

## David Toop: Echoes of Immersion



### Charlie Morrow Interviews David Toop

**Musician and author of *Ocean of Sound* and *Haunted Weather* has followed the path of shamanism and sonic experience. He is a respected improviser and thinks of all of his creative activity as improvisation.**

**David Toop:** So what's your project here, this immersion project?

**Charlie Morrow:** As an investigator of Shamanistic things in my early years and then as an explorer of 3-D immersive sound experiences. I've become very interested in the whole concept of Immersion – what does it mean. So I've been interviewing colleagues and asking 2 questions: 1 is what is your relationship or your current view on immersion. The other question is what was the first exciting immersive experience you had like singing or blowing bubbles when you were a baby or something that you remembered as triggering an immersive experience and then bringing it forward to the present – or the other way around.

I've been building planetarium shows for the last ten years and before that I was making puppet shows for kids and before that I was writing books. This book is based on a series of descriptive essays or spoken essays and timelines ... And I will compare these on a chart because we've all lived through these periods and I'm interested in charting what we've done over time because I find it a fascinating discussion. I mean, technically, we start out biologically immersed in our mom's and so we spend a whole life reenacting immersion. So, there's an interesting cyclic quality to it as envelopes that we build as a civilization or as individual explorers ... I've appreciated the depth of your experience both the way you've described sitting in an audience or the weather, whatever moves you. You seem to be very much in touch with the world around you, so that's why I wanted to ask you to talk about your sense of immersion and your history with immersion.

**David Toop:** Okay, to take the second question: the thing I remember of listening and feeling in some way immersed in sound is when I was a young child and my mother used to take me to my grandparents house. We used to walk along the railway tracks from the main part of town to the suburban part and, of course, it was not long after the end of the Second World War, so there were prefabricated houses built along that walk for people who had been bombed out of their homes because there was a munitions factory nearby and so it was a target for German bombers. These fascinated me, these homes. They were single-story temporary buildings and there was something really interesting to me about them. But then the main part of this experience came when we walked through an alleyway and I guess it was two parallel walls of I don't know what material, maybe concrete, and I suddenly noticed the sound of our footsteps changed dramatically. So, if I'm remembering it correctly, it suddenly had this metallic reverberant quality and, of course, now I know that that was a phenomenon called flutter echo. You know, the two parallel walls and the sounds of the footsteps bouncing back and forth very rapidly, but, because I didn't know that then – I was five years old or something – but I noticed it. And that's the important thing: I noticed it and I think **that** experience was quite formative because I was suddenly becoming consciously aware of the auditory world. And the fact that sound could be

transformed according to environmental conditions and the way in which it changed could suddenly immerse you.

So that memory was dormant for many years and, like some of these memories, it suddenly came back to life again. I don't know what you unlock in yourself but you unlock something, which is a kind of a key to – I'm not saying *all* subsequent auditory experiences – but it's kind of a key to awareness and that awareness of sound and its behavior within environmental conditions or within spatiality was probably really important to me. Because years later I started to think about these things – not when I first played music – but, because I was playing music in bands and trying to do what we all try and do in bands, which is work with other people and make something respectable. But when I got past that phase and started to ask questions, rather: “What am I doing?” or “What is music for?” or “What is sound doing?” and “What is listening all about?” You know, these big key questions that launch you into another rather precarious life of exploring this is phenomenon.

One of the questions was “What is music doing?” Well, music is sound in space; it's the behavior of sound in space and if you find that interesting and that takes you beyond the conventions of playing in a blues band, which is what I was doing, or whatever your musical genre or your musical taste is. It takes you into a much more exploratory area. And that exploratory area was – yea, I think it began with space. And the power of music is really about the way music behaves in space and because of that, well, you're getting down to fundamentals, aren't you. You're getting down to basics. You're not dealing with kind of sophisticated harmony or any of this kind of stuff; you're dealing with really basic stuff and, in a way, it takes you back to the cave. It takes you back to these amazing paintings that we're now aware of, that were depictions of scenes that were perhaps part real and part imaginary in which the ability to represent a scene was aligned with reverberation because these scenes were created in caves. So, that seemed to me a very fundamental aspect of what interested me.

But, of course, the problem is you're kind of trapped in a commercial musicmaking world. And at the time, I was working with drummer Paul Burwell and we were trying to find something new for ourselves and everything we tried was failing because we were trying to make something that still had a connection to this commercial world. And what we were doing I suppose was too extreme, too unusual. So, then you start searching: how can I find a way out of this impasse? One of the ways I found when I was 21 was shamanism. I started reading about shamanism. Of course, the first book I read was the classic Mircea Eliade book on shamanism [*Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*]. There are some very vivid descriptions in that book that he had collected from various ethnologists and explorers of shamanistic seances and they described various scenarios in which there was an exploration of the way sound could work in space to create an immersive feeling, a powerful effect that aligned with all of the other aspects of the practice, which could somehow contribute to a healing situation or something of that nature. And so, there was the use of a drum and use of metal objects hanging from a costume and the use of ventriloquist techniques and spatial allusions and all of these things were combined to make something that was very powerful and very immersive and could affect change. How that affects change. Well, the interpretation of that depends on your belief system, but let's say it created a very strong atmosphere. It was a powerful invocation and it took people somewhere. I thought, yeah, this is what we're trying to do in our ignorance and our naivety because as very young

people with very little experience, this is what we were trying to do. So, I suppose it was a kind of guiding light to begin researching these practices that use sound.

The use of sound was something that was beyond just a kind of tool for making money and becoming famous or something. It was really a way to explore this whole territory. So, yeah, I think those experiences, the experiences with my mother, hearing the flutter echo and then the experience of discovering shamanism and discovering that through that there were many other ways to think about using sound. They were both keys to this whole life's work that I've been engaged in since that time.

I mean, the other thing I would say is I think that improvisation is the key, the core element of my practice and when I say my practice, I mean all of it: this composing in the computer, or writing, or curating exhibitions or whatever, improvisation is. The source material, that's the kind of laboratory where things are worked out. I've always thought of improvisation as imminence rather than transcendence. Some people think of improvisation as a way to get out of yourself. I think of improvisation as a kind of dwelling; it's being within something and feeling you're within something. And it's working with materials and objects and seeing the way they behave and exploring the way sound behaves in a space in relation to other people who are witnesses in that space. So you're always in it. You're always in a kind of strange semi-conscious, very alert and aware state. But then you're in another state of mind as well and that balance is enormously important.

I think you could describe that as a kind of immersion. For that period of time, if things are going well, you're not really thinking in the way we think of as thinking. Does that make sense? In other words, you're not really consciously processing verbally thought. You're in relation to sound, you're in relation to space, you're in relation to other people, you're in relation to objects and you're intensely listening. So you're very much in the space, in the moment and sound is enveloping you. At that point you're very, very conscious of the way that the invasive quality of sound, the way that sound enters us and exits us almost symmetrically.

You know I'm a flute player, so I'm very conscious of this process that you're inhaling sound when you inhale air and you're exhaling sound when you play a flute. And if you're playing a flute, it's as if you're inhaling the sounds that are already happening in the space and you're exhaling them along with the flute sounds. This is a kind of miraculous process, but it's also very ordinary, somehow. You know, we don't have to be mystical about it. It's just becoming in those moments of performance very much in tune with everything that's going on. And I think what we might call professionals in this work, we developed these faculties maybe more than somebody else who's more visually oriented, you develop these sensitivities. But even if you develop these sensitivities, for me personally, my experience is that you don't become fully one with them until I'm in this imminent performance situation. At that point you're fully immersed in the world of listening and it's an extraordinary thing and when it happens, fortunately for me, as I've got to this age, it happens at most performances. Years ago, it was touch and go and some performances could be disastrous because you couldn't get into that place. But maybe it's something to do with getting older that you know that you have more experience, of course. But, maybe in some ways you're more – I'm not sure what to say about this – I was going to say maybe it's your Karma. I mean, certainly I feel karma but then you could feel panic for all sorts of good reasons as you get older. I

don't know, but anyway, that change that has happened in me means that I can access that immersive super-conscious state quite easily these days. And I'm very thankful for that.

And then you can imagine how it is if you go back to these stories of shamanistic seances in Siberia or wherever it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or early-20<sup>th</sup> century. They would have a powerful affect and they would have the capacity to exert some kind of healing force. So, I think through all these years from the first moment, being 20, 21 and starting to explore these things to now – that's a 50-year trajectory. So, yes, you would hope to pick up quite a lot of experience from that time.

But it's interesting what you say, that we're born through immersion into sound. I started to think about this when I was writing my book *Sinister Resonance*. One of the catalysts for writing that book was thinking about John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing*. I'd read it when I was in my early 20s and went back to it and, on the first page of the book, he says the first sensory experience that the newborn child has is visual and I thought that's not right; that's so wrong because, you know, obviously during the period when we're in our mother's womb we're experiencing this auditory tactile sense, which is very powerful. And, of course, now it's well known that a newborn baby recognizes its mother's voice immediately because that's one of the main things it's been hearing for nine months or so. I think for those of us who explore these areas in our practices, there's a very profound connection back to that state, you know, the pre-birth and the newborn state where sound is the primary experience or this very tactile sound is the primary experience for us.

I read Peter Sloterdijk's *Bubbles* not so long ago and he writes about this a lot. It's very, very interesting and he talks about us being within a circle of hearing. So, in a way, he suggests that the idea of a community of hearing is very much a part of our biology. It comes from this experience of being in the womb and hearing this tremendous sound. It must be extraordinary to be in that situation, hearing this tremendous sound of the internal processes of the mother. All of the internal organs, everything working together and then hearing external sounds, which are mysterious because they're of another world. I often think in terms of listening that we're constantly conscious of events, which are of another world. So the sound events that we hear, that are out of our sight and not part of us... As I'm speaking now I can hear a car coming up the road and suddenly out of the corner of my eye I see it pass by. But up until that point, it's just a sound from another world. Even a car's tires on the road probably have some connection to this internal sounding world before you're born, you know, this rushing, pulsing, roaring, white noise sound inside the womb.

So, you know, for those of us who devote our lives to these activities, I think there's a very strong looping back and forth between this origin moment and then other origin moments. I've identified three origin moments which is: before being born; again, my mother taking me on this walk, which was the repeated walk so I had a chance to notice once, then notice again and again and again this effect of reverberation and; then third which was reading about how this type of phenomena can be used actively for a specific purpose. In other words, in the practice of shamanism. That's kind of in a nutshell I guess what you're asking...

**Charlie Morrow:** 100%, totally beautifully said. I'm struck by the fact of being on a parallel journey. I think we're all on the same parallel journey but it's just that we're more conscious of it because that consciousness has produced our life's work that we've engaged in. My story begins

with the fact that I actually recalled my first sounds. I was able to do a regression, I was in my 20s after doing shamanistic singing. I built my first studio and did multi-tracked thick voices and then extensive breathing exercises and healing ceremonies and then I just began to do sky songs where I'd follow the tempo of the clouds and play a gong. I was playing gong and chanting as part of my new music performance and going into dream states and relating to the dream state. But I was able through a series of recollections to get back. I remembered particularly the absolutely accurate odor of the first time I smelled, which is after making it through the storm of birth, which is, if you can recall, a tremendous mashing that you get as you're coming out and it's very scary. I'd say if you could survive birth then you can do life (laughter). The doctor who birthed me was this hairy guy who stank. I mean, he probably didn't smell bad at all, but I'd never smelled anything and that the olfactory experience brought me back to the remembering of the mashing, which brought me back to flashes of lights because every time I get these particular light flashes they bring me back to before when I heard voices outside of myself. I actually did a *hors piel* for Westdeutscher *Rundfunk* Köln (WDR) in which I recreated that whole experience with tubs of water and underwater microphones and voices heard in the distance and so forth. But you're the first person I've interviewed and talked to when doing this book who has verbalized what we're talking about. That's deeply moving ...

**David Toop:** That's great (laughter) ...

**Charlie Morrow:** It's nice not to be alone. I'd say this is our dawn chorus.

David Toop: Yeah, that's right (laughter). So, yeah, I mean, this is something that could be talked about endlessly. For me, that's the basic stuff of it. I think it has taken me a long time to get there, to become aware of these three key points. I suppose that's because you get mixed up in all sorts of things, professional stuff when trying to find your way. And then at a certain point you think, ah okay, I understand more of a structure to what I've been doing. You know, I had an autobiography published in Japanese a couple of years ago. But then it was published in this country earlier in May 2019, on my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. I called it *Flutter Echo* because of this key experience. Also, flutter echo to me was very poetic; it's a scientific term, but it had a very poetic resonance because the echo was like the reverberation of memory that was sounding from the beginning and like a repeat echo and delay. But then this sense of flutter, the way that these kinds of memories cause a fluttering of the heart. This gave them nightmares in Japan of how to translate this title because there's a lot packed into two words. I felt it made sense of a lot of things that before had not really made sense to me.

I mean, why do any of us embark on this path, which is so precarious and so uncertain and so difficult in so many ways. There has to be a good reason for it. But often we're not really aware of the reason. We think: oh, I just couldn't help it or some sort of ambition comes in or whatever it is. There are a lot of superficial reasons that we come up with to explain why we do this crazy stuff. But for me, once I made these connections with the importance of the pre-birth environment and the flutter echo experience with my mother and then the shamanistic accounts, I thought, okay, that's kind of why I have taken this crazy route through life. In the end you can say: well it's been very rewarding; I didn't get rich but that wasn't important anyway. I didn't get famous, but that wasn't important anyway. Best to avoid those things if you can. To be able to make a connection to the point before you were born when you're getting old I think is very satisfying.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's very beautiful. I can't think of anything more meaningful than what you've just said. We're two parallel travelers in this particular meditation that's led us to the same place – and from the same place. I guess you know the end of this serenade has a poem by Jerome Rothenberg, which says: you're no closer to the beginning or the end, you are just exactly where you are.

#### **Immerse! Podcast 3: David Toop**

Musician and author of *Ocean of Sound* and *Haunted Weather* has followed the path of shamanism and sonic experience. He is a respected improviser and thinks of all his creative activity as improvisation.

Interview by Charlie Morrow  
Incidental sound samples used  
– Mud & Quartz • Toop (em:t 3394)  
– Bone Conduction • Toop  
– Eyelash Turned Inwards • David Toop & Max Eastley (Doll Creature)  
– Late Night Chant • Morrow  
– Cuntinamo: Piaruainai, Solo Shaman • recorded by Toop (Lost Shadows)  
– Metropolis Atlantis • Morrow  
– Explanation of Flutter Echo • Derrick Gill (Youtube)  
– Come On And Hear exc • Toop, Morrow, Derek Bailey, et al.  
– Crossthreads BBC 1972 • Toop  
– Sheep, Wind, Fence, Flute • recorded by Toop (Field Recording & Fox Spirits)  
– For Neill on the Ascent of the Fragile • Morrow  
– Landing Apollo 11: Moonwalk One • Morrow

Mixed & collaged by bart plantenga, mastered by Sean McCann

**David Toop:** That's right (laughter).

**Charlie Morrow:** Your conversation with me is as close to what I'm trying to do with this whole project as anything could be because we're on the same journey and I think you understand what I'm trying to do ... I found myself being drawn to recreate 3-D sound and immerse people totally. I actually defined immersion as part of the patent. Then I just come back to the beginning. And then I saw that all it was

envelopes. First we're in an aqueous envelope, which, in a way, is like the sea that covers the earth and then we go into the aerobic envelope and then somehow we're still connected to our mothers ...

**David Toop:** Yes.

**Charlie Morrow:** ... Or the big mother or whatever.

**David Toop:** Yeah, well that's great. That all sounds very exciting.

**Charlie Morrow:** I'm so glad. Be in good health and thank you.

**David Toop:** Thanks a lot. Bye-bye.