

Fifteen Questions with Uwe Schmidt aka AtomTM

Pure energy

A new era

Uwe Schmidt has released music under many names, but in the '90s he decided to summarise his working titles into one simple moniker, Atom TM. HD is the latest release in what could be conservatively called a wildly prolific career spanning many years. While Schmidt's album was released on Raster-Noton, it is generally considered that his own label Rather Interesting was the largest unified collection of his music with over 46 full length releases all written, recorded, mixed and mastered by Schmidt himself. To put it mildly, Schmidt doesn't see the dissolution and evolution of the music industry as a bad thing, and believes that the intensifying conversion of music and sound is not a problem that needs solving. Preferring the label 'sound' over 'music' as a way to describe the new reality of today, Schmidt hopes to overcome traditional understandings which will allow transcendence into new realms of pure physical and spiritual energy.

When did you start writing/producing music - and what or who were your early passions and influences?

I started writing/producing music around 1985. Before that I had just played drums, but switched to drum computer programming after I had heard a drum machine on the radio. I guess this must have been the biggest influence, since it really changed the way I saw music from that moment on. I got deeply into all sorts of electronic music after that.

What do you personally consider to be the incisive moments in your artistic work and/or career?

Hearing an LM-1 drum computer on the radio when I was 14

Listening to acid music for the first time, around 1990.

Seeing a merengue band playing at a beach in Costa Rica around 1994.

Hearing and seeing at the same time, sound waves on a "Funktion One" sound system.

What are currently your main compositional- and production-challenges?

Managing the above listed incisive moments.

What do you usually start with when working on a new piece?

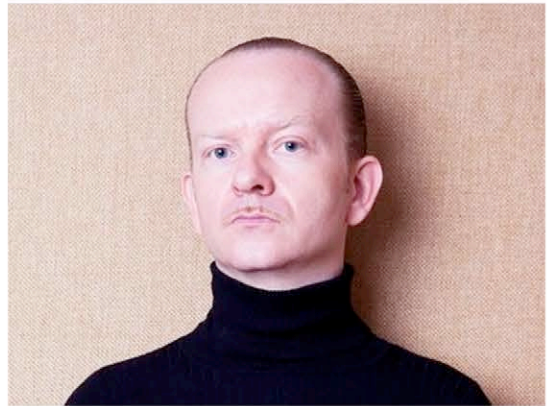
There is no fixed rule or routine, really. I usually work on many things at the same time, therefore I collect all sorts of elements constantly: words, lyrics, samples, sounds, typographies, photographs, and so on. Each single one of those things may start a track or trigger an idea to start a new piece.

Every now and then I just record a couple of words, around which the rest of the song is then assembled or sometimes assembles itself. In other cases it's a jam on a drum computer, or maybe a melody that goes around in my head while taking a shower.

How strictly do you separate improvising and composing?

Very strictly. I am very aware of when to apply both methods. In general I consider composition a very clear and mental process. Most of it I do almost without touching any instrument, but rather put things together in my head. Then I would sit down and program, play or edit what I had in mind. There is very little space for improvisation during that process.

That said, it is important that during the process of programming, one does achieve a state of intuition, where ideas and even improvisations can flow freely, yet always in



Photograph taken by J.P. Montalva

We are standing at the beginning of an era where the traditional understanding of music will transform into something bigger.



Content

A new era

Not materialistic

Fighting inertia

About

Uwe Schmidt has released music under many names, but in the '90s he decided to summarise his working titles into one simple moniker, Atom TM. HD is the latest release in what could be conservatively called a wildly prolific career spanning many years. While Schmidt's album was released on Raster-Noton, it is generally considered that his own label Rather Interesting was the largest unified collection of his music with over 46 full length releases all written, recorded, mixed and mastered by Schmidt himself. To put it mildly, Schmidt doesn't see the dissolution and evolution of the music industry as a bad thing, and believes that the intensifying conversion of music and sound is not a problem that needs solving. Preferring the label 'sound' over 'music' as a way to describe the new reality of today, Schmidt hopes to overcome traditional understandings which will allow transcendence into new realms of pure physical and spiritual energy.

Video

relation to the initial idea. It's important not to get carried away then, but stay focussed on what the idea was.

On the other hand, I like to improvise every now and then, when I don't feel like working on a specific composition. I would just program beats or design sequences or patches and would record them, without any specific piece in mind. Very often then, those improvisations do become starting points for ideas, since they turn into the above mentioned collection of elements. So, in conclusion, I think both methods are very important, yet need to be clearly identified as such and used in the correct moments.

How do you see the relationship between sound, space and composition?

I'm not sure what you mean by 'space', so I'll just focus on sound and composition. Now, sound and composition are two parameters that have always been close, yet ultimately during the last maybe 50 years have finally merged into one single thing.

Like, when you listen to a composition, let's say of J.S. Bach, it is clear how much he must have been concerned about the sound of it, when for example writing for an orchestra. There used to be, of course, the core of the composition, perhaps a chord progression and a melody, which could always work and be perceived without any specific or determined sound. Then there are pieces which heavily rely on the correct arrangement and then, naturally, the correct placement of the musicians in relation to the listener (orchestra).

This has become more and more prevalent during history, up until a point when compositions without a properly designed orchestra were not possible anymore. An orchestra, incidentally is called a *klangkörper* in German, which means body of sound.

Then, the moment that recording appeared, it became obvious that music, even though still just an abstract composition that could be written down as musical notes, had transformed into something else as the recording and its sound became part of it. During the last couple of decades, especially with electronic music/electricity, this has become more apparent.

The new reality is that electronic sound, unlike any other sound, because it is being shaped and most importantly amplified through electricity, transcends into the realm of physics, that is, pure energy. A composition could be a combination and configuration of specific sine waves and it would still be music, yet at the same time, just pure sound.

Instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved, that sound, in most traditional opinions, is not considered music, I say that we are standing at the beginning of an era where the traditional understanding of music will transform into something bigger.

Sound is not a disadvantage, that one needs to cover up and camouflage by using fancy chord progressions and pretty melodies, so it would be accepted as music, but rather, sound will ultimately replace the limited language of musical notes and transform music into a physical and ultimately spiritual experience for everybody who has felt a 20 Hz sound wave running through his/her body!

Do you feel it important that an audience is able to deduct the processes and ideas behind a work purely on the basis of the music? If so, how do you make them transparent?

I think the biggest challenge in any art, is to hide the process of creation from the audience. Apart from the fact that the process of creation is not important for the understanding of the piece of art itself, I think that a big part of the mystery of art has to do with the absence of knowledge about its creation. The mystery enables and even amplifies its effect.

The processes and ideas behind my work are only relevant to me. For the audience those ideas might seem mental, logical, analytical ballast that distracts from the somatic, ultimately physical, illogical and abstract impact of music.

In how much, do you feel, are creative decisions shaped by cultural differences - and in how much, vice versa, is the perception of sound influenced by cultural differences?

I wouldn't isolate cultural differences from any other differences that human beings are made of. Especially with music, there is a direct somatic link happening between the composer, the music and the listener, in the sense that something connects. Or not. Yet this 'something' seems to be unrelated to anything we can pinpoint to larger influences, such as a cultural surrounding. Obviously, cultural differences are not unimportant, and sometimes they weigh more than other differences, yet, from my experience throughout the last 20 years, the differences or affinities between audiences or human beings, has more to do with non-cultural influences.



Links

Homepage:

<http://www.atom-tm.com/>



Fifteen Questions with Uwe Schmidt aka AtomTM

Pure energy

Not materialistic

The relationship between music and other forms of art - painting, video art and cinema most importantly - has become increasingly important. How do you see this relationship yourself and in how far, do you feel, does music relate to other senses than hearing alone?

Everybody who has listened to music with his eyes closed, knows how much our other senses influence sound. It's a vast territory of investigation. I am very interested in the combination of audio and visuals for example, and have been playing a live A/V set for many years.

All the different types of art you mentioned in your question, may in fact be defined by how audio and visual content interact and influence each other. The three types contain many sub-genres, and every artist (directors, painters, etc.) creates their own specific method of expressing their intentions by blending the visual with sound and music. Not all of those seem necessarily interesting to me, like for example cinema, which often requires either dull music so as not to intrude on the visual content, or very strong music to rescue dull visuals, which unfortunately seems to be the rule nowadays.

Video art seems a less standardised art form though, and has got more of my attention and appreciation. However, when making music, I usually do not look at anything and try to perceive the music as is, as much as that is possible. Strangely, when I do so, I tend to see the wave forms and sounds I have been shaping. In a way, sound design is like drawing or painting the sound, which renders it a very visual thing to do.

There seem to be two fundamental tendencies in music today: On the one hand, a move towards complete virtualisation, where tracks and albums are merely released as digital files. And, on the other, an even closer union between music, artwork, packaging and physical presentation. Where do you stand between these poles?

I don't stand between any of the two poles. I grew up and learned to adapt to the format of CD for example, yet, frankly, I feel that the death of the CD format bears a tremendous advantage too, in the sense that the musician does not necessarily have to deal with the specifications and limitations of said format any longer. Right now basically ANY format can be filled. This is opening up a huge space for the artist, as the composition itself is no longer bound to a specific format or carrier.

CD definitely has advantages and disadvantages and so does vinyl or mp3. Composing for a format, or alternatively excluding certain formats through the way a piece is made, is a new, challenging situation which I fully embrace. The last 70 years of music, the years in which we learned how to understand and perceive music in a certain way, were just an illusion. The fact that music was considered material just by being sold to us on a material carrier may have been a huge misunderstanding in itself.

Perhaps music has freed itself now from the material world all together. I am not completely against the idea, that music should not be material at all, like, once it's transmitted and listened to, it ceases to exist and remains existent only in our memories where music is being constructed in the first place. The topic of the material carrier, as implied in your question, is basically the topic of exploitation. As such it is the problem of somebody else, not per se by the artist, therefore it is not a tendency in music, but a tendency in music business.

The role of an artist is always subject to change. What's your view on the (e.g. political/social/creative) tasks of artists today and how do you try to meet these goals in your work?

I think there is a big difference in what was culturally relevant, let's say between 2000-2010 (let's not even mention the '90s) and today. It's hard to pinpoint what



Photograph taken by J.P. Montalva

Perhaps music has freed itself now from the material world all together.



Content

[A new era](#)

Not materialistic

[Fighting inertia](#)

About

Uwe Schmidt has released music under many names, but in the '90s he decided to summarise his working titles into one simple moniker, Atom TM. HD is the latest release in what could be conservatively called a wildly prolific career spanning many years. While Schmidt's album was released on Raster-Noton, it is generally considered that his own label Rather Interesting was the largest unified collection of his music with over 46 full length releases all written, recorded, mixed and mastered by Schmidt himself. To put it mildly, Schmidt doesn't see the dissolution and evolution of the music industry as a bad thing, and believes that the intensifying conversion of music and sound is not a problem that needs solving. Preferring the label 'sound' over 'music' as a way to describe the new reality of today, Schmidt hopes to overcome traditional understandings which will allow transcendence into new realms of pure physical and spiritual energy.

Video

exactly it is, but I feel that what we need right now is a clearer, simpler and reduced focus on the essential elements of art. 2000-2010 was a playful, funny mash-up of anything goes in a hysterical and excessive manner. This, I think, is totally over and a certain kind of seriousness has set in. The wild blend of basically anything has become everybody's daily routine, yet, combined with living in cultural decadence, my feeling is that art needs to be more direct, honest, essential and eventually detached from economy.

In my personal work I am currently focussing a lot more on essential elements, elements of which I consider my field of expertise: electronic music. The phenomenology of the essential deals with electricity, wave forms, sonic pressure and all sorts of musical and physical artefacts that could express a new path for electronic music.

Music-sharing sites and -blogs as well as a flood of releases in general are presenting both listeners and artists with challenging questions. What's your view on the value of music today? In what way does the abundance of music change our perception of it?

The question about the value of music has always been the essential one. We should not confuse the value of the physical carrier with the value of music itself though. The fact that nobody seems to be interested in paying money for a specific carrier such as a CD for example, a format that has always been overpriced and for which the musician did not receive more money than for any other format by the way, does not mean that anything radical has happened to the value of music itself.

I would rather say that the value of music has always been the same and it still is. To most people it is just the soundtrack to socialisation...picking somebody up, getting drunk, lying on the beach, driving in a car, hang out with friends, etc., etc....just to name the most entertaining few.

There are MILLIONS of add-ons that create the value of music, yet have nothing to do with music itself. Unfortunately, those are still the very same ever since music was consumed. Just a very few people give value to the music and not to the information attached to it. I hope this does not sound like I'm complaining, because I'm certainly not. I'd like to bring the discussion about music and what's going on with it, down to a clear conversation and analysis of what is really going on.

Unfortunately, music and business, that is the exploitation of music, has become one big blur in which the very same musicians are unable to differentiate the one from the other. The question is whether we discuss musical issues or economical ones? Frankly if I am having a look on how music is consumed and perceived today, I think people give it just the very same value as, let's say, 30 years ago.

You may say that something has changed in how the audience is paying for music, and, yes, I agree, the money is floating somewhere else, this is true! Now, I really don't want to give a lesson in basic economics, but, everybody who thinks that music, or basically any other content on the internet is free, has not understood the tiniest bit of how capitalist economy works. While everybody seems happy receiving content for free, somebody is making money on the traffic such content generates. Without being a genius, it is obvious to see that the money is floating around somewhere, it has just found a new realm, which is not the traditional music biz.

The abundance is necessary for the system to function. Since you're asking about my perception of music and its value, it has to become more precious and more personal. And personal is in fact everything that's going on right now, in the sense that everybody who is consuming music and other products is essentially part of and responsible for the general development of things.

The paradox of "everything" is, that it may as well mean "nothing".



Links

Homepage:

<http://www.atom-tm.com/>

Previous page:
[A new era](#)

2 / 3
< >

Next page:
[Fighting inertia](#)

"FIFTEEN"
QUESTIONS

Disclaimer

Fifteen Questions with Uwe Schmidt aka AtomTM

Pure energy

Fighting inertia

--- How, would you say, could non-mainstream forms of music reach wider audiences?

I'd rather ask "why should non-mainstream music want to reach a wider audience?". Isn't "wider audience" a contradiction to "non-mainstream" all together? Many, many years ago I read an interview with Umberto Eco and back then he said that "not being on TV is a sign of quality". Back then I didn't fully understand him, but throughout the years it sank in. The clearer I see our current reality, and who is representing it, and most importantly how it is being represented, the less I feel an interest in becoming part of it.

I mean, I am happy about a wider audience, don't get me wrong, but I'm not concerned about the technique of how to reach or generate it. Any art, or even any form of expression, by definition, holds within whom can be reached by it. Nietzsche described it as "selecting ones audience by the very content of your work". In return, every art and certainly every piece of music, automatically selects its audience. Sure, you can always optimize public relations, this is true, but there's a limit to everything. The current PR methods are systematically all functioning the same way (money) and therefore that wider audience is by definition, excluded to a specific and large portion of non-mainstream music.

Usually, it is considered that it is the job of the artist to win over an audience. But listening is also an active, rather than just a passive process. How do you see the role of the listener in the musical communication process?

An artist doesn't have a job, because art is a vocation, not a profession. It's funny how for many decades winning over the audience was the job of a record label, promotion agency, media, etc., while now all of a sudden it's supposed to be the artist's task.

While there was still enough money in the system, the artist was preferred to be seen as inactive, as far as the business was concerned. Nobody asked the artist about business, marketing, the audience, the market, the formats, etc. As long as the artist delivered the music and, in the best case, collected mediocre paychecks, due to having signed mediocre contracts, the world was in perfect order. Let me say, that I'm tremendously glad that entire shit hole of parasites called music industry went down the drain, and at the same time I refuse to win over anybody.

I'm tired of art being forced to do the dance of economy, and trying to win over an audience does certainly resemble that. As an artist, following ones instinct and interest is very much the only option. If by that, an audience can be won, well, then that's a lucky circumstance. Part of the current problem is that we are having this fat, sluggish audience sitting there, wanting to be won... "entertain me!" they say. In physics the very same effect is described as inertia, the power of passive force. I'm not sure I want to work against inertia!

Reaching audiences usually involves reaching out to the press and possibly working with a PR company. What's your perspective on the promo system? In which way do music journalism and PR companies change the way music is perceived by the public?

Answering your 15 questions, this very much talks about my perspective on the promo system, doesn't it? I see the necessity of doing promo work and for the biggest part I like doing it. It is a system that works in between the music, the musician and the audience. Due to the complexity of our society it seems necessary to go that route. While seeming like a natural tendency for the function of economic exploitation of music, the media dealing with music, to a certain degree, has developed questionable, cancerous tendencies.

To everybody who had to deal with, for example radios (public or private), not to speak of TV and everything that's related to it (ever wondered who is winning the



I'm tremendously glad that entire shit hole of parasites called music industry went down the drain



Content

[A new era](#)

[Not materialistic](#)

[Fighting inertia](#)

About

Uwe Schmidt has released music under many names, but in the '90s he decided to summarise his working titles into one simple moniker, Atom TM. HD is the latest release in what could be conservatively called a wildly prolific career spanning many years. While Schmidt's album was released on Raster-Noton, it is generally considered that his own label Rather Interesting was the largest unified collection of his music with over 46 full length releases all written, recorded, mixed and mastered by Schmidt himself. To put it mildly, Schmidt doesn't see the dissolution and evolution of the music industry as a bad thing, and believes that the intensifying conversion of music and sound is not a problem that needs solving. Preferring the label 'sound' over 'music' as a way to describe the new reality of today, Schmidt hopes to overcome traditional understandings which will allow transcendence into new realms of pure physical and spiritual energy.

Video

Grammy and how?), the cancerous mutation of something that is initially a good thing, must be obvious.

I don't want to judge all media the same way, since there are certainly and nowadays even more than in the past, very good publications and programmes around. But at the same time I have my reservations towards it. It is of course necessary for an interested listener to obtain some sort of information from somewhere, basically that's what it's all about, and strictly speaking I have no problem with it.

It's naive to believe that somebody ends up on a front page, because somebody decided that this person was "worth" it. Mainstream media is a business first and foremost. What is perceived as reality to us, may it be print, radio or visual media, including the internet, is actually a distorted version of reality.

I personally don't consume any media, neither printed or in any other form, since I consider it as second-third degree reality. Most importantly, when it comes to tendencies, what the media depicts as real time is by definition someone else's past! This may work out for most of the planet, yet for me it doesn't and I decided a long time ago, only to consider relevant what I am able to perceive in real time and with my own eyes. This necessarily brings the amount of relevant parameters down to a manageable size. Over the last two decades, information obtained through music journalism has very, very rarely impressed me or changed my way of seeing things.

Please recommend two artists to our readers which you feel deserve their attention.

[Sun Ra](#)

[Oskar Sala](#)

Read and hear more Atom™ at www.atom-tm.com

Previous page:
[Not materialistic](#)

3 / 3



Links

Homepage:

<http://www.atom-tm.com/>

"FIFTEEN"
QUESTIONS

Disclaimer