

ABOUT FAR REACHES (SSAL-A2), NATHANIEL BARTLETT
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BY DAVE MADDEN
<http://www.squidsear.com>

You've maybe heard your grandpa express "that's about as exciting as watching water boil". With a creative attitude, grandpa, this can be an interesting experience. It's a slow process of energy transfer where heat creates a reaction of bubbles that form into an explosion of...yeah, you already know this: slow, linear and a brash release of tension at the end. Now think about the ten million year process for molecular clouds and interstellar gas to birth a star. This is exactly what Wisconsin born Nathaniel Bartlett asks on the first work of *Far Reaches, star_birth*.

As he mentions in his CV, "When one listens attentively to details, it becomes readily apparent that most complex vibrating bodies — be they gongs, strings, etc. — do not produce a 'note,' but rather dozens or hundreds of perceivable events that unfold over time before the complex vibrating body comes to rest." Avoiding all reliance on extended technique, performer Justin Alexander slowly explores a twenty-one piece percussion kit where "small motives...conglomerate into larger structures and then dissipate into relative inactivity". Pauses are frequent between placid shimmer of dual tam-tams, knocking wood blocks, the hammer of brake drums, skins and metals, with most instruments rarely overlapping.

There are brief periods where the composer emphasizes one instrument: hyperactive hits on a cymbal, bongo rolls, fits of tom-tom thuds; but for or most of the work, it's as if Bartlett is painting a wall with several sizes of brushes, one stroke at a time, standing back after each to assess the progress. The static aesthetic requires a bit of patience and a distraction-free listen to appreciate the individual resonances and macro relationships, but that's the point: slow down and pay attention to whatever your multi-tasking, fast-paced routine is making you miss.

The second chapter, *heap*, is a different animal where Bartlett fills in the rests and sonic gaps with software assistance. Focusing on the metallic side of his palette, Bartlett begins with a subtle play on the attacks, releases and direction of his strikes, the results forming a wash of shadows and echoes under the bright pings and thuds. Just past minute seven of the eighteen-minute work, humanity is overtaken by the synthetic for otherworldly possibilities: chimes become squiggling arpeggiations, smacks sound as brittle, bit-shifted fizzles, gongs take on multi-pitched tones they don't normally project (i.e. fundamentals, natural harmonics and mysterious, ever-rising harmonies with each bang). The piece straddles a reality and dreamlike cosmos throughout, eventually leaving in a cloudy swish of low frequencies that file across the stereo field (I don't have the eight channel surround DVD version, and can only imagine the tangible intimacy there).

Christian Wolff, whose spacious style comes to mind when listening to *star_birth*, said, "Any collection of sounds that you put together, they'll have a rhythm no matter what." Debatably, Bartlett's work here, despite resting on percussion instruments, seems to defy this notion (but so does Wolff's music to my ears). And it's not about melody, or other traditional elements of music. It's about sound. Many wonderful sounds.