST •

Classic/1990s:

INCAPACITANTS - Operorue (Kubitsuri Tapes, CD, 1995)
BLACK LEATHER JESUS - A.N.T.I. (Deadline Noise Recordings, cs, 1993/1994; CDr reissue, 2006)
TAINT - Victimology (Taint Entertainment, cs, 1997)

MXM - Flesh-Biting Pedophile (Mother Savage Noise Productions, cs, 1995)
OMVN - Throbbing Pulse (SE Productions, cs, 1996)
MONDE BRUITS - Portuguese Man-Of-War (Vanilla Records, one-sided cs, 1991)
SKIN CRIME - Urge (Bloodlust!, cs, 1996; Self Abuse Records, CDr reissue, 2004)
MERZBOW - Great American Nude/Crash for Hi-Fi (Alchemy Records, CD, 1991)
DEAD BODY LOVE - Low-Fi Power Carnage (Old Europa Café, cs, 1995; Militant Walls/PACrec, CD reissue, 2007)
HIJOKAIDAN - Ferocity of Practical Life (Fourth Dimension Records, 10-inch, 1997)

Contemporary/2000s:

THE CHERRY POINT - Night of the Bloody Tapes (Troniks, CD, 2005)
WEREWOLF JERUSALEM - Music for Mass Radio (Monorail Trespassing, 2 x cs, 2004)
KNIVES - Switchblade Princess (Troniks, one-sided 7-inch, 2005)
BLACK AIR - Plague Ritual (Dada Drumming/Iatrogenesis Records/Militant Walls/Rundownsun, 1-sided LP, 2006)
TASKMASTER - Swamp Lurker (Troniks, 1-sided LP, 2006)
SEWER ELECTION + TREFIKSRÖSET - The Killing Sessions (Troniks/Chondritic Sound, CD, 2007)
HUM OF THE DRUID - Societal (SNSE, LP, 2005)
TOTAL SLITTING OF THROATS (Militant Walls, CDr, 2005; Troniks/PACrec, CD reissue, 2007)
PARANOID TIME - 4:20 Brother (Tapeworm Tapes, cs, 2005)
VOMIR - Living Dead Noise (Maisonbruit, CDr 2006)

Sam McKinlay is responsible for harsh noise project The Rita, as well as PE-themed outfit BT.HN. His manifestoes, as well as his CDr labels Militant Walls (not defunct) and Lake Shark Harsh Noise are widely regarded as galvanizing influences in the growth of HNW.