

The sound of now

The constant improvisation of Tashi Dorji

If you've listened to the music of Tashi Dorji, you likely have never heard the same song twice. The experimental guitarist based in Asheville, N.C., makes music that is completely improvised. His live shows are sometimes reminiscent of tones or themes found on his recent recordings, but nothing is ever planned.

"Whatever happens, happens," Dorji said in a recent interview. "I don't really prepare or think about what I'm gonna play. Sometimes I'll have ideas, mostly sonic ideas, not necessary physical playing. It can even be mood or emotion."

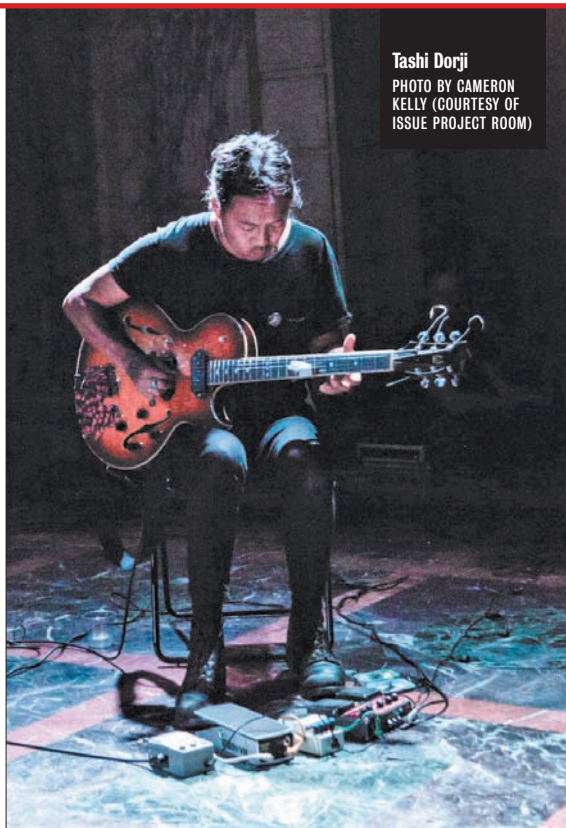
The absence of strict boundaries in Dorji's work—both solo and alongside a long list of collaborators (including Thom Nguyen in their duo MANAS)—has created an impressive range of outcomes. His most recent release (one of eight in 2018), *gàng lu khau chap 'mi gera gi she*, is an abrasive, metallic collection of short, fitful experimental pieces. By contrast, his 2015 single, "April Woods Are Red," is less chaotic, with an alluring explorative feel and acoustic-guitar fingering that sounds sitar-like. You never know what you're going to get and, really, neither does Dorji.

"Most people are like, 'What are you doing?'" Dorji said, laughing. "Whenever I go back [home], people are like, 'It seems like you're touring a lot, but what exactly are you playing?' They're very polite, but they're like, 'I just wanna ask you what you're doing.' And I don't know how to explain that."

Dorji grew up in Bhutan. His parents dabbled in music, and in both his home and community, Dorji found himself steeped in the folk music of the country. "Bhutan is a very traditional culture," Dorji said. "I grew up with a lot of traditional music, and a lot of monastic music. That's very heavy music. Emotionally, it kind of gives you goosebumps. It's very chaotic and loud. I think that opened me up."

Around middle school, Dorji picked up the guitar. He learned a wide range of styles, but mostly gravitated toward English-language pop songs that filtered into Bhutan.

"We didn't have access to the outside culture; [to] CDs or cassettes," Dorji said. "I started learning songs, whatever friends were playing ... 'Heart of Gold' by



Tashi Dorji
PHOTO BY CAMERON
KELLY (COURTESY OF
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Neil Young, [things] like that."

In 2000, Dorji moved to Asheville for college. Though the town has recently received national recognition for its growing music scene, back then it was already a tight-knit underground community, which Dorji fell into quickly.

"[Asheville] was a lot more vibrant—less tourism. The rent was cheaper, the internet was not as prevalent," Dorji said. "There was just more interaction. It was pretty amazing to be part of that."

Dorji dabbled in punk bands, but that didn't last long. He began listening to English experimental guitarists like Derek Bailey and Fred Frith, and also tried his hand at free jazz. He felt an immediate connection to that genre and experimentation in general, a familiarity and intensity that was reminiscent of his earlier Bhutanese influences. It felt right.

"That really opened my eyes and ears to the possibility of navigating nonstandard, nonconventional [music]—not really trying to find my own voice in it, just experimenting," Dorji said.

He soon immersed himself in the world of experimental music and has been touring and releasing music ever since.

"I just stopped playing chords or worrying about melodies, but knowing those things would happen," Dorji said.

Dorji has a handful of records coming out in 2019, mostly live collaborations and one solo album (via Moone Records). They'll all be sonic snapshots, mostly from tour stops, which might sound slightly haphazard, but it really isn't. There is intent; it's just not stated until the moment he starts to play.

"When I go into a studio, it's an emotive reaction to something I want to do," Dorji said. "I have to go in there and start really focusing on that feeling, and react to that. I really have to start playing, that's the only time I know what's gonna happen—or don't know." □

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