

# ELECTRONIC SOUND



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# AMON TOBIN

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FROM TAPE LOOPS TO TURNTABLES  
AND BACK AGAIN

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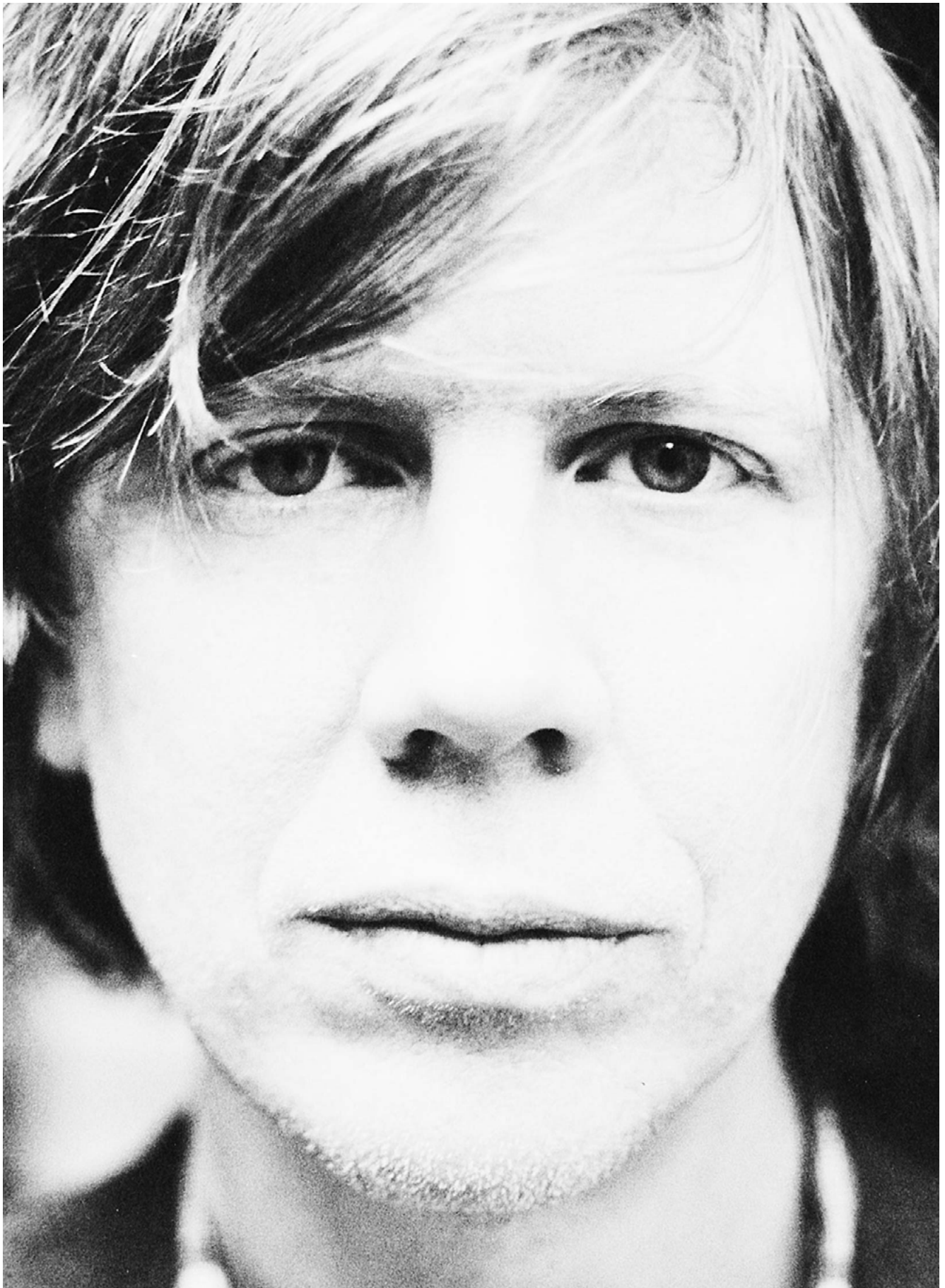
NICE 'N' SPLICY

# Sonic Adult

Since moving to London at the beginning of the decade, **Thurston Moore** has found himself at the forefront of east London's experimental music scene. From Luc Ferrari to Public Enemy, we enjoy a free-ranging chat

Words: **David Stubbs**

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BRUNHILD FERRARI - PHOTO BY FABIO LUGARO



THURSTON MOORE AND ERIKM - PHOTO: ROBIN RIMBAUD



THURSTON, ERIKM, SCANNER & BRUNHILD - PHOTO: EVA PRINZ



THURSTON AND BRUNHILD - PHOTO: EVA PRINZ



PHOTO: ROBIN RIMBAUD

“I think Luc Ferrari liked all musics,” says Thurston Moore. “It’s like when a journalist interviewed Thelonious Monk once and he said, ‘I like all musics equally’. And the journalist refused to take that as an answer. But he meant it. Ferrari came out of studying Honegger, Messiaen, Varèse, but we included in the book an interview he did with a French jazz magazine, which we came across late into our editing. His perceptions about jazz in relation to his own sound world were fascinating. I went through his archive of records, and there was a lot of contemporary underground rock music, he was curious about this stuff.”

Moore and I are at east London’s Cafe Oto, in the middle of the Stereo Spasms festival, an eight-day programme of events dedicated to the work of the late French musique concrète composer Luc Ferrari. Among those taking part in performances to mark the 90th anniversary of his birth are experimental luminaries such as David Toop, David Grubbs, Scanner, Steve Beresford, Tania Chen, eRikm and Jon Leidecker, aka electronica artist Wobbly, who also joins us for our conversation.

Much of Ferrari’s work presents a fascinating challenge for the players, given the latitude they are allowed by the composer. For a performance of ‘Et Tournent Les Sons Dans La Garrigue’ (‘And Turn The Sounds In The Scrubland’, 1977), says Leidecker, “the directions given to the instrumentalists are almost nothing, just a series of poetic words: pause, ripple, reflection, tension, orgasm, recession. Yet there is a 25-minute pre-recorded tape that contains all of the tonal centre of the piece, and so the musicians are going to respond to that.”

Thurston Moore, who also plays in the festival, performing one of Ferrari’s final pieces, ‘Les Protorhythmiques’ along with eRikm, is here to launch ‘Luc Ferrari – Complete Works’. Edited by Ferrari’s widow Brunhild, the book is a collection of English translations of the composer’s writings, correspondence, interview scores and other such “musica materia”. It reveals the full extent of his activities that took in not just music, but poetry, theatre, radio and visual art.

Published on his Ecstatic Peace Library imprint, Moore provides the book’s foreword, in which he pinpoints the importance of Ferrari as a musique concrète composer who escaped the dogmatic confines of the studios/institutions in which it was born, personified by his early mentor Pierre Schaeffer.

“You look at pictures of Ferrari in the 60s, he’s a hip dude,” says Moore. “Schaeffer’s not a hip dude.”

In his foreword, Moore explains that using handheld mobile technology, Ferrari would go out “into the field, to document a planet rife with change, emotional and political, giving voice and value to the sound worlds of the disenfranchised”. Such were his radical explorations, writes Moore, that “much of psychedelic, avant-garde and experimental rock, free improvisation, jazz and contemporary classical music has bestowed continual adulation to Luc Ferrari”.

For some in France, such as eRikm, excitement at the attention garnered by Ferrari’s work is tinged with dismay that Stereo Spasms is not taking place in his native land.

“He said, ‘Why am I coming to London to play Luc Ferrari of France? Why isn’t there the possibility of doing it here? I should be doing this in Paris, Marseilles’,” says Moore. “But the premise of the book was to do an English language version of what has previously been en français – to translate what are lovely existing texts into English. And there’s such a wealth, his poetry, his collage art.”

Moore’s own route to indisputable hipdom began in his dreams while growing up in Connecticut. He longed for, and eventually sought out, the action in the urban centre of New York, far away from the rural Americana of his home environment. For him it was CBGBs, not Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. In 1976, lured by the likes of Patti Smith and the Ramones as well as the critics such as Lester Bangs who feted them, he moved to New York.

His love of extremism drew him into the electronic realm, but by the time Sonic Youth formed in 1981, he was as familiar with Sun Ra, Suicide and Stockhausen as he was with The Sex Pistols. It wasn't rock that counted, but organised noise.

Of all the post-punk rock 'n' roll noiseniks, Sonic Youth were always the best equipped to build a bridge with 20th century classical and contemporary music. And so it was that in 1999 they released the album 'Goodbye 20th Century', in which, using a hybrid palette of rock and electronics, they render compositions by Christian Wolff, Pauline Oliveros, John Cage, Cornelius Cardew and Steve Reich anew. It's an unmatched piece of work that the passage of time has done nothing to wither.

"We thought about that and considered how we would approach it," says Moore. "It was incredible, we had fierce arguments about who was going to be involved."

Drone pioneer La Monte Young was briefly considered but then, collectively, the group decided that would be way, way too on the nose for Sonic Youth.

"Instead people like Christian Wolff came into our studio – and then we toured, which we only did in Europe. We played the South Bank, which was the only place where we got heckled. I think it was during a James Tenney piece. And as it was crescendoing, very slowly, we hear from the audience someone shout, 'COME ON, GET ON WITH IT!'."

"Then we played Sonar where I thought we would go down a storm. And they snoozed at us, they were bored by us. It was only then I realised that we were playing alongside a lot of contemporary electronic players. So what we were doing must have seemed like Dixieland at an avant-garde jazz festival."

Following the demise of Sonic Youth and the break up of his marriage to Kim Gordon in 2011, Thurston Moore relocated to east London, the most musically happening quarter of the capital, where he lives today. Having longed for New York, Moore developed a yearning Anglophilia in Sonic Youth's early days, inspired by the British music press and the beguilingly austere images of groups like Wire. He recalls fondly his first trips to London with the group in the early 80s, playing everywhere from "punk squats", to concerts with Glenn Branca, sleeping at railway stations, being thrown offstage in New Cross for playing too long, before eventually achieving the critical acclaim in the NME that they craved, and was their due.

Since moving to London, Moore has been, as it were, at the vanguard of the avant-garde, constantly busy, whether playing at the Barbican's This Is Not This Heat event, or presenting his own work Galaxies, for experimental 12-string guitar ensemble. He has played countless events in the UK and Europe alongside everyone from Can's Irmin Schmidt to free improvisers John Russell, Evan Parker and Mats Gustafsson. He insists on equal billing with lesser-known names, and makes a point of not going on first or last, respectful of the calibre of his fellow artists, which isn't always matched by their box office appeal.

Such is the scope of his work that, despite being a guitarist, like Jimi Hendrix, he can be counted as an "honorary" electronic musician, concerned with sound fields rather than fretboard warfare. Traditionally, the guitar and electronics have been at odds with each other, which perhaps accounts for the guitar synthesiser never catching on. One is about virtuosity, ostentatious, some would say gendered displays of physical wrangling, sometimes hidebound by ritual clichés; the other is about the conceptual approach, the organisation of sound. Moore has found a way of reconciling these differences.

"I like using the guitar as an electronic music instrument," says Moore, citing as a further example the tabletop players Keith Rowe, playing on his instrument as if it were a keyboard. "Sonny Sharrock used to say he wanted his guitar to sound like Pharoah Sanders' saxophone, Billie Holiday wanted to sound like Lester Young's tenor sax. I love making my guitar work in the context of electronic music, using the electronics of it."

Or, as Moore told me on a previous occasion, "to me it's all about a conversation between traditional guitar playing in rock 'n' roll and the guitar as an electronic music machine. I want to create sounds, noises. Some people who play like that use lots of pedals, but me, I don't want to hear pedals. Even electronic music with keyboards, I want to hear who the person is rather than pure machine music."

As for the challenge of bringing the electric guitar to the work of Ferrari, Moore says, "There's a dialogue in his scores between performer and composer, which is at once liberating, but also a sense of regard to the structures of the composition. For me to present an electric guitar into someone's pieces, well, it's a challenge, but I don't want to insult the piece."

In a sense, Ferrari's field recordings made him a voyeur of sorts. Works such as 'Les Anecdotes' are almost (if not quite) the equivalent of street photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, offering a vivid sense of the visual through subtly treated audio recordings, like postcards from his travels. And, like Cartier-Bresson, there were doubtless times when this stranger with his handheld equipment must have been disconcerting.

"There's a great moment in one of the documentaries featuring Luc when he's going around with headphones and mic and he's at the zoo," says Moore. "And there's an older gentleman, standing beside him, looking at this gear. He wonders what he's doing there, if he's eavesdropping; and he says, 'Oh don't worry about me, it's the machines I'm trying to listen to.'"

There is a lightness about Ferrari, a pleasure, as well as an underlying seriousness, which makes him a good point of entry for those wishing to dip into the waters of musique concrète. His sampling and collage methods are still commonplace in contemporary pop and R&B today.

"Hip hop was the first mainstream success for experimental music," says Moore. "I used to have these conversations with Public Enemy when we were recording alongside them in the studio. Sonic Youth were coming from this privileged cultural situation where for us to be cool was to be underground, it was to be part of a popular format – but for a disenfranchised culture, the agenda was to be cool by succeeding in the mainstream."

"There was a lot of groupthink with Public Enemy, there were always a lot of people around when they were recording. It's like with singing, we'd always want to seclude ourselves a bit, because it's embarrassing. They'd have everyone in there, eating, watching TV, yelling – Ice Cube was there visiting, and in the middle of it is Chuck D on the headphones, writing."

Moore's upcoming schedule is typically mixed. His most recent album with the Thurston Moore Group, 'Rock 'n' Roll Consciousness', featuring Sonic Youth drummer Steve Shelley and My Bloody Valentine's Debbie Googe, saw him in more regular rock mode, which thankfully he has never lost his love or enthusiasm for. He continues to promote that, as well as teaching music at the Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen, and a writing course in Colorado.

At the time of writing, he's just teamed up with an east London ensemble, the Ever Present Orchestra, also including John Tilbury and Oren Ambarchi, to play works by the American composer Alvin Lucier. Lucier will also be performing a live version of his best-known work, 'I Am Sitting In A Room', in which he reads a piece of text which is recorded, then re-recorded sequentially, each version becoming dominated by the resonances of the original words, which fade away with each successive playback. It's of a piece with Moore's abiding and enduring love of "drones, wonderful drones".

**For more, visit [thurstonmoore.com](http://thurstonmoore.com). 'Luc Ferrari – Complete Works' is published by Ecstatic Peace Library. See [ecstaticpeacelibrary.net](http://ecstaticpeacelibrary.net) for details**