

## Phasers to Stun

**Experimental electro magnate Dave Smolen puts the pedal to the mettle.**

by Shaun Brady

Published: January 10, 2007

"My story is not significant," claimed Dave Smolen as we sat outside a Center City coffeehouse on an unseasonably warm post-Christmas day. Not the sort of statement one wants to hear from an interview subject.

But Smolen, who unveils his new 20-minute solo CD, *Malleable Laminates*, at a Bowerbird-presented show on Friday, was merely protesting that he's just one among many in a snowballing local experimental music scene. "There are so many people who are on the same page. I can't stress that enough. It's a pretty awesome thing, and I certainly don't take it lightly."



WIRED: Jimi Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love* led Smolen to electronic music.

Smolen came to experimental music — in his case an array of gadgetry that creates tense, surging waves of electronic turbulence — in the way of many other locals: through punk and hard rock, bringing a certain DIY aesthetic with them that has helped to sustain a scene.

Born and raised in Newtown, Bucks County, Smolen picked up the trumpet at age 10, but abandoned the instrument for the drums two years later because, "I wanted to be in a rock band, and to me people in rock bands didn't play trumpets."

Inspired by the likes of the MC5, The Stooges, Hawkwind, the Minutemen and Black Flag, Smolen played drums for eight years "in various unworkable rock bands" before forming a heavy psych group called Fuzzbucket.

It was hearing the drums on Jimi Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love* that sent Smolen on the path to electronic music. "It's so subtle," he says, "but I heard phasing on the drums, and I wanted to see how I could make a total transformation of the organic sound, but in a very focused and complete way."

Smolen made a recording of processed snare at 17, manipulating his drum sound with a friend's phaser. Soon he began buying up effects, starting with a ring modulator, which multiplies audio signals, creating a metallic, bell-like tone; a phaser; and an echo pedal. As he became more serious about electronic

music, he experimented increasingly with different combinations of effects, developed more concrete ideas about what sounds he was striving for, and eventually sold his drum set to expand his setup. In the summer of 2003, Smolen moved to Philadelphia, where he played his first live electronic show the following fall with local synth legend Charles Cohen. Soon after, he met most of the musicians making up the current scene, and moved into saxophonist Jack Wright's house, home to a rotating cast of improvisers, in the beginning of 2005.

*Malleable Laminates*, says Smolen, is "the result of about two and a half years of working with different forms within the electronic configuration that I came up with. I wanted to have a more cohesive, bigger-sounding recording that was not just improvisation, but a bit more calculating, that displayed my system and showed electronics in a focused compositional sense."

To the listener, the CD sounds like a fluid, constantly evolving whole, with bubbling, molten tones breaking up into mechanical bird-chirps that decrease and are replaced by a thunderous, roiling static dissonance. But each segment is designed to showcase one element of Smolen's system, whether it be feedback, multiple processed snare drums at different pitches, modified electronics that work as a note-creation system or circuit bending. He sees this recording as an initial outline, and looks forward to combing these sounds into larger, more complex compositions in future work.

Smolen's "DIY way of composing" involves drawing his visualization of a desired sound onto composition paper. At the risk of sounding "borderline New Agey," he describes his graphic compositions as "pretty cosmic-looking stuff, though it's certainly not my objective to make a connection between space and the musical reality that's actually going on."

Besides his solo performance, Smolen leads the local electronic supergroup Jive Nation, which includes Cohen along with members of Drums Like Machine Guns, Mincemeat or Tenspeed and Normal Love. Initially inspired by avant-garde guitarist/composer Glenn Branca to impose his own systems on the group, Smolen found that he preferred to simply let everyone's diverse vocabularies interact. "People who play electronics seem to be able to talk to each other and know what we're talking about, even in this fragmented, really vague language," he explains.

Opposed to this easy communication between electronic musicians, Smolen sees "a certain clashing philosophy" when playing with acoustic improvisers. "I think the medium we're working with is not more progressive, but it's definitely more fresh. So as far as playing with acoustic instruments, I try to bring it into my system as opposed to following the saxophone or the violin. That way it's more at the forefront as opposed to auxiliary electronics. I don't like that. That makes electronics seem like this secondary, closed-off, previously explored instrument, when it's really just beginning. So I try to take a progressive stance with that."

Dave Smolen plays Fri., Jan. 12, 8 p.m., \$5, with Dan Blacksberg and N\_B\_H\_W, Powel House, 244 S. Third St., [www.bowerbird.org](http://www.bowerbird.org).

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