

In 1997, Amon Tobin spoke about the sampling philosophy behind his Latin-tinged full-length album, *Bricolage*.

By Marc Weidenbaum

By the fall of 1997, when the following interview took place, Amon Tobin had released a small flurry of Latin-themed drum'n'bass, including a full-length album and three EPs.

Born in Brazil, based in London, drawing sample material largely from American jazz and South and Central American percussion -- Tobin was making brisk, international music, with complex beats and cinematic aspirations.

The album, *Bricolage*, was his debut under his own name, though he'd previously released a full-length, *Adventures in Foam*, under the pseudonym Cujo.

Just over a week before Christmas, Tobin took time to talk about his music, about his sampling philosophy, and about the music of his peers.

"I spend 90 percent of my time listening and 10 percent making music," he said, going on to express affection for Aphex Twin, who occasionally uses cut-up voice samples, and for Scanner, who makes atmospheric backdrops to audio he captures on the surveillance equipment from which he takes his name. Tobin himself prefers not to employ vocals, saying, "I'm not that interested in using something that defines what the music's about so clearly."

But on the phone from London, he spoke clearly and patiently about his detailed, nuanced and rhythmically rich art. The full interview, lightly edited, appears below.

Marc Weidenbaum: You've released a lot of music that involves Brazilian and, in general, South and Central American percussion. How are your *Piranha Breaks* EP, the *Mission 12"*, the *Bricolage* album, the *Chomp Samba* EP related?

Amon Tobin: I think a little too much was made of my using Latin breaks in my music because I used a lot of samba and bossa nova, and general batucada percussion, in my productions. I think there's an awful lot of power in this kind of music for use in contemporary ... drum'n'bass, whatever you want to call it. A lot of people have made the connection to do with my having been born in Brazil, and that might have something to do with it. I'm always saying it's not really that at all. I just think that strong percussion, if it's really good, I'll use it in a track. Those records you mention are linked because they all use South American or Central American music in their production. I think they're just really good rhythms and they haven't really been exploited that much recently. Whenever you get -- I hesitate to use the word "fusion" -- but whenever you get that in contemporary music with samba, for instance, you tend to end up with a very happy, "let's have a party" sound, with the cowbells and the whistles and whatever. And I quite wanted to experiment with the darker side of Latin percussion.

Weidenbaum: You were born in Brazil?

Tobin: I was born there and left when I was quite young, and came to Europe, and then I went back again when I was about three or four, and lived there for a few more years, and came back to England again, and lived in lots of other places in between. Been pretty much scattered around really.

Weidenbaum: What did your parents do?

Tobin: My mom went off, it wasn't really a job, she and some friends decided to go off when I was about two years old to Europe on a hippie trail, I guess you could call it, wandered around Europe. I don't take any responsibility for what she did.

Weidenbaum: You and Richard D. James, aka Aphex Twin, have shown in your recordings how the rhythms we associate with today's electronic music, especially with drum'n'bass, have been around for some time.

Tobin: Oh, yeah, sure. Everything seems to have come from something else at some stage. I think it's quite healthy that rhythms and music generally mutate and mix with other things. It's quite interesting to go right back to the beginnings in some ways and see what's there. Some rhythms have been so far removed from where they originated, they've become completely different. It's useful to look back and see what was there in the first place.

Weidenbaum: On the *Bricolage* tracks "Creatures" and "One Day in My Garden" you seem to be constructing your own jazz from pre-existing material.

Tobin: Everything I use, including percussion, is very chopped up. The idea is to take something that exists in a different context and manipulate it in such a way that it works in a different context, along with a whole range of other sounds that have also come from other places and might not have come together in a natural situation. So, yeah, everything, including the rhythms, are very chopped up. I like to work with sometimes three and four drum samples and chop them up and go in between them and use the kick from one break, the snare from another break. The same way, I might do with a saxophone. On "One Day in My Garden," I think there are three different sources where I got the saxophone and I got them together to create one melody.

Weidenbaum: When you used the title *Bricolage* for your album, were you thinking of the way the term is explored in Claude Levi-Strauss' book of anthropology, *The Savage Mind*?

Tobin: I wasn't really making any kind of cultural statement. I was using the term bricolage really with a view to things working within a particular environment, and not necessarily being used in the same way they were intended to be used. I don't think what I'm doing is unique; I'm just trying to focus on this aspect because it's what really interests me about the sampler and the way music's made these days. This whole thing to do with bricolage was to do with sounds originating somewhere and being used by other people in quite a subversive way, not necessarily in the way they were intended to be used, working in a different way. I often use an analogy about this tribe that used television to communicate with spirits. Even though that's not what TV is meant for, it worked perfectly within their environment.

Weidenbaum: William Gibson, the cyberpunk novelist, has said something along the lines of how "the street has its own use for things."

Tobin: That's right. You use things in whatever way they work for you.

Weidenbaum: You're often constructing something that isn't unfamiliar, yet making it feel new, like the walking bass line on "Creatures."

Tobin: I really want there to be -- the important thing about music is the power to, when you're in a certain place and hear a certain tune it might bring you right back to somewhere in your life. Music really does that: it takes you right back to a particular moment in time, or it might remind you of a person, or whatever. The idea of using samples, they come directly from somewhere in time, people might not necessarily recognize where they come from, but there might be some subliminal recognition of the sound and they might feel close to it in some ways.

Weidenbaum: What kind of set up do you use?

Tobin: I only use a sampler, an AKAI S3000. I don't use any synthesizers or keyboards or anything like that. Obviously I use a keyboard to trigger sounds and stuff, but all my sounds come from other sounds.

Weidenbaum: Do you use a computer along with the AKAI?

Tobin: I use Cubase on the Mac. For a long time I was working with a Performa, and just recently I got myself a PowerMac.

Weidenbaum: It's incredible how accessible the materials and equipment are to produce such music.

Tobin: I think it's great. Tech is becoming more and more accessible, and cheaper, so people who might not have been able to get their hands on an orchestra are able to experiment with those sounds. Of course there are restrictions and limitations in the way you can use those sounds, but that's part of the creative process itself.

Weidenbaum: Before you recorded under your own name, you recorded under a pseudonym, Cujo. You released an album, *Adventures in Foam*.

Tobin: I dunno. The Cujo thing, it's no longer running, I had to stop it in the end, but it was just a name really. You kind of think, you should have a really cool name. The album was out quite a while ago over here [in England], in a different format as well. I was quite upset with Shadow [Records] record, with how they edited that album. I thought it was edited quite badly. Tracks don't start where they should start, basic things like that. It's quite insane, really.

Weidenbaum: You don't see yourself exploring other pseudonyms.

Tobin: I'm quite concentrating on what I'm doing with Ninja Tune.

Weidenbaum: I picked up *Joint Ventures*, an album that collects collaborations, and you're on a lot of them. Were you in charge of it?

Tobin: I tend to be quite a -- I produce an awful lot of music, I seem to steam on. I was really into the idea of collaborating. There were quite a few people I wanted to do tracks with.

Weidenbaum: Could you talk about how, say, working with Curtis on the track "Scram" is different from working with Funki Porcini on "Z Cars"?

Tobin: Curtis just won't go above 86 bpm or something, he just refuses, he's got his set of rules and he's sticking by them. James [Bradell, aka Funki Porcini] is a different story. We did the collaboration a while ago. I don't know, I suppose it's different with everyone, but it's interesting because you learn an awful lot working with other people from the way they approach problems and deal with them. It's a very useful thing to do.

Weidenbaum: A little more about the Porcini. Could you recollect the circumstance under which that *Joint Ventures* track was made?

Tobin: I went up to his house and we did it in a night, and then he worked on it more by himself afterwards, added some horns and vocal samples as well. We did it quite quickly; I tend to do that anyway, I like to get really stuck into something and not stop until it's finished, and that's how we went with it, really. But it was a strange one, because I was quite nervous, actually. I was really a big fan of James for a long time, and it was the first time we really met, the first time we worked together.

Weidenbaum: When did you first start making music?

Tobin: I'd been messing around with different instruments for a long time, but I didn't really start making it professionally until three years ago.

Weidenbaum: Do you aspire to play a traditional instrument. Are you fully satisfied with modern technology?

Tobin: I wish I'd learned one instrument and become really competent on that one instrument, but I think that my instrument now is the sampler, and that's what I'm focused on. I think there's a lot more that can be done with it and I'm just skimming the surface, really. I'm not really interested in using live instruments at all. I could get session musicians in or whatever as well, and sessions to do samples for me, but I'm really quite into using sounds that come from other places.

Weidenbaum: Focusing in on jazz -- do you have early memories of listening to jazz, did you come to it later on in life? Since the birth of rock, most people have tended to catch up with jazz later on, once they come up with whatever's popular with their peers.

Tobin: I definitely was along those lines. I'm certainly no expert. What appeals to me about it is the fact that it can pretty much do what it wants, it's very unrestricted as a form of music, it's very free -- and I'm not into music that has too many rules or regulations. I was into blues, I was into hip-hop, but jazz is quite recent.

Weidenbaum: Brazilian music, of course, has its links own to jazz, notably "Girl from Ipanema." By making a new kind of jazz and emphasizing this Latin element, you're kinda doing what Dizzy Gillespie did with Afro-Cuban jazz; you're giving jazz what Sidney Bechet famously called the "Spanish tinge."

Tobin: I'm a big fan of Stan Getz, Jobim, all that stuff, I really am. There's a kind of melancholy in that music and a kind of darkness as well. It's quite a natural thing. Brazilian music and jazz have always lent themselves to one another, so I think it's quite a natural step to take if I'm using jazz music in my music to use Brazilian music as well.

Weidenbaum: There are those three off shoots of *Bricolage* --

Tobin: How do you mean offshoots? Oh, the EPs. I'm kind of working on my next album, which is almost finished. There will probably be another single before the album is completed. It really hasn't been worked out because I'm just producing tracks and doing a lot of DJing at the moment, but I should imagine there will be something out in spring or summer next year.

Weidenbaum: I saw you on one of the Ninja "stealth" tours, in San Francisco. It reminded me of the old package tours, like Motown used to do.

Tobin: It's good, there's quite a cross section of sounds, an eclectic night.

Weidenbaum: You seemed to have a different audience than, say, Up, Bustle and Out, who were also on the tour.

Tobin: It's a strength of a label if it can be diverse and accept differences. People like different things, but they're equally credible.

Weidenbaum: Could you discuss how a particular track on *Bricolage* was put together?

Tobin: I don't really have a method, one particular way of doing it. I tend to approach it differently each time. Sometimes I have a load of sounds I've sampled, and I try and work within those samples. Sometimes I have just one sound or some breaks and it progresses in a more linear way. I don't know, it's quite an organic thing. It tends to, you know, evolve from one idea to another, and it's quite rare that I end up with what I thought I was gonna end up with. Sometimes I might start with -- "One Day in My Garden," I might think that's the way the track's gonna end up, but suddenly a perverse aspect comes in and I go off on a tangent. And the nice thing is that you allow yourself to go off on a tangent and see what happens down that route and maybe come back again. I like to have little journeys in the tracks.

Weidenbaum: Who are your three or four favorite jazz musicians?

Tobin: I'm not an expert, but I am a huge fan of Stan Getz, I also like Eddie Palmieri, Thelonious Monk. I like people like Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, those Hammond players. Yeah, there's an awful lot of people I like. I go by tracks -- if I like a tune, I might not like other stuff the person's done.

Weidenbaum: I like the idea that sampling is an expression of enthusiasm -- rather than writing about something, you make music out of it.

Tobin: I only sample things I really love. It's like saying, God this is fantastic, I want to do something with this.

Weidenbaum: Do you have lingering fears about copyrights.

Tobin: The thing is, the samples I use tend to be quite small, with the odd exception. Some things on the *Cujo* album are quite cheeky. It depends, really, how you work with the sounds -- if you're just taking something and using it in the same way as it was used before, I don't think there's really much point in doing that. Whereas, if you're taking something and changing it into something new, I don't see how you could be accused of plagiarism. You're obviously taking something. I don't know how it's done legally in that sense. I tend not to think much about it because I'm using such small pieces, and I'm changing them so drastically, I doubt I'd ever get in too much trouble.

Weidenbaum: What are you listening to know -- do you listen a lot?

Tobin: I spend 90 percent of my time listening and 10 percent making music. That's the way it happens because I'm always looking for samples, always listening to stuff. I listen to an awful lot of soundtracks, old jazz records as well. Contemporary stuff? I'm really into Danny Breaks. I quite like Photek as well, I'm just talking about drum'n'bass now. I'm a big fan of Funki Porcini always; *Lets See What Carmen Can Do* is always in my box. New standards are set all the time by people and you can't get complacent. That's really good.

Weidenbaum: It's a bit overwhelming how music is out there.

Tobin: The number of labels releasing stuff is quite insane. The more people who are doing it, the better the standard will get.

Weidenbaum: The record industry as an organized corporate body is under the impression it's in a depression, yet you go to these small shops and there's more than you could afford to buy.

Tobin: There's really not much in common between the industry and the smaller labels that are quite genuine in their pursuit of good tunes.

Weidenbaum: Matt and Jonathan from Coldcut have had a different experience than the other artists on Ninja Tune, the label they founded. They had a mainstream existence before going underground. How aware are you of their success on the mainstream level?

Tobin: I don't really speculate on the working of the Coldcut mind. I realize they worked with some big names and it gave them the opportunity to take their stuff further. I wouldn't be recording for their label if they hadn't had some success and been able to set it up.

Weidenbaum: Are there things you're waiting for? Luke Vibert says wants more memory in his computer. Aphex Twin desires new input devices. What do you want?

Tobin: Time, more time, I want to be able, for instance, to go on tour, and while I'm doing the waiting, which is a lot of what you do on tour, I'd like to be able to be producing. So I guess the technology I'm waiting for is the sampler-sequencer I can take on the road with me, that's small enough but is flexible enough for me to do tunes.

Weidenbaum: Sean Booth, of Autechre, says he does a lot of work on his portable computer.

Tobin: Yeah, but it's difficult if you're just working with samples. Because I use a quite lot of memory and flexibility in the sampler itself, I'll probably wait until I can do that on tour.

Weidenbaum: So you're fairly satisfied technologically?

Tobin: I've got more technology than I need. I don't think the technology is the be all and end all of the production process. It starts and ends in your head, really, and you work with whatever you can.

Weidenbaum: This feels like the first time in a long time there's been a music that's both poplar and avant-garde.

Tobin: It's so good to not have to do cheesy things to make a living. I'm always amazed that I can get away with experimenting to the extent that I do. Aphex Twin, as well. You listen to *Come to Daddy*, that's another record I'm really into at the moment. It's just brilliant that that stuff is cool at the moment, 'cause it's so interesting as well.

Weidenbaum: You haven't experimented much with vocals.

Tobin: I'm not that interested in using something that defines what the music's about so clearly. The vocal tends to tell you what the track's about: it's a love song, or it's whatever, and it kind of gives too much information away. I want the music to be more interactive, where people can put their own input into it.

Weidenbaum: Vocals are counter to your imagination?

Tobin: They explain a little too much. Then again, if I were making hip-hop I'd probably want to use vocals. Again, I'm not using live instruments, live people. I'm taking samples and if I started taking vocal samples, well that would be quite easy to spot.

Weidenbaum: Scanner seems to have --

Tobin: Yeah, definitely, Scanner's done something unique with what he does with vocals -- it holds pretty tight with what he does. But that's his idea ...

Weidenbaum: Is there much American music that you listen to?

Tobin: I used to listen to a lot of hip-hop, but as I make more and more music I tend to listen to more jazz than anything else.

Weidenbaum: Could you describe the nature of the Ninja Tune consortium of musicians?

Tobin: I wouldn't like to do that. I can only really speak for myself. Wouldn't want to speak for Ninja Tune. It's quite exciting, all these influences and ideas flying around the whole place. It feels like something that's about to go boom. I wouldn't go any further than that.

Weidenbaum: Do you have health insurance, how formalized is your association with the label?

Tobin: I haven't been offered health insurance so far -- haven't really looked at the contract. But I get a lot of support. I give them tracks all the time. The people in the office do an incredible job of sending out the tunes, and getting remixes, and arranging DJ dates and all that sort of stuff. It all goes a bit mad when you've actually got an album coming out. It's when you see them really running around and working for you.

Weidenbaum: Do you like doing remixes?

Tobin: Sometimes more than other times.

Weidenbaum: I imagine at this stage you're approached by people with whose music you're not familiar?

Tobin: It's a different thing completely. You just have to look at each one individually and take it like that.

Weidenbaum: There haven't been many remixes of your work.

Tobin: It has to be people I really, really like. I don't want to say anything but I think something's in the pipeline that could be quite great.

