

THEME

Hawks and Sparrows

By Trinie Dalton | Issue 22, [Vibrations](#)

TAGS: [Art](#), [Conceptual](#), [Performance](#), [Music](#), [Experimental](#)

The night before they left to perform in Taiwan and Japan, I called Lucky Dragons to brief them about Chinese dragon folklore. Did they know that dragons in Eastern myth symbolize the yang principle and are more akin to angelic protectors than to furious antagonists? Which of the nine dragons were they named after: Yellow, Celestial, Spiritual, Dragon of Hidden Treasures, Winged, Horned, Coiled, Azure, or Sea Dragon? “In a college history class,” Luke Fischbeck replies, “I learned of a Japanese fishing boat called Lucky Dragon that accidentally sailed into the hydrogen bomb test zone in South Pacific. Everyone on the boat got radiation sickness. This spawned so much anger that it led to an anti-nuclear movement. I like the idea of moments crystallizing into something explicit through one event.” Crystallizing moments is perhaps what Lucky Dragons, reincarnated from a boat into a band, does best.

[Lucky Dragons](#) is Fischbeck and partner Sarah Rara, who met in Providence, Rhode Island and first synthesized their art and music practices in 2004. Though officially, the first Lucky Dragons single was released by Luke solo in 2000, the duo’s current practice varies widely and moves fluidly between genres and mediums, between in person practice and that which lives in cyberspace. I met them writing about their work for the [2008 Whitney Biennial](#). Then, I was charmed by their early sound experiments like *Hawks and Sparrows*, a collection of field recordings taken from protest marches. They were borrowing from counterculture revolutionary politics, but definitely doing something technologically new. “It was invitational so we did it as a group,” Luke says of that project. “People collected recordings and the only constraint was to have spoken language removed to leave the sound as material.” Overall there’s a sparse ambience to Lucky Dragons music that reminds me of water trickling over pebbles. While it’s electronic, full of sequencing and sampling, it does not pressure the listener with pulsating beats. Their music is meditative, and attempts to simulate Los Angeles “vibrations.” As Sarah describes it, “There’s something about the plant colors here that

make the landscape vibrate. LA is impossible to traverse in a straight line, and everything overlaps. That overlapping directly happens in our music, the vibration from multiple plateaus. It's about topography.”

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Lucky Dragons are known as community builders, the artists who make people hold hands to generate sound, or the musicians who press rocks onto tin strips to create a magnetic field that transmutes into sound. They view seedpod shakers and laptops as instruments, one in the same. “We take an open definition of technology,” Luke says. “Looking at flutes buried in the ice and imagining computers in the same lineage. One instrument we use a lot is a pile of rocks. The design of the instrument is just a rock. It's a borrowed design.” Sarah adds, “It's a hand holding a rock!”

In an art context, Lucky Dragons are performance artists who make videos and audience-driven electronic devices. Their shows rely on instruments and software, built by Fischbeck, that react to energetic vibrations given off by humans, and lately, rocks. But they are not prehistoric rockhounds. Under the moniker Glaciers of Nice, Sarah's publishing endeavor, they publish handmade artbooks and zines. As Birds of Prey, Sarah designs bird pins and jewelry. As Sumi Ink Club, they are a community gathering for ink drawing sessions. They host [Open Book](#)>[Open Book](#), a living, on-line book to which anyone can add their favorite spreads from existent works. [New Other Thing](#) is an online mixtape label that releases and distributes music, for free. [Echo Park Museum of Art](#) is their curatorial foundation, for which anyone can curate and exhibit works in their favorite local Los Angeles park. One would think all of these projects would fracture concentration, but Lucky Dragons takes a prismatic view. “I do tend to think of all of this as art,” Luke says. “It may be more complicated for Sarah. The term ‘art’ frees me up to have a context to put stuff in that isn't about a revenue stream. Because of the etiquette of art, you can do more. Maybe we could call it research.” It is more complicated for Sarah. “I think of a lot of these activities as a research group or archive,” she says. “The archive is the ideal model for artwork. It's not fully digested yet, and it demands interpretation but it's not doing the work for you. There's a messiness to an archive.”

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While Luke and Sarah tour as a band, their approach to making work is archival, quite literary, and borderline academic. Sarah, who studied Comparative Literature, used to work as an archivist at the [Getty Institute](#), while Luke has a background in

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“1960s information theory stuff, Eco basically explaining how poetry works. If you leave a constellation of possible meanings or fields open that you can enter and turn around in, take whatever meanings you like, then the more it can be held in suspension without collapsing and the more poetic it is. We try to do that with every project. You can combine in your own mind instead of simply watching us.” Sarah, on the other hand, is currently reading a sci-fi novel called *Looking Backwards*, about, as she says, “someone who fell asleep for 1000 years and when they woke up there was complete equality among men and women! No class system. I think of the performances as environments where I can live in that equality for the moment. It’s about being there and occupying it, rather than it being a distant ideal. Creating it right now.”

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computer science. When describing their music projects, they sometimes cite books that have influenced the way they think of sound. Luke is currently into Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work*, which he calls

Lucky Dragons’ performance environments are non-traditionally structured, and frequently one will find people wandering through the space, dipping in and out of the sound as if it’s architecture. As collaborators with their audiences, they function well in settings where they are not separated by a stage. Luke mentions over the phone incorporating the sounds of his audience eating food into a recent show.

They create a playful, flexible arena in which sound is art — something tangible — and is as much about the interactive process as the product. Luke and Sarah think of this as a game of sorts. “Most of our work goes into providing a foundation for other people to try stuff, like devising rules of a game or building a toy people can play with. Making an environment where people have a feeling of infinity, where it’s safe to play with something that has no boundaries. But in actuality, there are boundaries. That’s my way of cheating: offering up something community-based though some would try to break those rules.” Sarah adds to this sentiment. “Our interactive activities are devised so that nothing is dissolving itself. You oscillate between states of being an alienated individual, like when we play trance music in the beginning of a show, to contrast with the moments when you dissolve and make contact with other people, lose the boundaries of yourself. It’s important to have both. Not to completely dissolve but to go between the two states.”

If one were to point out that Lucky Dragons’ generous goal sounds akin to that of Indian spiritual music, it wouldn’t displease them at all. We end our talk with thoughts

on LaMonte Young's Dreamhouse, where we've both caught recent raga performance tributes to Prandit Pran Nath. "The Dreamhouse exemplifies," says Luke, "something that requires a really long time to take place. Young uses tones and overtones that change sound over time in a spectral way. It's about the interference. Regarding that emotional range you experience while listening, imagine the shift over decades, or the possibility of the failure, of not processing all your possible emotions. What if it shuts down before it runs its course? It's really ambitious." Sarah was either transported into an advanced meditation, or into an alien world. "I went in one way and I came out another," she says. "What happened in the middle? I have amnesia."

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