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MUSIC / Thursday, November 3, 2011

# THE ART OF SOUND

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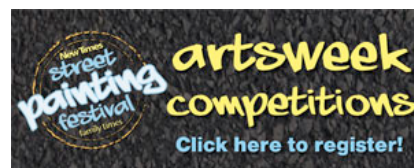
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2	3	4	5	6	7	8

**Pride Night Karaoke w/DJ Smegie.** Jul 02. 9pm-2am. .

**The Dropouts.** Jul 02. 7-10 pm. Acoustic Rock Variety. 302 Vine Street

**WoodStone.** Jul 02. 7:00pm-11:00pm. Acoustic Duo - Eclectic Rock Covers.

**Breathing Blue, Falling From One, The Avondales, Storm Cell.** Jul 02. 7pm. .

Sound men will play an integral part of the Kronos Quartet's performance at Syracuse University

By Mary Gibble

A soundman is an electronic conductor. They are the unsung heroes of the music world, the men behind the soundboards. In a profession dominated by males, Doug Quin, Ron Keck and Jeremy Huntley stand out for their innovation, prowess and passion. They live, breathe and eat sound waves and electrical cords. For these men, sound is more than a profession. It is a way of listening to the world.

Quin, a professor in Syracuse University's Television, Radio and Film program, is creating a musical experience marrying field biology and avant-garde composition. Together with the Kronos Quartet, Quin is combining the sounds of the natural world with strings in a composition to premiere at Syracuse University on Wednesday, Nov. 9.

"My passion lies in the natural world," Quin says. "Every landscape is very different, every soundscape is different." Having spent most of his adult life traveling to exotic locations, Quin has amassed a large collection of nature recordings. He calls them soundscapes.

He's traveled to the Amazon. Perched 150 feet in the air, he collected recordings of the canopy at dawn. That's when the sound is alive; when he captured a cacophony of birds and howler monkeys that sound like lions.

He's traveled to Antarctica. With three microphones at different depths of the ocean, he collected the cries of Weddell seals. While in the water their calls resemble electronic music, not the quintessential bark of Fisherman's Wharf.

"Sleeping on the ice you could feel and hear the sound coming through," says Quin. "It would tickle the soles of your boots when you were walking around."

He's listened to outer space. Atmospheric whistlers are produced when lightning strikes, sounding like a landing spaceship. Although they are within the range of human hearing, they operate on radio frequencies and, therefore, elude the ear. Quin captured them with special microphones and transformed them into sound.

In addition to his field recordings, Quin is also a composer. His latest work incorporates soundscapes from outer space and the northern and southern polar regions of the earth.

It will be performed by the Kronos Quartet, a string foursome known for breaking the classical music mold, i.e. playing Jimi Hendrix songs, performing with Nine Inch Nails. If all goes according to plan the audience will not be able to differentiate between the sounds of a violin and a Weddell seal, the strike of a cello and a strike of lightning.

"We are creating a vocabulary of sounds where it is not a violin or a whale but the sound in between," says Quin. "It is the bridge between music and natural sounds; it is sonic ambiguity." The composition, "Polar Suite," will premiere at SU on Nov. 9 as part of a weeklong residency with Kronos. The free event begins at 8 p.m. in Setnor Auditorium, Crouse College, on the SU Quad.

This endeavor is made possible by the K-Bow. Developed by Keith McMillen, the K-Bow allows musicians to alter the sound of their instrument. This isn't your grandmother's bow. Although it resembles a standard violin bow (only with a battery pack), it includes a built-in bluetooth controller, a USB port, an accelerometer (which measures the angle of the bow) and a series of sensors. These components allow the members of the Kronos Quartet to move sounds around different speakers, change the actual speed of the sound, create loops and cue soundscapes.

"It really is like a Harry Potter wand," says Quin.

During the performance each member of the quartet will use the K-Bow and a laptop. Quin, also equipped with a laptop, will set up offstage. From a distance he'll program and control the sounds played; he will be the electronic conductor.

The final product will be a textured composition that asks as much of the audience as it does the musicians. Quin hopes to create a certain level of ambiguity. While the strings imitate the soundscapes, the soundscapes will be presented as composed music. It will be unlike any composition the audience has heard before. Quin, however, has confidence in the power of sound to communicate, even if the meaning is not immediately clear. "Sound has the ability to engage all of the senses," he says. "When you have done that, then you have a clear avenue to the heart."

### Sound Thinking

A soundman is an engineer. In the heart of downtown Syracuse sits SubCat Studios, the best-equipped recording studio between Toronto and New York City. The co-owner, soundman Ron Keck, is, above all, a sound engineer. Previously located in Skaneateles, SubCat moved to 219 S. West St. in the Redhouse performing arts center in February 2011. Although the digs have changed, Keck's job remains the same. "I'm in the studio every single day," he says.

In 1998, while studying music education at SU, Keck sat in on a friend's recording session and came across a magazine advertising a Macintosh IIsi's recording capabilities. He took out his credit card and ordered one. "I got so enthusiastic about it I decided that maybe I'm not going to be a music teacher. Maybe I'm going to be a sound engineer," Keck recalls.

Keck isn't the only engineer to sit in the plush seats and glide across the dark wood floors of SubCat. The studio employs two full-time engineers, but he encourages musicians to bring their own. "We

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designed these spaces so that they're very intuitive," he says. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to come in here and at least get rolling."

Rocket scientist or not, the sound engineer is involved in the recording of an album from start to finish. In the case of SubCat, Keck begins with an artist consultation. Then there is the initial recording of the song, also known as tracking.

Then the retracking, which occurs if the performance wasn't quite what the band wanted. Some more retracking. And just in case someone messed up, another round of retracking.

Once this is complete, production values are added. The fancy term for sound effects, production values are anything that isn't produced naturally by the musicians. These effects either come from a catalog or are produced onsite. Sometimes, engineers have to use their imaginations to obtain the perfect effect.

"One item that comes to mind was taking a trash can, placing the microphone inside the trash can and recording the song through it," says Keck. Production values are not always this kooky. It may be as simple as adding background harmonies into a chorus or inserting a violin or guitar solo into a bridge. Keck ensures that every effect contributes to the song.

Following the production value process comes what Keck refers to as "tweaking." The artists are given a copy of the music and make notes on anything to be changed. "They'll come back and we'll make those tweaks, and then the song is done," he says. "For the most part."

The final step is the mastering phase, when the final touches are applied. At SubCat, the job of mastering usually goes to someone other than the primary sound engineer. The mastering engineer provides a new set of ears. He makes sure from song to song there are no abnormalities, the volumes are working right, the fades are smooth. "There are certain things that the mastering guy can do to just sweeten the music," says Keck.

Then the album is complete. Hours and hours of playing, recording and tweaking pays off. The final product is more than just a collection of 10 or 12 songs. The album is an expression of a band's identity.

"It's important that the band has a relationship with the sound engineer," he says. "They're creating something very personal."

### Chaos Theory

A soundman is a master of chaos. It is raining in Baldwinsville. Dark Hollow, a Grateful Dead cover band, is scheduled to play on the open air patio of Lake Effect, 7 Syracuse St., adjacent to the Seneca River. Never fear: This is Central New York and they have a backup plan. An hour before Dark Hollow is to begin their four-hour set, their soundman, Jeremy Huntley, is running around the 15-foot-wide covered patio space that has become the makeshift stage.

"It's a delicate ballet of confusion," says Huntley. He curls and unwinds cords. He empties hockey bags of microphones and other equipment. The rain is a problem but one that Huntley can handle. "As long as the soundboard's not getting wet, I'm good."

Huntley has worked as a soundman since age 16. But unlike others in his field, he is not a musician. "I started off carrying gear for a band I knew," says Huntley. "One night, the regular sound guy didn't show up and they said, 'You're up.'" His career with Dark Hollow started three years ago, but he has been a fan of the band for some time. Formed in 1996, Dark Hollow regularly rocks out at Shifty's, Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, PJ's, Coleman's, the Westcott Theater, Club Fusion and Lake Effect. The band believes venues continue to book them because of their die-hard fan base and the variety of their set list.

"We take chances," says guitarist Mike Stanford. "It's a free-flowing process."

Having worked with Dark Hollow for so long, Huntley is able to roll with whatever surprises come his way. "Sometimes the set list's written down and sometimes it's locked away in Mike's head," says Huntley. With a jam band like this one, an established set list is not necessary. Once the show begins, Huntley makes only minor adjustments.

The stage setup is anything but simple.

Many evenings, Dark Hollow welcomes guest musicians but tonight it's the bare minimum of five musicians and 12 microphones. Yards of electrical cord line the back wall. A band member starts his tuning process. "I'm still running cables there, butthead," Huntley jokes. Two rugs, which look as



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though they would be more at home in an antique shop than at a rock concert, are placed on stage. "Lots of beer has been drunk by those rugs," Huntley admits.

Once the stage is ready, the soundcheck begins. He starts with the drums because they are the "backbeat of any band." This is followed by the bass, keys, guitar and finally the vocals. Normally, the band plays one whole song while Huntley walks around the venue. In the case of the Lake Effect show, he walks out from under the awning and into the rain. "Different rooms have different sounds," says Huntley.

With rain and gusts to contend with, it is a challenge to get the sound just right. He returns to his soundboard, his light brown beard and moe.down T-shirt both damp. "I still have most of the settings from Sophistafunk on here," says Huntley.

Sophistafunk, a funk trio based in Syracuse, played at Huntley's most recent gig, the Last Daze of Summer festival, part of the Sterling Stage summer series. Dark Hollow is his primary employer, but he works other soundman gigs throughout the area. With a fiancé and 4-month-old daughter—Althea, named after the Grateful Dead song—he takes any job he can get. "Music is music, it's all the same skill sets," says Huntley. "The job is just more fun if it's music you like."

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How could you write this story and leave out Jason ( Jocko ) Randall owner of Moresound Studio's as well as running F.O.H. for John Browns Body and Jeff ( The Mole ) Moleski who own's Moletrax Studio Has recorded Smashing Pumpkins and has been running F.O.H. for Blues Traveler as of late ? Both of these men's resume's are full of accomplishments and are recognized on a national level I don't think the same could be said about the gentleman in your story ?



Stefan Ilnitzki

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