

# SOUND AMERICAN

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## SA Issue 6: Five Questions with Nicolas Collins

### FIVE QUESTIONS WITH NICOLAS COLLINS



*Nic Collins: Photo by Viola Rusche*

*New York born and raised, Nicolas Collins studied composition with Alvin Lucier at Wesleyan University, worked for many years with David Tudor, and has collaborated with numerous soloists and ensembles around the world. He lived most of the 1990s in Europe, where he was Visiting Artistic Director of Stichting STEIM (Amsterdam), and a DAAD composer-in-residence in Berlin. Since 1997 he has been editor-in-chief of the Leonardo Music Journal, and since 1999 a Professor in the Department of Sound at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His book, Handmade Electronic Music – The Art of Hardware Hacking (Routledge), has influenced emerging electronic music worldwide. Collins has the dubious distinction of having played at both CBGB and the Concertgebouw.*

Visit Nic at:

[www.nicolascollins.com](http://www.nicolascollins.com)

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**Five Questions with...** is a feature of Sound American where I bother a very busy person until they answer a handful of queries around the issue's topic. This issue features composer, educator, and writer Nicolas Collins. Collins is best known for his ability to find music in the inner workings of everyday electronic objects. CD players become laser turntables, laptop motors create instant electronic music, and the laying of hands on circuits control unholy manipulations of children's toys. As with many musicians working with homemade instruments or objects repurposed to make music, the initial reaction to viewing Nic's instruments can be to relate them to the comical or cartoonish, but the music he makes with them is stunningly deep and beautiful. His book, [Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking](#), is a manual of how to use technology against type to create beautiful music. I caught Nic during some of his time away from his work teaching sound at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and he was kind enough to participate in SA 6's Five Questions, as well as giving us permission to reprint his great web essay, [Hacking the CD Player](#) for this issue.

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**Sound American:** What's your first specifically musical memory?

**Nicolas Collins:** Listening to 10" Burl Ives records on a kiddie record player, then trying to record over the record by shouting into a paper cup with pin stuck through the bottom. I would have been 5 or 6 years old.

**SA:** What was the initial impetus to start modifying objects to create musical instruments?

**NC:** I come from a long line of tinkerers. Building and hacking instruments and circuits followed on the heels of Erector Set and homemade bookshelves. Also, there's the economic angle: in the early 1970s, when I got interested in electronic music, synthesizers and the like were crazy expensive, while a few musically appropriate chips were pretty cheap.

**SA:** A good portion of what you do seems to be driven toward education. What role does circuit bending and modified instruments play, in your mind, in getting people to make music?

**NC:** Only recently. I've only been teaching for the last 14 years, and I'm pushing 60. I have had a colorful series of day jobs over the years. I've always been interested in community, not just music. So I've done a lot of festival and concert curating, writing and editing. I was artistic director of STEIM in the 1990s. I like to spread the musical wealth as far as possible. Lately teaching has been my primary outlet for dissemination, both at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago -- my regular job -- and through the hacking book and lots of workshops. In the workshops people go from starting to build their first project to playing it in about 5 minutes -- a gentle learning curve compared to coding. So, as much as I love programming, I think tactile instrument invention seduces novices into making music before they know what hit them.

**SA:** What problems do you encounter as the rate of change in technology increases?

**NC:** Not many. People work where they're most comfortable. For some it's at the cutting edge, for others (like myself) at the trailing hilt. The biggest problem is finding the signal in the noise, winnowing something personally meaningful from the

increasing mass of stuff out there. It's mostly a question of focus.

**SA:** Do you consider what you do musically to be a business, a passion, or a moral imperative?

**NC:** As a dear friend, a free-lance designer, once told me, "every time I get nervous about where my next job will come from I think of Nic, who dragged his family around the world on nothing more than hoops and beeps." Miraculously it has been a business, if oftentimes below minimum wage. It must be a passion, because I've been doing it without serious reservations for over 40 years, despite some serious economic drawbacks. No way it's a moral imperative -- I still have doubts about the morality of teaching young people how to be artists, given the dire conditions that await them (at least in the USA) after graduation.

But I think back to a discussion John Cage had with students at Wesleyan while I was there. He started by telling us music was a waste of time, that we were young and smart and should study environmental science instead. Some wag pointed out that he (Cage) was still making music. Cage responded, "I'm old, it's all I know how to do." Ditto.

