

Control This!: An Interview with Fresh Kils

ICASP Outreach Project (Sept 2012)



Control This! was an outreach project by ICASP in collaboration with Immigrant Family Services in September of 2012. The goal of the project was to explore ways in which youth might learn to create improvised music using digital tools, particularly the MPC 500 and MPC 1000. With the assistance of Karen Kew, ICASP Postdoctoral Fellow Mark V. Campbell explored the MPC with 5 youth over the course of one month. The expertise of Controllerist Fresh Kils was brought in to enhance the final workshop. To learn more about the **Control This!** project check out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zkv3U2LO3h8&list=PLF2B4285403EBB8E0&index=7>

"Once you can internalize the gear, and master your interface, then it becomes jazz. The freedom of improvisation only comes from a mastery of your instrument."
-Fresh Kils

Mark V. Campbell x Fresh Kils interview



Photo Credit: Karen Kew from Immigrant Services in Guelph

Mark V. Campbell: How do you define or explain what it is you do? Having a profound love for your art, I can easily appreciate what you do, but for the layperson how would you convey your style?

Fresh Kils: I'd have to say that one of my main *modus operandi* is trying to bring the live element to the beats, to present the music beyond its component parts; beats & rhymes. A lot of hip-hop sounds compartmentalized, with the beats & rhymes occupying their own space, and not really interacting. I try to bring a holistic approach to the music, specifically through the MPC. Also, I try to bring the fun. I find hip-hop emcees and DJs tend to take themselves too serious, and I like to be myself on stage; a goofy, nerdy white kid from Canada. [laughs]

MVC: When did you first hear of or see controllerist innovations? And what did it involve?

FK: I think my first exposure to it was seeing Jel from Anitcon. What really sets Jel apart, and what he impresses upon me most, is that although he's got insane technical

skills, nothing is done at the expense of the music. He's not masturbating on those beat machines, he's making incredible music. Technical skills are nothing without vision, in any form. There's dudes who can flow like no one else on the planet, but can't put a song together. Controllerism involves creating and using new ways to control/create music. One could say that turntables are a type of controller, a way to interface the music, same way a guitar is. "Controllerism" is the innovation and utilization of new interfaces.

MVC: In your sonic creations is the goal to create a track for your audience or is it more like the creation of sonic beauty simply for the sake of art?

FK: The creative process is an exploration essentially, and it's difficult to hold lofty ideas in your head while on that journey. I'm an engineer, so my process is definitely guided by the desire to create "sonic beauty," especially from a technical point of view. A lot of the time one will have much narrower, or practical guidelines. Like my routines, for example, were designed specifically to wow crowds and win battles. So they obey certain rules of that format. Other times it's trying to convey a particular emotion for an artist.

MVC: What are the skill sets one needs to get into controllerism? Do you think there are some skill sets similar to analogue music creation, like say jazz?

FK: I think the most important skill sets are work ethic, and a tolerance for repetition and practice. [laughs] It's like learning an instrument that's never existed before. And it goes hand in hand with a creative approach to the interface. You essentially are building your own instrument, and then trying to master it. I do things with the MPC that it's not really meant to do, and I had to create my own approach to it, all the while keeping the end result in your mind's eye. Once you can internalize the gear, and master your interface, then it becomes jazz. The freedom of improvisation only comes from a mastery of your instrument.

MVC: When you perform or compete how much of your routine involves improvisation? Is improvising in a live show something valued by the digital music artist? Is the risk worth the reward?

FK: A lot of my routines are quite set in stone, with small

spots for improve, mostly because of how complex they are, and my reliance on pre-sequencing certain parts. The Funky Drummer routine, and parts of the Transformers routine for example, are improvised, because I'm hitting every sound you hear. For me the best-improvised moments come between me and an emcee. It's harder to improvise alone, and when there's someone else's creative energy, and the crowd, to feed off. That's when the music can become greater than the sum of its parts.

MVC: Why do you think we are seeing an increased interest in the types of digital innovations such as controllerism, remixing and mash-ups?

FK: Obviously we're in a digital age, where we constantly crave new gadgetry, but I think it's also about artists looking for innovative ways to express themselves. For DJs, mash-ups represent new ways to deliver classic ideas and songs. Why play Missy Elliott and Nirvana separately when you can mash them together? The power of that on a dance floor is undeniable. It's also an incredible way to show the musical connections that all genres have. It's been said that there have been no new musical ideas since Beethoven, and if that's true, then we have to concede that it's the formats, textures, and instrumentation that have defined musical innovation. If we've essentially been playing the same chord progressions and songs this whole time, then the digital and technological innovations are what define, and drive the music forward.

MVC: How would you respond to the musical purists that suggest digital music is not music?

FK: I don't see the distinction between them. I was in Nashville once listening in on a panel with a famous country music engineer. He was speaking to a room full of old school Brill Building songwriters and purists. And he was asked about what he thought about sampling, DJ and mp3 culture. And he said that when he makes records, he goes for microphones and instruments, because he wants to make records the way they used to sound. And I thought to myself, it's funny that he's trying to distinguish what he does from what I do, by stating the exact same reason I do what I do. Why do you think people sample Motown records, old rock records, soul, etc? Because they want to make records that sound like those old ones. The modus is exactly the same, it's just the output that's different, but then when you take into account the whole Beethoven argument, then

it's all the same again. [laughs]

MVC: What would you say is the best way to teach young people controllerist skills? Is it experimentation, joining a community of similar artists or direct instruction?

FK: YouTube is the best way not just to get familiar with it, but to learn as well. There are literally thousands of "green content" videos out there with producers demonstrating what they do and how. I think that DJing needs to be part of the early process, because that gets you thinking about tempos, styles, and sounds. And obviously hands on experimentation is key. A community of artists will always drive each other forward, which goes back to the work ethic I was talking about. That's the biggest hump, because there's no shortcut really to mastering anything.

MVC: What do you see as the future of controllerism in Canada and in an international context?

FK: It's hard to speak about Canada as a separate entity sometimes, especially with the internet connecting all of us. There are some exciting Controllerists in Canada though; Peterproject, Memorecks, Supa83 to name a few. I think again though, it's important that we don't think of it as a separate culture. Controllerism is only as relevant as the music it helps achieve.

MVC: What does the future hold for Fresh Kils in terms of your artistic innovations?

FK: We're gonna see a new generation of routines, this time using more contemporary material, a more updated version of the first beat tape [www.freshkils.bandcamp.com]. I'll be integrating more instruments, like I did in the Double Dragon routine with the kaossilator solo.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Orc2S6_0zM0&feature=plcp]

Relic and I are starting our new project, and with the performance we'll be integrating some loop creation elements, vocal effects, and potentially guitar work. The project is called the 13th Floor, so keep your eyes peeled for that.

As well, Fester and I will be building a new Extremities live group to perform our new album, and the ReFresh EP,

which will feature Guilty Simpson, Skyzoo, Saukrates and others.

[<http://get.extremitiesmusic.com>]



Photo Credit: Karen Kew