




The Dawn of the Musical Selfie: A Mission to Make Music Interactive

SCOTT SNIBBE WITH PHILIP GLASS

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By Courtney Balestier
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on 09.19.14 in Features
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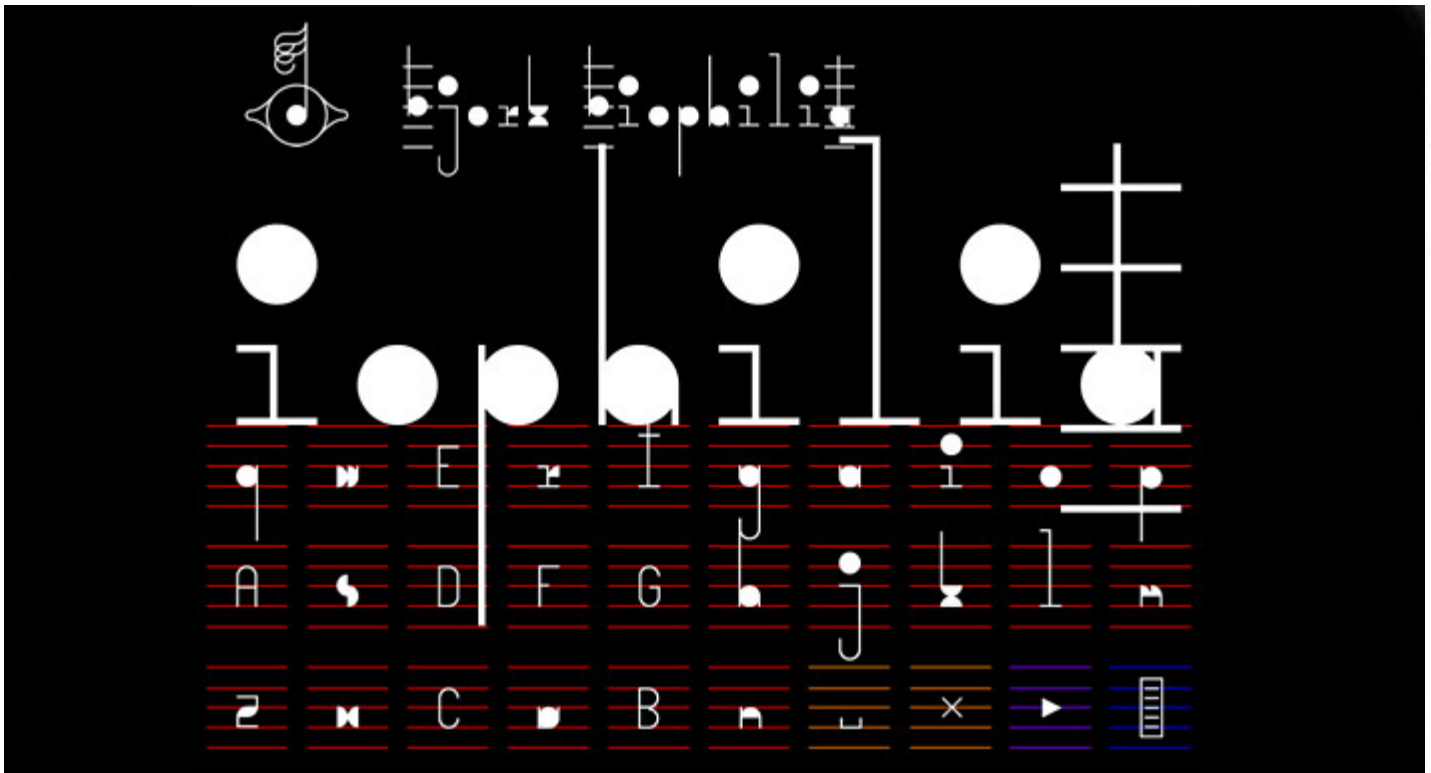
Scott Snibbe spent the summer before seventh grade sanding wood. It was 1980, and his sixth-grade class at Pacific Grove Middle School in Pacific Grove, California, had recently gotten to use six Apple II+ computers. The computers ran Logo, a programming language with “turtle graphics,” nicknamed for the look of its cursor, which allowed programmers to draw vector graphics on the screen. Seeing the forms and colors respond had a profound effect on Snibbe. His parents were abstract artists (they’d partied with the Warhol crowd back in the day), and he recognized the blinking shapes as his own medium. Snibbe wanted a computer of his own, and his parents, plastics sculptors who encouraged their children to forge excuses to skip school whenever they felt creative, agreed to buy one if he helped his father build cabinets.

‘We’re entering the age of interactivity. This 100-year period where

music was a one-way experience was a blip. People might look at it and laugh. — Scott Snibbe’

“I remember sanding: zzz-zzz-zz-zzz,” Snibbe says now, in his gentle, nasally voice. “I convinced my brother that he would like the computer for playing video games, so he worked all summer, too.” The drone of the sanding machine wasn’t the only sound Snibbe immersed himself in. He remembers, as a teenager, the kinship he felt with New Order when he saw the band’s 1983 single “Blue Monday,” its cover art a large floppy disc. (“Very few people thought computers were cool, so to make something in the shape of a floppy disc was not an earmark of something culturally hip,” he says. “But to me it was.”) As a student at Brown University, where he earned degrees in computer science, film and fine art, he would listen to Sonic Youth’s *Daydream Nation* every day after lunch, falling into a half-trance on the couch.

Now 44, Snibbe has merged these two interests into a career, co-creating the motion-graphics software Adobe AfterEffects and in 1997, co-developing a music-making video-game prototype that combined the production capabilities of ProTools with the then-emerging phenomenon of DJ culture. After a business deal fizzled, he began focusing on his love for interactive art, eventually launching his own company, **Snibbe Interactive**, and its splinter business, **Snibbe Studio**. There, the media artist is trying to solve a riddle that has ultimately culminated in the cross of his formative obsessions: What does musical interactivity look like in the 21st century?



Snibbe Studio and Bjork's *Biophilia* app

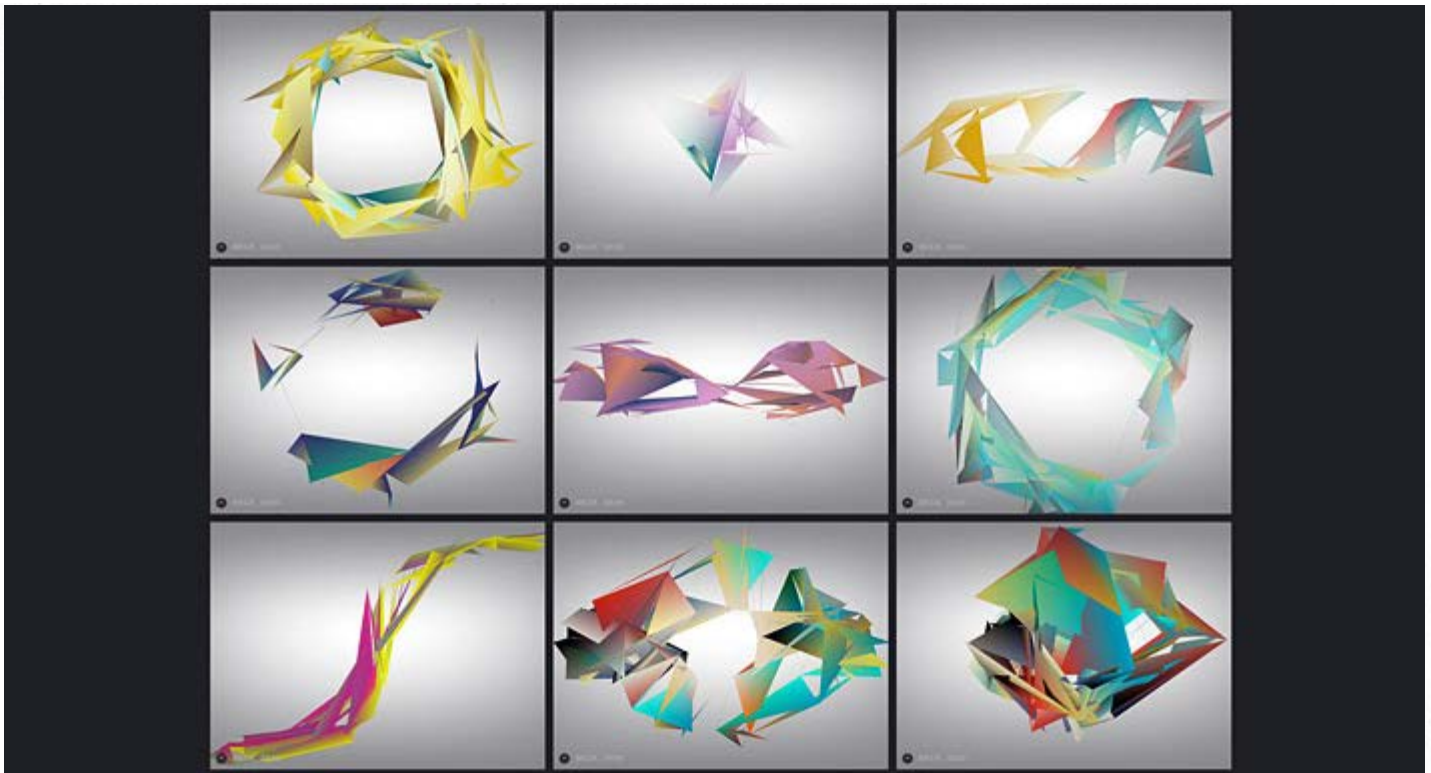
The most obvious and powerful aspect of interactive music is that it gives the listener control. Take sheet music, for example. Snibbe calls it “the killer app of the 19th century” because it is, essentially, a blueprint that’s brought to life by the user. He’ll go on to assert that music was always meant to be multisensory: Only in the past century or so, since the dawn of recorded music, have we begun isolating its auditory dimension from its other, formerly simultaneous, components like performance or dance. Walter Frisch, a professor of music at Columbia University, calls this “audio contemplation.” That is, in the past 200 years, as music began establishing itself as an art form, compositions became more complex; they required focused listening, the way a painting requires focused viewing. Now technology has presented us with a new opportunity to reset the clock. “We’re entering the age of interactivity,” Snibbe says. “This 100-year period where music was a one-way experience was a blip. People might look at it and laugh.”

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on the turntable and flipping through liner notes — has devolved into a one-note one-night stand.’

Every era has its new ways to experience music, a reality that’s partially driven by technological advancement; the 1980s had MTV, with its marriage of music and moving images, and the ’90s had the CD-ROM album experiments of artists like the Residents, whose *Freak Show* spun off the album of the same name with a navigable world of carnival curiosities. Our formats evolve too, of course, from vinyl to cassettes to CDs to MP3s (though [U2](#) and [Neil Young](#) are both currently developing alternative digital formats.) For now, we stream and download, a matter of infinite convenience that makes the act of acquiring an album effortless and the album itself intangible. And so our multisensory love affair with music — a courtship that just decades ago had us sitting rapt on the living room floor, watching a record spin on the turntable and flipping through liner notes — has devolved into a one-note one-night stand.

Snibbe’s first attempt at an interactive antidote was the app album, an enhanced collection of songs that lets the user manipulate visuals, remix tracks or change the music’s DNA — say, speeding up drum beats while silencing bass lines. The studio’s most prominent effort is [Björk](#)’s epic 2011 release *Biophilia*, developed with Björk and M/M Paris. *Biophilia* — the world’s first app album and, as of June 2014, [the first app in the Museum of Modern Art collection](#) — is interactivity in the extreme. One of its features is a responsive music video that pits viruses against cells; if the user protects the cells, the song enters an instrumental holding pattern, changing only as the infection progresses. (“As much as I like videos, they are only representations of my music, but the apps — they *are* the songs,” [Björk told *Wondering Sound*](#) in 2011. “They are the direct visualization of the music.”)



The Beck, Philip Glass, and Snibbe Studio app *REWORK_*

Snibbe Studio has also made smaller-scale iterations: On *REWORK_*, the 2012 app album of the Beck-produced compilation of Philip Glass remixes, the main interactive portal is the Glass Machine, two simple, turntable-like circles set to the scale of *Einstein on the Beach*'s "Train" that the user plays to compose minimalist snippets. App albums are boutique creations that seemed to address the question of how we can download a digital song and touch it at the same time. There was just one problem. "Each of the attempts to create such a thing is hand-crafted, from scratch, with enormous effort and little to no profitability," Snibbe says.

Most of his studio's apps fall in the middle of a wide range of production budgets, from \$30,000 to several million; individual sales are confidential, but most equate to 5-10 percent of an artist's Facebook fan count — in the case of Björk, 10 percent would be about 310,000 people, each paying \$12.99 for *Biophilia*. Which is all to say that app albums have yet to find mainstream resonance. It was too soon, Snibbe concludes now. "Realistically, *Biophilia* is probably a decade ahead of its time in terms of mainstream culture," he says.

The other problem was the lack of a platform — a daily destination that could deliver musical

interactivity to both boundary-pushing musicians' hardcore fans and broader audiences — that could become a mass medium. “Imagine, what’s the Instagram for interactive music?” he asks.

‘An app album — expensive, elaborate, arty — is like a concept album; a DIY “Fancy” video is like a moving selfie.’

Snibbe’s answer is **Eyegroove**, an app that lets users record and share their own mini music videos, 19 seconds max, that can be tweaked with a menu of special effects. (Songs are sourced from SoundCloud.) Eyegroove cuts exist for everything from Nicki Minaj’s “**Anaconda**” to Nirvana’s “**Smells Like Teen Spirit**.” There’s a clip of a teenager aping Iggy Azalea and one of a cute kid (Snibbe’s, in fact) shooting down a slide while “Wipe Out” plays. There are many takes on “**#SELFIE**” by the Chainsmokers. The app is easy to use, with an interface intuitive to anyone who’s filtered a photo. (Eyegroove has filters named by year — ’99, ’83 — and effects like “TV,” which imparts color-bar hues and static, and “K,” which lends a kaleidoscopic view.) There seems to be a Groove m.o. for everyone — proud parents, aspiring rappers, pop ingénues — though it seems most popular with performing types. (A 19-second selfie is too much for me, so, after my dog refused to do anything but sleep, I shot graphical-looking kaleidoscopic effects to “Tighten Up” by the Black Keys.) Tinkering with effects was fun, but scrolling through the Grooves was actually my favorite part. Some offer great dance moves, some (perhaps unintentional) comedy, some suggestions of narrative, like the view from a plane window that got a moody cast from “**Cool Kids**” by Echosmith. All together, they made exploring Eyegroove feel like scanning a visual radio.

Eyegroove plays off the popularity of fan-made videos — recall the “Harlem Shake” phenomenon — a species that now generates more revenue for copyright holders than official music videos do, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry’s **2014 Digital Music Report**. “Something huge is



The Eyegroove app

happening in the culture,” Snibbe says. The app is young — it just launched in April — but a profile is emerging: Eyegroove users are overwhelmingly female (80 percent) and millennial (the top two demographics are 13-17 and 18-24). They spend an average of seven-and-a-half minutes crafting their Grooves and log in 2.4 times per day.

This is a crucial deviation: An app album — expensive, elaborate, arty — is like a concept album; a DIY “Fancy” video is like a moving selfie. Short and emphatic, Eyegroove videos have the potential to act as emotive shorthand, the way gifs do. They don’t just put the user into the song; they can also bend the song to the user’s purposes, as happens when a home-movie snippet like a ride down the slide becomes a soundtracked event. An app album, however cool, is a self-contained universe: interactive, but isolated. However, if Twitter is how we think about the world and Instagram is how we see it, then it’s easy to imagine Eyegroove becoming how we hear it. “What digital communication lacks so often is emotion,” Snibbe says, “and music is the most emotional medium there is.”

Depending on your point of view, the prospect of the musical selfie could be liberating or depressing: the synergy of resonant songwriting and personal expression or a horseman of the digital-solipsism apocalypse. Snibbe, a Tibetan Buddhist who can speak in sustained meditative awe about computer code, takes a benevolent interpretation: “There’s one subject that’s always around for an artist, and that’s yourself. It’s the fundamental artistic impulse in humanity. I don’t think there’s any bigger or lesser proportion of ego involved than any other human activity.” In some ways, really, it’s as self-expressive as a mixtape.

“I don’t think digital life has taken us further away from enjoying music; it’s just bombarding us with more of it,” says Julian Hamilton, one half of the Australian electronic duo the Presets. “Vinyl, cassettes, CDs — they’re delivery systems for songs, just as the Internet is.” In July, the Presets helped launch the Google Cube, a six-sided interactive storytelling platform, with six distinct videos for a new single, “No Fun.” The band prepared different musical stems (just the bass, just the vocals and so on), so that each side of the cube would have unique music components to go with its unique video. The project represented a creative outlet beyond the recording-video-concert circuit, but when it comes to actually using it, Hamilton says, “Every fan is different.” He continues: “When I was young, I would have loved being able to spin the Cube and hear different components of the song and mix and hear the stems in different combinations. I imagine there are some fans who will also dig that, and probably others who are happier just to listen to the real song.”

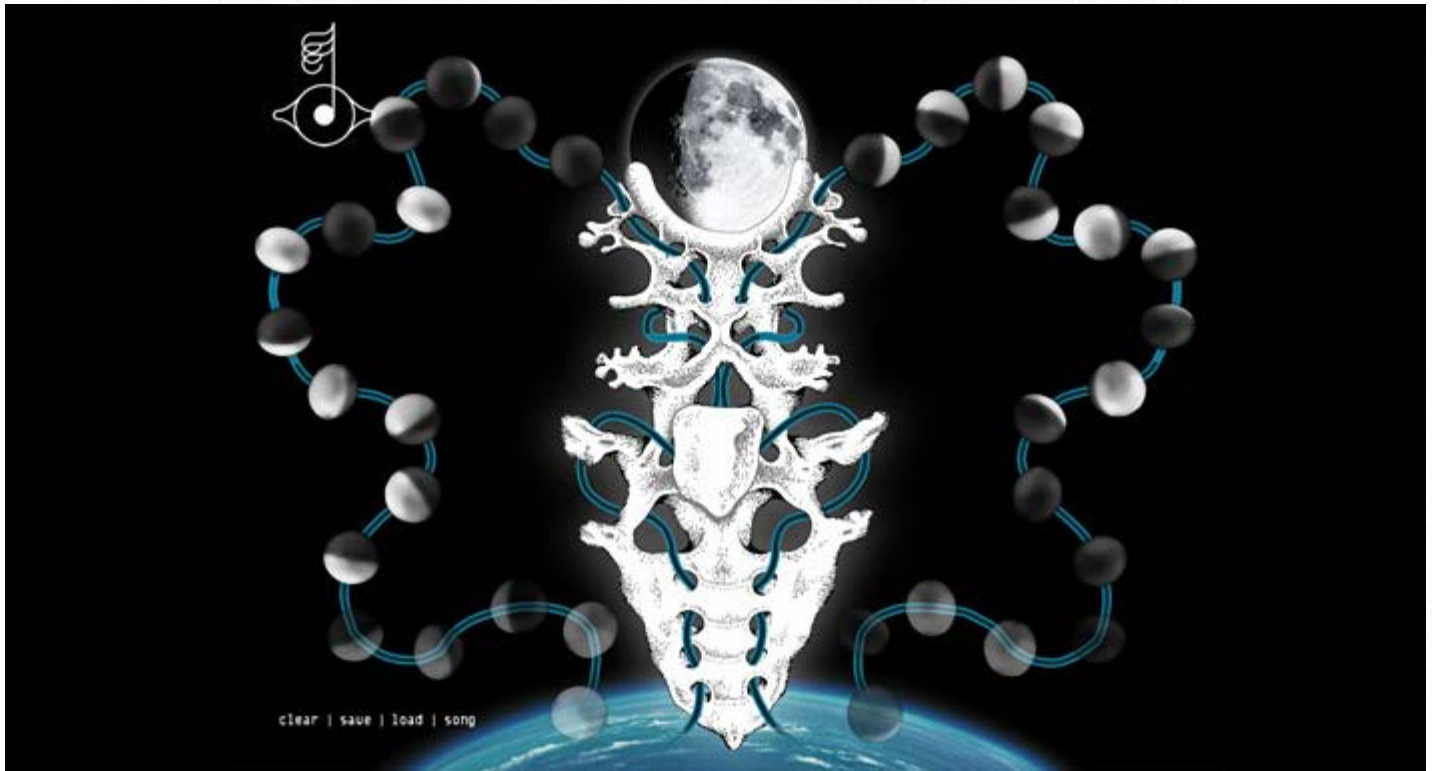
‘I don’t think digital life has taken us further away from enjoying music; it’s just bombarding us with more of it. — Julian Hamilton of the Presets’

Still, video — self-portraiture or otherwise — is perhaps the most popular frontier for musical interactivity right now. Some of the most recent artist-related apps, like art rapper **Yung Jake’s Augmented Real** and **Eno * Hyde**, by **Brian Eno and Karl Hyde**, rely on the user’s smartphone camera to superimpose augmented-reality effects, creating an interactive 3D-video experience. Viacom’s O Music Awards, which focus on the intersection of music and tech, even have a category for Best Interactive Video. Recent nominees include Yung Jake’s “**Embedded**” — a web music video that launches an onslaught of pop-up windows, each with their own fake content — and the groundbreaking concert experience of **Beck and Chris Milk’s “Sound and Vision.”** (Between producing *REWORK_* and releasing 2012’s *Song Reader* — sheet music that spawned DIY interpretations on songreader.net and a compilation album featuring fun., Jarvis Cocker and

Jack White — Beck is basically one big high-concept experiment.)

Directed by Milk and filmed with 360-degree cameras and binaural microphones, “Sound and Vision” uses webcam facial recognition to let the user control the camera angle with a turn of the head. By clicking on a venue map in the corner of the screen, the user can also shift point-of-view: to Beck’s perspective from his central perch on a rotating circular stage, to Beck himself, or to the 170 musicians arranged in concentric rings around him. The end result — a bit like being a mouse scurrying through an alien orchestra — is mesmerizing, a sense of sonic wonder rare even for a live performance. It brings back the romance, which is exactly what Snibbe wanted to do in the first place.

“I think there is a really interesting junction ahead when artists can create their music and inform digital technology,” says Murray Bell, cofounder and director of Semi-Permanent, the Australian design fest where Google Cube debuted. “But then we, the listeners, intervene and evolve it further and bring it toward us.”



Snibbe Studio and Bjork’s *Biophilia* app

Snibbe is banking on that maker-remixer impulse, and the MTV-sized hole it could fill. “We

really believe that Eyegroove is what MTV turns into in the 21st century,” he says, “where it’s not just a new way to watch videos; it’s participatory and immersive. It could actually reward you in a way that people expect today.” Built into Eyegroove is the possibility for the rich interactivity of app albums like *Biophilia* and *REWORK_* — eventually. Right now, Snibbe isn’t rushing it to catch up with the broader appeal of the new platform: “I just like the idea of bringing out people’s creativity and connection to themselves and feelings of wonder.”

“The power of music is still the music,” says Bell. “Throughout my time listening via cassettes, CDs, MP3s and streaming, digital technology has gotten me in front of music. I’m sure we miss out on some things, but we gain others, and we gain experiences that complement our lives today.” *Experience* might be the key word. Maybe it’s not so much that we miss flipping through liner notes but that liner notes are no longer enough — not when we have the power to do so much more.

Tags Beck, Bjork, Philip Glass



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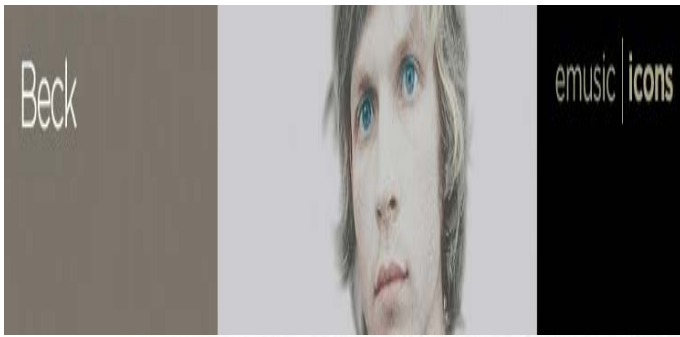


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