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## Audio Nonlocation: Collaborating Over Distance

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## SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

**Audio Nonlocation: Collaborating Over Distance**

Rob Riddle on Jan 1 2000

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**Musicians have always been on the forefront of sharing and synthesizing information, from shamens and troubadours to composers and hip-hop producers, each participating in a network of content creation, delivery and distribution. There's something inherent with the basic nature of music that encourages play between people; perhaps due to the physical properties of vibrations, which as waves reveal a means of interaction not immediately obvious to a world of sight, or perhaps it's the shared emotive experience these waves inspire.**

"While long distance collaboration is, of course, not the same as actual human contact, it is the next best thing. There is...a greater immediacy to doing projects this way, and a much wider range of talent that can be called upon."

- Kevin Dooley of zer0-0ne

Musicians have always been on the forefront of sharing and synthesizing information, from shamens and troubadours to composers and hip-hop producers, each participating in a network of content creation, delivery and distribution. There's something inherent with the basic nature of music that encourages play between people; perhaps due to the physical properties of vibrations, which as waves reveal a means of interaction not immediately obvious to a world of sight, or perhaps it's the shared emotive experience these waves inspire.

In either case players share their abilities, their sonic vision, their thoughts and emotions, both between themselves and with their audience. That's how the sensational power of music manifests energy within listeners, through the manipulation of repetitious frequency and its corresponding objective and subjective responses. In many instances distinctions between "players" and "audience" become blurry and lose their relevance, a sure sign of true playfulness. It's a beautiful process, a means of crossing cultural perspectives, because when people cease concentrating on differences the imagination opens and becomes more receptive to original ideas, sounds, concepts and feelings. Music provides an extremely able method of sending information from one person to another, from one time to the next, and from one musician to another.

Entering the next millennium modern electronic musicians have many methods of transmission and collaboration at their disposal. New technologies and mediums, such as MP3 audio ([www.mp3.com](http://www.mp3.com)), Napster ([www.napster.com](http://www.napster.com)) and Rocket Networks ([www.rocketnetwork.com](http://www.rocketnetwork.com)), open up a frontier of possibilities in terms of artistic communication, including real time synchronous playing with others half the planet away. Independent musicians, who tend to be crafty frugal types, insure that older technologies, such as reel to reel tape and the US Postal Service, still contribute to artistic production. From cutting edge to dead tech, a plethora of potential exists for those inclined and motivated.

I have set out to examine several local DJs and producers to discern different approaches and implementations of the nonlocal collaborative concept. Which technology is being used, and why? How does the medium affect the creative process?

What are the unique abilities and aesthetics offered? From these questions I've gotten a sense of the ideal, the practical and the critical aspects of trying to use technology, whether old or new, creatively and effectively to work with others who are not near.

Tom Aragon ([www.mp3.com/tomaragon](http://www.mp3.com/tomaragon), [www.mp3.com/tomaragonII](http://www.mp3.com/tomaragonII)), a former rock guitarist turned electronic musician who now resides in Northern California, uses MP3's extensively to work on numerous pieces with people throughout the world, most of whom he's never met. MP3 is a digital compression format for music that uses a 10:1 ratio to increase the throughput of the information. The MP3 is decoded and restored to an AIFF or WAV file (two standard audio formats) with minimal, but some, loss of fidelity. Tom really appreciates the benefits of working with this medium; "I absolutely love the fact that technology has enabled me to create music this way. I have been in numerous bands that rehearsed forever and in the end we walked away with no recorded material at all. Here you have none of the band traumas to go through and if you're lucky you can create quite a diverse catalog of music." Certainly new and intriguing combinations of instruments and influences can result in a medium that allows previously disconnected artists to share ideas and information.

Rob Johnson, of San Francisco's electronic outfit Protolab ([www.protolab.com](http://www.protolab.com)), concurs regarding the utility of the MP3 format, "we trade MP3's a lot...this is a much better way to play someone an idea." Protolab shares its sound files, as well as sequences and sound patches, within the group as a means of staying in touch with other members' projects and contributions. All members lead "normal" lives with "real" jobs so time is essential and timing difficult. A Protolab practice doesn't resemble the standard rehearsal studio scenario as much as it does a business meeting really. Using MP3's allows members to share ideas without having to be fully assembled as a band, which allows flexibility with writing songs.

Other musicians, however, hesitate implementing MP3's because of the loss in sound integrity. Kevin Dooley, a San Bruno based electronic musician currently records music as zer0-One ([www.zero-one.org](http://www.zero-one.org)) on the Waveform label ([www.waveformhq.com](http://www.waveformhq.com)), states concern regarding the loss of fidelity in converting MP3's back into WAV files. Though for that particular work the loss was "insignificant" he plans to "investigate and use other techniques...in the future." Many digital formats have a similar problem with loss of resolution unfortunately, as the size of data affects both the speed of transmission and the sound quality.

Mark of Negativland ([www.negativland.com](http://www.negativland.com)), an independent experimental group from Contra Costa County whose work with cut ups, copyright issues and radio programs have explored new terrain for well over a decade now, notices a more basic problem with the network options. Negativland recently recorded with England's Chumbawumba ([www.chumba.com](http://www.chumba.com)) using entirely nonlocal techniques. Despite using RealAudio ([www.realaudio.com](http://www.realaudio.com)) and CD-R's to send ideas back and forth he found the process "frustrating...because I'd rather be in the same room working over the same mixing board...it wasn't a fun way to work." No doubt the lag in reaction time, in critical feedback, can really stagnate a work in progress, especially when an artist thrives from the immediacy and playful energy of a live situation (though one could argue how "live" is a recording studio?). Mark believes that, if given the chance to collaborate in person, the album "would have been a better piece...because the feedback loop is immediate, you're right there."

Curiously enough, San Francisco based DJ and techno producer Joshua "Kit" Clayton ([www.musork.com](http://www.musork.com)) actually appreciates the lag.

"There is more of a delay between communications than if the collaborators were sitting in the same room. It gives collaborators more space to internalize what the others have done on their own and then respond. If in the same physical location, people are pressured to respond immediately. While this works well for improvised music, I don't believe it works well for non-realtime composition."

So where one artist prefers the immediacy of live interaction, another finds a use for the delay, studying options for furthering the work on hand. A complete lack of connection would almost certainly lead to lackluster work, but sometimes the weaknesses of a given system can be exploited to the artist's advantage. As Mark says he found the process "an interesting way to work, exciting to do...challenging, frustrating, counter-intuitive, because you can't just go 'here's what I want you to do,' you have to explain, you have to guess." Or as Kevin puts it "I no longer believe that I have to do \*everything\* myself. If a particular part or sound isn't working for me, I can let someone else give it a try...sometimes I'll use what another person comes up with and sometimes I'll revert back to what I originally created, but the very act of getting other input functions as a...reality check for me."

Other methods exist to share musical information. Many of the artists mentioned sharing CD-R's, and even reel-to-reel tape, over the mail. People have been collaborating via recorded material through the post for decades now, mostly on an independent, artistic scale, but nevertheless sharing, breaking ground with nonlocal methods. Of course the obvious problem is the mail can take days, even weeks, to be delivered; difficult to capture the spontaneous generation of groove with such a slow method, but for some pieces that long, contemplative pace could accurately reproduce a continental drift type of effect.

Intriguing in the present and near future, truly "virtual studios"\* allow musicians to work with each other in real time over high speed networks. Rocket Networks sponsored the nonlocal collaborative recording of the "War Child" single (a remake of a Bob Marley song as a benefit for a children's relief agency) with Sinead O'Connor ([www.sinead-oconnor.com](http://www.sinead-oconnor.com)) and Brinsley Forde of Aswad ([www.ark21.com](http://www.ark21.com)) singing in one London location, Matt Black and Jonathan More of Coldcut ([www.ninjatune.net](http://www.ninjatune.net)) with Rocket Network co-founder Tim Bran of Dreadzone ([www.netkonect.co.uk](http://www.netkonect.co.uk)) elsewhere in London producing the live mix, while Lucky Dube ([www.africanmusic.org](http://www.africanmusic.org)) recorded from Johannesburg, South Africa, Thomas Dolby ([www.thomasdolby.com](http://www.thomasdolby.com)) played keyboards in San Francisco, with additional instruments added in from Los Angeles, Hamburg and New York. That's a fairly impressive feat of time management for sure, and indicative of what's already possible now, if you have access to the requisite tools.

Modern electronic musicians tend to be tinkerers and DJ/producers, part mad scientist, part inspired chef experimenting in the kitchen, part precise technician. Perhaps with current mediums the playfulness and sharing are not always immediately apparent, but sound is sound, and the essential phenomena remains constant. Naturally enough the creative process simply adapts to the new tools and mediums, quickly discerning the unique character of the situation. Often at first the trail blazers and prophets go through a period of extreme infatuation, where the newness of the medium inspires idol worship, with the benefits exaggerated and the drawbacks dismissed. No method or technology can glow mindlessly forever, fortunately, and over time new methods tend to augment old methods, not replace them. After all, with such a wide range of options available most musicians still prefer to work together in the present tense, and that the new methods only are interesting and useful so far as there's no real opportunity to work with each other live and direct.

"It's a different way to work, it means people who otherwise couldn't collaborate can, but there is a tendency in the computer world where everything you can do is cooler or more interesting because you do it with a computer...that's the biggest pile of bs in the world...the computer is A tool, not THE tool..." - Mark from Negativland

\*As the writer I've been trying to elicit from the interviewees some grand new marketing name for this collaborative phenomena - what they hell, I figure, I'm an American, it's my God given right to use language in jingoistic catch phrases to capture peoples' brief attention spans so as to sell them stuff, or whatever. Everybody I talked to, of course, rebuffed me immediately (and rightfully so). Several times in my research I've come across the term "virtual studio", which has a certain amount of accuracy I suppose, but also refers to a different process (using software to mimic a studio environment) and contains the word "virtual", which always sounds like a cybernetic cliché. Everybody I communiated with thought the word "collaboration" sufficed.

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Rob Riddle is currently a graduate student at the CADRE Laboratory.



## ::CrossReference

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