

CROSTOWN ARTS

Q&A with Gunter Guapp



Gunter Guapp is a composer and music teacher based in Memphis, whose work combines noise composition and genre music. His recent work maintains a connection to jazz and folk traditions in its approach to melody and harmony while exploring new possibilities through extended technique and graphic notation. His music has premiered recently in Chicago, Memphis, and Green Bay, as well as internationally in Vienna and Paris. Gunter completed his masters in 2019 at the University of Memphis, where he studied composition under Kamran Ince and John Baur. More recently, Gunter has been teaching music to middle and high school students at Memphis Rise Academy.

Gunter's [made-at-home performance video](#) is featured on Against the Grain, the online music initiative organized by Crosstown Arts to support Memphis musicians. The videos on Against the Grain are free to watch, but viewers may show their support by donating to the artists. 100% of proceeds from an artist's page go directly to the artist.

Crosstown Arts registrar Jesse Butcher talked with Gunter about noise music, composing for multiple instruments, and his work as a music instructor at Memphis Rise Academy.

Jesse: Your work combines an interest in jazz and folk music, as well as noise composition. What piqued your interest into noise music?

Gunter: When I first started playing guitar, I was really into Tom Morello. I started listening to Audioslave and Rage Against the Machine maybe a month after I started playing and quickly became obsessed with how seamlessly extended technique and wild prepared noises fit into his playing and songwriting. It just felt really innovative and free in ways I wasn't hearing from anything else at the time. When I started studying jazz more seriously in college, I really latched onto free jazz players, like Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra, for a lot of the same reasons. After that, I started listening more closely to experimental composers, like John Cage and George Crumb, and I snowballed deeper into the noise music stuff from there.

I noticed you recently participated in EMERGE, a virtual workshop and performance hosted by The Julius Quartet. Surely that was an amazing gathering of modern composers. What was that experience like?

It was really wonderful! The Julius Quartet are incredible players and really supportive collaborators, so despite all the strangeness of being virtual, they were able to build a

remarkably genuine sense of community around new string music. All of the composers were supportive and invested in each other's work, so it turned into this nice moment of togetherness around a wide range of musical backgrounds. It can be difficult to get new string music played, so it was encouraging to see so many different styles represented in one program. Despite all the weird challenges to making music in the last year, it's been cool to see how many different performers and ensembles have adopted that kind of virtual model for collaborating with composers. In a lot of ways, I think new music has hit an unexpected stride recently from everyone being on Zoom and hungry for new opportunities. It's something I really hope to see continued in new music communities as in-person concerts become more viable in the future.

You have written extensively about blues music. Does your interest in the blues inform your compositional methods?

I actually started researching blues music mostly by accident. While I was in college, the school was starting to build a relationship with Bobby Rush as a guest lecturer/performer, and that grew into this wild opportunity to hang out with Mr. Rush a few times over a summer while I researched the culture around blues festivals. What has stuck with me most from that research, though, is the idea of authenticity in blues music. There are all kinds of specific cultural implications surrounding blues festivals and the idea of what makes "real" blues music, but what I found was that almost everything that happens musically in a blues song is in service of telling a story or communicating an experience. A lot of the rules that get applied to blues are really broad generalizations that try to retroactively fit those artists into a specific category, but blues players are consistently defying the genre for the sake of better communication with an audience. While I don't take any direct musical influence from the blues in my writing, I think a lot about that idea of message and meaning as the focal point of a piece of music and its priority over genre or style.

You are fluent in traditional jazz and folk guitar, as can be heard in your work with The Cricket Orchestra and The Tea Rose Trio. How do you approach playing and writing in these more collaborative arenas?

I was lucky in both of those bands that we were all really close friends and had already been playing together in other settings for several years prior. I think we were all about as familiar with each other's personalities and playing as we could have been, so collaboration came really naturally. In Cricket for example, it eventually got to the point that I would usually only

bring in half-finished song ideas and trust that everyone else would fill in the gaps better than I could have on my own. The Trio was a little different in that we were mostly playing jazz standards and arranging pop covers, so a lot of the collaboration was just in deciding what we wanted to play next. But again, we were so close that we mostly just liked being around each other and listening to each other play, and everything else was kind of secondary. I think, in collaborative efforts, it can be easy to prioritize the project over the people making it, so being able to start from a place of mutual admiration and building a shared vision out of that was a really valuable experience in both of those groups. It's something I hope I can bring to other collaborative projects but obviously nurturing that kind of creative relationship organically can be difficult.

While listening to your composed pieces, I was struck with the amount of depth within the textures of each instrument. Composing for multiple instruments seems like a very daunting process to begin. How do you begin to compose a new work? Is there a particular instrument you start with?

Thanks so much for saying so! Texture is definitely a priority for me, so I'll usually start with what I think will be the most sparse section of the piece or even one sound that I want to define its character, and then I'll build layers on top of that until I find the limit of how dense those textures can be. That looks different for me every time depending on the instrumentation of the ensemble and the goals of the piece, but I almost always start by recording as many different ideas into a digital audio workstation (DAW) as I can think of and then slowly sculpting those samples into something more workable. Since I've been working with extended technique a lot more in my recent work, sometimes I start by scouring the internet for any kind of weird recorded sounds of a given instrument and building a bank of samples as reference points for the sounds I want to use. I like the workflow of composing in DAWs for texture pieces like that, especially because it gives me a lot of minute control over sounds that I wouldn't necessarily get in traditional notation, so I can fully define what the piece is first and then try to describe that in a score.

Along with your compositional work, you are also a music instructor at Memphis Rise Academy. Do you have a particular piece of music that you like to implement to inspire students?

I keep trying to find one, but it is so hard to predict what kids will be interested in. I teach 6th through 12th grade, so it's a constant rat race trying to keep up with the kinds of music my

students really like versus what they hate versus what they just pretend to hate and what they'll tolerate for a class period. The middle schoolers are especially difficult to figure out, because they think it's cool to hate on anything written before 2018, and they'll absolutely let me know the second they don't like something. In those classes, I play a lot of relentlessly positive pop songs and lean in to the groans.

My high school students are a lot more open-minded, but their tastes are still so broad that I usually end up playing a scatter-shot of different artists in class to try to expose them to as much as possible. We had a class recently where we talked about Daniel Cesar, Steve Reich, Jacob Collier, Noname, and Daft Punk all within an hour. All my students are mind bogglingly supportive of each other's work though, so the easiest way I've found to get them excited about something is to show off examples of songs and projects they've written themselves.

Gunter, thanks so much for filling us in on your practice! Hopefully we can see you perform live soon!