

CRATER DUST

Score for a Space-Music Performance Piece & Jam

Composed by Art Cohen and Steve Bowman (Delicate Monster)

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This is the “score” for a piece we’ve been playing since 1990. It’s a formula with a very simple melody that can be performed by groups of 2 to 4 electro musicians. We share it here in hopes that more people can enjoy and explore the sonic and tonal potential and beauty of this piece.

It features a very long feedback delay, and a trip through tonal modulations. Although it could be played by one person, the magic happens if you have two or more, because there’s an element of chance in it. It has unlimited possibilities for jamming, but it’s structured just enough to give it a distinct character. Any more than four musicians and it tends to turn into a noisy mess.

If you use it in performance, all we ask is that you give us credit as the composers. If you want to use it commercially, contact me for appropriate permissions.

To play Crater Dust correctly, all the musicians need to be playing through a digital delay, and all must be able to transpose a three-note melody into any key. Although you can use any type of sounds, the best are those *without* sharp attacks and that have some sustain and timbral variety.

Delay setting: **375ms, feedback at 95%** (or the equivalent; any one note should take a very long time—about a minute—to decay to silence.)

Opening key is **D Dorian** (all white keys with D as the root)

Begin: All musicians join in on a big drone on a low D. Milk the drone and feed timbral changes into it—playing with filter frequencies, for example. All D, no other notes.

After droning for a while (maybe a minute—depending on your appetite for big drones), tame the drone down into the background, and one musician plays the melody over it. (It helps to have one person be the designated leader throughout the piece.)

Melody (in D): c, a, d (all descending). In technical terms, you are playing only the 7th, 5th, and root of the D Dorian scale.

Try to count the pulses from the delay and play each note on the beat after 16 pulses (if you think of each pulse as an 8th note, you are holding each note for two bars in 4/4). Later you can shorten it to 8 pulses (one bar), according to taste. This is one way you can vary the timing of the melody later. If you mis-count, it still works. If everybody’s counting, amazing things happen.

Other musicians join in with the same theme in D, at will.

Development: After a full statement of the theme in D (maybe two repeats, depending on the feel), we go around the circle of 5ths, *backwards* (which technically makes it the circle of 4ths) transposing the tonic and theme. Key progression: D, G, C, F, Bflat, etc. For example, in G Dorian, the notes are f, d, g.

The fun part is that we don't plan or organize the rate that the players move to the next key. In fact we try to get out of synch with the keys. This is how you get "enharmonic" notes in the mix. We usually make it about half-way around (to Dflat or Gflat), but that's an artistic choice how far or fast you go. Play with this to get a feel for what can happen and how it sounds.

You can alter the order of the melody notes as you explore, but don't play any notes other than the three in whatever key you are in. One good alternate works as a call and answer to the main theme: c, up whole step to d, down 4th to a, then down 5th to d. Or c, d, then down an octave to d. In the recapitulation of the melody I like to sometimes add d, a, d, a, d, going up or down octaves, for dramatic effect.

As you transpose, it helps to vary the timbres of the notes. Also, as in any good jam, you will find yourselves going into different territories—soft, loud, high, low, sweet, nasty, meditative, colorful, twisted, smooth (but because of the persistent delay, you can't get rhythmic). Again, this is where the variety and jamming possibilities open up. Warning: It's easy to make a lot of noise and confusion. Try some restraint and it gets very spacey.

Then after playing through different keys, at some point somebody starts to pitch bend a note or two. Pitch bends sound awesome with such a long decay on the delay—we call them "smears." This might be a time to throw in some non-tonal sounds. The piece disintegrates into a wash of noise.

Recapitulation: Out of the chaos the big D drone emerges (usually initiated by the leader). All musicians finish their last idea and then join in the drone. When the drone is built up, then tamed down, the lead musician comes in with the original theme in D Dorian. Others follow, all in D.

You can end it by fading out the drone together.

As an option, add an intro of a mixture of descending sin-wave tones (with normal delay feedback of about 40%), like a spaceship landing, that merges into the first drone as you turn up the feedback on the delay to 95%. Do the same for the outro, but in reverse and with ascending tones, maybe mixing in some spaceship beeps. It's best if one person does this as a "solo."

Final warning: It's really easy to get carried away with this long delay and make a big mess. The key to a beautiful, spacey Crater Dust is playing less. And listening to your fellow musicians. When it works, it can be as satisfying as any other type of music out there.

The name Crater Dust came from Art Cohen reading an article that speculated that it would be possible for a man to swim in the dust in the craters on the Moon—because of the 1/6th gravity and the thickness of the dust. That was the inspiration for the piece. Swimming in dust on the Moon. That's precisely the feel of a good Crater Dust.

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Send me copies of the jams you create with this score. I'd love to hear them.