

## Hail the Happy Accident: An Interview with Mike Cooper

Grayson Cooke

[Mike Cooper](#) is a consummate musician and improviser—an eclectic artist described by Room40's Lawrence English as "post-everything." English-born and with roots in acoustic country blues in the 1960s, Mike now presides over a wide range of projects and practices, from experiments with Greek Rembetika to soundscape recordings in Bangkok and live music for silent films. Linking all of these explorations is his instrument setup of choice: a 1930s National Resophonic guitar hooked up to a slew of effects processors, live-loopers, and samplers. In addition to being a sound artist, Mike is a music journalist and video maker. He is also a collector of Hawaiian shirts, and something of a magnet for Pacific kitsch.

I have been lucky enough to work with Mike on a number of collaborations since 2008. When I was teaching digital media at the Bundaberg campus of CQU, in sub-tropical Queensland, Mike would come through every year touring his "Live Music for Silent Films" project. Given Mike's love of the South Pacific, surf culture, and Hawaiian shirts, and my own explorations of the tropical aesthetic, in 2008 I proposed that we do a collaboration, a live audio-visual improvisation around the theme of "Tropica Exotica." I cobbled together a motley collection of clips culled from 1970s surf films, undersea docs and South Pacific romance films, and we projected our show outdoors in the car-park behind the local art gallery. Since then we have worked together on a number of occasions, playing shows in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Italy.

In this interview, my aim is to tease out Mike's approach to improvisation, and especially improvisation with digital tools, and in collaboration with visual artists. As a visualist, my practice is very much driven by digital technologies, by software and hardware and the possibilities—and difficulties—such equipment provides. Because my work is audio-visual, and is frequently produced in collaboration, I am also always in dialogue with sound artists, and with sound as such, and have therefore evolved a practice of live visuals that is very much focused on how my visuals relate to the sound being produced. With this interview, my aim is to flip this around and find out how a sound artist approaches working with visualists.

This interview was conducted over email in November, 2010.

**Grayson:** In what ways (i.e., rehearsal, material-gathering/editing) do you prepare for a performance? Or does it depend on the performance/collaboration how and if you prepare?

**Mike:** I don't rehearse as such unless I'm forced to, and even then I'm a half-hearted rehearser who attempts to forget everything the moment we start—not hard at my age. I think preparing is a better word, as you suggest. I often go weeks, if there are no public performance commitments, without touching a musical instrument, but I am always listening to and thinking about music, or engaged in another art activity.

Preparation for performance depends on the situation I am about to engage with. If it's a solo performance I don't do anything in particular immediately before a concert or event. I have been preparing for that all my life. It is an ongoing thing. I actually avoid even thinking about it if I can because the moment I start playing the event takes over and any plans I might have had are hopefully forgotten or lost. In a collaboration it depends on what it is. If it's a musical one, again, I might consider what instrument I am going to be engaging with and decide what guitar (e.g. acoustic or electric) to take with me, or consider the number of people that I will be playing with, and any effects that I might leave behind or not. Whether to be amplified or not is also a consideration.

I have more than one "area" or "direction" that I work with. I play acoustic and electric instrumental music; I sing and play acoustic and electric songs; I play live music to accompany silent films, both old and new; and I play live music for live film and video—with you for instance. So, each of those present different parameters to consider. With each of those "genres" I usually adopt a different approach which can get broken down into sub-genres even. For instance, a silent film will suggest certain ideas depending on things like where it is set. I take that into consideration when thinking about a live score. The film's form will often suggest a form for the music; if it is highly structured in terms of editing/montage and story, or if it is an open-ended film, I will approach the score accordingly.

I often make "scores" for myself with films but they are very open to interpretation, and they are often written notes (non-musical) or graphics. I sometimes work with other musicians on live music for silent films and I make scores which are open to improvisation. I rarely write notated music for these events. I often use pre-recorded events such as field recordings. In the situation where I work with Trystero System (see below) I come with pre-recorded rhythm tracks, but I digitally process and re-sample them live so that each time they are different. In fact, I try to subvert them as much as possible from being anything you could actually dance to, even though most of them start out as drum & bass dance tracks.

I use a lot of live sampling of my own playing in a performance but my sampling units have the capacity to play out-of-sync loops, which is one of my main tools in constructing my pieces. I suppose in a way you could say I prepare for a piece by choosing to buy and use certain equipment. I have avoided using computers for live performance, for instance. Getting to know the equipment is a preparation I indulge in but it is not something I spend a lot of time over. I explore a lot of avenues when I am actually performing and I am always prepared to welcome the unexpected into a piece.

**Grayson:** What does the “live” in “live performance” mean to you? What do you think is its value, to yourself, but also for the audience?

**Mike:** In my opinion, live performance of anything artistic is always better, as an experience, than a mediated one, especially when it is an improvised performance of anything, even cinema. This has something to do with the social event and its capacity to shape the work. Elliott Sharp, a guitarist friend, calls it socio-acoustics when he thinks about it as a musical event. The socio-acoustics can define the whole event. I avoid recording in studios as much as I can because I think my best music happens at live concerts and so I try and record live as much as possible these days – even in group situations. I think a lot of time and money is wasted on making music in studios where musicians get bogged down with sound quality instead of musical quality. Of course, there is music which can only be made in studios but that’s not my concern in life. I also think the value of seeing and hearing live art/music/video is invaluable to any artist especially young students. I learnt to play watching and listening to other people make music and art live. You get the sense of a community which you might like to join for a start. Sitting at home and learning from the computer screen has its benefits but the moment you step outside all that will change and that screen will not prepare you for the adrenalin and how to channel that or deal with it.

**Grayson:** What value do you place on improvisation in live performance?

**Mike:** For me improvisation is what I do—full stop. I am not interested in anything else. Even if, as I sometimes do, I am singing folk or pop songs, I will improvise, using them as a basis for my improvisation. Improvisation is the reason to play music as far as I am concerned. Let’s define my improvisation first though. When some musicians speak of improvisation it is usually spoken about in terms of improvising using melodic scales or harmonic structures, which is not what I do. At least, that’s not my primary indulgence. I improvise using timbre, textural elements, and formal considerations. Instant composition is the way I would describe it (not an original description). Self-organization in public. No nets, just let go.

**Grayson:** What are your artistic or aesthetic concerns when improvising, solo or collaboratively? What are the guiding principles of your work in this context, or, what are you trying to achieve or produce for an audience?

**Mike:** In a performance my main interest is to involve the audience in an experience. I’m not really interested in concepts. This might be seen as old fashioned at the moment but just wait a while!

Improvising solo is a different thing altogether than improvising as a collaboration, although the object might be the same, which is to come up with something interesting, cohesive, and coherent. To achieve it in a collaboration requires a lot of listening to the other person or people. Solo, you don’t have that to deal with. Instead, I try for a state of mind, one where I am detached from the situation as much as possible yet very much in the moment, and at the same time trying to observe the whole “composition” as it unfolds. One of my fellow improvisers of music is the guitarist Elliott Sharp and he advises “try to be in public what you would be at home and vice versa”—I think that’s what I try to achieve. That might sound selfish but the point is to try and get the audience into this state as well. Give up your expectations.

**Grayson:** In what ways do the capacities of digital media contribute to your practice as a performer?

**Mike:** I use a lot of live sampling in my performances. All of that is achieved with digital equipment these days. I should qualify here that I sample my own live playing not other people’s. The samples are made as I play them, “on-the-fly,” as they say. In terms of digital hardware, I use a Zoom Track sampler and a Kaos Pad. They don’t make the Zoom any more, which is a great pity. It was only on the market for a couple of years until it was phased out, so I am always looking for second-hand ones. The reason it was phased out, I suspect, is that it requires the performer to have a free hand to operate it, and as you know, most musicians use both hands to play. I am able to overcome that problem due to the nature of my playing technique and the fact that I play lap steel guitar or table top guitar (in other words it is laid horizontally on a table); I don’t have to hold it, for a start. Another feature of the Zoom Sample Track that I like is that you can play the loops that you make out of sync with one another. A lot of samplers automatically sync them (Jam Man for instance). Out of sync/out of phase interests me.

My other piece of equipment is a Kaos Pad sampler/multi effects unit, which has a touch-sensitive screen. Both of these units are linked together. Both of the units have the capability to create loops, reverse them, and pitch-shift them. The Kaos Pad only makes one loop at a time, which I can then transfer to the Zoom. The Zoom has the capacity to store 24 loops for playback but I have never used that many, ever. On the Zoom you can apply a variety of built-in effects to the stored loops. These two units, along with a Boss Delay/Pitch Shifter pedal, are my digital equipment and have shaped my music for the past six or seven years. I like their tactile qualities, simplicity and speed as much as anything they do. I don't have to think too much or get involved in complex visual chains and decision-making as I would have with a computer. Also, they don't crash!

Digital media in terms of visuals also plays a part in my art. I am a film and video maker as well as musician and collaborate with other film and video makers. Only recently have I started using digital media to record and edit music. I am a pretty lo-fi artist: in fact I like to think of myself as a "post digital primitivist." I made Super 8 films until quite recently and might again in the future. I also recorded on four-track cassette and mini-disc until recently. I made maybe more than a dozen CDs using those formats. I upgraded to a MacBook with Garage Band and a Zoom portable digital recorder recently. That's my "digital media" for recording. I am able to record live concerts with the Zoom as I did with my mini-disc.

For my visual/film/video work I started out making video with an extremely cheap 2.9 megapixel video camera. It was a digital version of Super 8 film, really. Extremely lo-fi. I made about ten short video films with that camera, exploiting its limitations; a lot of those films are on [my Youtube site](#). Eventually it failed and I was forced to buy another. Finances always determine what comes next, as I am a self-financing artist, and I discovered the Sanyo Exacti series of video cameras, which are cheap but extremely high quality—9.1 megapixels—which cost me \$300AUD. They make one now for around \$500 which is HD—amazing quality and a very small discreet camera.

The thing is, to never let yourself be limited by your equipment. "Make the most of what you have" is my motto. Lee "Scratch" Perry is my hero in this matter. He made some of the most amazing reggae records and practically invented dub with a very limited four-track recorder and a basic mixing desk.

Super 8 film was/is labour intensive. With digital video I am able to make a 40-minute video movie in a fraction of the time and cost it would take me to make a 40-minute Super 8 film with much more attention to detail, and of course I can manipulate the images. I am fairly new to digital editing of visuals and have yet to discover what I can really do with it, although I know what I want to do and I'm looking forward to discovering where it will take me and where I can take it. I enjoy trying to subvert it all the time. I have yet to get past the stock effects of digital-visual manipulation though. With sound I don't have as much of a problem with it I think because I don't use a computer to generate my sounds or manipulate them. My music is electro-acoustic—I use a lot of acoustic sound and sound sources.

**Grayson:** Given you use digital media tools, with capacities for looping and layering sounds, would you say you are "composing live" or "improvising" or somewhere in between? Why?

**Mike:** I would say I am involved in "instant live composition which is improvised" most of the time. That has nothing to do with the capacity of my equipment though; I proceeded this way long before I got into looping and layering. As for why, well, as I said earlier, I see improvisation as the heart and soul of any art. Even written notated composition starts out (for the most part) as an improvisation.

You've asked me about looping though. Why loop? Was that a question? I have an answer if it was. About fifteen years ago in Canada I met Steve Feld at a jazz Festival. At the time I had no idea who he was or what he did. He was playing trombone in a trio on that festival, but his "day job," so to speak, was as a musicologist/anthropologist, and he gave me a cassette tape of his recording entitled "Voices Of The Rainforest." These were recordings he had made in Papua New Guinea not only of the forest, but of the Kaluli people—with whom he had lived for fifteen years—and their "place" in the soundscape of the Papuan rainforest, and how they related to it and how it shaped their music. If you live in the temperate zones of the earth and have never been to a tropical rain forest, it is hard to imagine how dense the soundscape is, especially at night. It is tangible at times. It pulses with cross rhythms of insects and bird calls, frogs, and animal sounds. The Kaluli actually depend on this type of soundscape to make their music. They join in, and it is their backing track so to speak (I should note this is a very shallow and narrow appreciation of Kaluli art and aesthetics, and I would advise reading and listening to any of Steve's books and records for an in-depth understanding not only of this but many other aspects of their culture that are worth knowing). They live in a multi-layered and out-of-sync series of looping sounds—pulsing, beating, breathing, bird and insect sounds, water, voices close and distant with the natural reverberation of the forest, high and low in space. I read a lot of Steve Feld's work and communicated with him, and we became friends. I looked for a way to emulate that kind of ambience live—even using field recordings made on some of my trips around the Pacific Ocean and South East Asia. Most looping machines will sync everything up for you but that is not what I wanted. Life wasn't like that, as I had understood; life is out-of-sync layers. In-sync loops and "on the beat sound" became abhorrent to me.

**Grayson:** How often do you work collaboratively with visualists, and what is the nature of these collaborations?

**Mike:** You mean visual artists, I think? As often as they ask me. I have a couple of regular collaborators, other than yourself. One is Greg Pope, who is English but lives in Norway. We go back a long way to when he was in a punk band called the "A1 Vegetables" in my hometown in the UK. He is quite a lot younger than me, maybe twenty years. That band, and others, asked me to collaborate with them on occasions as a guitarist in the early '80s. They needed the "noise." Greg moved on, got interested in experimental film and joined the London Film Makers Collective, eventually becoming one of the projectionists at the Lux Cinema in London, which was the London Film Makers Collective's own cinema, since closed down. Greg was making experimental films and involved with expanded cinema. We both moved away and lost touch with each other for several years, but have recently been re-united as artistic collaborators. We did a performance at the Rotterdam Film Festival last year. As well as making short films on various subjects, he is also interested in live manipulation of film as a performance. It is very analogue and not the least digital so I won't elaborate on it except to say that my role is to process the live sound of his projectors and tools with which he distresses film as it passes through the projectors. He is a "light manipulator."

Another analog film-maker I have worked with quite a lot in Australia and in New Zealand is Louise Curham, who currently lives in Canberra. Louise works mainly with Super 8 film and is interested in hand painting, collage and self-processing of the film. She has refined her art to the point where it has a musicality all of its own.

Then there is my "Live Music for Silent Films" project, which has been a fifteen-year project where I have presented a new score/improvised sound track for a silent film every year at the Brunswick Music Festival in Melbourne. I see this as a collaboration, even though most of the makers of the films are no longer here in person. I have made music for more than twenty silent (and some sound) films in that time.

**Grayson:** In what way is improvising with a visualist, live, different from improvising with other musicians? And how is it different from improvising to a film?

**Mike:** Improvising with other musicians entails a lot of listening, while I can't say that improvising with a visual artist or live video/film maker entails a lot of watching on my part, to be honest about it. I am a man of many parts, musically. In the words of the Greek poet Archilochus, "the fox knows many things; the hedgehog one great thing"—I am a fox. I have never really thrown anything away in terms of musical techniques or ideas, no matter how far I have strayed from my original roots—and it seems pretty far to some people! But I am able to come up with something for most occasions, is what I am saying. I think I have a talent or intuition to be able to make a useful statement in most situations.

When working with film-makers or visual artists I usually try not to get too involved with what they have done but try to access the ambience or general drift of what is going on with the work and then add something totally unexpected sometimes. What are we after: something you already knew, or a new experience after all?

**Grayson:** In your work with me [Grayson Cooke] as Trystero System, how do you relate or react to the visuals?

**Mike:** The work with you has so far been in two different directions, really. We decided on the Trystero System idea for your video work using Second Life. Trystero System has been an ongoing project of mine since the mid-80s. The idea was it would always be a duo—me and another musician or performer. My role would be to provide beats or rhythm tracks which would be processed or distorted making them pretty much non-dance pieces, and I would improvise over the top of these, or if it was with another musician we both would. Dance and rhythm beats change over time and I have tried to keep up with that through the years as the duo changed. Trystero System seemed perfect for work which drew on Second Life for its visual content source. I use pre-recorded drum & bass tracks which I process live and play over. This Second Life work seems to have fallen into a groove which I am happy to pursue. You can view a clip [here](#).

When working with your other audio-reactive generative video work, I just improvise and usually drop the rhythm tracks. I don't actually react to the visuals; the visuals react to me in that situation. I don't watch the work of my other film-maker collaborators much either. Maybe we share a socio-acoustic/visual space when performing live? This might sound odd to some people, but remember (and I do often) that Merce Cunningham choreographed his dance pieces completely independently of John Cage's music. I share their work aesthetic. Following up the Merce Cunningham point of view, he was probably as interested in the unknown destination as I am. Where are we going? Wait and we will all see. The other principle I have always believed in is the sum of two opposites will lead you again to unexpected places if you let it. Beware the well-trodden path. That's my dynamic. Welcome the happy accident.