

“Poor” Sound Design – Guitars as a Gateway to Thinking Sonically

By Mike Wyeld

“My father loved music, and when I was a kid, ever since I could remember he would buy me guitars for either my birthday or Christmas...I do remember a small wooden one with strings when I was about 7, which I promptly ripped all the strings off, tied it to the tree in the back yard, covered it in fake blood and shot at it with a bow and arrow. I think it was about then that he stopped getting them for me.”

Guitarist Debbie Smith (Curve, Echobelly and more) in conversation with Mike Wyeld

In his 2020 book *Poor Queer Studies* (Duke University Press, 2020) writer Matt Brim considers the relationship between Queer Studies and the real-world issues confronting people of little resources (“The Poor”) who wish to engage with the subject matter. Brim argues for, “a reorientation of [queer studies] away from its prestigious and well-known institutions and toward working-poor and working-class people, places and pedagogies.”

In Sound Design, like in Queer Studies, there are similar hierarchies and apparent barriers-to-inclusion that present the subject as high-concept and high-culture. Sound Design, it is said, is software and synths, orchestras, quartets, violins and multichannel audio. It’s expensive art schools and film schools, film studios and legendary recording spaces. It’s John Williams, Walter Murch, Ben Burtt, Dolby Atmos and Abbey Road. But there is a branch of do-it-yourself sound design that we might say has a congruency with Brim’s diagnosis for queer theory. There is a rough-and-ready brand of noise-making that has at its heart, the humble guitar - an object that gave many sound artists and sound designers their start. For many sound design professionals, it is how they discovered SOUND.

“Sometimes the nicest thing to do with a guitar is just look at it.”

- Thom Yorke, Radiohead

For Western High Culture Music, the orchestra is the location of expertise and virtuosity. But rarely in the orchestra, even in modern symphonies, does the guitar find a home. Classical Music concerts rarely include the electric guitar, it’s tones still an embarrassing broke relative, dressed inappropriately, speaking too loudly.

Like the orchestra, sound design is often guilty of ignoring the guitar, or forgetting our debt to its ubiquity. I often meet young sound designers taking their first steps in film-making or gallery installation. They will tell you about their ability to compose for the orchestra, quartet, or have a collection of vintage synths or soft synths that they have mastered. Sometimes though, when you chat a little deeper, you find in many sound designers a guitar player.

The guitar and its accessories are not hard to find almost anywhere in the world. So it is often a relatively simple object to acquire, perhaps from a family member, or from a second hand store. Once someone picks up the guitar, it is not long before they figure out how to change the tone. At first it is the functions of the guitar itself; switches between pick ups, tone and volume that help the guitarist achieve their sound. Then there is the amplifier – the distortion, overdrive of a simple amp. Then come the pedals! Reverb, Delays, Wah-wah, so many from which to choose. There’s an amazing array of choice. The trick is though, that the guitar player MUST be the agent of their own future. They must choose.

Debbie Smith, guitar player with Curve and Echobelly and many other great British bands says it was HER desire to play the guitar that took her there. Although her Dad encouraged her to play the guitar, she had to take that first step herself. She told me, “I discovered punk and post-punk via the John Peel radio show, and began to hang out with a group of friends into that scene. I was particularly into Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Cure at this point, and on my 14th birthday I went and bought a Spanish guitar and a chord book with my birthday money. I basically stayed in my room and played along with their first albums until I could make noises on the guitar that were recognisable as punk music...Once I got an electric and a couple of cheap effects pedals, the volume, sounds and noises became even more important than the notes, and I guess I still live in that headspace 40 years later.”

By thinking about the way that players, both the amateur and the professional, come to the guitar, we can consider the way that sound design itself unfolds in the practitioner.

“The final question will be: is the soundscape of the world an indeterminate composition over which we have no control, or are we its composers and performers, responsible for giving it form and beauty?”

— R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Destiny Books, 1994)

Scholarship on Sound Design tends to focus on the Gallery uses of the art form. But even in this high culture context the guitar reveals itself as a precursor to further exploration and deviance. In their book “Sound arts now” (Uniform Books 2021) Cathy Lane and Angus Carlisle interview 20 sound artists currently working around the world. The survey is an interesting one, and for our purposes we find that many of these gallery-based sound artists began by playing in bands, experimenting with the stuff of sound through simple instruments and sound amplification. Sound Artist Adam Basanta tells the writers, “My background was as a guitar player, I played rock and jazz in bands in Vancouver...(I was listening to) Nirvana, Radiohead, that kind of thing.” Their survey of artists the world over reveals similar stories, artist Caroline Devine tells Lane and Carlisle on developing her sound practice, “Initially it was through learning guitar and then starting a band.”

Wonderfully the artists themselves are not shy or ashamed of admitting the place the guitar had in their formative years. So guitars are a place of beginning for sound design, a place of revolt, a site of new ideas and new inspiration.

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born”

— Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers 1971)

The guitar, I would argue, must be reconsidered not as the embarrassing ugly child of the orchestra, but as a location of fantastic deviation, as a way in for the interloper, for the rebel, into spaces they were not invited. As the artist Prince sang on the song Guitar, “I love you baby. But not like I love my guitar.”