The Game Boy-virtuoso

The music of our age is getting overwhelmed by "retro" influences. Among the samples that come from the distance of decades, we can catch sounds of the videogames or early PC games even in popular music, that are familiar because we have already heard them when we were young – but especially when we were children. Furthermore, it has been a long time since the first musicians who distribute their stuff freely on the Internet and get more and more well known every day have started producing their own pieces of music with the soundchips of these equipment.

Apart from audio works created by means of modified Nintendo Entertainment System or the C64 and ZX Spectrum or the Game Boy, we can find music in the ocean of free downloads created with almost any retro-instrument of this kind. Meanwhile, the sounds these machines make are getting more and more widely accepted.

The following interview has been made with **Johan Kotlinski** aka **Role Model**, the Swedish Game Boy composer. His name awareness began when he has written the first creative music software for the Game Boy consol, which was given the name Little Sound Deejay (LSDJ). Right after that, he has founded the now defunct labels, Bleep Street and Rebel Pet Set.
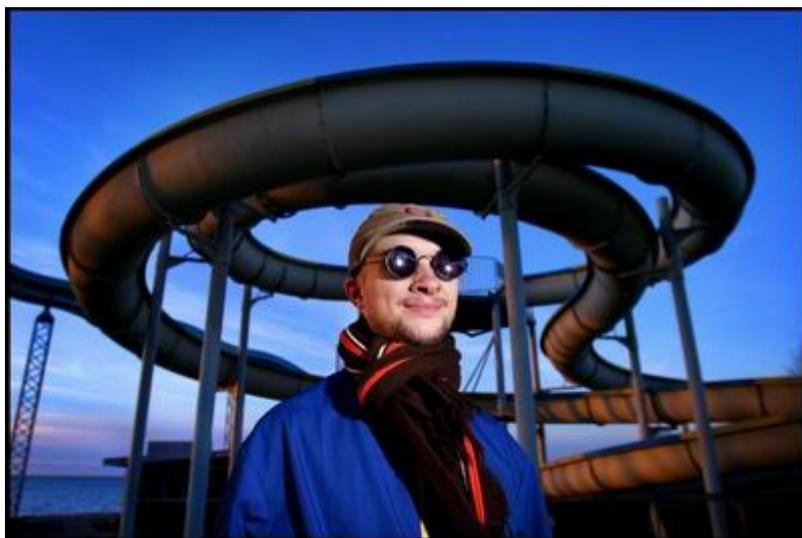
PRAE.HU: According to your bio, you've learnt to play a traditional instrument, namely the piano, and paralelly at that time you were still developing some of your works on amiga. For you, how did the distinction between the two instruments/music making tools look like?
I think the most different thing was samples. My keyboard only had preset sounds, so it was interesting to use samples from about anything and put them together to some kind of music... Also I found it was a lot more fun and inviting to compose music on the computer. With piano, I was learning to play it as an instrument. With the computer there were really no such skills to be learned. Everything one did was composing in a way.

PRAE.HU: You've released LSDJ 8 years ago. How do you look back to that event now?

Johan: Those were exciting times. I would never have guessed that it would become as popular as it is today. I was surprised that some people bought it, and it was also very exciting to hear the first song made by someone I didn't know. It somehow turned from being a fun project to a "real" program that people use and buy. Of course the program has improved a lot since that 1.0 release though.

PRAE.HU: Since you started developing LSDJ you were not seem to be satisfied with environments that were given to you... e.g composing with Amiga. Is that right? What were the main motivations to start developing that program and why did you choose the Gameboy? By the way, could you please explain to an average listener what the basic differences are between the sounds of a NES and a Gameboy for example?

Actually I jumped on the train when some of my hacker friends bought Game Boy Colors and developer kits. The Game Boy Color was pretty new at the time (around 1999) and we thought it would be a cool new platform to program on. Probably it would be the last major 8-bit platform, and the color screen was nice.

One of my friends had some cool ideas for how a music program could be done. I picked it up and actually started working on it. At the time, I thought there was no program at all that was making full use the Game Boy, especially compared with for example C64 and Amiga which had lot of programs. So I thought it would be very interesting to see what would happen if you took the Game Boy to its musical limits. It could be good or just not enough. But there was no real way to find out without trying.

The NES and the Game Boy are actually pretty similar soundwise. The Game Boy has four channels: two channels that can play pulse waves, one channel for noise and one channel for sample data. The NES adds a triangle wave channel, but I think it's pretty similar otherwise. The C64 is more different. It only has three channels, but has a more expressive sound. The Game Boy however has an advantage in that it has more memory so you can fit samples into it easily.

PRAE.HU: In these days when many people become uninterested in physical copies, how can a somewhat traditional label be successful?

It takes a lot of work and love to keep a record label going. I also think it is necessary to be more professional about it than I have been.

I really like the idea of having some physical artifact with the music though. I think the ideal release these days would be a 7" record (the perfect physical artifact) with a download code included (the most convenient for a lot of people). Although I also have to say, environmentally it's not really a great idea to produce a lot of plastic for no real need.

PRAE.HU: Why a 7" record? Why particularly that format?

I like 7" because it can be very good looking with the right cover. It's also easy to fit in an envelope. A bonus is that the limited playtime forces you to just put very good songs on it. It's a pop approach to music. You are forced to put out hits that can stand on their own, instead of doing some kind of conceptual album thing.

PRAE.HU: Chipmusic is in many aspects limited. According to you, by what means chiptune artists can express themselves or their thoughts and feelings within that limited range of art?

I think it's very open because so many people during history have done great work with limited stuff. I think the limitations in Game Boy sound are generally very good, four channels of audio is possible to do a lot with and the range of sound is pretty well varied. The one limitation I have grown a little tired of is the lack of dynamics coming from that kind of audio. You can almost only play at full volume all the time. It is like comparing a harpsichord with a piano. Both have the same kinds of limitations but the piano is so much more expressive.

PRAE.HU: We hear 8-bit/video game sounds in pop music - I mean particularly not the 'talented' side of pop music. Some say it is a rip-off of your subculture, others are happy about it. What is your view on that?

I think it is nice that things get a little mixed up, provided that the people who make music get paid for it.

PRAE.HU: Well, is it that simple? Because many people just don't really dig into what they can hear, and even if the credit was given to the original - in our case - 8bit artist, many people still worry because the sound is credited to the pop-divas (for example) in the listeners' minds. What do you think about that?

I think if you want to be respected professionally about your music and being a musician, getting paid is the #1 important thing. Of course getting credit is important as well. But there are many people who make wonderful music without getting their names in the papers... for example producers, musicians and songwriters. It's not bothering me that everyone doesn't get famous. I get more irritated when people take artists effort for granted and that it has no value. Bottom line is that artists should get paid.

When I was running the club Microdisko in Stockholm we always made sure the people who performed live got a fee, even if so little. I'm really proud of that actually. It's not so much

about the actual money, but as a sign that they are real artists and should be respected as such. And we gave them pizza as well... haha.

PRAE.HU: A shift is visible in the 8-bit music scene, because people tend to create not just demoscene style electro/techno related projects, but subgenres like chiprock, dub and ska is also present for example on **Dubmood**'s recent release titled Atari-ska L'atakk -. What do you think where does it lead to, and I may ask here the silly question that goes like "how do you imagine the chipmusic scene in the next decade"?

Actually I think it's a health sign that the music is open for other influences. Even the old computer music masters (like Rob Hubbard) were clearly inspired by popular music at that time. So in a way I guess one could say the music is going back to a healthier state - which means going forward at the same time :)

I have no idea what would happen in the next decade. Hopefully people will continue getting inspired, making friends, and making great music!

As the romantic humming and chirping of the old machines' soundchips becomes familiar and entertaining to more and more listeners, it seems that it is going to be interesting to see the forthcoming fruits of these sounds. Maybe they will waste away, or maybe they will not lose even a bit from their power. But it is quite sure that they are still going to put a smile on our faces for a long time.

Rebel Pet Set – Role Model's now defunct label with community blog and webshop
Role Model @ Discogs
8bitpeoples – probably the biggest 8bit music label, started in 1999
Micromusic – community site and netlabel