

C. Spencer Yeh by Michael Barron

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C. Spencer Yeh. Photo by Stine Janvin Motland.

At a recent show at New York City's The Kitchen performance space, the artist, musician, and filmmaker C. (Chihfu) Spencer Yeh performed a set of violin and vocal work, the latter drawn largely from his newest record, *Solo Voice I – X*, out later this year from Primary Information. Yeh began by violently whipping his face back and forth, blowing into a mic as his lips passed by—producing a sound like a blade cutting through air—then following up with a rapid shaking

of his head. The single sword had become many; I worried for his safety. The performance then settled into a flurry of looped smacking noises (also originating from his mouth, or more accurately, from behind the teeth) over which he tapped, taunted, and teased a violin with a bow.

The release of *Solo Voice I – X* isn't the only thing happening for Yeh this year. His video work was recently picked up for representation by Electronic Arts Intermix, which he celebrated by hosting an evening of his film shorts. In March, he performed in Cairo and Athens as part of an international contemporary art exhibition. And later this fall, Yeh will produce and show work as an artist-in-residence for the acclaimed time-based art organization ISSUE Project Room.

We met at a noisy bar for this interview, venturing before long to a quieter bar next door where, as *The Graduate* screened on a wall behind us, the following conversation took place.

<https://soundcloud.com/primaryinformation/solovoice-excerpts-vii-iii-v2>

Michael Barron I was listening to the master of *Solo Voice I - X* and was intrigued by the way you made use of the two sides of the record. Side A is made up of brief clips of continuous sounds, almost like demonstrations, and Side B is compositional. Did you think about that when you were making this piece?

C. Spencer Yeh That wasn't the plan from the beginning. When it came time to assemble the record, after a few failed attempts at structure, it became clear how to handle the idea of A and B. Most people who make records are familiar with this process, of course, but it's fantastic to me that the physical act of "flipping" still exists—like how it can be daytime on one side of the earth, while on the other it's night.

MB You can literally see the difference between the two sides in the wave forms of the sound files. A is startling because, unlike the peaks and crevices I usually see on a sound file, it's a series of plateaus. It looks like it's powered by an on/off switch. There's no variation. B has a more conventional visual and aural narrative. It climbs until it reaches an apex, hits some turbulence, then comes in for a landing.

CSY I prefer to make a record knowing from the beginning what format or formats the work will be published on. Of course, a digital version is inevitable these days, but I just pretended that the vinyl record would be the dominant format. With a digital album, the change from A to B would just be too abrupt. I'm counting on that physical silence of flipping the record to be part of the experience of listening.

MB How did the idea behind this record come to be?

CSY I've known James [Hoff] and Miriam [Katzeff] at Primary Information for a while, and we talked about a putting out a record. That's the short answer. The last few records I've done I made only after being approached by labels. A majority of my recorded work has been based on these offers, and about finding the right place for an idea I've been sitting on. For example, the CS Yeh record was done with DeStijl, which was a dream and the perfect place to realize

that project based on the records they've published in the past. I've been spoiled by having been able to work with labels that really are careful with cultivating an identity. I generally prefer those labels. Like many other aspects of getting work out there, it develops from relationships that form from sniffing each other out over time, like a bunch of dogs roaming around the park—and then suddenly a record appears. I had always wanted to put out a record based around voice, and Primary Information were the dogs to do it.

MB You've also put out a Solo Violin record, and there's a [Solo Electronics](#) recording on the ISSUE Project Room website—

CSY That's just a recording of a live performance—

MB But as a musician you seem interested in highlighting voice and taking it back to a primal function. Seems fitting for a label called Primary Information.

CSY They understand what I'm doing—perhaps even more than I do. Despite the frames and boundaries this type of record could land within, it's just a work first and foremost. It's up to an audience to decide to engage with it and place it themselves.

MB Did you have any guidelines leading you?

CSY Before I started recording, I had drawn out this diagram of intertwining arcs over time. Each arc was like a span of a single idea, similar to the waveforms you pointed out, for what is now side A of the record. I'd originally thought about a series of layers overlapping one another, alternating solo and superimposed moments—like a Venn diagram.

MB You mean that, the way you had drawn them out, there was a point where the sounds would begin to layer?

CSY Right. I was interested in fixing the location of the superimpositions based on these diagrams, rather than on a sense of musicality, whatever that is.

MB Side A is clips of different raw sounds. I can't tell if they're layered or not.

CSY There is no layering on side A. Raw sound is pleasing to me, especially once you let it sink in. Really, all you need to listen to is there. You don't need to have all these other elements going on at the same time. It's that genuine quality of sound that I find in minimal music, when you find just the right thing that doesn't require anything supplementary—a sound you can really hang with for a long period of time. Going into a proper studio and working with these crazy vintage microphones really helped realize that vision. It greatly influenced the final work. I had a good deal of material I had recorded in my studio prior, but I just trashed all that stuff.

MB Even without microphones, it still sounds like music you'd be capable of making after the apocalypse.

CSY Oh yeah, in terms of the voice, sure, absolutely. With voice in particular, I've thought about the ways certain cultures have developed “vocal only” music and what kinds of extended

techniques are involved. A popular example would be Tuvin throat singing. But why did that develop—this crazy extended technique, as opposed to orchestrated choral music? Instead of developing horizontally—just singing single notes over a period of time—their vocal evolution went vertical. The approach to making music in that direction is complex and limitless, and, like you say, would make for an ideal post-apocalyptic instrument.

MB Some of the vocal stuff reminds me of Dadaist work—Kurt Schwitters in particular. I saw the Dada show at MoMA a few years back, and there was a Schwitters vocal piece on loop. I remember just sitting there listening to his voice and thinking about how much he was able to do without the effects that many musicians today depend on to propel their ideas forward.

CSY What's interesting to me is that in order for things to get gnarly for someone like Schwitters, and maybe even a greater European art continuum, it had to be written down. A lot of sound poetry, for instance, is based first and foremost on the written word, or messing with the written word so then these vocal sounds would be uttered, because you'd have to read these gnarly word constructions. I'm really not a vocal music scholar, and someone may prove me wrong when this gets published, but I really doubt there's Tuvin throat singing sheet music. You know, sheet music that says, "really deep throat this line," you know? The culture is passed along as an oral tradition.

MB Did you have to train yourself to do these sorts of things?

CSY Yeah. I've said this before, but I would practice while driving to and from work when I lived in Cincinnati.

MB I noticed when watching you perform that you aggressively shake your head. I couldn't do that without getting a huge headache.

CSY There was a point at which I realized I was going to hurt myself, so part of my training was figuring out how to do that stuff without injury. Maybe I come from a line of people with really strong necks. I still get really caught up in the moment, in the zone, but now I'm also able to make some space in my head to think while in the middle of it. I can tell myself: Shall I bring it down? Shall I take it up? How am I feeling?

MB I feel a sensual joy. It's a very physical music that you do—your entire body seems to erupt out of your mouth. And yet these sounds toe the line between comforting and startling because they are intensely human.

CSY Well, they're specific to my own body and mouth. I had to figure out what I was naturally built for. For instance, I have a big face with big cheeks. I can make blubbery sounds. So I've developed what I'm able to do based on those qualities. It's been an ongoing investigation to see what my natural abilities are, and, of course, how they decay over time. On those reality talent show programs, audiences are often delighted when someone with a big face and big cheeks sings like a hummingbird. How about if Mr. Big Face actually goes for it like Mr. Big Face?

MB Some of your earlier material has pop elements—beats, song narrative, a band—especially when you performed under the moniker Burning Star Core—are you still engaged with that work?

CSY Not currently. There was a certain point when I started breaking away from that. Burning Star Core used to be a catch-all for everything I did, from noise to pop explorations. But, as the Burning Star Core project kept moving, it started venturing down its own path, and not everything I was doing necessarily fit within it. I have some early Burning Star Core CD-Rs that are just violin improvisations, which nowadays I would file elsewhere. Where a lot of people would make the obvious decision to either start new projects or end one that had run its course, I kept stubbornly just sticking to this one project, and adding to it and adding to it. Eventually it began to hinder other things I wanted to do.

<https://soundcloud.com/dronedisco/burning-star-core-beauty-hunter>

MB Why use your name and not another project name?

CSY I like the idea of work coming from a person and hearing how that person defines his or herself without the need for a project name. It's like a cartoon where the character jumps through a wall and the outline of the hole is exactly its shape and only its shape. Bugs Bunny isn't Daffy Duck. On the other hand, you take a Play-Doh mould and make predesigned sculptures from it, and mutate them however you'd like, but they'll still vaguely resemble the cut-out. I don't think it's more truthful, though—that's another thing to play with. I suppose you do back yourself into a corner when you use your own name.

MB What you, as C. Spencer Yeh, are able to do is both limited and unique to C. Spencer Yeh. Meaning no one else can perform your work. At least, not like you.

CSY That's funny, because I've toyed with notational composition, thinking about how to bust out of that. There were a couple of commissions that came up in the last few years where I was like: Okay, I'm going to work with notes on a staff. That became the most challenging and "experimental" thing for me to attempt, personally.

MB What do you prefer to use as compositional tools?

CSY In the studio, I tend toward visualizing music and sound as pieces of footage, and the methodology I use to create them is the same approach I use for film and video editing, so I use a program like Adobe Premiere or Final Cut, some non-linear editing program to help me build and organize sounds. Figuring out that I perceive sound like that really helped me past certain constrictions I was hitting when working with music editing programs like Logic or Ableton. That's what's great, right? Coming out of speakers, music is always going to be music, no matter how it's made.

MB Tell me about this ISSUE Project Room residency you've just been awarded. Do you have any idea what you'll be doing with it?

CSY I'm going to focus on three things—improvisation, composition, and installation. Which sounds like I'm making a pizza—flour, water, and tomatoes. But yeah, three simple things.

MB Maybe you could make a pizza.

CSY Someone, I forget who, once said, "As an improviser, I feel the ideal is to be handed anything and being able to figure out how to play it in a compelling manner." Like, how do you make a toy ukelele compelling? Maybe you hug it and start crying, I don't know.

MB And what's your compositional ideal?

CSY Figuring out how to present work without being there.

MB Sort of redefining "phoning it in."

CSY Right, or Dropbox it. Zip it in.

MB What are the guidelines they are giving you at ISSUE?

CSY I think that remains to be discussed. It's funny to be chosen as an artist-in-residence when the ISSUE space will be closed for renovations. But I'm personally excited about it. As much as I would love the constancy of working within a unique space I know fairly well—and I do think it's a unique space that helps inform many of the works performed there—I'm very curious to see what space we come up with instead.

MB Because it would be a completely blank space?

CSY Right, I can start from scratch, rather than from familiarity. Or maybe I could try and choose a space that informs the approach, like a performance at Anthology Film Archives.

MB Like a live-score thing.

CSY Or just using that space. I did just curate a series of live film scores at Spectacle Theater, and, before that, I had done similar events at Triple Canopy. One of my favorites of the live-score performances I organized in that series was by the group Title TK.

MB With Howie Chen, Cory Arcangel, and Alan Licht, right? You know, I transcribed that interview book they ended up making.

CSY Oh, you did that? How did that go?

MB I worked with Matt Mondanile. He gave me credit in the liner notes and a free copy of the release, so I was pretty happy.

CSY I think it's cool to get supporting role credit for doing something very particular, as opposed to a main byline. Your name starts popping up in all these odd places. I've been able to contribute to a bunch of other people's work, with some of my roles being pretty minute. It starts to build into this weird shadow career.

MB A professional background walker of the arts, like a film extra or cymbal player. That's a benefit to performative arts. Writers, in particular, often bemoan how lonely their art is.

CSY I can see that. However, audiences seem infatuated with the idea of the artist as an individual, or a band as a singular entity. Like, somehow, a sculpture magically appears.

MB It's more romantic.

CSY But, at the same time, I think it's attractive to execute what seems like group vision as a group of separate individuals.

MB Each bringing something to the table.

CSY Exactly, and just being aware of who's doing what.

MB Going back to self-mythology, your film and video work has just been picked up by Electronic Arts Intermix. Can you tell me more about that?

CSY These are things I've been making over the course of years—music videos, film trailers, and, I guess, art videos—for lack of a better term. So the EAI thing is a formal foot forward in that direction. It's funny, in the past I'd be a bit suspicious when musicians decide to become visual artists and/or writers or actors. And now that's what I'm doing.

MB Vito Acconci started out as a poet, before he became a performance artist, before he became an architect.

CSY I've talked to him about that, and he's told me, "I don't know why people keep asking me about this old shit I made. I'm designing this speculative public pavilion, and no one wants to talk to me about that."

MB But you have a film background—that's what you studied in college—and instead you veered into an expansive music career. So really you're coming back to your first love. How does that feel?

CSY In terms of film, I've rediscovered what some of my interests are in creating it: mise en scène, the nebulization of time and space, and aspects of auteur-theory shit, as I mentioned before.

MB I get that with your music, too. In the way a camera might zoom in on a flickering candle—the detail of the waving flame on a wick, the puddle of wax beneath it—you do the same by pulling out these little sound bits from instruments. For example: the sound of a bow tapping a string, rather than the sound of a bowed violin string.

CSY That's what I think is an overarching aspect of my investigations—this sensuality of detail. Looking back at my youthful film habits, I didn't really give a fuck about a plot or story. People who go on about scientific accuracy and continuity errors in film—what the fuck do you want? Go for the vibe. Some classic genre films are really just made up of mindblowing moments glued together by boring illegible passages of people talking the "story."

MB Do you see the notion of a story as being a burden to the artist? In a novel or a film or a composition or whatever, people expect to be taken somewhere and deposited somewhere else in a way that makes sense.

CSY As you said that, I saw a dash between “people expect to be taken somewhere and deposited somewhere else”—DASH—“in a way that makes sense.” Where does the notion of sense come from? From artists who are trained to supposedly move people with music or with film? What about the people who say “I don’t know what I just saw or heard, but I thought that was great.” Did it make sense to them? Did it have to? There’s a difference between a personal sense and having one drilled into you.

MB Do you find that sound has more freedom in that regard than film?

CSY Well, you have carte blanche with sound in a way you don’t with film. Say you take a sound sample, slowed it down, and added spring reverb to it. People love that kind of thing. It sounds amazing, while being goofy at the same time. But if I took a clip from, let’s say, *Eraserhead*, and I just reversed and slowed it down, it would still kind of just be a clip from *Eraserhead*. You can’t really divorce visual information from its origins the way you can with sampled sound. But I don’t know, maybe that’s being done on a pixel level? There’s a power in the visual in that regard that could trump sound. I should run with that idea, sampling images on the level of a pixel.

Maybe this relationship could be summed up like this—for sound, all you need is a bunch of celery to twist someone’s arm in half. To do that on camera you need a lot of rubber, fake blood, and just more stuff. You can ruin a million dollar shot with a whoopee cushion.

MB I’ve watched a ninety-minute film where the visuals had been taken out. It was in German, and all that was there were the subtitles against a black screen. It was mostly dialogue with occasional sound effects. It would be an entirely different experience to sit through *Eraserhead* without the visuals, listening only to the sounds and voices.

CSY When I was a boy scout, there was this one dude who would sit at the campfire playing the *Top Gun* soundtrack on a boom box—not the soundtrack music from the movie, but the actual audio from the film, taped to cassette. Looking back it’s hilarious and perverted, but he almost had it figured out.

MB It’s weird how you can just jump right into that movie at any point. It’s so familiar. There’s even a Twitter account now that’s just stills of *Top Gun* taken every second.

CSY I guess, in that regard, story interests me. Or rather, narrative interests me. How can you drop in at any point in that narrative and still know you are watching or listening to *Top Gun*? It’s like seeing my work as a worm—one long wiggling thing—that, even if it diverges to some vibe I want to ride, you can still identify it as mine no matter where you drop in.