

In search of glorious beauty

Musician and label owner Antony Milton on the magic of tape hiss and travails of touring

Where did you grow up?

All over the place really, but Clyde in Central Otago was where I spent my formative years.

What sort of music did you listen to in your childhood?

In central Otago we had no adventurous music whatsoever. Just the local radio station. Kenny Rodgers, eighties hits, Queen. When I was older I remember really liking Talking Heads. They were a huge thing for me. It was one of those freaky shows they used to have on a Sunday night on mainstream stations. The atmosphere at night would be clear enough to pick up Dunedin stations. I used to stay up on Sunday nights and be really tired on Monday mornings just listening to these radio shows. My step father got a transfer to Auckland after the Clyde dam was finished so I had my last two years at school in Auckland.

Then I left home on my bicycle, travelling around the country for about three years, fruit picking, camping, a fantastic on-the-road lifestyle for a few years and then I settled in Christchurch when I was about 21. I had a girlfriend there and ended up staying there for a few years in the early nineties.

That's when I really got turned on to New Zealand underground music, mainly through one particular guy I was sharing orchard accommodation with. He had this vast collection of Xpressway tapes. And he would insist on playing them. Initially I found them bloody awful. I was already into bands like Birthday Party and Sonic Youth, but some of these bands were so noisy that it was a step too far. But then my tastes suddenly changed and I got it.

What was it about that sort of music that was appealing to you?

I had this very romantic notion of what New Zealand is and the landscape. This nature mysticism going on in my own life, and for some reason I started to associate this with those sorts of sounds that these guys were producing – the ruggedness and the number 8 wire stitched together like flax sound of it, very appealing and evocative of that, and I wanted to explore that myself.

At what point did you start making your own music?

I was doing that from when I was still living in Auckland. When I was 18, I started doing tapes. Even before I started doing music, I was interested in tape recorders. I was always recording stuff. Obsessively recording things and fascinated by recorded sounds. I was into that before I started learning guitar, which came a lot later. Up until 2000 I was still using tape, as my main recording medium.

I remember recording radio static, even back then. Rubbing microphones on things. I was also doing a lot of recording tapes on to other tapes. I would play one tape really loud into the system and then record it again with massive distortion. There was nothing artistic about it whatsoever in my mind. I was just playing around with silly noises. I just found that fun. I got into song writing at a certain point. Until I was 22 or 23 I was very obsessive about my song writing, I counted them up. I had about 120 songs I could remember and sing. I would never play them to anyone except long suffering friends who would come and visit. And then I stopped playing

them. I think I had a revelation about more sort of free music, and let go of a lot of the baggage.

What do you mean by free music?

Improvised. The sort of songs I want to do are songs that are of the moment, that are snapshots of a moment in time. And I think as often as not, the best time to do them is in the impulse of the moment. The best thing is to do it as soon as possible and not work on it too much, a sketch sort of quality.

Would you describe your music as ambient?

Ambient is fine. I've also done pretty extreme noise music sort of things as well. Just using sound sources like feedback, extreme volume and things. But I still try and do things that have that sort of glorious beauty about it. How I got started making that really abstract music was that I was finding other people's abstract music was really good to paint to. I went through a stage of painting when I was around 22-23. I found it really stimulating, so decided to make some of my own tapes with just weird random noises, with no intention of releasing them. But then I discovered there were people I knew or my greater social circle who were actually releasing stuff like that. I was bamboozled by the fact that people were putting this stuff out into the world and that's where I started a tape label.

When did you start your own label?

The first tapes came out '94. That was called Wire bridge. It was pretty small scale, only 20 tapes in an edition. That lasted till I went overseas in 1998 to Australia, as a stepping stone to going afield. Then we (with partner Sara) went to India, Pakistan, China and Nepal and came back to Wellington. I met Campbell (Kneale, Featherston artist and musician) through friends of friends. He got me very inspired. The first time I met him he was doing a crazy gig with only a dictaphone. Then I started the Pseudo Arcana label. Wire Bridge was only me and a couple of duos. On Pseudo Arcana we had dozens and dozens of different artists. That was in the days of CDRs when you could burn and sell CDRs - that kicked it off. It's funny because I was trying to do tapes, and then I met Campbell and he said "you should start making CDRs" and I started burning them at home.

How did you come across the artists?

What happened was that my stuff got picked up by a couple of distributors overseas and people started buying those and then they started writing to me, so I would come home every day and literally have three or four people asking if they could release something with me, and sending me stuff. Some of it I really liked.

What was the primary purpose of that label?

It was fun and I was engaged with this community of like-minded people around the world. It is semi retired now. I had no intention of carrying on long-term. I have got other labels I would like to develop.

Has your music been evolving in the last few years?

It's going back to being sparser and sparser, and less and less going on, which I am happy with. Before that I got almost got into a big psychedelic dance approach. But now I've gone back to a really tiny little needle focus.

Pseudo Arcana can be found on YouTube, Bandcamp and at www.pseudoarcana.com Antony's new label Lay Your Burdens Down and his own music can be found on Bandcamp

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