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**LUCKY
DRAGONS**

Lucky Dragons presents any recorded or performed or installed or shared or suggested or imagined pieces by Luke Peaback and Sarah Rane, and/or any someone collaborators who claim the name. Their work is primarily based

CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

LUCKY DRAGONS

JANUARY 5, 2009

Lucky Dragons 1

DRAGON SMITH TO WITKAR ALA KATWA TO HINGE JAGROD

LUCKY DRAGONS

Lucky Dragons means any recorded or performed or installed or shared or suggested or imagined pieces by Luke Fishbeck and Sarah Rara, and or any sometime collaborators who claim the name. Their electronically based music experiences often involve audience participation in the music making. Lucky Dragons tours extensively and has been featured in the TBA festival in Portland, at the Smithsonian Institute's Hirshorn Museum, and the 2008 Whitney Biennial, as well as the Smell in Los Angeles. Some sister projects include Sumi Ink Club, a weekly collaborative drawing society, and Glaciers of Nice, a small press and internet community.



CYRUS SMITH Alright, welcome to Art Talk AM on the Radio. And we are here talking with Lucky Dragons. We have both Luke Fishbeck and Sarah Rara here today, so welcome to the show.

SARAH RARA Thank you.

LUKE FISHBECK Hi.

CS So you're not strangers to Portland, and I know you're actually having a fairly active time while you're here, right? You've already had a show in town, and a Sumi Ink Club gathering. So, maybe that would be a good place to start, you're musicians, but also artists, so maybe you could start with the Sumi Ink Club, and how that functions.

SR Sumi Ink Club is a collaborative drawing group that meets once a week. Our headquarters are sort of Los Angeles, which is where we're based, but we often travel with

IMAGE /// Luke Fishbeck and Sarah Rara of Lucky Dragons, 2008.

Sumi Ink Club. It's all ages, all humans all style. And the idea is that everyone meets and we make a drawing together, and there are no rules, except that you can add to anything anyone else has drawn, and you can draw anything you like. So, that's the basic framework.

- CS** And so this is a collaborative project that you and Luke started together, right?
- SR** Yeah, we organize it together, but often Sumi Ink Club will meet without us. People will write and ask "Can I hold a meeting of Sumi Ink Club in my own city?" And that's totally open, it's kind of open source, and it can be easily replicated. It's just a way of bringing people together who might not otherwise meet, and having a conversation.
- CS** This gathering point, and then also this idea of being open source in the way that you produce work seems to be a thread that connects your art making and your music making. Is that something you could talk about? Why to be open source?

LF I think, you're faced with many multiple economies, and if one that you have works for you, then go for it, but if it's not working in your favor, then you're free to pick another economy and go with it. And there's definitely an economy based on reputation, or you know, sharing. Almost like a potlatch style gift competition, that I think works better for us and the means we have, and the communities that we live in.

CS That phrase "potlatch," it refers to, like a feast...

LF Oh yeah, from right here in the Pacific Northwest.

CS Could you maybe explain the potlatch tradition?

LF Well, the way that I'm using it, is that you try to outdo each other in giving gifts, and it gets to a certain stage where you just can't outdo the other person, and you just have to burn your house down.

(laughter)

- LF** Which is my favorite part. I have nothing left to give you except the destruction of everything I own.
- CS** So you're trying to bring the house down with your life and work I guess?
- LF** Yeah. *(laughs)*. Or convince you to.
- CS** Okay, great. Can you talk a little bit about what you have collected on your computer? We're going to be listening to a lot of sounds today, because that's a big part of how you work, right?
- LF** Oh yeah, we just downloaded some...
(boo yeah!)
- LF** Reggae sound effects.
(boo yeah!)
- LF** And, um. In the background is the music of my mentor Ivan Shirebnan.
- CS** Reggae, has already come up today, and

I know you (Sarah) grew up with reggae, and I thought you were making some interesting connections about the way...

(laser sounds)

CS ...reggae is as a music form that connects with how you work.

SR The reggae radio show is really...

(fog horn)

SR ...is really a community forum where people call to get together...

(fog horn)

SR ...in this unique kind of space. Yeah, it's just a really good model of how people can share their ideas through music, or how music...

(laser sounds) (foghorn)

SR ...can be a positive healing force. The reggae shows that I grew up with do that in a

really literal way. Like, people can call up with a headache and request a song, to help them feel better, or to work a problem out with somebody, or to talk about something that they're doing.

CS And the positivity, that you have with reggae. I've been to your shows before...

(foghorn)

CS ...and it seems like there's a lot of positive energy flowing in the room.

SR And definitely negative energy is welcome too. I think during the show often...

(foghorn)

SR ...negative energy becomes a positive energy, because it's welcome. It's kind of okay to have a conflict and resolve it. I think that's part of the method of the music is as a conflict resolution tool. Yeah, there's all kinds of energy.

(laser sounds)

CS I think it might be helpful also to describe how one of your shows takes shape. Can you describe how one of your shows might unfold?

SR Um, the key part of the show is a moment where people play with these wires we make called "touchers" in their hand, and that allows them to send a digital signal through the skin so that when one member of the audience touches the other person on the skin, they connect a circuit, and they form a human network, or chain, and then that generates a sound or music. So it's a kind of synthesizer that people play by touching. So, it's really direct contact between people. And then the distinction between us as performers, and the audience is dispersed, or even erased by the end of the show. And that's really important too, I think. To create an equal power sharing situation.

CS And this is from a program that you designed, right Luke?

LF Oh, yeah, yeah. And we've both been working on it experimentally, just over the last couple years. It's a pretty simple program. It's divided into three basic parts, but there's a part that sends out a signal, like a steady state signal, and there's another part that analyzes changes in that steady state signal, and there's another part that translates that into something else. Like, right now we have it translating into a series of tuned modes. A lot of the work we do now is just tuning it and really coming to some sort of really good tuning system. We're gonna keep working on it. Because the tuning system is basically the rules of the game, or the rules of the engagement. The next note should really be something that leads you further into it. And you get deeper and deeper into this system of notes, rather than just wanting to get out of it.

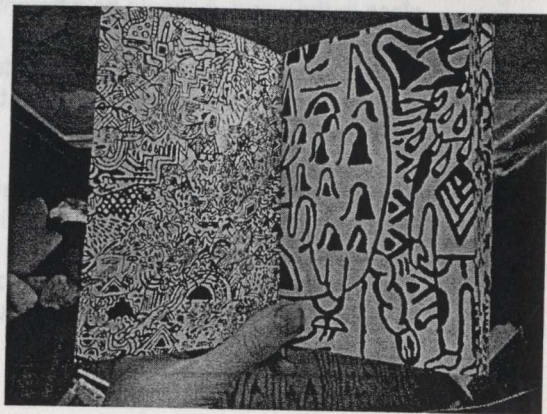
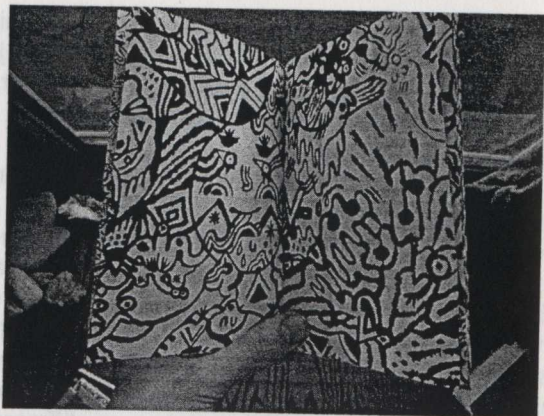
CS But then with this engagement as the end point of all of the technology, and all of the equipment that you're sharing with everybody. Is that appropriate to say?

LF I don't know if we've come to a recognition of what the ends of it all is yet. It's still just a matter of the means. It's like a toy, or a plaything, or a tool, or whatever it is.

SR I think open-endedness is a device that we use. And I think it's important to maintain that. It's part of the improvisation, or making it a game. Because in a game, the endpoint is unknown. Whereas if we make it a ritual, I think that would be less interesting... if the end were known all the time. And with each group of people it should be different. In every different place in the world, it should be different.

CS I guess I had been thinking of it as a ritual. The act of coming together as a ritual, but to think of it as a game...

SR It does have elements of a ritual. In that it unifies people in a single, symbolic activity, maybe. But I like to think of it more as a game. Something less prescribed. Not in the competitive sense of the game, just the unknown sense of a game.



CS Okay, well I think we could fade back into some music right now. Do you want to make any announcements about what music we are listening to?

LF I think that the end of the year and the beginning of the year is a good time for taking stock of what you have, you know? And uh, we spent a lot of the last year, and the last several years, like, ever since they invented illegally downloadable music, just downloading music, and, there's so much of it that we don't actually know what it is, and so much of it that we accidentally downloaded when we were looking for something else, and we're like, "What is this?" So we just put it on random, and we're in sort of an attention deficit DJ style where we just keep fast forwarding when it doesn't sound good. So I'm really wishing there were a way to have two different itunes open at the same time on the computer, but...

CS So, let's listen to some random surprises with Luke Fishbeck and Sarah Rara...

(laser sounds)

LF I don't want to say when it sounds bad we fast forward it, but sometimes we just want to fast forward it. Sometimes it's good music, but we gotta go, you know?

(foghorn)

CS So we just wanted to let you know that we're talking from the past, actually.

LF Yeah, we're six seconds ago.

CS And if we do say something...

LF I just push this button?

CS Just push this button and it disappears.

LF Push this button.

CS And you might not ever know that we said anything.

LF There was a word there that was just taken out.

SR How many seconds?

CS Six seconds.

(boo yeah!)

CS So, I was hoping to get you to start talking about your lives as artists. You're known as musicians, touring, playing shows. But then you're also known as artists, with visual art as well. So I'm just wondering where that distinction lies, and what it is appropriate to think of you as. Performers? Computer programmers? Artists? Is there an appropriate way of thinking of what Lucky Dragons is? Or what you think of yourself as being?

LF We were talking about this this morning. We went out for brunch, and I always have trouble with menus. It's a response to the way that I was brought up. My parents would always say, "You can do whatever you want with your life." And I think it

caused a very specific anxiety that is only when I go out to eat, and I look at a menu, I'm like, "There's too many choices."
(laughs) I can't decide.

CS So you've chosen not to decide in your life and work?

SR Yeah...

LF Every choice...

SR Often times we're doing a similar thing with Lucky Dragons, but in a different context. And it really depends on the place and community whether it's defined as a musical performance, or as performance art. But I don't like to make the distinction so much myself. I guess I use the term artist because I feel like it's pretty open to new genres, and creating new situations... to do whatever it is you want to do. But I do like music's history. DIY ethics, and the way music can be distributed is a lot wider and more available sometimes than the way art can be distributed. So maybe we are artists, but we use certain channels

that are specific to music to get things out in the world.

LF It definitely flip-flops though. It's just like we were talking about the economy and open source stuff. It's very pick and choose. You find the elements that work for you and then you just...

(inaudible due to reggae breakdown)

SR ...or other worlds.

CS Yeah. That's a way of being that seems really futuristic, or technological right, to be able to have so many choices like that.

SR I think it's definitely an internet era...

(inaudible due to pop world music)

SR It's a lot like the internet, just the way...

(inaudible due to pop world music)

CS What I meant to get to in the original part of that...

(inaudible due to pop world music)

SR ...an other worldly experience sometimes. Like a trance kind of experience. And that other times it's very real, very secular, or day to day, or very ordinary...

(inaudible due to Latin cantata)

CS So that ritual...

(boo yeah!)

(inaudible due to Latin cantata)

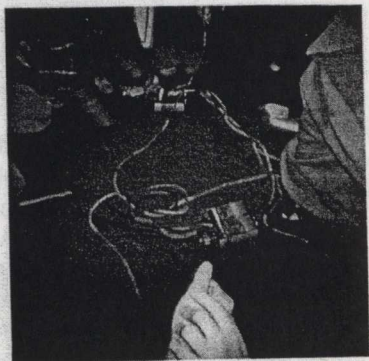
(foghorn)

CS So welcome back to Art Talk AM. We were talking a little bit off air about the difference between sound making and song writing, and it sounds like you might have different opinions on the matter.

SR Well, I guess I've been asked this before, if we as a band are in a post-song era, and I always think that we are very much

in a song era because we think very much about an ending, or a duration. And a lot of our songs, if you listen to them, the songs sputter, and they go by very quickly, and they kind of draw attention to a sense of ending or duration or how long the song can last. And we play with that a lot. From songs that are thirty seconds to hours long, but it's always that the duration is something being discussed, or to be critical about. I think we're very much in a song era, discussing what a song is, and redefining it, but definitely not post-song.

LF We were talking about ambient music, and I was thinking about that story of Brian Eno when he broke his leg and somebody brought a record over to his house for him to hear and they put it on and left, and it was like, across the room, and they put the volume so low that he could barely hear it, but he couldn't get out of bed because his leg was broken. And there was this torture of having this music that he couldn't quite hear. And then, I think he went through some sort of revelatory transcendent period lying in the bed trying



to hear this music and then realizing that he was listening more intently to all the sounds rather than just the one that he felt like he should be listening to. And the idea that something that is just outside of your, um... the range of what you can hear is... But I think traditionally, making music has a lot to do with reorganizing time or reorganizing space, you know? But I think reorganizing attention is a really interesting idea. Or encouraging different kinds of attention. Or maybe even motivating intention. Not to say it should be used for brainwashing... which it's definitely used for. These are all funny alternatives to a song, but they're all embedded within a song. Just like any time they put reverb on anything, they're suggesting that this sound came from something else, that it's been taken out of context.

CS Where do you gather your sounds from?

LF Soul Seek.

IMAGES /// Top: Lucky Dragons, *Desert Walkers*. 2006. Bottom: Lucky Dragons, *Make a Baby*. 2005.

CS Is that a program?

LF Yeah, it's a peer to peer file sharing network.

CS Oh, okay. So you're gathering information that's already been, kind of, created...

LF And youtube also.

CS Oh, youtube, okay.

SR Well, on our records a lot of our sounds come from music made in the home. It's not a very proper recording studio. We often include, like mistakes. Things falling off the table, or a cat walking by, or things that kind of interrupt pure sound as they're being recorded...

(boo yeah!)

SR ...I think that's very important, to me at least, the rough part of it. The reel is still going...

(boo yeah!)

SR ...and you collecting, kind of left over bits of sound from the environment.

CS I think that sounds perfect. And I think I'll say "boo yeah" myself to that. I think that was well put.

(laser sounds)

CS I'm also interested in your community and your support network. You go by many names. One being Lucky Dragons, and there's the Sumi Ink Club, and also Glaciers of Nice, which seems to be the broadest version of your many names, possibly. And I was just hoping you could talk about Glaciers of Nice, how it formed, how it exists.

SR Glaciers of Nice is kind of an amorphous thing that exists on the internet. And mostly it's printed matter and publications that we're involved in, that may or may not be connected to other identities like Lucky Dragons or Sumi Ink Club. It also includes things by friends and respected peers, and also this thing we've been experi-

menting with called "Free Book." It's an open blog that anyone can post to, with the parameter that you post pages from books you are reading. And so it forms this kind of loose archive, or collection of things that are being read and shared. But Glaciers of Nice is just kind of a bin where a lot of things are thrown in like stone soup. Things that are going on...

CS Which seems to work for you in general.

SR Yeah, I kind of like... not randomness, but collections of things, and correlations between different media and different people and...

(foghorn)

SR ...and what they're doing, it's kind of a melting pot.

CS You also made sure that I put the Smell in with my introduction. That's a place that you play a lot of shows, and is maybe the center of your community there in Los Angeles, right?

SR Yeah, the Smell is very important in terms of our development, because it's a really good model of a way a place should be, and the way a place should exist. It supports local artists but it also brings in music from afar to the community, and it's all ages, it's cooperatively run, financially very transparent. There's a lot of openness with the business transactions with artists, and are always very positive. The owner Jim Smith is just an incredible person, and the Smell has really been a starting point for a lot of amazing things in Los Angeles. A lot of amazing punk music and experimental music. Basically anything going on in L.A. can happen at the Smell, which is why for me, it's kind of a utopian thing. And when I go to other cities, I'm always looking for some sister center to the Smell, something like it. Because they really do support artists, and give them a place to do their thing, and to try something new.

CS *(inaudible due to pop soul music)*

SR Yeah, I just think you shouldn't have to be 21 years old to go to a music show...

(boo yeah!)

SR I really think that music should include anyone, and that includes teenagers and children, and they're doing some unusual things. I want to be involved with what younger people are doing too.

CS Great.

(music break)

CS I was hoping to get you going just about the gathering in general, and the gathering of music specifically. Whether or not that is something that you grew up into, as a fan of music, and found it that way, or how you came to find that as a space to be gathering people in the ways that you do.

LF Um. Well the gathering is I think one of the more awkward subjects to talk about, particularly in regards to art and music. But it's something I think about in a very non-specific sense. Just the idea of finding things to put together with people, of

finding people to put together with things, and the relationships that get established when you have gatherings of a lot of people. And it doesn't have anything rooted in an ideology really, it can just be a very casual thing. But the fact of the matter is that I did grow up with a lot of religion, and wound up taking away a very abstract vision of what religion was. Especially Quakerism. I went to a school where we would sit in silence, like once a week, everybody in the school. A lot of people hated it, thought it was boring, but I really got into it. Just as a way to collect yourself. It was very unstructured, there were very few rules, in fact you could stand up and say something if you wanted to, or you could stay seated. The only rule was that you had to be there with the other people...

(inaudible due to free jazz music)

LF ... the important part of it. And I think we take that attitude with music and art a lot ... that the only rule is that you should all be there. And we've even been pushing



that envelope, trying to think about ways of expanding that.

(inaudible due to free jazz music)

LF ...like we could just meet through the internet, and it would save so much fuel and resources. So even the idea of being in the same place at the same time is something...

(inaudible due to free jazz music)

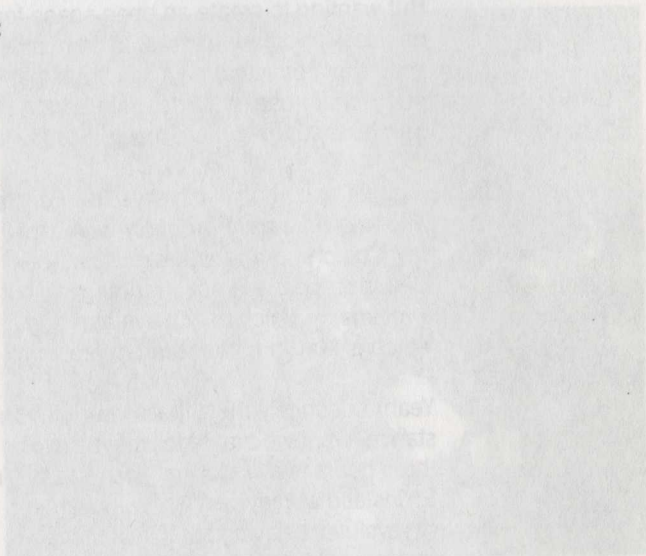
SR ...using gathering as an art form, or as a form of the thing that we do. I guess there are a lot of inspirations for that. I got into punk music later in life, and into skateboarding, these kinds of things maybe I would have done as a teenager, I didn't get into those things until my twenties, as I was already making art. I think now going back to the source of this idea, that the gathering could be the form, or the pretext, or the excuse. People being



moved together, doing something together. I think the inspiration came much more for me in paying attention to civil rights movements, and to protest movements. But wanting to create an open space for people with differing ideas, to come out together in a peaceful way. So I think that is really what I use art to do, or intend to do with it. Something more along those lines.

- CS** A quote that I carry with myself... People who know me have probably heard me say it before, but I think it relates. The idea that "peace is not a far off goal, but a means by which to achieve that end," which is Martin Luther King quote.
- SR** Yeah, I definitely think that in our circumstance, what we create for maybe two or three hours is a world that I want to live in. So instead of maybe a larger movement, or revolution, having small instances where people cooperate and have equality, and that's the premise under which we meet, that everyone has equal drawing

skill regardless of technical training, or anything like that. To create these situations where everyone is equal for a moment, and to experience that.



where people could sit and have lunch
in, and that's the promise under which we
meet, that everyone has equal drawing

ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
KPSU RADIO 2008-2009

Book 9 of 10

This interview took place January, 5th, 2009, live on KPSU, in conjunction with the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

All audio available for download at arttalkam.blogspot.com.

