

Pat Kraus & Sam Longmore

SL:

Hey, so, what have you been up to these last few weeks? How have you been feeling?

PK:

The first week of the lockdown I was overwhelmed with anxiety, and spent most of the time feeling like I was going to puke because of the stress. I was really surprised by that, because of course I knew what was coming, and I thought I was prepared for it. I have a chronic illness and can't work, so I'm mostly at home making music anyway. I thought the Level 4 restrictions wouldn't affect me much. But the reality was different. I missed my girlfriend terribly, and I felt like I was sponging up all the fear and sadness around me.

But after a week I got my focus back and calmed down. I guess anything can become normal after a while. In the last two weeks I've been feeling unusually creative and focused, and able to finish a bunch of songs in a short time. I'm actually finishing an album right now, and I think under normal circumstances it would have been months away from completion.

One thing is Auckland has become very quiet, which has helped my mental clarity. And in normal times it's amazing how much you can clutter up your days with unnecessary activity. When things like coffee dates and going to the dentist become impossible, you can really get a lot done.

For a while I've been thinking of reducing my online activity to clear my mind. When I first started out recording my own music I would have a lot of sound ideas in my imagination, in my mind's ear, and then I would try to record those sounds and see how they worked. I think in the last ten years I've lost that ability to some extent, and I think the internet overload is contributing. Within a week of the lockdown I realised I was going to have to severely curtail my internet time, just to preserve my sanity. And that's cleared the way for new sound ideas to emerge.

SL:

That is an interesting realisation to have come to re: online activity and imagined sounds. I wonder what sort of observations and conclusions future sociologists / psychologists / neurologists will be able to make about how the internet has affected us...

It is amazing the vast range of ways in which people have experienced these recent weeks. We are all different beings, huh.

PK:

I feel lucky to have lived half my life pre-internet, so I have some perspective on how it's changed my brain.

This pandemic has thrown a spotlight on what's important in my life, like seeing my friends' faces. I also used to hate video chatting, but immediately after the Level 4 announcement I realised I was going to have to get into it.

I must say I'm lucky to have a great living situation, and the best studio set up I've ever had. Plus for about six months I've been pretty focused on music, so I was well placed to take creative advantage of the lockdown. I just had to keep that ball rolling.

SL:

It is certainly a fine time to appreciate the good things!

I still dislike video calling, though, especially with more than one person. I find it terribly frustrating. Give me a telephone call over that any day!

What sort of musical material have you been working on?

PK:

In the last few months I've been branching out and trying to challenge myself to adopt musical technology that I haven't used before, and make that work in the context of the Kraus oeuvre. So I've been using digital synthesizers and samplers, and learning a musical programming language (Supercollider) in order to do algorithmic composition. That's pretty new territory for me, and it's been a real challenge to work with that technology, and make it fit within the aesthetic parameters of Kraus. Those were kind of set 20 years ago – I've just been working them out ever since. So the new album has stuff like FM synthesis and wavetables, '80s music technology that I haven't touched before.

SL:

What makes for a 'good studio' for you?

PK:

A good studio for me has enough space that I can leave everything set up from session to session. And everything is connected together so I can just switch something on and start working, rather than wasting time plugging things in. And also just obvious stuff like having enough leads and power points, and decent headphones. I put some effort into improving my studio setup earlier in the year, and I'm glad I did, it was perfect timing to have it ready for the lockdown.

SL:

Do things such as light figure in too? Or it is primarily having adequate space and surface and power / music cables, etc. (I ask knowing that your current studio also has a nice big window)?

PK:

I guess light is important, I hadn't thought about that. I'm sure sunlight helps my mood. My room gets a lot of direct sun in the afternoon, in fact so much that I have to cover some of my gear to stop it getting too hot. My window is kind of high up off a suburban back street, and I really enjoy seeing people walk along the street and catch a bit of what I'm doing. A lot of people react the same way, they sort of look around, like "what the fuck??" But they can never seem to figure out the source of the sounds, so they just carry on with their journey.

Working at home, it really helps to live with people who are cool with me making sounds, and are not going to be bothered by that. My flatmate James Sullivan (Jim Nothing) is often across the hallway making cool synth stuff. He's more known for guitar music but he's been getting into synths and making some amazing shit. I love it when we are working at the same time, and overhearing what he's up to.

SL:

What are some of the aesthetic parameters for the Kraus project?

PK:

Most Kraus songs are short, usually only 3 or 4 minutes max. I generally use the structure of popular music, say three parts, like a verse/chorus/bridge. But I interpret that structural approach very broadly. Harmonically I generally only use minor modes. There are exceptions to all these rules, but there's a lot to explore within those limitations.

Harmonic and rhythmic stasis are important features of Kraus too. A lot of my drum beats are loops, or just me playing very monotonously. Russell Coveney said I use drums like drones. Harmonically it's rare for me to have chord progressions or modulations. Usually the harmony is drone-based and modal. If there are chords it will usually just be two chords going back and forth. I

like creating a sonic space and dwelling in it, rather than using harmonic progression to create emotional drama. This is partly a result of my interest in folk music and pre-modern Western art music. I see what I do as quite closely related to a lot of folk music, although I guess that's probably not how most people would understand what I'm doing.

Another important idea in Kraus is clashing together the ancient and the modern. So for example on the song "Eat, It is Good" from "Interior Castle", there's a lute-like acoustic guitar, a goat-skin drum, and a bamboo flute, but then a freaky atonal synthesiser thing that runs over the top. I find that kind of contrast exciting and surprising.

[LINK]

SL:

...and now you're trying to bring in 'newness' in other forms?

PK:

Yes, because that would enhance the possible contrasts. So far I've mostly used the sound palette of psychedelic rock music, and electronic music of the analogue era. In other words, the music of the mid-sixties to the late-'70s. I still find it interesting to look at the sound technology from that time, which is now obsolete, and find avenues and combinations that were not explored back then. I think it's common to have an interest in the decades preceding your birth, because you have this received idea of what happened, that might not really reflect what it was like to live in that time. That gives you a lot of freedom to play with that culture and create your own interpretation of it. Whereas I did actually live through the '80s. When I started making music in the '90s, me and my peer group considered '80s music to be mostly uninteresting trash. And so it's taken me a long time to feel ready to tackle the sound palette of the '80s and feel like I can rearrange it to my satisfaction. An increasing appreciation for camp has certainly helped me in that regard.

Regarding finding new approaches to old gear, the synthesiser is such an unexplored instrument, in terms of it's sonic potential, and how recent a historical development it is. And I particularly relish trying to make listenable music with the electric guitar. It's an amazing instrument, and I absolutely love it, but so much awful music has been made with it, it's really hard to keep it fresh.

SL:

...and are there examples of attempting to branch out along other trajectories, too?

PK:

I definitely have branched out a little from those self-imposed limitations. For example, in the last few years I've done some longer pieces, both live and in recordings. I don't know if that's development, or me backsliding from my original ideas. I came up in a particular punk rock/noise scene in Dunedin in the late '90s, and that background has had a profound impact on everything I've done since. The attitude of austerity, and skepticism of anything considered too pretentious; commercial; or frivolous, is really deeply embedded in my thinking about music, for better and worse.

SL:

Where does Kraus end and another project begin? Is there a clear delineation?

PK:

I guess if other people are involved, then it's not really Kraus any more. Kraus is the project for *my* ideas about music, and what I want to listen to. I think there have only been like 2 other people appear on Kraus records ever, and only in minor roles.

There are a lot of layers to it being purely a solo project; not just the sound palette and the

compositions. To me even the little physical ticks that come out when I play the guitar are an integral part of the music.

I'm just not very good at telling other people what to do, so I end up doing it all myself.

But I absolutely love working with other people in bands or collaborations. Working in a band like Pouffe I get to play guitar in a different way, playing chords! Finger-picking! And working with vocalists is wonderful, I love creating music in support of a voice, and of course I never get to do that in Kraus, it's always been instrumental only.

SL:

It sounds to me like the Kraus-parameters function like wee challenges to motivate your artistic / creative process... Like to help with getting the ball rolling you have a challenge (or set of them), i.e., *how to use this in that way, or, how to subvert this or that structure or convention...*

PK:

Yeah I've always been really conscious about the choices I make when I'm recording. I try to think of novel combinations of sounds, but I also consider what the sounds signify, and play with the expectations around that. I always want to feel like I'm exploring and posing questions for myself. Just to keep myself interested, but also because that seems like an obvious path to producing fresh work. This is a little strange to talk about, but honestly if something makes me laugh, that's a good sign. Not laugh because it's funny or silly, but if a combination of sounds is surprising, and works even though it shouldn't, or brings about mental associations that you haven't encountered before, that can make you laugh, just for pure intellectual joy and satisfaction.

Often when I see a great new band for the first time, I'll stand there laughing just because I'm so surprised and pleased. I always have to catch myself and try to stop that, because I don't want the band to see me laughing and misunderstand what it means.

SL:

I've always been impressed by your output (both in terms of quality and quantity!), so am looking forward to hearing some of the new work!

You said before that (after settling into it) you are finding the current situation quite productive, and that in this way you're appreciating a quieter Auckland.

Has the current context manifested in the work you're doing in any ways beyond that you are finding yourself working more quickly? I wonder, also about context, about to what extent (if any) the context we are in now relates to the way you *think* about Kraus and your work more generally?

PK:

Well, that's really hard to answer, because the pandemic has caused everything to change so much and so suddenly. The pandemic has made me more keenly aware of my mortality, of course. So possibly my sense of focus and motivation comes from thinking I might not be around much longer. But I'm also thinking a lot about how *valuable* music is to people, and that's helping my sense of purpose. I'm always making music for myself *and people like me*: my peers in music, and just other weirdos in general. And right now I know everyone is basically cowering in their homes, bored and scared and feeling crazy. Knowing I might be able to entertain or comfort some people for a short time is helping me value what I do, and want to do it more.

Of course I'm also having to think a lot about practicalities of making music during a global pandemic, and how Kraus can even continue to exist in the current environment. In terms of releasing and performing music, the pandemic is placing much more emphasis on the virtual zone. It's been possible for years to stream performances, of course, but suddenly it's crucial that everyone learn how to do that, and think about how to express themselves in that way. I'm trying to work that

out myself. It's not obvious how to make it good. I'd really like to do something extra cool with it, not just sitting in front of a camera.

Because of my health problems I recently went into a long hiatus from playing live, so the pandemic is not actually having an impact on me as a performer. But now like everyone I want to perform online. In some ways I'm grateful for being forced to figure out internet performance like this, because if I can overcome my confusion over how to do it well, it will help me continue to be a live performer in the future, which was looking quite uncertain.

This is just one aspect of the importance of the internet to contemporary musical culture generally. As far as I can see, we're only just starting to figure out how significant a benefit to music the internet is. Think about the broad access to music that exists now. That's HUGE compared to the situation when I started out. Really it's unprecedented. I can pretty much listen to whatever I want any time. When I was first making music, I would hear about things, read about them, but have no way of getting access to that music. It was a big deal if I could find a Sun Ra record for example, or, if I could, to afford it. Now the sonic universe that we inhabit is massively expanded, and we have the opportunity to try and incorporate into our music an enormous variety of sounds and influences from across time and space. That makes me very happy, and gives me hope that I'm not going to run out of challenges any time soon.

SL:

I wonder sometimes about what accessing and relating to music from elsewhere was like was like pre-internet, and about how easy access has changed things.

I suspect that it has changed the manner in which music is listened to; that we listen to more, but with perhaps less repetition and/or deep engagement. I think this is become more pronounced with Spotify and those other mega-streaming platforms.

The other thing I wonder about in relation to that is how the internet has changed the way enthusiasts relate to labels and record stores. In my imagination, labels and stores seem like they would have been more important than they feel now, both as points of trusted curation which collate material aesthetically or by another metric (say, ideology or location), or as networks for distribution. BTW, this isn't to say that I don't think labels or stores are important now – they are. But, like, surely before you could dip into and out of a release on a whim, labels had more significance...

This doesn't even mention how music production and publishing has gone some of the way toward democratization, what with free DAWs, and (imperfect but still pretty great) publication platforms such as Soundcloud and Bandcamp, and how this has resulted in a boom in the amount of music that is out there (even before we consider the means by which we access it).

But then, as this relates to my previous comment about the function of labels, perhaps with the mountains of new material being published, labels regain (retain?) some significance? A label release is a point of difference, right? To have something released by someone else, as opposed to a self release, lends a veneer of legitimacy, eh?? (Whether this is playing into a logic of capitalism, I'm not sure – branding is a thing, though, huh.)

And then labels still provide that mechanism through which groups or artists are bought together...

I really don't know if any of this in is on the money...

PK:

I think labels are super important now from that curatorial perspective. Because there is such an impossible tsunami of new music all the time, it's important to have ways of navigating through that. A label or radio show or podcast can be a lifeline, you build up a relationship with them, and come to trust their judgement and knowledge. You'd think that the democratization of publishing would have reduced their role, but it's the opposite.

Also it's a bit of a myth to think that everyone is just swimming in this undifferentiated sea of culture. Even with the opening up that the internet has brought, we still operate in scenes and communities. This is one reason why as an artist it's still important to work with labels. I work about 50/50 with self-releases and label releases. Each label has its own community, it's like a huge Venn diagram with crossover zones, and if you only self-release you are missing out on connecting with the communities that exist around different labels.

I agree that we probably listen a little less deeply and with less dedication to particular albums and works. But on balance, as someone who is just hungry for new sounds, I'm ok with that. Anyway, and, well, this is a bit embarrassing, I don't really listen to a huge amount of music, in terms of how I spend the hours of my day. I know a lot of people who listen to music all day, but I've never really been like that. I have an appetite to hear exciting new sounds of course, but I would rather make new music than spend all my time listening. There's music that I haven't found yet, and I want it to be in my ears, so I have to make it myself. Motoko Kikkawa once said to me "*Making music is easy. You just make the sound you want to hear*".

I am incredibly excited and happy about the democratisation of music production. I strongly reject the idea that art is to be made only by certain specialists who have innate "talent". To me creative work is a fundamental human need. It makes me happy thinking about people in lockdown doing creative projects that they don't normally have time to do. But it's not just that it's important for people's liberation. I think culture in general would be enriched and broadened by having universal participation in art production. It's really important to me for example as a queer, disabled person that marginalised voices are not excluded.

One thing that could contribute to this is improved music education. Music education in my view is very backward looking. Why don't we teach kids to make the kind of music they actually like listening to? Music teaching has a long way to go to catch up with the widespread access to music technology. I'm looking forward to a time when you can do primary school classes in beat-making, or how to use Reaper. I suppose that is happening in some places but it's not at all common yet.

SL:

I couldn't agree more with these points

I am very put off by an attitude I sometimes notice when it comes to music which situates it as a sort of competition. *Chops. Virtuosity. Genius.* It is a bit gross, competitive and unnecessary.

This isn't to say that we should abandon taste or anything, or refrain from celebrating amazing work or anything. Only that it isn't a competition, that *bad vs. good vs. better* is a bad metric, and that we don't need to bully those we think are less talented.

PK:

I honestly just don't believe in the concept of talent as an innate thing. I think "talent" is just a matter of environment and how many hours people have put in. For example, I have no talent in the normally understood sense. I didn't start playing an instrument until I was 19. As a kid I wasn't even particularly interested in music, let alone making any. I can't sing very well, and for someone who's been playing guitar for 25 years my style is pretty wobbly and limited. But I've been able to do some OK music. Anything good I've done is just a result of thinking a lot about music, and working hard to develop what I can do.

SL:

I've a couple more threads I'd like to go through if you don't mind, one which is about the future, and the other about sound in the present moment.

Do you have any thoughts about that? About how the presentation of art and music might change?

Positives / negatives on the horizon? Etc.

PK:

Firstly, a lot of people have been saying "Things can't go back to normal after this." But really that's up to us. WE have to make the changes, FORCE the changes to happen. If you look at history, you see time and time again that positive change happens from the bottom up. We are not going to be handed a socialist utopia by political leaders, even international rock-star prime-ministers. Capitalism will not just wither away naturally, and anyway we need to figure out what is going to replace it. If we want anything to change, we have to do it ourselves. That applies to music and art as much as anything else.

I think there are positive opportunities for music. The music industry might actually just die. It relies so much on live performance now, since the profitability of recorded music products plummeted. What happens to that industry when all tours are cancelled indefinitely? That's not looking good is it.

I hate the music industry and think it's a parasite on actual culture. To me it's something that stands in the way of the promotion and development of music as an artform, rather than helping it. And it's enormously exploitative of performers and most other people involved, even by normal capitalism standards it's awful.

So I really have no idea what music will look like in a year or two. But there are a lot of people out there who have dedicated their lives to organising musical activity on an independent, community basis, and I hope they will continue to do that and maybe they can fill a bit of the vacuum that is left when the dinosaurs become extinct. But I'm terrible at making predictions, so who knows...

SL:

Thanks heaps for your thoughts, Pat. Look forward to seeing you sometime soon (when it is safe)!

PK:

Yeah same. I hope we can get out of jail soon. Looking forward to seeing who else you talk to.