The wider boundaries of electronic music – An interview with Psilodump (part one)

Simon Rahm became an acclaimed producer and labelowner under the pseudonym Psilodump. His works is tagged as 8bit or chiptune, though his sound is much more complex, contradictory and even more polyphonic. He has recently finished his new album – that was the time we asked him about making music and our contemporary culture of music.

Listen to Psilodump - Live @ En Festival i 8 Bitar ([mp3])

PRAE.HU: Have you had any memorable experiences with releases or festivals recently?

SIMON: I haven't been doing any releases for quite a while now, since I got signed to a new label, Demon Tea, with the Psilodump-project, back in September 2006. With, of course, an exception for a couple of releases under the project Simon Rahm, which is sort of a techno/house side project, on Johan Wikman's (Lithis) and my new digital label WikRahm, to blow off some steam.

As for live performances, I have been turning down quite a bunch of them during 2007-2008, but still managed to cover about 30 gigs in that period, once in both Italy and Israel, and twice in Norway, France, Finland and of course several here in Sweden. Festivals I did in 2007-2008 were Stockholm Pride, Blipp Blopp Festival, En Festival i 8 Bitar, Emmaboda Midsommarfestival, Peace & Love 2008 and Norbergfestival 2008, all in Sweden and Main #2 Data Airlines Festival in France.

PRAE.HU: According to Discogs, your first release dates back to 1999. What are the things that seems the most different to you today compared to the old days?

SIMON: My first offer to get a real record deal was in 1996. Back then my idea of music, the industry and ideals were very different. Between 1996 and 1999, while sending demos, discussing with labels and such, my music developed radically. Exploring new grounds, ideas and solutions I kept myself glued in front of my computer, constantly composing new music. I even skipped school to be able to do it.
During this period, I came to discovered that making music interesting or somehow "unique" wasn't really a benefit at all, in terms of getting music released. Labels often asked if one could make tunes that sounded a certain way, a certain style and asked if there was some sort of "scene" involved. The concept of "scenes" was very alien to me, and I did not understand what that talk was about, since my idea was that if music was good enough, it would be released. This turned out not to be the case. This problem has turned up later in my career, with labels being absolutely ecstatic about my music, without knowing what to do with it.

So in 1999 I started a new project, called Psilodump, in which I planned on producing 9 albums, called the 476 volumes. The theme was to do a deep dive into weirdness, darkness, melancholy and psychedelic soundscapes. The first 3 volumes I made in 1999, which I followed up with 3 more in 2000. After that I got a severe writer's block, and I put the next one on hold, waiting for the right

moment to make it happened. These albums were not officially released, but distributed by myself. The idea was to save them to get released on 9 different labels.

The biggest difference between 1999 and 2009 for me was basically the success of isolating myself with my music back then. Not having constant access to Internet, not having access to tons and tons of music, and not having to compete with millions of other so called musicians. Today everyone claims to be a musician, a model, a photographer, an artist or whatever. Most people I find doing this in a highly superficial sense. Everything is expected to be instantly rated, commented or discussed. There is a war of attention going on. A sort of battle of narcissism. Calculating number of friends, number of plays, etc. Somehow I get an alarming feeling that people, including myself, are in fact relying on statistics to decide if a piece of music or art is good or crappy. As if the piece of art that gets most attention is the best one. Surely, I have the benefit of having many listeners and having a following, but this all makes it very confusing. Should I be flattered or not? Furthermore, I don't want people to believe that my display of interesting ideas and works are a cry for attention.
 I find the scene- and subculture-fetishism of today rather appalling, and at same time very tragically useful. Hence, I don't find the climate of 2009 being that satisfying at all.

PRAE.HU: What a listener or a label should "do" with your music which would suit you well and satisfy you?

SIMON: What listeners do with my music is really none of my concern. But I often hear people describing my music as inspiring, so if listeners take the inspiration and get creative and/or get something positive out of it, and maybe spread the word of my works, naturally, I would love it, but honestly that's not why I make my music.

Labels on the other hand should go on and release my music. But then again, it would be both selfish and foolish of me to blame someone for not taking the risk of putting something out that might not be marketable. As I understand it, a label has a responsibility towards the distributors, the distributor towards the retailers and the retailers towards the consumers to provide what is in fact demanded.
So I guess it's reasonable to prioritize products that more or less guarantee the money back that is put into it. I'd be happy and grateful if I myself, as an artist, wouldn't need to be forced to make that adjustment to fit into this calculation.

PRAE.HU: You don't want people to believe that your works are a cry for attention. But listening to music "in the real sense" is paying attention to it, isn't it? Or is there a positive and negative kind of attention?

SIMON: Well, of course I can only speak for myself, but I don't necessarily see my music as being a product of my person. I see it as series of independent events, or objects that appear. It's as if there would be a pile of sticks and I arranged them together to form something resembling something else, like an image or a character. It might cause a certain emotional reaction, maybe something funny, maybe something sad, something that makes you angry or happy. If I find this reaction interesting, I

might want to show it to someone else to see how they react. Sort of like "haha, hey look at this! that's so fucked up!". They might also find if being funny or interesting. But in this I can absolutely not see it being same as saying "hey look at me!" or expect people to congratulate me for it. It's not about boosting myself, it's about sharing something some kind of experience, which people can relate to and take part of. On the other hand, I can't deny that getting positive attention for anything is a pleasant and lovely experience, and might even be useful. But I would find it rather cynical and tasteless of me to try to orchestrate such praise on the expense of my art. So ultimately, I don't take feedback on my works personally, and it doesn't directly influence my music more than anything else. Therefore, negative feedback on my works is virtually useless information for just about anybody, unless someone imagines there being a reward in telling anyone else what to think and not to think.

PRAE.HU: Your music is much more full with melodies, chords as other so called "chiptune" musicians' pieces. Are you fond of any kind of music that is called "classical"?

SIMON: I have always regarded music being music. Not styles, not genres, and before it never occurred to me that artists would be under any sort of pressure and limitations by the audience and their peers.

Before late 1994, I strongly disagreed on electronic music being considered "real" music. Not really because I had reflected upon it closely, but rather because most people I knew seem to see it that way. But after discovering electronic music having wider boundaries and almost unlimited possibilities, I developed a sense of hearing and isolating elements, to hear how they were made and I eventually learned to do it myself, and build upon them myself. This is how I learned to make melodies, harmonies, and complex sequences, and patterns etc. These things were as useful in the sort of "chiptune" music as any other music.

I don't really understand why most contemporary chiptune music won't go beyond making simple, almost "retarded" melodies, but at the same time, I have never considered this to be my problem, and feel that I am in no position to pass a judgement upon the phenomenon. I feel that people are free to do whatever they want with their music.

But yes, I do listen to all sorts of music, and I need to confess that I don't find most "chiptune" music that interesting at all, although I love to make some of my own, in my own way. If there is an arrogance to that, people who claim it being so can answer for it themselves - I cannot.

PRAE.HU: What was the development of your sense of hearing like?

SIMON: To pay extra attention to how things are formed, in what shapes and directions. Imitating other works is a really good practice. When I was 14 years old I was listening to a CD I had bought and noticed the different elements and arrangements, and found the piece be something I would

possibly be able to reproduce. Being so curious, I actually reproduced the whole track on my computer, and found it being hilarious. I remember telling my dad something like "hahaha listen to this; this is the CD - and.... this here I made sounds exactly the same!!!" He said nothing but I could see in his face that he didn't have a clue what I was talking about.

This became a fun thing to do. To analyze elements for different tracks and seeing the patterns of how people were making them. This developed into a certain understanding of how the elements work, so instead of copying something right off, I just applied the same type of functions and made something new. Eventually, this activity lead to a sort of fascination. I would actually look forward to with excitement to hear my next finished track. Almost like buying a new CD, only it was for free ;) haha - The finished piece itself has always been more exciting and interesting for me, than the activity of making it. Over the years, as my production has grown more complex and toilsome, it's really a pain in the ass to make music, but it's almost always worth the effort. This is why, for me, the idea of detailed technical discussion about music production pisses me off. It shouldn't be about the tools used - it should be about skills and understanding to manage and choose the tools yourself.

Psilodump webpage - http://www.psilodump.com
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