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Walter Kitundu is an innovator of turntable-based musical instruments. He and his magnificent creations are featured in ALARM's twenty-fifth issue.

"Dare to be naive."

That is the advice of twentieth century inventor/philosopher/environmentalist/architect R. Buckminster Fuller. It helped him dream up innovations that de-conditioned the accepted modern thinking about cars, housing, ecology and a number of other societal issues. Where most people saw an implement or construct and considered it fait accompli, Fuller saw myriad elegant possibilities for a more harmonious design.

While his approach is more wheels of steel than wheels of the automobile, **Walter Kitundu** is Fuller's visionary kinsman. The 33-year old **Kitundu**, who calls the San Francisco Bay Area home, has spent the last 15 years re-imagining the turntable. Where most people see a tool perfectly acceptable for bringing sound out of a record, **Kitundu** sees potential for so many more interpretations.

But it wasn't until entering Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota in

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1991 that he discovered hip-hop, and through it, the turntable.

"It started off as a love of a hip-hop and being fascinated with scratching."

Theodore Livingstone forever changed the idea of turntable as musical instrument in 1975 when he "scratched" the needle across a record to momentarily appease his mother's calls for silence. **Kitundu's** revelation was far less accidental. After learning that a turntable could be played percussively if the volume was turned up, **Kitundu** methodically set out to explore other ways the unit could be manipulated for sound. If the stylus and cartridge are able to amplify a percussive strike, perhaps they could also amplify other kinds of vibrations, **Kitundu** reasoned.

"I put a peanut can over the cartridge and had the base touching the cartridge. When I hit the base with a chopstick, I expected it to just be a thud, like every other place on the turntable. But it was actually a tone of the can – TOOONG – and it was amplified. That's the moment that I realized that not only would it pick up percussive sounds, but the needle would amplify notes. That's when the possibility of attaching strings started out."



Kitundu performing with his kora.

"Later on I stretched the string on a piece of wood and brought it into contact with the needle. When I turned the turntable up, it was so sensitive you could even use it as a wind instrument. You could blow on the string and it would be amplified. You could hit it with chopsticks; you could play it with your fingers. That was a huge discovery for me. I made a whole bunch of those and called them stylophones because they resonated the stylus. Eventually I just started to build the strings in."

This combination of one of the world's oldest music making devices with one of its most advanced ignited a creative firestorm for **Kitundu**.

"I started to look at the world through the lens of the turntable. That's why I started building wind and ocean powered ones. I keep trying to figure out ways to have elements power records. I feel like there is a connection there for me. The thing about gadgetry is that we get so caught up in it we forget that we are working with sound. Everyone's got the latest greatest, but they're still dealing with the same fundamental principles that someone who's playing a drum in the countryside or someone who's playing a one-stringed violin is dealing with and that's sound, melody and rhythm. Using the turntable as a physical instrument is my way of linking the technology with the physical world and the physical properties of sound."

A musical outsider, **Kitundu** related the sounds he was developing on his stylophone not to momentary time of sheet music, but to the cosmic time that runs our planet. It struck him as odd that so many other people intellectually segregated the ancient sound making devices from the most modern ones. There was a disconnect, he felt, between the conception of technology and the natural world from which it had sprung. He set out to change that.

"Exploring that even further led me to think about the physical world and the natural world and wanting to link the technology of electronic music or new music to nature. I felt like those two things weren't mutually exclusive. To me, making a runoff rainwater-powered turntable that you have to wait for it to rain for the thing to start to playing music is a way to reassert not only that connection with nature, but a connection with time too."

"My notion is to go into the lava fields where eruptions might take place in the future and do recordings with storytellers and poets. Then make huge records, like 10-12 feet in diameter with these exaggerated grooves. Then take the negative molds of those and install them in the landscape."

Kitundu has developed several hi-fi systems to more clearly illustrate a relationship between electronic music and the world around it. Among those is an ongoing project in which the four natural elements of ancient Greece – water, wind, fire and earth – are harnessed to power turntables.

Other projects have included a pigeon-powered sound apparatus and a turntable glove, by which the wearer can play records using needles attached to the fingers. Still more **Kitundu** concepts, in various stages of development, seek to reconnect music with the environment that surrounds it. Beats may be made in a studio now but they started off with a person coaxing sounds out of whatever their environment provided.

One of his current project ideas involves making records from Icelandic volcanoes.

"My notion is to go into the lava fields where eruptions might take place in the future and do recordings with storytellers and poets. Then make huge records, like 10-12 feet in diameter with these exaggerated grooves. Then take the negative molds of those and install them in the landscape. If it's 5 days or 5 years or 200 years, whenever there is an eruption these sites would get inundated with lava and the lava would cast itself into the shape of the record. When everything cooled, you could excavate these big boulders and they would have the sound information in them. It would be part of the history of Iceland captured and reinterpreted by the island itself.

"Then put those boulders in a public place so people could come and hand-crank

them. You might not hear the words absolutely clearly because a lot of stuff has happened between the recording and the eruption and everything else. But you'd hear everything that happened – you'd hear the mineral content, the chemical composition of the lava, how fast it cooled, things that happened during its excavation. You might even actually hear some of the original sound, which would be amazing to be able to hear speaking off this big stone."



Kitundu's light-activated phonositar (in development).

For all the beauty and ingenious notions contained in his instruments, which include the stylophone's multi-stringed cousin the phonoharp, **Kitundu** makes sure to point out that he considers himself to be a "sound artist." These are not novelty items. They sound as beautiful as they look, as **Kitundu's** gigs with **Kronos Quartet**, **Crown City Rockers**, **Art Ensemble of Chicago**, **Matmos**, and others attest to. Douglas Ewart, the Chairman of the **Association for the Advancement for Creative Musicians in Chicago** has also been a big influence, putting him on a string on West Coast gigs.

"Every time he would come out to California, he would put me on the gig. Here I was on stage playing with **Leo Smith** and **James Newton** and these monsters of the musical world and I had this turntable with a stick and fishing line and they would turn to me and say, 'Solo!' I was completely in over my head. But nevertheless, he'd come out a year later and put me on the gig again."

Given the deftly-crafted eerie sinuousness of his music – think a more free-form **Kieran Hebden** – it is easy to forget that **Kitundu** has no formal musical training and that he must teach himself how to play every instrument he builds. However, he is just naïve enough to make it happen.

"I see a cello as a box with strings on it that at some point somebody refined. Then it became this instrument that you had to play in a certain way or you had to get lessons on. I'm a big fan of tradition, but I also don't think we should be bound by it. I disregard that and just focus on the thing as a sound-making object and try to see what it's capable of. With these phonoharps in particular, because they are new, I don't know what they're capable of. The more time I spend on them, the more I find out."

– Buck Austin

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