

# *Gnathonemus Petersii*

## Alex Halsted and David Moré

October 13 - November 21, 2009

### EVENTS:

- 10/14 6:15 pm** Opening reception performance by Halsted and Moré
- 10/15 7:00 pm** Performance by Halsted, Moré, composer/performer Joe Grimm and Berlin-based group Ige<sup>+</sup>Timer (Simon Berz - electronics, and Klaus Janek - double bass)
- 10/20 5:00 pm** Lecture by artist/musician M.C. Schmidt (1/2 of Matmos)
- 10/21 6:00 pm** Performance by Halsted, Moré and M.C. Schmidt
- 11/03 6:00 pm** Performance and demonstration by Alex Halsted with Electronic Voice Phenomena specialist Michael Esposito
- 11/18 7:00 pm** Video and film works curated by Ben Russell

First things first. Alex Halsted is an elephantnose fish. The pulses heard coming from the speaker cones augmented by water bottles and spread across the floor in the gallery are not music or language, but an amplified recording of the weak electric impulse used by Halsted for electrolocation. Elephantnose fish engage in active electroreception, generating an electric field, and interpreting disturbances and variances to that field as friend, foe, foil, food, etc.

Not to worry, Halsted is not harmed or confused by amplifying for our ears her electrolocation. (In fact, being transferred to, and confined to an aquarium is more stressful to Halsted's system.) Even if the sound were broadcast into the aquarium, audio amplification of a living being's electrical impulses to that being is considered a weak feedback loop in biomusic literature, meaning that the sound is 1. a transfer into an adjacent form of the impulse, 2. can be disregarded by the being, and 3. does not affect the production and function of the biological electric field. Chances are Halsted is completely unaware of the amplified sounds. Moré works with this electrical impulse, processing it audibly and transforming the signal with various effects. He has recorded the results and asked other musicians over to record with him and Halsted. The proceeds from the recordings go to the Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

For years many experimental musicians and artists have used input from animals in their compositions: from the absurd, artist Marcel Broodthaers's interview with his cat, to the formal, composer John Cage's tape compositions of collaged birdsongs, to the political, engineer/sculptor Natalie Jeremijenko's attempts to highlight the symbiotic relationships between species. Does this history make Halsted Moré's artistic collaborator? Hardly. Alex Halsted has not chosen to make recordings. Basically a naturally occurring fact of Halsted's daily living is amplified by Moré for sound works. Is Halsted being taken advantage of like some preteen wunderkind? Not exactly. Moré sees to Halsted's needs, and the fish is not made to perform, Halsted just happens to broadcast a signal we can interpret as music while going about eating, sleeping and swimming. Does this make Moré Halsted's collaborator? Yes, in both the positive and negative connotations of collaborator. Moré is the active agent, and he is the sole individual with active agency and responsibility to keep the collaboration safe, fair and generative.

Alex Halsted comes from somewhere in the rivers of West or Central Africa, particularly the Niger River basin. Does this mean Halsted can be considered a Nigerian-born musician? Hardly, nation-states and their territories have no meaning to Halsted. And yet, Halsted has been displaced in a fundamental way, beyond simply moving outside of national borders, but into a tank. Not just displaced, but brought into collaborations to which Halsted has no

understanding. There is, at its core, an ethical imbalance to this project.

“I forgot all my sorrow and started to sing the earthly songs which sorrow prevented me from singing about since I entered this bush.” — Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

Written in 1954, Nigerian author Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* follows the adventures of a young boy who is trapped for decades in forests, traveling alongside ghosts, trying to find his way back to the cities of the living. Escaping from a slave raid on his town, the narrator begins his journey into the Bush of Ghosts, where the living are not allowed, “because I was very young to understand the meaning of ‘bad’ and ‘good.’” He is then lost in a land he does not recognize, with foods that are strange to him, languages he cannot speak and horrible ghosts he never imagined. Eventually the narrator makes some friends amongst the ghosts, learns a little of their languages and customs, marries twice, meets a dead cousin, tours ghost hospitals and schools, and finally meets a television-handed ghostess who shows him the way to his home village.

Now, what if Moré and his sound-making cohorts are to Halsted what the fanciful ghosts are to Tutuola’s narrator? Halsted has, after all, ended up in Chicago, not quite understanding the meaning of bad and good. For six weeks, Halsted will live in a gallery made out to be somewhere between an underground concert venue with a merchandise table, and a scavenged soundscape with a busker’s travel gear—all a touch unreal. Moré’s concert gear surrounds Halsted, constantly emitting low synthesizer-generated environmental drones, in anticipation of the performances happening during the exhibition. What then to make of the sound encounters, the records and tapes and digital downloads and performances of the collaborations between Halsted and so many strangers? Maybe these are tokens from Halsted’s time in our land. Small gestures of communication that force us to be hyper-aware of Halsted’s needs and behaviors. Maybe the money collected and donated by Moré helps preserve Halsted’s “village” while she is gone. And I like to think that amplifying Halsted’s electric impulses is “to sing the earthly songs which sorrow prevented,” earthly songs sung by Halsted as long as she remains in this land, until she meets a television-handed ghostess of her own.

What these earthly songs might mean to us, beyond abstraction, hinges on the method of production. Biomusic is a form of music made by sounds generated with living things, be they plant or animal. Biomusic is a strand of experimental music that has had an occasional half-life in science throughout the 20th century. As scientific modeling and recording of physiology has advanced, the methods by which biomusic can be produced have proliferated. Without doubt, the recordings of Halsted and Moré are biomusic, even if in fairly rudimentary form.

In biomusic’s heyday, the 60s and 70s, a good number of its creators were looking for ways to generate more organic and body-friendly electronic music. Music that could heal, soothe or operate as vaccine. Manfred L. Eaton, author of the book *Bio-Music* (1974) was of this camp, stating in his book: “Society must realize that unless it provides itself with artistic medicinal defenses against the hard technology that it has created, that technology will possess him [sic]; and then, who will approach its creatures?” It is safe to say we have gone far beyond Eaton’s line in the sand, with nary an artistic medicinal defense at hand. At this point, the technology possesses us as we possess it, a ghostly presence exponentially proliferating mediated selves every moment we are plugged in. We’ve become something else, some of us even television-handed as we ride the train. So with technology ever present, it is high time to ask ourselves, following Eaton, “who will approach its creatures?” Hopefully the answer is: one musically experienced elephantnose fish.

— Anthony Elms, Assistant Director

David Moré is based in Chicago. In 2004 he was quite honored to play his self-built instruments at the High Zero Festival of Improvised and Experimental Music (Baltimore), performing with such luminaries as Daniel Higgs, Joe McPhee, and Le Quan Ninh. He has remained involved with the High Zero Festival as Stage Manager ever since. In Chicago his artworks, performances and sound installations have been presented through Harold Arts and Vega Estates.

Alex Halsted arrived in Chicago during the fall of 2008, where she met Moré on October 19, 2008. The two have since been working as a duo, and in collaboration with other artists, musicians and sound experimenters.