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From Destruction, a New Sound of Life

When William Basinski's Tape Machine Failed, a Stunning 9/11 Tribute Was Born

Article

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Musician William Basinski had spent decades making tape loops—circles of magnetic tape that cycle repeatedly through fixed snippets of songs—before he was struck with an epiphany in the summer of 2001. Archival-minded, he had been working to digitize his tapes, which he'd looped from recordings of orchestral music on the radio, for the sake his career-long "mad-scientist experiment" with music and sound.

After queuing up one of his loops and pressing "play" on his trusty old tape machine, Mr. Basinski went to the kitchen to make some coffee. "When I came back, I noticed something changing," he said. "The glue had started to lose its integrity, so as the loop went around and around, the iron oxide turned to dust and fell into the tape path—very gradually, very beautifully. It was spellbinding."



Enlarge Image

Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal

Jeremy deVine, whose Temporary Residence Limited label is releasing a box set of William Basinski's 'The Disintegration Loops.'

As the sounds on Mr. Basinski's aging tapes began to decay, the fidelity of the music—mostly sappy, stringed versions of popular standards—broke down. But it was also transformed into something much more moving, as triumphant orchestral passages collapsed into eerily silent passages of dissolution.

"The loops each did their own beautiful dance to the death in their own way and in their own time, but the intrinsic quality of the melodies somehow managed to hold

on until the very end," Mr. Basinski said.

So was born "The Disintegration Loops," a nearly five-hour-long work of art that takes the transience of time and the inevitability of decay as its subjects. Since its creation, the piece has become recognized as a masterwork in the world of experimental music. But it has also moved into much wider-reaching realms, as evidenced this week by the release of a deluxe box-set edition and the work's induction into the National September 11 Memorial Museum—a collection not ordinarily inclined toward music.

In early September 2001, Mr. Basinski

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Lom Hamaekers

Composer William Basinski

labored on the loops in his Williamsburg loft, where for months he had been mulling an uncertain future. He was out of work, having recently closed his pioneering Bedford Avenue vintage shop, Lady Bird. And his impressionistic, exploratory music was not exactly suited to a stable career. On Sept. 10, he was "listening to the work, swimming in it," he said—though he had made other plans in hopes of paying his bills.

"The night before, I was having a major dark night of the soul, knowing I was soon to be evicted and knowing I had this work I didn't know what to do with," he said. The

next morning, Sept. 11, 2001, he planned to go downtown and apply for a job with a Lower Manhattan arts group. Instead, he and a friend watched the Twin Towers burn from his Brooklyn rooftop. Suddenly, the magisterial hybrid of breakdown and beauty that had come together as the foundation of "The Disintegration Loops" had assumed a new purpose.

"On 9/11, I was determined that it was going to be an elegy," he said. "The whole world changed, and it just got worse, coming to understand the horror of what happened down there, with all these F-16s flying around terrorizing us even more. Everyone was falling into their own disintegration loops."

He spent the end of that grim day with a video camera, winding up with a static shot of smoke billowing from the fresh wound downtown. The video footage and the tape-loop recordings (released in four volumes) make up the whole of "The Disintegration Loops."

"It's powerful, evocative, artistic," said Michael Shulan, the creative director of the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which will install "The Disintegration Loops" in its permanent collection when it opens at the World Trade Center. (No firm opening date for the museum has been set.) "It really says something about the events of that day in a non-didactic way—a non-verbal way of understanding the experience of 9/11 and particularly the way it was presented in the media, looping over and over. Like the way images of it fade over time and then snap back in memory."

It also works wondrously as music, enough so that a live arrangement of its sorrowful yet stirring sound was performed by a 17-piece orchestra on Sept. 11, 2011, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to mark the 10th anniversary of the attacks. It was the first time the work had been played live.

Mr. Basinski said he would like to hear the remaining parts arranged as well. But for now the legacy of "The Disintegration Loops" is being served by a lavish box set, which includes nine vinyl records, five CDs, a DVD and a 144-page book filled with images and notes. It's an appropriate mode of presentation for what singer Antony Hegarty, a close collaborator and friend of Mr. Basinski's, calls in the liner notes "the most helpful and useful music I have ever known."

"It's ambient music that has a really, really intense emotional resonance to it," said Jeremy deVine, whose Brooklyn-based record label, Temporary Residence Limited, is behind the box set. "Within a group of people who are music obsessives, it's like the Holy Grail. It has become a work of art, part of our cultural fabric."

Strangely, for a work associated with destruction and decay, "The Disintegration Loops" also led to a kind of rebirth for Mr. Basinski, whose stature as a composer and sorcerer of sound swelled in its aftermath. As word spread after he self-released the first volume in 2002, Mr. Basinski issued other works on his own label, 2062, which he operates from his Los Angeles home. As for the mysteries of history, the impact of "The Disintegration Loops" confounds him still.

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I was profoundly moved by the work itself in the way that it was not just about destruction, but the fact that it was recorded through another medium," he said. "So the entire life and life and death of each melody was recorded and redeemed in a way. I found that to be mind-boggling. For the same thing to happen to me and my career is another step in that chain."

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