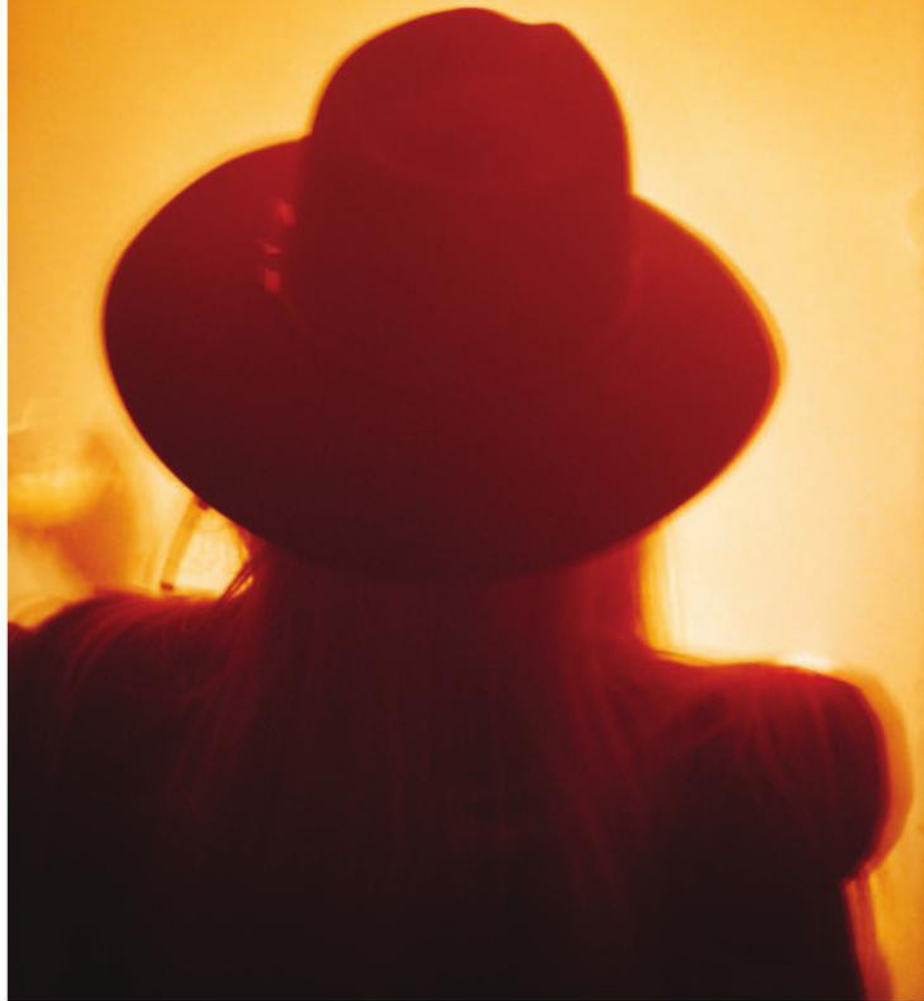


WIERD RECORDS

TEXT BY ETHAN SWAN / PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORG GATSAS



In December of 2008, Silk Flowers, the band I play with, received a *MySpace* message asking if we would perform at the weekly Wierd Party at Home Sweet Home, in lower Manhattan, NY. We were a new band, having played our first show just three months previous, and were thrilled by the attention. Without much background information or any expectations of the show, we accepted the invitation. That night at Wierd would prove to be one of our favorite shows ever, not just with this band but throughout our lives. 16 months later, I've attended the party countless times, seeing both Wierd mainstays like Martial Canterel, Epee Du Bois and Led Er Est, and "crossover" acts like Blank Dogs and Nite Jewel. Inspired by the extremely deliberate and supportive community built around the party, the following article draws upon the months of conversations I've had about Wierd with its founders, acolytes, fans and admirers.

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"A Smoke Filled Room" by Flesh Gracy Display

The healthy human eye can adjust to low light very rapidly, able to discern shape and form in near-darkness in a matter of three minutes. Within 30 minutes of darkness, vision adjusts to full sensitivity, even able to recognize high frequency colors (violet, blue, and green).

By contrast, the eye is incapable of adjusting to fog. Artificial fog in particular is designed to resist dissipation, and even the most basic consumer machines are capable of expelling 2,000 cubic feet in 60 seconds. On Wednesday nights, the Lower East Side bar Home Sweet Home is subject to 30 second blasts from an industrial fog machine every hour, guaranteeing that the dance floor is constantly submerged.

For many visitors to Home Sweet Home, the effect is frightening, limiting vision to about the same distance as their arms can reach. Finding the bathrooms is impossible without courage, and the low stage situated two-thirds of the way across the floor regularly spills people onto their knees. But for others, the fog provides a barrier, a cocoon of invisibility that facilitates the wildest, most intimate movement, liberating each dancer from any outsider's gaze.

This public isolation, a conceivably baffling, frightening, or counterintuitive potential, is for some the main reason to be there. Regular attendee and member of the band Led Er Est, Owen Stokes, is clear on this point: "I really dance a lot and feel totally alone, like no one's watching me, but also that I'm surrounded by other people who are willfully being alone." The feeling of being alone, but encircled by sympathetic individuals, is perhaps the best visualization of the kindness that Wierd Records has performed for the better part of the decade.

"A Beginning" by Xeno and Oaklander

Wierd was born, nameless and vaguely defined, at the beginning of the 2000s. This was a dizzyingly strange era for New York's nightlife. Beginning in 1996, with the *Limelight* ruined after the gruesome, sensational murder of a drug dealer by a club promoter, the 15-year reign of Manhattan's mega clubs began to falter. The *Tunnel* and *Twilo* soon followed the *Limelight*, both closing in 2001 after years of drug busts and pressure from Giuliani. The absence of these steady venues fragmented both the dance and electronic music scenes. The paranoia and unease of post-September 11 New York further complicated the politics of going out, as described by Cheyney Thompson, one of the founders of Wierd: "Night life in NYC after 9/11 seemed to demand a convulsive protocol. Everything we did at night had alienation and affectivity slathered over a festering lack." Into this lack, "ten or so" (in the estimation of Thompson) people began to meet regularly to listen to records, and actively resist alienation and affectivity.

The records that brought them together marked clear boundaries, chasing away non-believers. The group favored music that was dark, morose, rhythmic and violent. Their selections were drawn from the late 1970s and early 1980s, an era notable for new technologies in electronic instrumentation, extreme reactions against the record industry, and rampant negation of existing genres. The bands they played were not only making difficult, unpopular music, they were actively positioned in opposition to success, to popularity.

"Nobody was interested in it if they did hear it," explained party co-founder Pieter Schoolwerth, "and it was a great bond between us." He went on to clarify the source of this bond: "None of us felt anything akin with new music that was popular, or was acceptable to like. I always just felt totally alone. And I think when we all met, it wasn't just that we liked this music that we had in common; we also all identified with this notion of being discarded, or not relevant."

The bars they frequented, crowded and compact enough to prevent any respite from the DJ, determined that anyone spending more than a few minutes there had to have some tolerance for the music. To illustrate the sonic brutality at play, Sean McBride invoked two of the most grating and oblique bands of the past 30 years: "You could get away with playing *Nurse With Wound* or early *SPK*." Liz Wendelbo reinforced his statement: "It didn't have to be dance-driven or anything like that. There was no crowd to please."

The group rotated through a few neglected Brooklyn bars like *Ivy South* before settling on the *Southside Lounge* in 2003. By the spring of 2004, the party had coagulated into a weekly slot, every Tuesday from 11p.m. - 4a.m. The core group of DJs, including Gilles Le Guen, Glenn Maryansky, Schoolwerth, and Thompson had expanded, with McBride, Veronica Vasicka, and Liz Wendelbo all taking turns at the decks. Initially nameless, as the party evolved, it was given a title: "Weird." An apt, if simple description, the name was truly formed in 2005 when the vowels were reversed, purposefully misspelling the word: WIERD. Sufficiently awkward, elusive, and completely unforgettable, "Weird" distinguished the night each week, promising "dark synth, coldwave, and classic deathrock."

"The Lower Lifestyles" by A Vague Disquiet

On any given night, the *Southside Lounge* drew in an unpredictable and diverse cast of regulars. Located in the southern range of Williamsburg, the bar stood at the intersection of the Hasidic Jewish community, a cluster of artist studios, families that had lived there for generations, and the growing number of young professionals who liked the short commute to Manhattan. They all converged at the *Southside*. Pieter Schoolwerth summarized this collision in his 2006 eulogy to the *Southside Lounge*: "I'm still proud to say WIERD will always be the only party in North America and maybe the whole world where you can watch a Hassid making out with three teenagers while three off-duty cops high on blow are dancing to the first *Sombre Septembre 7*" at 4 a.m...."

"*Le nez rouge*," the A-side of *Sombre Septembre's* debut single, is an immensely melancholic, slow-motion tour through a lonely day. The band formed in 1986 in Belfort, France, a small town near the Swiss border, hundreds of miles from any metropolis. The band sang in French, a decision described by their countrymen *Opera Multi Steel* as "not good for French audiences, and very bad for English music fans." Although the single is readily available for non-licensed download these days on the Internet, and via fan videos on YouTube, in 2003 the only way to hear these songs was in the presence of the original single. And although the fan-base for this music was small, committed listeners began to find their way to Wierd to hear it. Anarexia, who today is a frequent DJ at Wierd, has been "into synth music since I



Mollie Gondi Wierd Guest



Owen Stokes

put on my first pair of heels." She remembers hearing about Wierd in these early days, even while living in Los Angeles. "When I moved to NY years ago, though," she remembers, "I kind of lost touch with my love of the music." This absence eventually became unbearable, and Anarexia found herself searching for the party, ultimately "going to Wierd, the club, almost every week since then." She wasn't the only one seeking out this music and arriving at Wierd. Shawn O'Sullivan, of the bands Led Er Est and Further Reductions, and a DJ since his teen years, remembers this attraction: "Going out to hear Ceramic Hello, to hear Twilight Ritual, to hear Martin Dupont in a club environment; at the time there was no place in New York where you could hear music like that at all."

"Tracking Shot" by Epee Du Bois

By this point the ten individuals who initially made up the body of Wierd had become the core group in an expanding community. Their extensive collections of rare and forgotten records fed the party, but their involvement began to take on a second facet. Beginning with Sean McBride's Moravagine (later renamed Martial Canterel), the members of this core group began to assemble vintage synthesizers and drum machines to create their own bands, crafting an expansive new development for this cold, electronic sound. By 2004, Cheney Thompson was performing as Epee Du Bois, McBride and Liz Wendelbo were collaborating as Xeno and Oaklander, and Thompson, McBride, and Wendelbo played together in Three to Forgotten.

McBride took the name Moravagine from the protagonist of Blaise Cendrars' eponymous novel, once describing the character as "a psychopath noble who travels the world helping to foment revolution whilst eviscerating little girls." This intersection of cruelty, splendor, and insurgency is especially well suited for the tone of his music. McBride's singing voice is mournful, clear, and a little distant, the voice of a dissatisfied observer. Surrounding this voice is an elaborate architecture of melody, rhythm lines like staircases and synth runs soaring overhead in impossible arches. The perceived obsolescence of the analogue synthesizer vanishes in the face of his craft, and the desperation of the music is a supremely vital force. McBride's songs are obviously informed by his vast knowledge of cold wave and electronic music, but they exist unmistakably in the present.

The divergence between McBride's Moravagine/Martial Canterel and the original minimal electronics bands begins with a shift in intent. As explained by McBride to *Skug Magazine*, "I think the chief difference between what we saw in many '80s performers, for the most part, was the synthesizer's function as a tool of future-making... the politics of advance technology played a central role for many groups, especially themes of artificial intelligence, cybernetics, robotics, and cryogenics. These days we are seeing more human and perhaps mundane expressions of day-to-day living—such as memories from a lost past, love betrayed, political tribulations..." McBride's "perhaps mundane" expressions of everyday life are expansive, dusty panoramas, interrupted with sudden sharp words or cartwheeling notes. Within them, the world is a terrain that engulfs the individual, perceiving him or her just enough to mock or scorn. But this fleeting attention is enough to stir resistance. With

a tone that's perhaps never existed before, the songs are pre-apocalyptic, giving off a warning, but leaving open the possibility of a different course.

A direct source of this attitude can be discerned through the context that birthed the music. Wendelbo cuts to the core of this context: "There is an overall, overarching discomfort in everyone. Everyone is uncomfortable, and the music is willfully uncomfortable somehow." By aligning personal emotion with the feel of the songs, she acknowledges their quotidian content, and asserts a lack of separation between the performer and the performed. But what is the impact of this relationship? McBride is clear on this point: "the fact that the music is uncomfortable is like two negatives creating some kind of positive." Just as the "discarded, not relevant" 1980s cold wave sounds inspired the Wierd community to assemble and shrug off their own sense of superfluity, the overarching discomfort that compelled Martial Canterel and his peers to create music became an inspiring, exciting force.

"The Unkept Area" by Led Er Est

Throughout 2005 and 2006, various forces within Wierd organized occasional concerts for this budding community, at art galleries, off nights at bars, and illegal lofts. But on a day-to-day basis, the growing number of Wierd live bands lacked a venue. The concurrent underground, thriving mostly in Williamsburg, tended away from analog synths, preferring instead the rising trend towards laptop music. "What we thought was really not interesting was all these laptop performances that were taking place," remembers Liz Wendelbo. "It didn't feel visceral, it felt sort of disembodied somehow."

Embracing this resistance, the Wierd artists descended further into their own shell, a process Wendelbo described as a simultaneous negation and self-empowerment: "Instead of going to that [laptop performances] and complaining about it, we decided to just not take part in it and do something new. But it did require some hibernation and shutting off from the whole thing for quite awhile." Planned or not, this hibernation came in the autumn of 2006 when the Southside Lounge, a casualty of Williamsburg's redevelopment, closed its doors, leaving Wierd without a home. The timing was inauspicious; within the same month the first release on Wierd Records emerged, *The Wierd Compilation*. A lavish, hand-numbered edition of 1000, the compilation presented 32 songs spread across three LPs and one 7". An accompanying book included photos of all of the bands, including New York mainstays like Martial Canterel, Three to Forgotten and Blacklist, and visiting comrades such as Opus Finis (Miami), Diako Diakoff (Los Angeles), and Echo West (Germany). As a document, its statement was resounding. Synth music, cold wave, and minimal electronic music are unmistakably alive. The proof was in these 15 bands, drawn from around the world, all actively producing music, performing live, and engaged with one another. Appearing at the exact moment that the physical musical object truly began to vanish from the world (i.e. the CD replaced by MP3), this immensely tangible object was an act of resistance in every sense, embracing its own outcast state.

A release party featuring performances by nine of the compilation's bands and DJs followed, but for half a year, Wierd returned to its nomadic existence. Occasional



Anarexia



Martial Canterel, live at Wierd, January 27, 2010

DJ nights in Manhattan or shows at a Brooklyn gallery maintained the momentum, but the party needed a home. In a March 2007 email to the Wierd mailing list, Pieter Schoolwerth lamented this absence: "For the past 6 months of our dormancy the WIERD has been suffering from lack of anyone to tell about all its as always astounding findings in the Coldwave world." Fortunately, this email also announced a new home for Wierd—Home Sweet Home, in downtown Manhattan.

"Guts on the Dancefloor" by Charlie Draheim

This basement bar offered a much different energy from the Southside Lounge. A disco ball, fog machine and spinning lights all create a party atmosphere, straying from the intense listenership of the Southside. Liz Wendelbo remembers that the change was immediate: "it became a very hedonistic party, which was basically geared around dancing more, and it moved from the sedentary to pretty full on." Couples and small furtive groups disappear into the row of locked-door bathrooms hidden at the back of the club. The flight of stairs leading to the front door gives the sensation of descending into something, a transition to a different world. Margaret Chardiet, of the bands Pharmakon and Throat, is literal in her description of this transition: "the lighting and the fog really makes it seem like you're on another planet sometimes." This spectacular play of elements not only changed the stakes of participation, it also created a new entry for the unconverted. "It became entertaining to people who were not privy to it," explained Wendelbo, "Whereas before it was kind of a closed circle."

This new crowd often wanders in, attempting to escape the dense, exclusive Lower East Side nightclubs. Turned away by doormen at Kush, or overwhelmed by the testosterone at 205, weekday parliers tentatively push through the door, drawn in by the music. "I think a ton of people end up there by accident," estimates Pieter Schoolwerth. "They kind of stumble in and they're like, 'what's this?' And those are the best people because they come up to me and are like, 'what is this music?' I of course get their email and send them CDs, because if they're asking, they'll come back."

This open, accepting attitude that welcomes anyone who wants to be there, has built a crowd as unpredictably strange and diverse as the Southside era. "The crowd is a weird mix of people," observed Shawn O'Sullivan. "Obviously you have hardline goths, occasionally you even get Albion or cybergoth people, with cyberboots and goggles and spiky hair. You get young NYU kids, Brooklyn kids, and old guard LES types. There's a lot of transies."

Asked to provide commonalities between these crowds, no one involved in the Wierd party is able to suggest a uniting thread. Georgette/Pre Op Trans, a doorperson and DJ at Wierd (who conflates the two in her alias, DJ DoorWhore), is in a rare position to see every person that comes through the door on a given night. Her best estimate as to the shared interest or identity of the crowd is, "I think most people—that I talk to, anyway—come to Wierd for the best night in the city. That's the common denominator." Cheney Thompson rejects the entire idea of commonalities. "I don't think Wierd was founded on mutual likes or dislikes, or any sort of aggregated super-taste." Or, in O'Sullivan's comparison of the old crowd versus the new: "There's

been talk about how it was sort of a haven for misfits in the early days and that was certainly true back when it was at the Southside Lounge. It was definitely a very strange crowd. It remains quite strange, but these days, it's sort of for everyone."

"Pathway Splits Apart" by Martial Canterel

"Everyone" arrived with their own sets of discomfort, their own needs for community, and their own desires for interaction. The music is at the center of this geometry, but the draw to it takes on drastically different forms. The abandon and thrill of dancing is a common attraction, yet just as common is a fixed appreciation of the sound. Ryan Woodhall, of the bands Yellow Tears and Throat, remembers his first time at Wierd: "I sat on the couch in front of the speakers almost the entire night, listening intently to Pieter spin some of the darkest dance music I had ever heard." Many, like Anarexia, find a source of joy in the music: "I've always been attracted to dark music. Most people say this kind of music is depressing or too macabre, but in all honesty this kind of music makes me happy!"

Others locate a vitality and directness in the music that approaches a political dimension: "Aesthetically, I found this music to fit the dark, fucked up spirit of the times far better than anything so-called 'contemporary,'" remarked Josh Strawn, of the band Blacklist. "Nobody could put on the news for an hour then toss on any of the touted big name indie bands and convince me that that music reflected the now." Even Georgette, who gave in to carnality when considering her favorite thing about Wierd—"the straight guys I make out with and suck off in the bathroom every week"—ultimately acknowledges the sounds: "I really do go to Wierd for the music." Still others are drawn to less tangible aspects of the party. Liz Wendelbo describes it as "a way to shield away from this culture that we couldn't relate to in Manhattan... it was a bunker mentality, shutting everything out." Elaborating on this idea, Wendelbo contextualized the party within the greater force of Manhattan: "We all have to remind ourselves that we live here in New York, one of the biggest centers of capitalism, and there's insane amounts of money being made here. Everything in this city—that is, the culture that is produced here—is all geared towards the market. Materialism is huge and capitalism is enormous: hyper capitalism, high velocity, things come in and out of transit, ultimate high speed. It was our wish to stop time into this capsule and just wait." This idea of waiting should not be misread as stasis. Within this capsule, growth occurs. Metamorphosis takes place at a natural, unobserved pace. The best illustration of this process was through the time and space provided for live performance at Home Sweet Home.

"There are Other Gates" by Carlos Giffoni

This focus on live performance marks another clear distinction from the original minimal electronics and synth music scenes. Many of the '80s bands were unable to realize their songs in a live context, like Bal Paré ("we didn't want to play with playback [backing tracks] so we decided not to play live"). Some artists were held back by the lack of support in their hometown, for example Eleven Pond: "Was there a mid-'80s cold wave community in Upstate New York? God no." Opera Multi Steel found some support in their immediate region, but were never able to travel outside



Weird Dancer



Wierd Guest



Epee Du Bois

of France: "We have curiously performed very few concerts. Most of them were performed in our region and some few others in Paris, but never abroad." Even contemporary synth bands have seen live performance as unnecessary. Ramiro Jeancarlo, of the bands Staccato du Mal and Opus Finis, explained his own thought process in this regard: "Music has always been an intimate experience and private matter. I never really saw the point in performing live for an audience that will either like, ignore, or dislike what you have to offer. Some artists do it to invite fans, for fun, some want to become stars, prove themselves, whatever. I never craved any of those things. I always made music for my own listening." Tellingly, after participating in early Wierd concerts, Jeancarlo discovered his own passion for live improvisation and began to incorporate performance into his practice. The relocation to Home Sweet Home allowed Wierd to focus on the clearly human experience of live performance. Offering both space and equipment that the Southside Lounge couldn't provide, this new location meant that each week a single band could perform at Wierd, breaking the DJ set in half. The party guarantees an engaged crowd, and the structure facilitates even the most elaborate setup. "Maintaining one band per night is a luxury," explained Led Er Est's Owen Stokes. "You have two hours if you want to sound check." Given the fickle nature of much of the analog gear that comes through the doors of Home Sweet Home, this amount of time is extremely helpful. By comparison, according to Shawn O'Sullivan, also of Led Er Est, "definitely the first few shows we played at real venues were sort of horrifying."

"Departures" by Staccato du Mal

Initially, Led Er Est had no intentions of performing live. Their home recordings, assembled onto a demo, were delivered to Veronica Vasicka for play on her East Village Radio show, Minimal Wave. "At that point we really weren't thinking of playing live," remembers Samuel Kklovenhoof, the third member of Led Er Est. "We were really just being recorded by our friend." But the request to play at Wierd changed their minds. Kklovenhoof continued, "I saw Martial Canterel play at London Paris West Nile [a DIY venue in Brooklyn] and it was an amazing show. Pieter came up to me and asked when are we going to play at Wierd... I was just like, yeah, we'll play." The band made their live debut at Home Sweet Home. Wierd also hosted their second show, before Led Er Est ventured out into the "horrifying" world of New York's live music scene. When Shawn O'Sullivan's other band, Further Reductions, prepared for their first show, they also chose to debut at Wierd. O'Sullivan's bandmate, Katie Rose, described the importance of the Wierd community for this performance: "It really helped to know that in the audience there were people who knew the precarious set up that we had, and the instruments that we were working with, and the fact that they are living, breathing synthesizers that take time to warm up and tune... not a lot of people understand what it's like to have this sort of set up." Kklovenhoof echoed her sentiments when describing Led Er Est's experiences playing at other venues: "Our set up time is really long, and a lot of times they [sound engineers] can get really pushy. That really just makes for us not having a good

time when we're actually playing." The credit for Wierd's positive environment is universally attributed to organizer Pieter Schoolwerth. "It makes every band that plays there feel special," explained O'Sullivan. "You get to sort of be in the spotlight for a minute. There's pretty big bands that have played there and there are really small bands. There's always a good crowd, and these smaller bands get to really be treated well instead of opening for the opener of a show at some shitty basement or something. They get treated with respect. Pieter's very good at that, at making new bands feel welcome and excited to be making music."

For his part, Schoolwerth is quick to divert the praise. "This is my way of contributing," he confesses. "I'm not Sean, I'm not a genius piano player, but I know how to make people have a good time. I think." Mark Solotroff, a 15+ friend of Schoolwerth's, and the creative force behind the bands Anatomy of Habit and Bloodyminded (to which Schoolwerth occasionally contributes), is much more direct in his explication of this role. "Pieter wants it to be right," he stated. "One thing that he and I really share is a need for the full package. When we go on tour with Bloodyminded, Pieter basically makes sure that under the most dire circumstance of playing some complete shit hole, suddenly he will have rummaged through a backroom and found some lights or something so that we can differentiate ourselves from the six other noise bands we're playing with."

It's a quality that's immediately apparent to all bands that have played at Wierd. Ramona Gonzalez, whose group Nite Jewel played "the best show we've ever had" at Wierd in the beginning of 2010, observed Schoolwerth's attention to detail: "Pieter's demeanor is pretty great. I appreciate that he takes the right things seriously: the vibe, the atmosphere, the décor. The environment is strict, including the DJ selections, so people must commit to a mood."

In fact, according to Schoolwerth, it's the live performance that continues to encourage his dedication. While the weekly party does a great service by providing bands with a regular venue to hone their craft (as in Liz Wendelbo's capsule), it also provides a forum for exploring new music and testing a critical tenet of Schoolwerth's philosophy—the invitation of the very human element of chance and uncertainty. When asked about the decision to book Silk Flowers, having seen the band only once and having never talked to any of us before, Schoolwerth was enthusiastic, affirmative: "That's what I usually do, that's the best." He went on to explain that "I get a huge turn on and excitement, like a kid, about putting on shows where I have no idea if it's going to work." This uncertainty connects to a bigger idea for Schoolwerth: "There's very little left in art and culture that has any sense of danger or potential failure. And failure, to me, is the ultimate thing... the best thing about putting on a band you've never seen before is they might not show up, they could suck, they could hate me, they could blow up the PA, they could start fights... that's what I live for, the danger and the potential failure in anything. That's what makes me go every week."

"Havoc Heap" by Opus Finis

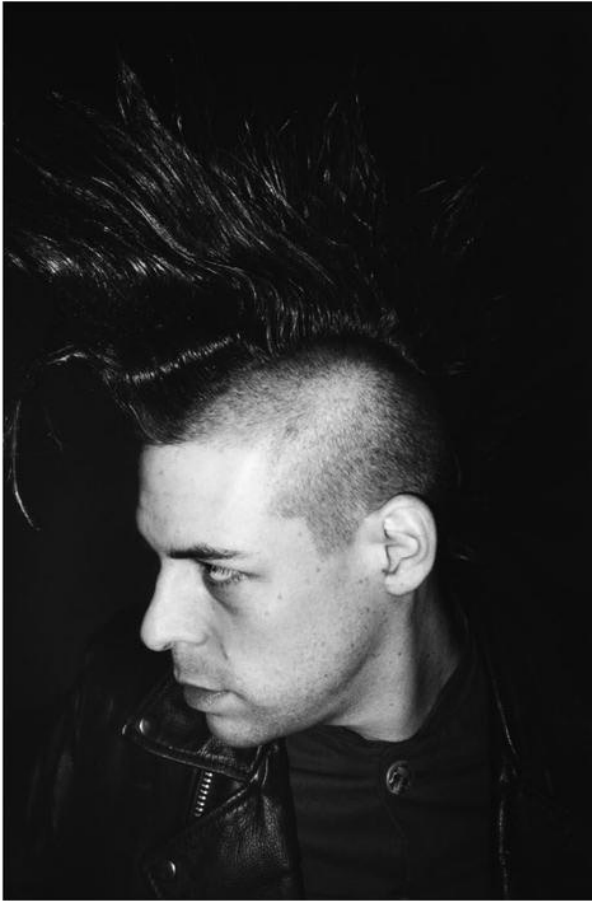
Josh Strawn has had similar revelations about this potential failure, and its



Georgette aka Pre Op Trans aka DJ DoorWhore



Wierd Ball



relationship to humanity: "I've had the pleasure of playing at Wierd with several different projects and several different instrumental setups ranging from the extremely organic music of Religious to Damn (harmonium, acoustic guitars, tribal percussion) to Blacklist (guitar, bass drums), to Creation Myth (vocals, analog synthesizer & tape loops, electronic & live percussion). No matter the setup, there's always a sense of exciting frailty to it." This "exciting frailty" is key, providing a link to the human being manipulating the gear. This is an idea that Strawn firmly asserts: "It's much less about the instrumentation—it's about the human being behind it... I'd almost elevate this to the cardinal principle of Wierd."

This correlates with the performance strategies of Xenos and Oaklander. Their live setup, comprising multiple keyboards, drum machines, and a sequencer, runs the risk of abstraction, of obscuring the human players. To resist this abstraction, the band insists on making everything visible, publicly playing out the process of the song. "What is important to me also is the idea of everything you play is generated by what is visible," explains Liz Wendelbo. "There's a diegesis involved in here. What you see is what you're hearing... it is very important that what you generate is visible." To that end, Xenos and Oaklander prefer to construct their songs onstage, rather than plotting out the sequencer parts in advance. Sean McBride described this process: "I'll make the step sequence in the interims [between songs] so the song is potentially audible before it's even played." Each movement of the song is recorded live into the sequencer during this part, playing out the individual building blocks one at a time until they've been assembled and are ready to trigger, one after another.

This insistence on making everything visible feeds back into Wierd's initial impetus to break away from the abstraction of computer-generated music. As McBride explained in his interview with *Skug*, "At the end of the '90s music had become quite disembodied; the widespread use of the computer/laptop as both a sound source and playback device for live performance coupled with an ethics of technological speed—there are certain parallels with the advancement of military might—left me wanting something more visceral." The invocation of "military might" is especially provocative, recalling the ghastly Iraq War footage of "smart bombs" delivered by remote to the villains, avoiding civilian casualties and allowing the operator to work from the safety of home.

This contemporary trend towards abstraction, towards the human-less interactions of internet consumption, of kiosk purchasing, of self-serve checkout lines, rushes civilization towards what Strawn aptly described as "digital posthumanism." Strawn goes on to highlight the political aspect of the resistance against abstraction: "The increasing inability to meaningfully engage with the Other, be they on the other side of the aisle, the ocean, or the debate on global capitalism—these are the central concerns of Wierd because it is positioned as an antidote to this new, insular, anonymous digital mob mentality." Considering the possibility that the internet may offer some positive community aspect, Pieter Schoolwerth used his interview with *Skug* to declare, "I feel very strongly that the fantasy that true community and subculture can be built through activities on the Internet alone has proven to be an absolute fucking failure."

"The Cunning of History" by Blacklist

Considering this faith in human interaction and capacity, and this staunch resistance to abstraction, it's apparent that Wierd's connection with the original synth artists and cold wave bands of the 1980s provides more than an aesthetic inspiration. The vulnerability of the '80s music, existing outside of the realms of new wave commerce or international exposure, provides a guideline for a deeply human expression. The process of unraveling this history exposes new connections between artists and scenes that were once alienated, geographically, ideologically, or gesturally, providing a framework for integrating seemingly disparate sounds today. And, perhaps most importantly, an examination of this era illustrates the difficulty of operating without a supportive community.

Liz Wendelbo states it, simply: "It's no fun being alone playing this kind of music. No one will appreciate it unless you're reaching out for other people who are like-minded who are involved in the same kind of music." For the minimal electronic pioneers, this was a remarkable challenge. Franck Lopez of Opera Multi Steel remembers this clearly: "During the '80s, we never got the feeling to be part of a musician community... we had the sad sensation to be the only one band of an unnamed movement." Jeff Gallea of Eleven Pond was caught in perhaps a more acute agony, recognizing that there were similar musicians, but they were unreachable: "I listened to 4AD bands, watched '70s films with sad endings, and walked in the Upstate New York rain. Very depressing yet oddly inspiring. The musicians I liked were in the UK but I've never been to England so I have no idea what their scene was."

The Neon Judgement, from Belgium, knew that their music had the power to draw people. Their practice space was situated above a small punk bar called Arno's, and the band was able to perform there whenever they liked. "The first show we ever did in Arno's was for 10 people," remembered co-founder Dirk Da Davo. "A few weeks later we played there again in front of 25 people, and months later we played there for a crowd of 60 people. Then the place was packed." The band distributed cassettes at their concerts, which circulated their name and led to record label interest, but until recently, The Neon Judgement was never able to break out of their regional isolation. Da Davo considered the band a part of a community that included Cabaret Voltaire, Liaisons Dangereuses, and Gang of Four, but the bonds were theoretical, without literal connections: "we felt a mental relationship with these type of artists." Fortunately, the renewed interest in their music in recent years has formalized these relationships: "It's only the last decade that everything has come together and we communicate more with our generation of artists."

Toronto band Land of Giants had a much healthier situation. Surrounded by an aesthetically diverse community of artists, the band was unique in their sound but not in their ideals. "We were outsiders from the mainstream, and perhaps we were isolated," recalls Marc Wonnacott, "but it was more of a self-imposed isolation that created a community and brought together a great number of artists from different disciplines to storm the gates of what we saw as the mediocrity and stagnation of the mainstream." Land of Giants belongs to a community that was "filled with musicians, DJs, artists, designers, writers and filmmakers," including performance/video artists The Hummer Sisters, the painter Peter Schyuff, and new wave band Rough Trade, whose 1981 single "High School Confidential" was one of the first explicitly queer songs to reach the top 40. "That is where the idea for the name of the band came from," explained Wonnacott, "that we were a land of giants."

This idea of bringing together a great number of artists from different disciplines resembles the diversity of artists that have performed at Wierd. Between the stern, minimal electronic sound of Epee Du Bois; the guitar-driven death rock of Blacklist; the glittering synth pop of Further Reductions, and the power electronics of Pharmakon, a vast range of underground musics have been represented at Wierd,

a depth recalling Josh Strawn's "it's much less about the instrumentation—it's about the human being behind it." Or seen from a different direction, Margaret Chardiet, of Pharmakon, expressed her own understanding of how a dark, negative power electronics set fits into the context of the Wierd party: "When you pour so much time, energy, and sanity into something, you cannot then apologize for it, just because it might make someone else feel uncomfortable. Art/music that is worth giving so much of your self to should be strong enough to exist in *any context*." In this sense, Pieter Schoolwerth's permissiveness and interest in the potential to fail truly connects with this strength through diversity. "I like the fact that Pieter doesn't really ask you what you're going to do, and what it's going to be like, or what it's going to sound like," remarked Katie Rose. "He's really interested in you being able to just do your thing and if it's a 20 minute noise set or pop songs, or a little bit of both, people have an attention span for it and they're ready to take it in." In this way, both Schoolwerth and the Wierd community at large are responsible for providing this opportunity to fail, succeed, or grow.

The strength and energy of the Wierd community has been potent enough to affect even the '80s groups who trudged through obscurity for decades. As a part of a network of fans that have unearthed and shared this music, Wierd has helped to validate these artists. In the words of Opera Multi Steel's Lopez, "Even if the recognition has been long to come, it's really comforting to get the feeling that all the time, passion and pleasure involved in our band was not in vain."

For Gallea, of Eleven Pond, the affirmation was even more potent and direct. A band that self-released cassettes and one LP, and "didn't get a lot of feedback," Eleven Pond was given a physical dose of feedback in 2009. "I did go to the Wierd/Killing Spree event at Nomad in Los Angeles," recalls Gallea. "It was my first time to see Martial Canterel or Xenos & Oaklander. I was blown away! In between sets the DJ played 'Watching Trees' and everyone started dancing. I got goose bumps! So many people danced. It was surreal. I even got a bit teary eyed."

"A Gift of Tears" by Jeunesse D'Ivoire

Pieter Schoolwerth considers that experience, and others like it, one of the primary inspirations for his dedication to the party. "There's nothing I like more in the world than to DJ people's own music for them," he explained. "The look on someone's face the first time they hear their little intimately-produced private thing made public is the ultimate pleasure, to give someone that. I put it on and just watch them; they're nervous, they're pissed off, they're freaked out. And they light up. That's the fucking best, man, that's one of the things I live for." For Schoolwerth, this act of shifting from the private to the public is one of the critical functions of any community. Just as his personal discovery of the music, of its narrative of isolation, has helped to ease his own sense of distance, Wierd provides a platform for these shared yet underrepresented experiences, closing distances.

But beyond this very rare quality of bringing individuals together, Wierd is actually able to activate this community, to structure opportunities for participation. Partygoers are encouraged to join in, to form bands, to DJ, to perform. Georgette remembers her first DJ set ever, alongside co-founders Schoolwerth and Glenn Maryansky. "I first became involved when Pieter was nice enough to teach me how to spin," she recalls. "The lesson was literally about two minutes long!" Just as the original, nameless party was an opportunity for friends to share favorite records, today's Wierd is DJed by regulars—dedicated attendees selected more for their enthusiasm than for name recognition.

Similarly, Wierd has encouraged the formation of many bands. The same visceral excitement that draws listeners to synth bands, both old and new, suggests endless possibilities for music. As demonstrated by the creativity of artists like Martial Canterel, this possibility is a result of this inspiration, but the promise of an open-minded, thoughtful community is equally important. Katie Rose, whose band Further Reductions made their debut at Wierd roughly one year after she first attended the party, grew up in Michigan, where she worked in a record shop and actively participated in the local music scene. She departed to attend college, but her disillusionment led her to New York: "When I moved to Colorado I didn't really go see music because I had never left Michigan, and I envisioned Boulder was going to be like New York. I thought I was going to this amazing place with all these creative writers and musicians and it would just blossom from there, but it didn't. So I decided to move here. I moved here without knowing anybody." But her relocation to New York, to a larger and more active city, didn't initially fill this lack. "I was broke all the time," she recalled, "and feeling negative about the world and that I wasn't able to put my own music out and I didn't have any connection to a scene. I stopped going out. And it was during that time that I met Shawn, and it really opened my eyes. I was really happy to go out and discover music, what people were doing. It took collaboration with friends and time to grow intimate with these instruments in this environment to figure it out."

The critical elements highlighted by Rose—collaboration, time, and environment—are all potentially unstable qualities. For New York in particular, given the media saturation and turnover of facts, each of these three assets can be drained or corrupted by an onslaught of attention, a hype-driven drastic change in taste, or the manufacture of a commercially palatable rendering. Alert to such forces, Wierd has consistently avoided the sort of reductive behavior that compels them. The avoidance of genre demarcations, the lack of a unified dress code, this "willfully being alone" described by Owen Stokes that allows each participant to remain an individual while surrounded by others, all evade the pigeonholing that creates a commodity. Ultimately the goal is an avoidance of manufacturing image, to revert all attention back to the music. The same way that dancing in a shroud of fog creates a freedom from observation, stripping image from the performer provides more space for the music. Sean McBride expands his admiration for analogue synthesizers to include this function: "It keeps me from inadvertently becoming an image source because I am stuck behind, playing keyboards. I can't dance and I can't show off."

Liz Wendelbo, whose artistic practice also includes photography and film, is clear in her sense of this rejection: "I think we're all trying to free ourselves from image in some ways, in an environment where image is everything." In her visual work, a movement she's termed "Cold Cinema," this resistance consists of invoking Brechtian alienation, using DIY tactics to avoid the escapism and abstraction of film. For her music, it's necessary for Wendelbo to engage in a more aggressive resistance to image: "We willfully shied away from any form of marketing or branding or anything like that. We really wanted to be under the radar, sort of invisible or barely visible, almost there. Kind of ghostly. Only recently did we start taking photos, we do our own photos." In fact, the portraits accompanying this article are the first of Xenos and Oaklander that they didn't take themselves.

Not only does this break from image encourage the listener's focus, but it facilitates concentration for the creation of the music: "That was also part of the bunker mentality, keep all that vanity and crap out of the way, and concentrate on developing the form and the content." Similar to the countless assertions that the

(opposite, clockwise
from top left)
Wierd Guest
Katie Rose
Wierd Dancer
Wierd Light



Martial Canterel



Pieter Schoolwerth



Miss Liz Wendelbo

binding force at Wierd is the music, Wendelbo stresses that the music is not only the core of Wierd, but is in fact the vital thing. But what quality binds the music together?

According to Schoolwerth, it's a spirit, an expressive balance between thoughtfulness, gloom, motivation, and defiance. In his 2010 *Skug* interview, Schoolwerth gave one of the most declarative, illuminating descriptions of this balance: "all [Wierd bands] are tied together by their emotional resonance, which is a very affirmative sense of melancholy, backed by an aggressive, life-affirming sense of resistance." This resistance to abstraction, to the dehumanizing, divisionary forces of the Internet, of computer music, of homogeneous culture, is a force of negation, but also of empowerment.

Shawn O'Sullivan's attempts to compose laptop music before Led Er Est formed were always abandoned unfinished, every song "just a loop that didn't do anything." While he was thoroughly aware of minimal electronic music, it took the example of Wierd and the invitation from Schoolwerth to shift him from an admirer of the music to a participant in it. In the words of his bandmate, Samuel Kklovenhoof, "Shawn used to spend a ridiculous amount of money on records and now he's using all that money to buy synthesizers." This transition from consumer to producer is among the most politically radical acts in this era of late capitalism.

"Cold Forever" by Xeno and Oaklander

From Dada, to the Situationist International, to Oulipo, to peace punk, the 20th century is dense with examples of bound, deliberate subcultures exhausting themselves, getting lost in dogma, or extinguished by outside forces. A huge majority of the original cold wave bands lasted only a few years, victims of their own obscurity, and of the lack of support. Pieter Schoolwerth is upfront about the achievements of Wierd, both as a self-sustaining force and as an inspiration for like-minded movements: "The WIERD party has proven for 5 plus years that rebuilding at the microscopic level is a possibility. We have all worked as a socially-oriented, non-economically motivated unit creating an extremely strong community to emotionally and psychologically support a very energetic group of young artists working to create music that all can be named as genre and identity specific."

Sean McBride similarly expressed the impact of this community: "I was thinking about this the other day. The golden years of minimal electronics: 1979-1983. There are few groups that did it longer than a year or two. Okay, this is appalling in a way. I've been doing this stuff since 2001. It's 2010 now. I've been doing it for eight years, nine years now. And not just me but a number of other people as well." Schoolwerth is also proud of the party's longevity: "I'm going to be coming up on 500 parties in November. That's always been my goal, to get to 500. Not for any reason except that it's a nice number that I can be proud of."

When considering the durability of the community, Cheyney Thompson is more enigmatic, invoking the idea of cultural bunker: "Wierd was never the bunker itself, but the corpse rotting inside the bunker. Specifically a bunker somewhere off the coast of Marseille. If I am correct in this assessment then longevity is not an issue. The issue is the odeur of its putrefaction and the forms of life that take up

residence in this sun-bleached sac. This means we participate actively in its continual decomposition. It achieves its pestilence through attack, sustain, decay and release." Behind the poetry of this description is an intensely defiant and sober assessment of both the community and the world surrounding it. Thompson is resolute in his take on the greater impact of his actions, the "odeur" and "pestilence" caused by his community, but also acknowledges the benefits afforded. With an attitude that approaches the punk/hardcore identification with roaches and rats—unwanted survivors—Thompson declares the endurance of participants, less concerned with the body that nourishes them. The individuals dancing within the smoke, not the cloud of fog itself.

Reflecting upon this ten-year history—the 500 parties, the 10 releases, the countless bands introduced to the world—Schoolwerth is cautious in naming a favorite aspect of Wierd. Considering the generosity of everyone involved, the non-commercial desire to create, he explains: "I feel like a kid a lot. That's something I never want to lose, that excitement that has absolutely no means. It's not a means to anything other than itself." But ultimately he considers the individuals dancing alone, sharing their isolation publicly, and he says, simply, "It makes people so happy."

For more information:

Wierd Records: wierdrecords.com

Bal Parè: myspace.com/balpare

Blacklist: listofblack.com

Eleven Pond: darkentriesrecords.com

Epee du Bois: myspace.com/epeedubois

Flesh Graey Display: myspace.com/fleshgrayedisplay

Further Reductions: myspace.com/furtherreductions

Land of Giants: myspace.com/landofgiants1982

Led Er Est: lederst.com

Martial Canterel: myspace.com/martialcanterel

Minimal Wave: minimal-wave.org

Neon Judgement: theneonjudgement.com

Nite Jewel: nitejewel.com

Opera Multi Steel: pagesperso-orange.fr/opera.multi.steel

Opus Finis: myspace.com/opusfinis

Pharmakon: myspace.com/noisepharmakon

Pieter Schoolwerth: miguclabregallery.com/PieterSchoolwerth.htm

Sombre Septembre: myspace.com/sombreseptembre

Staccato du Mal: myspace.com/staccatodumal

Cheyney Thompson: www.suttonlane.com/artist.php?a=ct&p=home

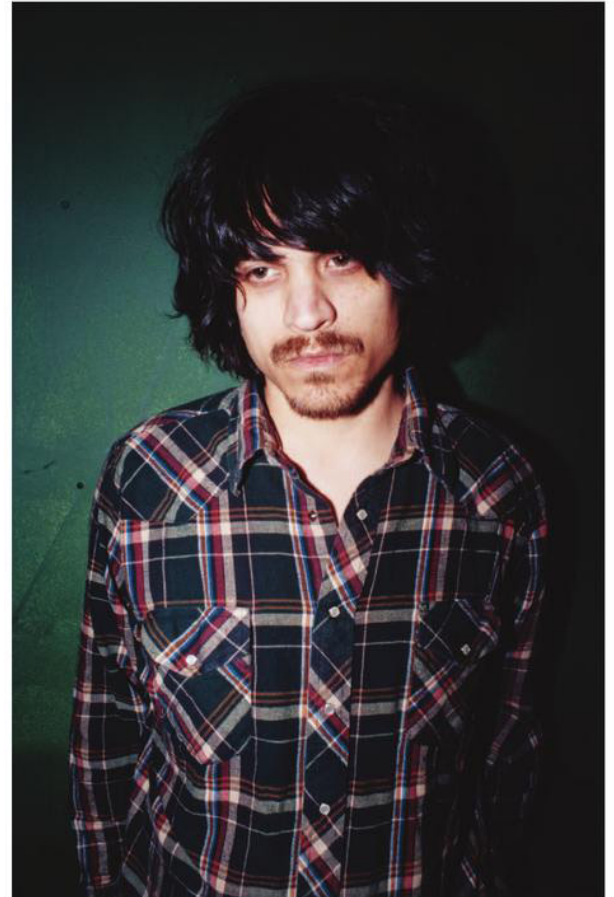
Liz Wendelbo: lizwendelbo.com

Xeno & Oaklander: xenoandoaklander.com

Yellow Tears: yellowtears.com



Shawn O'Sullivan



Samuel Kklovenhoof