



c/o Eian Kantor <http://www.eiankantor.com/>

“Marble Words” is a song about songwriting, steadied by an elusive quality of lethargy. Without giving into Proustian pretensions, the track mourns the streamlining of the creative process, juxtaposing powerful suites of distorted sounds against a backdrop of tired words. Jake S-M abrades sonic layers with an aura of sophistication, treating them as if they were, indeed, unravelling from jaded reverie. He explores the daily rite of passage like a belated epiphany. And it’s this clever accord, whether applied to the subdued *Eucalyptus* EP or the joyously trashy *for reality tv* EP, released earlier this year, that sets Jake apart from ditzzy contemporaries with portmanteau BandCamp genres slopped across the Internet. If there’s one thing he knows, it’s the art of crafting dense, delectable sounds without reducing them to a predictable progression.

Today, I’m here to talk to the New York based composer, songwriter, electronic musician, drummer and teacher about his self-conscious, wandering thoughts, the process of writing music and the subtleties of daily life.

**Gauraa Shekhar:** *for reality tv* is an entirely instrumental collection of original electronic music written for television—featuring selections from MTV’s “My Life as A Teen” and HGTV’s “My Daughter is A Cop.” How did you come about writing songs for television?

**Jake S-M:** I originally made that music for a project that fell through – background music for a fitness reality TV show.

It was fun to make – quick, corny, dramatic – letting myself pull out all the clichés I would otherwise avoid. I was making music not as myself, not worrying about if it represented “me”. But I ended up liking the music more than I expected, and have since been self-consciously trying to be less self-conscious in music-making.

**GS: What are your thoughts about reality TV? Are you an avid watcher? What are some of your favorite shows?**

**JSM:** Oh god, I love and hate reality TV. I've watched some *Big Brother* and *The Real World*, and some HGTV shows. Oh and I love the kid cooking shows – so amazing!

**GS: Studying composition, do you ever find parallels between two genres of music? Do you, for example, find similarities between the works of romantic composers and avant-garde/black-surf/sludge-pop? Do you find a similar thread uniting the works of Steve Reich and someone like Swans?**

**JSM:** Yeah, when I'm looking for a certain mood or approach, I try to find it in a lot of different contexts. Right now I'm excited about music that gets a lot out of limited materials, or pushes the boundaries of how barren something can be. I've found that in Feldman & some Cage, this composer Simon Steen-Andersen, songwriters like Julia Holter, James Blake, some Joanna Newsom arrangements, Sun Kil Moon – to name a few.



c/o Eian Kantor <http://www.eiankantor.com/>

**GS: In the set of mini-playlists you curated for us last month, I noticed a lot of ambient artists like Oneohtrix Point Never. What draws you toward contemporary noise music?**

**JSM:** I like OPN's way of decontextualizing familiar sounds. He'll use samples in a way that is somewhere between forcing you to think about the original source with just hearing the texture and the sound itself. Or he'll use cold, kinda

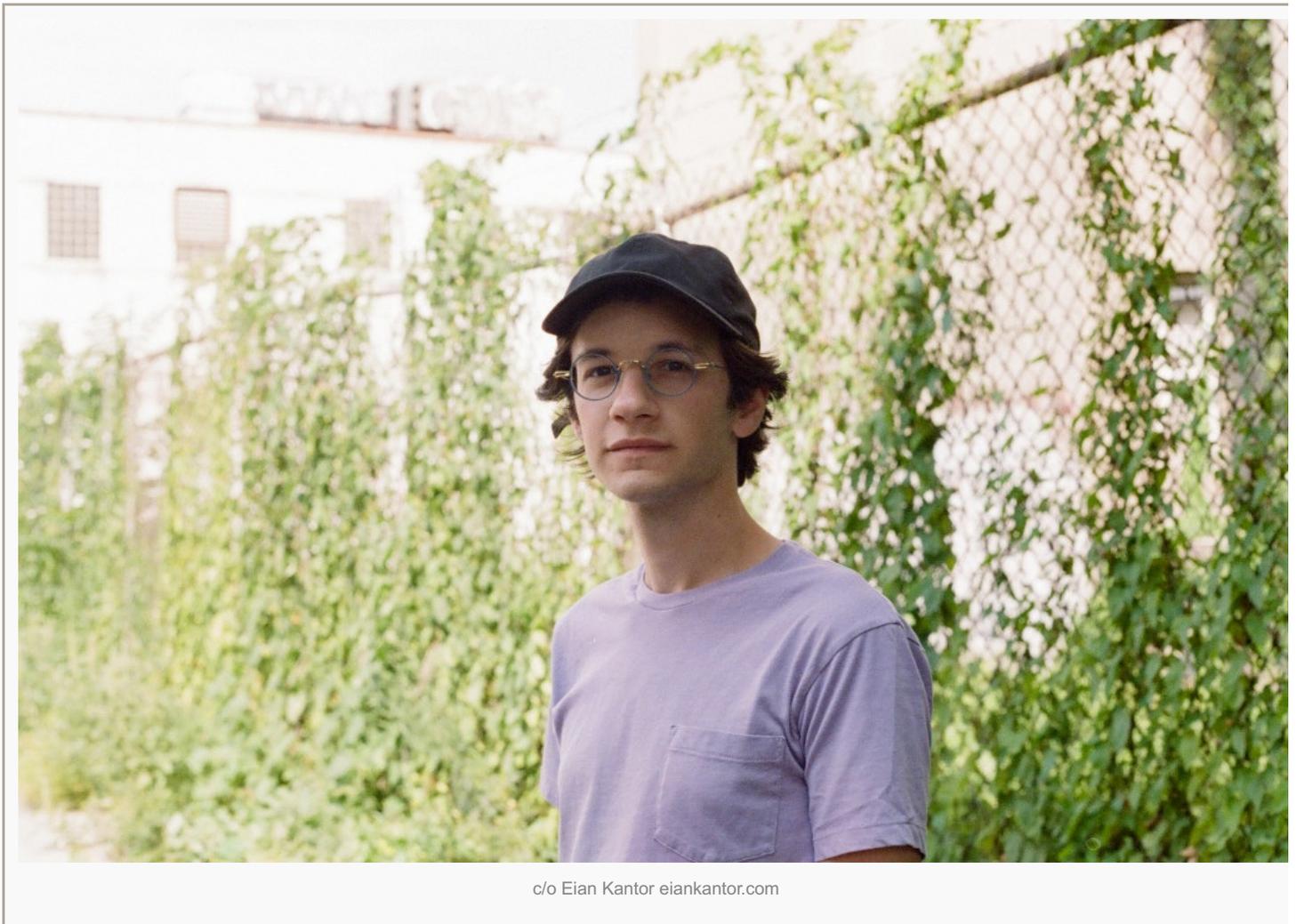
corny MIDI instruments, but in such an unusual context that I'm always back and forth between perceiving a level of irony and just being into the sound. I get different versions of that kind of thing from Tim Hecker and Jan Jelinek.

**GS: With said set of mini-playlists, you emphasized the importance of challenging your tastes and biases. How do you personally challenge *your* musical biases? Do you do so by rotating the genres of music you listen to?**

**JSM:** I try to be open minded when discovering new music, and not judge too quickly. Its easy to get caught up in preconceptions about an idiom or recording aesthetic. I used to write off anything that sounded 80s. So for those playlists, I tried to pair things from different genres that felt connected for some reason or another. Maybe an unusual context could uproot preconceptions? But also, whatever 20ish songs I was going to pick was never going to feel unified, so at least there is some purpose to it.

**GS: Do you listen to music differently after having studied composition?**

**JSM:** In some ways I'm much more open than I used to be – I definitely listen to a lot more kinds of music than I used to. But I am also a lot pickier than I used to be, and don't listen to things that I think are just OK. I've never been a person to analyze while listening, or listen for technical aspects of music – but I've definitely learned to listen much more carefully, hear details, and notice time passing.



**GS: You're a multi-instrumentalist—you play the cello, keyboards and drums, amongst other things. Which instrument did you learn first? Do you have a preference?**

**JSM:** I started playing cello when I was about 7, and switched to bass when I was tall enough (I haven't played cello

since then). I started playing drums when I was 12, which came pretty naturally to me. Drums have been my main instrument for a long time. But I have a soft spot for electric bass. I used to play bass pretty often with my Dad, who is a great guitar player. I also have this little Moog that I got when I was 15, which still sounds incredible and makes me feel nostalgic. I don't know which is my favorite!

**GS: Was there a particular force that attracted you towards simplicity and minimalism?**

**JSM:** Maybe a reaction against myself making things too complicated. At the moment, I prefer the challenge to be expressive and genuine with limited resources. Like – how far can I push this back, and strip it away, before it becomes nothing? Stuff I'm working on currently is on that line. Different things are possible in a stark environment. You can be differently sensitive to change and surprises and time.

**GS: Your music discusses a lot of ordinary, everyday things, evidenced particularly by the hyper self-aware “Marble Words.” Do you have an everyday routine do you fall into?**

**JSM:** My schedule changes constantly, so not so much. But I have some rituals – coffee making, cleaning the kitchen, cooking, eating in front of the TV (usually watching *The Office*), Ash and I picking and splitting two meals when we go out, and we usually go to bed at the same time and wind down together. But I'm lucky to have things change pretty frequently.

**GS: I found most of your EPs, from 2013's chamber pop *Sleep Stir* to your latest, *Eucalyptus*, woven around a specific mood. A narrative arch, if you will. Are there certain narrative arches—literary or musical—that inspire or interest you?**

**JSM:** The book “If on a Winter's Night a Traveler” by Italo Calvino was really inspiring for a lot of the *Eucalyptus* songs, and some stuff I'm working on right now. The chapters alternate between a story about a reader searching for books and engaging with the process of writing and creating books, with chapters from the books that the reader comes across. I'm sure that's not a sufficient description. But it's a really weird experience to get immersed in a kinda traditional way, and then suddenly have it acknowledge the book you're holding and how it was published, and constantly switch between different voices and styles.

**GS: “If On A Winter's Night A Traveler” is my favorite Calvino! I can definitely see how that plays into your work stylistically. What about when you find yourself struggling to write music? How do you overcome your block?**

**JSM:** Take a shower, distract myself with something tedious, listen to other music. I'm not very good getting out of a block, but those are my strategies.

**GS: Are there certain records that you consider informative to your current sound?**

**JSM:** Madvillan's *Madvillany*, Oval's *Systemisch*, Kate Bush's *The Dreaming*, Sun Kil Moon's *Benji*.

**GS: YES to Kate Bush's *The Dreaming*! And what would you consider your favorite record of all time?**

**JSM:** Bjork's *Vespertine* (minus “Pagan Poetry”)

**GS: Why not “Pagan Poetry”?**

**JSM:** Ohhh it's not so bad ... it's just not as good as the rest of the album. I don't like the sound of the opening and the big build up at the end. The other songs are so perfect and detailed, and have a different kind of smallness and inwardness. This one is too big and just a different vibe. I usually skip it.

**GS: Is there something you're listening to right now that you'd like to share with our readers?**

**JSM:** Motion Graphics – *Motion Graphics*

---

A composer, songwriter, electronic musician, drummer, and teacher, **Jake S-M**'s music is widely varied, much like his resumé. 2013's chamber-pop EP ***Sleep Stir*** married simple songs with cellos, voices and synths, while his latest, ***for reality tv***, is an entirely instrumental collection of original electronic music written for television. Jake's concert compositions span the traditional and unconventional, having written pieces for the acclaimed [Either/Or Ensemble](#) and [Contemporaneous](#), as well as the more unusual "*Piece for 8 Microcassette Recorders*" and "*Counterpoint for Two Isolated Drumsets.*" Originally from Utica, NY, S-M lives in NYC, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Composition at the CUNY Graduate Center.

*Eucalyptus* EP is available now via Newlywed Records. Stream Jake S-M on Bandcamp [here](#).

[Eucalyptus for reality TV Italo Calvino jake s-m Marble Words newlywed records](#)