Baghdad Music Journal

A Soldier's Move toward Technology in Music

WILLIAM A. THOMPSON IV WITH **JEFFREY ALBERT**

ABSTRACT

The author was deployed to Iraq as a member of the U.S. Army National Guard in April 2004. He left his acoustic piano roots and embraced electronic music as a way to stay involved with music during his deployment. While deployed in Iraq, Thompson recorded and released a CD entitled *Baghdad Music Journal (BMJ)*. The soldier's recording was made and released while he was deployed to an active war zone and is a document of his experience. Describing his time in Iraq, he discusses how it has changed his musical practice.

I joined the Army National Guard in 1999 as a way to help fund my education at the University of New Orleans, where I studied jazz piano. In April 2004 my unit, the 256th Mechanized Infantry Brigade Combat Team, was officially deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. My job title in the army was that of a 97b or Counter Intelligence Agent. Although I have always been interested in military matters, the army lifestyle was about as contrary to that of a jazz musician and college student as possible. When I finally came to terms with the reality of my deployment, it was as if my life flashed before my eyes. I was a piano major at the University of New Orleans, and my instrument and music were my only obsessions; they were my life. I was a "purist," having no interest in playing any instrument other than acoustic piano. Although I owned a keyboard out of necessity, I detested it. I knew that there were few and probably no pianos in Iraq, at least none with which I might come into contact. I saw this as the potential death of my musical ambitions. It seemed too painful to go without my music obsession, so much so that I thought I might not be able to return to music if I left it. In the end, however, I found there was another way, which would inform my approach to music going forward, and even to this day. I embraced technology in music.

I do not recall many things that happened directly before deployment, such as how I became interested in making electronic music. I was listening to a lot of music in which computers played a large role, especially that of bands like Radiohead, Stereolab and Massive Attack. With my fattening active Army pay, I quickly purchased a PowerBook G4 with maxed-out RAM, a 40-GB iPod, a Griffin voice recorder mic made for attaching to an iPod, Reason 2.5, Logic Express, an Oxygen 8 MIDI controller keyboard and a device called a MIDISport that allowed a computer to communicate with a MIDI device via USB and without an audio interface. This was a significant move, considering that I had never owned a computer in my life. In fact I am sure that I was the first person in my family to buy a computer. I already had considerable training in computers in various fields, much of it from my Army training in Intel school after I enlisted in 1999. With this new gear, some books on digital music and pretty strong ambition, I had a new mission that was separate from, but dependent on, my deployment to Iraq (Fig. 1). Even before I left for Iraq, I had decided that I would produce music to reach an audience back home and elsewhere from the combat theater of operations, and I would act almost as a musical journalist, composing music that could give the listener a taste of one soldier's "boots-on-ground" experience in Iraq in 2004.

It was during my unit's pre-deployment period, a 6-month training period designed to take National Guard members and transform them into active-duty, combat-ready soldiers, that I began cutting my teeth on this new musical format. Even in this early stage, my focus on music and my new mission allowed me a certain type of escape. Soon all my free time at Fort Hood was taken up by composing music using Reason and a MIDI controller. I learned to love the synthesizer as an instrument in itself and no longer thought of it as an imitation of acoustic instruments, but rather as one with seemingly infinite possibilities. I wrote several pieces. Some I discarded as part of my learning experience, while others

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Fig. 1. Will Thompson en route to Iraq. (Photo © William A. Thompson IV)

would eventually become part of *Baghdad Music Journal*. At this point I had not yet conceived of a CD release. Instead, I decided during my last "pre-deployment" stage in Kuwait that this new music I was working on would best find an audience via the Internet and that I would begin building my own website once in Iraq.

After we were settled in at Camp Victory and getting into the routine of life there, music resurfaced in my daily life. For the first half of my tour I worked at the Brigade Interrogation Facility or BIF. Every day I would conduct between two and 12 interrogations along with my three-man team. Initially my unit might capture anyone encountered on a mission—most detainees were innocent of any crime or threat and were released. It was our job as interrogators to decide who walked and who got sent up the chain to the Division Interrogation Facility. My approach to interrogation did not fit the stereotype the general public applies to the word interrogation. Being "the nice guy" worked for me. I would sit in the 5 × 5 standalone room with a detainee and my interpreter and feed him fruit and cigarettes. When detainees were obviously innocent, I would usually ask questions about music, since I was interested, and the detainee would rather smoke with me than go back to his cell. It was around this time that I became fascinated with human speech in recorded audio samples and as an element of composition. I was aware that this had been done before by Steve Reich, as in *Different Trains,* as well as by others. I had no real field recording gear (Fig. 2) and somehow ended up using my classic "click wheel" 40-GB iPod with an attached third-party mic adaptor on the top. It was not the best-quality audio but it worked in my situation. I began recording often, not only speech (but never during interrogations) but also distant gunfire, humming power generator trailers and anything else that caught my ear. The most interesting recordings to me remained human speech.

A good example of my field recording from this time can be heard on the track entitled "Follow Our Orders." It is a composition based on a recorded conversation I had with an Iraqi man concerning his opinion of the war. The content of the conversation was less important than the idea that all sound, including the human voice, contains melody, rhythm and implied harmony. "Follow Our Orders" also contains a loop of Arabic speech repeated throughout the track. This sample was not recorded by me but was instead supplied to me by the U.S. Army on a CD on "How to Speak Arabic," which was full of commands useful to soldiers. One of these commands is "follow our orders" in Arabic.

I found myself in a whole new world of sound. Nightly after my work at the BIF was done, I escaped to a set of headphones and found amazing patterns in speech. It seemed to me that Arabic speech and Arabic music were very much alike in their microtonal content. At this point I was pretty far down the rabbit hole of Arabic music. It consumed much of my listening time, something that I could not have imagined before the war, as I had cared only for American music and almost exclusively jazz. Much of the resulting music I have composed, especially shortly after returning, is inspired by the music of the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular. Some of these influences include Oum Kalthoum, Assyrian pop music of the 1970s, Maqam and readings from the Koran. These influences found their way into *BMJ* live performances once I returned, on pieces such as "Assyrian Folk Song" and "Khala."

Whenever someone from one culture uses the cultural resources of another culture to make art, issues can arise, especially when there is a war involved. My use of Iraqi musical and sonic material in my music is intended to show respect for that culture. I do not feel that the music on the record is necessarily dark or derogatory; nor do I feel that all my experiences in Iraq were bad. I greatly value the relationships I developed with my fellow soldiers and also with a number of Iraqi people. My use of speech patterns, music or prayer calls is both my own artistic reaction to the sounds around me at that time and an acknowledgment of the respect and admiration I gained for many of the individual people I encountered.

During this time I also composed the album's first track, "Post Election News." I recorded an Iraqi radio broadcast of the news that President George W. Bush had been reelected.

Fig. 2. Thompson's barracks (home) studio while deployed in Iraq. (Photo © William A. Thompson IV)

This was recorded from a small Iraqi-made transistor radio. I took the news report, added some radio static and arranged it. I then transcribed the pitches in the Iraqi newsperson's voice and reproduced these pitches using software instruments in Logic and Reason. I still have no idea what the specific content of the Arabic speech is but I had strong feelings in regard to the election. (At the time, at least, I blamed Bush for my deployment and hoped another candidate would bring us home.) This is still probably my favorite track on *Baghdad Music Journal*.

Wars are political by nature, but in my experience, the soldiers fighting the war think less about the politics than one might imagine. I understand the making of this music, in that setting, to be a political act, but not an act of pushing a political agenda (I did not wish to use this music to put forward a specific agenda at that time). The listener should bring the political thought to the music. This music is not meant to be a grand manifesto on war but simply the result of one soldier's specific experience.

Before my initial deployment, I had a big going-away party at my apartment in New Orleans near the University of New Orleans on Pasture Avenue. One of my best friends, Matthew Golombisky, was filling up my computer hard drive with hours of great music during the party. All this music proved to be important to me; however, one thing in particular stood out. It was a recording he had made of himself practicing, and it was full of great ideas. With this recording I was able to collaborate, in a way, with my favorite bass player back home. "Golombisky" (track 4) is the result. Included in this track is one found sound, a recording of an odd-sounding Army bathroom air conditioner.

It was during the first half of my tour that I built a website to communicate with the world and home about my experience in Iraq. With the help of a tech-savvy friend and fellow soldier, along with a book I bought online, I managed to create a simple website. The site hosted mp3s as free downloads, explained the concept behind *Baghdad Music Journal* (still not imagined as a CD) and presented information regarding my personal history. At some point, through emails with a musical colleague and friend in Santa Fe, NM, named Carlos Santistevan, we embarked on a quest to make *Baghdad Music Journal* a CD, with the ambition to release the disc while I was still in country. Now my mission had more purpose than ever.

Approximately halfway through my deployment, some positions were shuffled around. Operation Iraqi Freedom was now called Operation Enduring Freedom. I was reassigned from the BIF at Camp Victory and joined two of my other home-unit buddies at a small Iraqi army base in the middle of Baghdad. We were working outside the wire and doing what Counter Intel Agents are really trained for: going out and meeting people, making connections and friends and acquiring useful information on a tactical and strategic level. Our three-man team was made up of some of the few Americans on the post. We wore modified uniforms with no names or rank insignias and grew large unkempt beards (Fig. 3). This was an exciting period for me. We were under very little command, seemingly, from higher-ups. We did our work very well and spent the down time as if we were home hanging with friends; however, instead of drinking beers at a local bar, we were sitting on the top of a 10-story building in the middle of Baghdad, laughing, while still very much aware of the war around us. Often from the rooftop we would hear small battles that we conjectured were Iraqi-on-Iraqi skirmishes, given the fact that we could only hear the small arms fire of AK-47s, and no M-16s, which would have alerted us to American presence. On certain occasions, these fights would be accompanied by the sound of prayer calls through loudspeakers. We imagined that these sounds of sung scripture were a signal for attack or perhaps a soundtrack for fighting.

I recorded sounds like these on many nights, and although they did not form a part of *BMJ*, I still use the samples during performance today. The samples I have from my time in Iraq are among my most prized possessions. They are sounds that are unique to my own experience. One particular sample might be my favorite of all. I recorded it while assigned to the Iraqi Army base. The event was a large outdoor public address made by the then–prime minister of Iraq. I recorded the whole event, but the part that grabbed me was the Iraqi Army band's performance of the Iraqi national anthem. Their performance is a good example of the state of the Iraqi Army at the time. These soldiers were the exact same soldiers, for the most part, who had once operated under Saddam Hussein. Their performance of probably their best-known tune sounded as though they had not played a note since 2003,

when the U.S. invaded Iraq. It seemed that they knew their parts but were terribly out of tune and time. The result was for me similar to the famous Charles Ives representation of two bands crossing paths in *Three Places in New England*. I cherish my recording of the Iraqi Army band. I used this sample in my most recent composition, *DD-214,* a sound installation I composed for New Orleans's citywide biennial art festival, Prospect.3+.

DD-214 draws its name from the nomenclature given to the Department of Defense document that is every servicemember's record of service. The sound piece *DD-214,* much like the document, chronicles war in hindsight and seeks to express the thoughts, conditions and inner lives of combat veterans of all wars. Similar to *Baghdad Music Journal,* it makes use of found sounds from my deployment. However, *DD-214* also includes recordings I made of interviews with other combat veterans. These samples, both from my deployment and from post-deployment interviews, serve as the themes of the five movements. The first of these themes centers on a recording I made of the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Healthcare System's automated telephone answering system. The melodic content is derived from speech samples from the VA director's voicemail address. The speech starts with the important but unpleasant reminder, "If you're having thoughts of harming yourself or others please hang up and dial 911." For this section I also recorded myself dialing the phone number given in the speech for a "suicide hotline." I then reproduced the pitches assigned to each number on the telephone keypad. The second movement centers on the previously mentioned recording of the Iraqi Army band and is preceded and followed by variations on the theme of the Iraqi national anthem recorded with piano, Hammond organ and various synthesizers. The next movement is an interview I recorded with a very old veteran who served under General Patton in World War II and who experienced war from the invasion of Normandy to the Battle of the Bulge. The fourth movement is a song I wrote with lyrics about dealing with war in hindsight paired with interviews I conducted of a Vietnam War veteran and a Iraqi War veteran. These interviews took place on Wall Street during the Occupy Wall Street movement. The fifth and final movement is composed of recordings of mosque prayer calls I collected during my tour of duty in Iraq. Due to their microtonal nature, these are some of the most difficult but beautiful vocal transcriptions I have undertaken. *DD-214* premiered on 25 October 2014 as a sound installation at Tulane University in New Orleans as a part of Prospect.3+ [1]. This piece is also now available online at <wativ.tumblr.com>.

There is one track on *BMJ* that best represents my experience in Iraq. The piece, entitled *Pasture Peace*, is one that I began writing with much excitement before I knew I would be sent to war and continued to write until far into my time in country. The work starts with a very hopeful movement but carries a certain feeling that something is about to change. Things take a turn for the dark in the piece very soon after that, while still acknowledging with the occasional harmonic shift that all is not lost. In the final section the hopeful mood returns but with confidence and passion. All of these pieces from *Baghdad Music Journal* can be heard at <www.wativmusic.com>.

My experience In Iraq deeply changed me musically, especially regarding my relationship with electronics. Before I went to Iraq, I played acoustic piano exclusively. I can only speculate how much I might have embraced electronics had I not been deployed, but electronic music is now a significant part of my practice, stemming from my inquiry into the electronics field out of the necessity of my situation. Without this technology, I imagine that producing music in my wartime setting would have been impossible. Since my return to civilian life I have used laptop computers in performance and have added sampling and other electroacoustic practices to my regular means of artistic expression (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Thompson in battle gear in Baghdad. (Photo © William A. Thompson IV)

I did not see the making of this music as a coping mechanism for my deployment but rather as a way to stay involved in music-making through the tools that were available to me in the theater of war. It was also a way for me to be a sonic journalist and share through sound one soldier's experience in Iraq. I did not intend to make a specific political statement but instead let the listener bring his/her own political meaning to the music. What started as a way to enable me to keep making music during my deployment became an expansion of my artistic palette that is with me to this day. The result is significant in that it is something that

Fig. 4. Thompson performing with his electronic rig at the Mudlark in New Orleans, 2013. (Photo © William A. Thompson IV)

I believe has not been done before: recorded music (not a score) during combat; all the sounds were captured in that space and cannot be separated from my time there. The resulting music provides a view of a soldier's experience in a new and unique way.

I often answer the unanswerable question that all veterans are asked—"What was that like?"—with the response that it was the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. In reality I have found that the "best" and the "worst" are in essence the same thing. Through experience I have found that the wider my spectrum of perceived darkness is opened, the more the spectrum of light expands as well. As an artist I must draw from my experiences. I know my experiences as an artist-soldier are unique and for that, and for the ability to share them in a way through my music, I feel truly blessed.

Reference

1 <www.prospectneworleans.org/p3plus/>.

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