

# LOCAL NOISE

## Marcus Guitarkus

18/9/05, Melbourne.

Marcus Guitarkus, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

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### Summary:

“I used to get really angry when Curse would get up and talk about hip-hop and you’d get these fuckwits in the audience standing up the back and yelling ‘You’re not fuckin’ hip-hop you know, you’re not hip-hop, asshole’, and just heckling them. And it was like ‘How dare you say what hip-hop is’. But I’m almost of the opinion now ‘Fuck it’, because if the hip-hop purists want to take it that much then let them have the term, you know what I mean. Let them keep it, we don’t need it, I don’t need it. We are still making music, so it’s not going to change anything, particularly in Australian hip-hop. At the moment there is a lot of amazing stuff coming out that is being categorised as Australian hip-hop, but I think there is also a lot of stuff that is very narrow-minded, that is basically claiming to be unique just because it has an Australian accent and an Australian flavour. And that is just blindly playing up to the hip-hop structure that was set out by the Americans.”

We visited Marcus’ house for a quick interview on the way to interview Music vs Physics at the Evelyn Hotel. Marcus gave us a run down of the genesis of the Symbiotic collective, which emerged from a New Year’s Eve party in 1999 at the house of Pasobionic’s [producer and DJ for TZU and Curse ov Dialect] girlfriend. Marcus spoke of the nature of the way the collective functioned, pooling their diverse talents into shows and performances, often improvised. Marcus also spoke about other collective projects he has been involved in, which managed to incorporate people from the more mainstream hip-hop world. The discussion also covered the issues surrounding the term ‘hip-hop’, its contestation and the problems of limitation, especially in relation to a notions of authenticity and ownership. At the same time as resisting the puritan perspective, Marcus spoke about the ways in which he’s come to understand why the term ‘hip-hop’ is so crucial identity of people who believe they embody hip-hop as a lived reality. This developed into a discussion about the form itself, as a contemporary folk music, and the possibilities for the expression of street-level reality.

### About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

**MG:** Marcus Guitarkus

**TM:** Tony Mitchell

**NK:** Nick Keys

**NK:** So, can you tell us how Symbiotic got started, and when? And how you got involved?

**MG:** All right. It started out in 2000. Initially it was just a bunch of friends, like myself, my brother who is one half of Pitch Bureau, DJ Dusk as well (who plays hip-hop around town), and he was in Carbon which was on the first Symbiotic compilation. And also guys from Curse ov Dialect and Music vs Physics. And that whole group got together at Shahib's [Pasobionic, DJ in TZU and Curse ov Dialect] girlfriend's house on New Year's Eve 99/2000. We had a big party there and it just happened that we ended up having a big jam; we got all sorts of instruments together and just went for it. At that time, using samples and beats was a very new thing for us, we were just really in our experimental phase, playing around with tapes and basically just messing around with sound at a very rudimentary level.

**TM:** And was Paso involved at that stage?

**MG:** Yeah, it was at his girlfriend's house. And we basically said afterwards that we would do that every year on New Year's – get together and spend a couple of days just creating music, recording it, doing something with it – basically just mucking around. Because we were all sort of busy at the time, though it was big on our agenda, but as far as most of us were concerned it wasn't a top priority. And we ended up doing the following year on New Year's – it was a lot of fun and Joe and Beck came up with the idea of the Music vs Physics variety show. That was held at the Empress, and people just got up in half-hour blocks and played, and then someone would get up and start jamming with them and then someone else would start playing. So it was just constantly flowing throughout the night, constantly, for four hours.

**TM:** Like a chain?

**MG:** Yeah, like a chain. So someone would be playing and then others would try to join in with what everyone else was doing. It was just a big mash-up, really and out of that came Symbiotic. It was really a couple of guys called Steve Kay and Dan Gardener who are no longer here, they went back to the United States, but we were hanging out with them at the time, they were living here and studying and they were both big hip-hop heads. Dan did a lot with Symbiotic in the early days, and he was also a former member of Carbon – I guess he still is, really, but he's not in the country so it is hard. And Steve, who is also known as DJ Cream, from Buffalo, New York. And they thought we should start a bit of a sound system of sorts. We thought, 'Why the hell not', and so we started mucking around together, because we were all hanging out together anyway, the core of us were living within a two-minute walk of each other in North Fitzroy, so we were basically in each other's pockets all the time anyhow. So it made sense to do this thing, and make it something. So we did another Music vs Physics variety show, and Symbiotic was established, and the whole thing about it was that it was meant to incorporate musicians and artists and photographers, just the whole lot. Basically anything that anyone had to bring to Symbiotic was a member of Symbiotic, just as our group of friends at the time. So it was never meant to be a band, it was meant to be something more like a record label – but not even, just a way of putting things together, because there is strength in numbers. Because there are so many of us, we can put all our resources together and press up 1000 copies of an album without batting an eyelid. It's a lot more difficult as an individual, going solo or with a group of three or four people. And that was the thinking behind it. And so that sort of worked, and we started playing shows, and then it ended up getting bigger than we expected, because people started having expectations of us acting as a band. They seemed to think that because we had performed as a band

before – which was largely improvised stuff – that we would therefore always be a band. And so we started getting booked for shows, and we did some crazy things, like we ended up jamming with Dos and Sol from Anticon. We supported people like Prefuse 73 and got taken up to Sydney to that Coalition of the ‘Illin thing with The Herd. And the weirdest thing was Decoder Ring, like they did two nights up at the Hopetoun and I kind of got into talking with them down here and I got them to come down and play this show I was booking – I was booking shows at the Corner Hotel at the time, sort of on and off. It was a thing called Megasmash with TZU, Music vs Physics and Decoder Ring. It was just a big mash-up of all different types of things.

**TM:** It seems a lot of people are hip-hop but are also doing a lot of other things as well. You wouldn’t exactly describe Curse as being a hip-hop group.

**MG:** Yeah, definitely.

**TM:** They are too far out on the avant-garde tip to be just hip-hop, and same with TZU.

**MG:** Yeah, particularly with TZU’s new album. But I think that’s the thing with the term ‘hip-hop’, as well. Even if I do something that is me just producing a track and then getting up and rapping on it, I find it a bit dangerous – even then – to call it hip-hop. I mean, I used to get really angry when Curse would get up and talk about hip-hop and you’d get these fuckwits in the audience standing up the back and yelling ‘You’re not fuckin’ hip-hop you know, you’re not hip-hop, asshole’, and just heckling them. And it was like ‘How dare you say what hip-hop is’. But I’m almost of the opinion now ‘Fuck it’, because if the hip-hop purists want to take it that much then let them have the term, you know what I mean. Let them keep it, we don’t need it, I don’t need it. We are still making music, so it’s not going to change anything, particularly in Australian hip-hop. At the moment there is a lot of amazing stuff coming out that is being categorised as Australian hip-hop, but I think there is also a lot of stuff that is very narrow-minded, that is basically claiming to be unique just because it has an Australian accent and an Australian flavour. And that is just blindly playing up to the hip-hop structure that was set out by the Americans.

**NK:** A lot of Australian hip-hop is completely uninspired derivatives of American hip-hop. The structure is the same, and really they only thing ‘Australian’ is the accent. Like you say, the place that they speak from in their rapping is often very narrow as well. Which is, of course, why we try to talk to Symbiotic and people on that same tip, who are not so attached to any hip-hop puritanism. Why be so obsessed with setting out the terms, and setting up the four foundational elements and anyone who wavers from that in the slightest is somehow sacrilegious.

**MG:** Definitely, but as I said before, I have mellowed out a lot with that. I’m now at the point where I can almost understand why the hip-hop puritans are that way, in a sense, because they have chosen that lifestyle and it’s not like it was any big surprise that someone like me would have that reaction. I mean, I’ve always loved hip-hop, as a kid I was popping all over the N.W.A lines and the sound of rebellion for me, as a 14-year-old. So I’ve always loved it, but I mean, it was no surprise for me to get into hip-hop and suddenly find myself up against all these dudes who had been in it all their lives as well, and literally wanted to live it. Particularly the graff writers, and people like the Hilltop Hoods and the Obese crew. It’s like, as much as I can’t stand the arrogance that comes from some of them – and I’m not going to bag off all of them, because a lot of them are really good guys. But even those other guys, I find it hard to bag them sometimes because that’s what hip-hop *is* to a large extent, and there is a lot of that narrow-mindedness and arrogance, because there is much ego involved. I mean, the MC battle, one of the oldest hip-hop staples, is basically just a complete brazen show of arrogance. And that’s what it is, and so I’m not going to slag it off for being that, but at the same time, I’m not going to act like, ‘Oh, we have to change hip-hop, we have to rescue hip-hop’, because I guess it’s just not going to happen in that way.

**NK:** Yeah, totally. And it's similar to the point Joelistics made on the hip-hop panel up at TINA last year, and as you know TINA is a cross-section of a lot of people, there is a strong hip-hop collection there these days, but there is also the writers and people there for others parts of the festival who come along to the hip-hop gigs and are really confronted by the rawness of the MCs, particularly the battle, with its homophobia and misogyny, etc. So they turn up at the panel the next day and kind of vent their frustrations, and so people like Joelistics, Urthboy and Batla are there kind of having to weather the storm for it, and they made some interesting points without defending it, namely, that homophobia is not a phenomenon exclusive to hip-hop, it's in society at large. Yes, there is narrow mindedness in hip-hop, but it's largely a focused reproduction of a strong vein of that within society.

**MG:** Yeah definitely. But that's another thing about hip-hop: in one way it's a wonderful thing that's it's a very easy outlet for people to attain, that's what is arguably giving it the status of the 'new folk music', because anyone can do it, just having cypher sessions on the street and what not. Whereas 'art' and 'music' are to a large degree in our society – I'm just kind of speaking as I think here, so I don't know whether it will come out right... In my opinion, art and music have largely been something that the middle class have indulged in, where as hip-hop is making itself a lot more accessible to all people, who can come along and say 'Oh yeah, fuckin', I just smashed out six train windows and I'm havin' a beer'. I just think it's made it very accessible. Another thing I find really interesting is freestyling, because you don't have to have anything good to say to be a good freestyler, which I find interesting. They used to have these terrific nights down at the Evelyn on Saturdays called Phat Logic, and there was another one where True Live had the night on Monday. So there was two nights in a row where everyone was pretty much jamming with freestyling over the top. In the end I found it really difficult to listen anymore because I just realised it was empty of content. When I first heard people busting really tight freestyles I just thought 'My god, this is amazing!' It just blew me away, but then later I started to realise that most people when they freestyle aren't really saying anything. And then I started going to nights down at this bar on Smith Street where a lot of the younger writers get up and are freestyling, and I realised that even those these guys were total bogans – absolute flat-out yobbos who were into rolling people for their shoes and getting smashed and getting into fights – what they were saying in their freestyles was actually far more interesting than these older guys who were all big left-wing political animals. Because it was all mostly 'Fuck Bush', 'Fuck Howard', etc, but nothing really interesting, whereas the younger guys were telling really interesting stories.

**TM:** They were talking about their own experience, rather than just rhyming..

**MG:** Yeah, exactly, and they were just telling an interesting story. But not that there weren't some real quality people down at Phat Logic – that was the night Elf Transporter used to run.

**TM:** So you mentioned that you have done a bit of MCing yourself?

**MG:** A little bit here and there, but my problem is that I don't have the brain for freestylers and I've always been very envious of good freestylers, Joelistics for example, who is amazing, because he has an ability to bring things together, he can create story arcs in freestyles, and that is what I respect. I can sort of do it a little bit, but I lose my train of thought and it just comes out sounding stupid. And because of my frustration with listening to freestylers who say nothing, I just refuse to get up on the mic unless I have something really important to say. I don't want to get up there and feel like I'm talking just for the sake of talking.

**NK:** It is a real brain thing the freestyle thing isn't it?

**MG:** It really is!

**NK:** Because there are plenty of super articulate and intelligent people who can talk forever, but you try

to get them on a rhyming train and it just doesn't come out. It seems to come from somewhere else.

**MG:** Totally, it is just a natural ability I guess, and I suppose if they did enough research on it they might be able to teach people how to freestyle like they teach them how to speed read. Using that mega-memory stuff, maybe it's just a little bit of your brain that you figure out how to switch on. I'd like to hope it is, anyway.

**TM:** So you're mainly involved in production and instrumentals?

**MG:** Yeah, that's mainly what I do. I produce a lot of music as a moniker called the Doily Room. It's got some hip-hop elements in it I guess, in terms of beat and sample-based, but it's more live instruments, sampling guitars and vocals and chopping it all up. Other people have described it as a cross between Fourtet, Jim O'Rourke, Architecture in Helsinki and Prefuse 73. So that's what they said. I did a show with Brendan Webb... Actually, that's another thing that I should talk to you about, another show we did which was called Word to the Motherboard. It was actually Brendan's idea but I helped him out with it. He basically got two producers or singers (or whoever really) and just coupled them and said, 'OK, you guys have to work together to create a set', and so it would be like Jason Swing from Pretty Boy Crossover and the rapper 24K...

**TM:** So it was much more into the electronica scene really?

**MG:** That thing was, but that was almost an offshoot of this other night that Brendan and I put together which was called One Mammoth Saturday Night, which was a strictly a hip-hop thing. And the whole idea behind it was – this is the reason I think you should talk to Brendan, because it was his brain child – to get Joelistics to host the whole evening. We got 15 MCs, all of as high a calibre as we could find, five scratch DJs and five beats producers. The MCs names were all put into sealed envelopes and same with the DJs and producers. There were four sets planned, consisting of 20 minutes each and Joelistics had to pull out the name of three MCs, one DJ and one producer for each set. So no one knew who was going to be playing with who, not even Brendan or I knew. And so they all got called up on stage and perform a set.

**NK:** That's really interesting.

**MG:** Yeah, it worked amazingly well. There were lots and lots of people involved in that: Weapon X, Muphin and Plutonic, True Live, Elf Transporter, dudes from The Hospice. Pretty much anyone we could get our hands on. It was really widespread and there were almost fights because we pretty much wanted to do the opposite of a battle. Rather than getting up and battling, we wanted people to try and collaborate and do something amazing. It worked very interestingly.

**TM:** It's almost a kind of John Cage thing, with chance.

**MG:** Yeah, yeah! In a sense. It was very difficult and harrowing, but we pulled off three of those, which was amazing that we got that far. They were really good fun.

**TM:** Were they recorded at the time?

**MG:** Yeah, we've got recordings of all of them. Which we might do something with one day, though the quality of them isn't that fantastic which is a problem.

**TM:** And you're a guitarist as well?

**MG:** Yeah, I mean I played bass mostly, but I play guitar in the project we have got going at the moment called Sons of Dad, which is a very weird cover band. We do really morose versions of Cure songs and Gene Pitney songs. Just songs that are generally about a-woman-treated-me-wrong type subject.

**TM:** Which Gene Pitney songs?

**MG:** ‘True Love Never Runs Smooth’.

**TM:** Oh, OK.

**MG:** And we do a Burt Bacharach song, and some Beatles as well. Like I’ll sometimes play just one note for the whole song, and there is three of us all playing acoustic guitars like this [*he plays a single muted note on the bottom string in a quite fast tempo*] you know, just very staccato. Anyway, it’s just really depressing.

**TM:** Well the main Symbiotic release that we are familiar with is the *Ant Farm Aphids*, which is a few years old now. But there was one before that?

**MG:** Oh, there were many. There are a lot that didn’t actually get distribution. I would give you some copies but I only have the one. They were little samples that we would sell at shows, just so we could make some cash basically. We’d sell it for like ten bucks with like 20 tracks on it, or something like that.

