

## **Jazz in Britain: interviews with modern and contemporary jazz musicians, composers and improvisers**

I still feel that: improvisation reaches out, breaks down barriers, challenges frontiers. Music is about liberation, jazz is about liberation, that's the word to focus on.

Maggie Nicols, singer

### **Preamble**

*I undertook these interviews in 2002-2003 as part of the research project I was working on, Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain. The primary outcome of the project was a book of the same title (published by Duke University Press in 2005). This was an extension into more recent music practice of the interviews I'd undertaken regarding the trad boom of the 1950s. Both sets of interviews were for research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, and I am extremely grateful for the board's support.*

*Methodology. The interviews (mostly) fall into two groups, those that were direct responses to email correspondence from me, written by the musicians themselves, and those that were telephone interviews. The latter worked like this: I took written notes during interviews, typed up and ordered the material, and offered to send the transcription to each interviewee for approval, correction, amendment. This offer was usually though not always taken up; there would be minor factual corrections or nuances, sometimes extra paragraphs added (excellent!), on or two occasions the interviewee actually rewrote the entire transcription (intriguingly, my version and the complete rewrite weren't even that different).*

*Why these interviewees? Partly a matter of pragmatics: they were the ones that responded to my requests. Other musicians or their agents simply didn't get back to me at all. (No one I think actually refused to speak with me.) Also, I chose people that I considered important for the issues I was interested in, because of significant musical or social innovations, interventions, projects, and so on. A very small number of improvising musicians are the focus of extensive existing interviews over many years in the jazz and other press, and I did tend to look for voices other than theirs, in order to widen out the range of responses and political experiences. (That shouldn't be read as a slight on their marvellous achievements.) Occasionally this backfired, as you'll see!*

*There is a slant towards discussions about cultural politics, in particular race, gender, and national identity, for the simple reason that that was the way the questions were phrased, those were the issues I was interested in exploring. The interviews are presented in a rough chronological order of each musician's appearance on the scene.*

*Final point. Talking with these creative musicians was a tremendously enjoyable experience for me; it's not going too far to say that it felt like a privilege. People whose work I admired, whose sounds and performances I had been listening to and*

*watching for, well, decades now, gave up to me some of their time and energy, and I am profoundly grateful.*

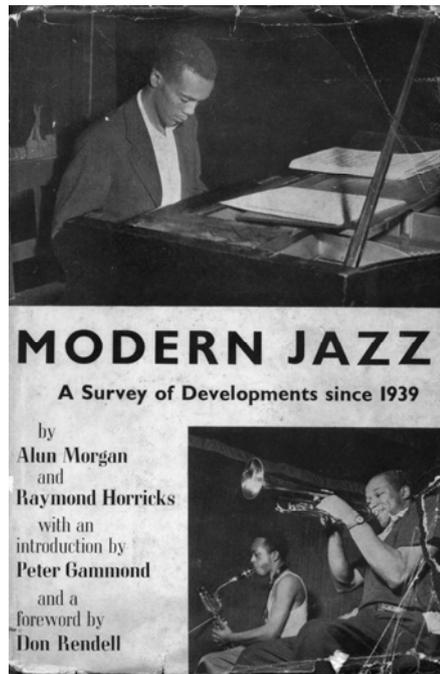
*Interviews (in order of appearance):*

- *Trevor Watts*
- *Eddie Prévost*
- *Mike Westbrook*
- *Keith Tippett*
- *Maggie Nicols*
- *Steve Beresford*
- *Kate Westbrook*
- *Tony Haynes*
- *Gary Crosby*
- *Ben Crow*
- *Deirdre Cartwright.*

*If you want to quote from this material please do, but please do also acknowledge the source.*

**George McKay**

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**The first British-published book specifically on modern jazz (London: Gollancz, 1956), includes fourteen chapters on US music, and the last, the fifteenth, on ‘New Sounds from the Old World—the Modern Jazz Scene in Europe’**

## Trevor Watts

**Saxophonist, improviser from Spontaneous Music Ensemble to Moiré Music  
12 December 2002, email correspondence**

### What was it about jazz that attracted/attracts you to it?

I was born in 1939, and my father, who had lived in Canada in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and also visited the States at that time, brought back his love of Jazz and popular music of the time, which was closer to Jazz in those days anyway. So we had a wind up gram and lots of 78s of Tex Beneke/Artie Shaw/Duke Ellington/Nellie Lutcher/Nat King Cole/Fats Waller etc, etc. My parents let my brother and I use the gramophone, so we were constantly playing all that music which we grew up with. Eventually when I became a teenager and left school at 15 (having failed the damned 11+, or at least been told I'd failed) to work in a bakery like him, I wanted to find a way out of that life, and the constrictions of the industrial north [of England] (Halifax) in the early 1950s. I heard all this fantastic music, but there was none around 'live', nor any way of hearing it live. So I chose to play the first instrument my parents found, and could afford. It happened to be a Buescher saxophone. And taught myself. I also started to buy recordings of Charlie Parker and Stan Getz. This time on 33s of course. And heard in the later 1950s the Count Basie and Duke Ellington bands live.

I always seemed to be attracted towards the surprise elements in the most original Jazz musicians, and in particular to the slightly more quirky players and playing styles. For instance, Ernie Henry was my first big sax influence. This eventually led onto all the greats, Eric Dolphy, Thelonius Monk, Charlie Mingus, Ornette Coleman etc. Anyone who had a different take on it. They were suggesting through their playing that the game was eventually to find your own voice and way through. That's what I took from it. Sadly lacking in today's teaching methods I feel. *Nothing* attracts me to the current methods of teaching and regurgitating the music. I think promoters and teachers are perhaps even more to blame than aspiring musicians. They teach kids to be very proficient on their instruments, competitive and judgemental. Whereas I feel there should be some encouragement of a musician's individuality and to show the students of the music how to embrace and value discovering their own way through this music.

I heard the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra a few nights ago and thought it was the most appalling music I'd heard in a long while. A true parody of the music. It was awful. Fronted by that self-styled guru of Jazz, Wynton Marsalis, who has the audacity to berate Miles Davis whilst serving up this pap! Sure he can play the trumpet o.k. But his propaganda about the music, and need to claim that he's holding the torch for future generations is so far off beam in my opinion. That this is helping to kill Jazz forever, if it's not dead already. Lousy arrangements under the guise of 'Rhythm is our Business', what rhythm? Tenor solos that sound cloned. All the licks from John Coltrane without the passion, and the middle eights of tunes, using a different set of Coltrane licks tagged together sounding unrelated in storybook terms. And this at great expense. The promoters of all this are irresponsible. They're in it purely for profit and self gain, and the new audience I fear are not educated for the sound of surprise (sorry about the cliché). None of this is said with an ounce of sour

grapes because there's nothing to be sour about. I am so glad I didn't go down that path, and I feel sorry for the state of the music, and what is being touted as good jazz, or so called excellence. Excellence in what?

**Many musicians and enthusiasts talk of jazz as a music of 'freedom'. Do you agree?**

Any music can be the music of freedom. No music has inherent freedom within it. Sure it may have chordally or non chordally for that matter, but that isn't where true freedom lies. It lies in the head of the musician. I didn't think Jimmie Hendrix was any less free than Ornette in his playing, and Charlie Parker was free as a bird. It's when the freedoms of a musician become institutionalised and learnt as a language that there becomes less freedom for the individual learning it and playing it by rote, because it's been done before. You have to find your own voice, and there would lie your freedoms as well as some restrictions of course. I played with Sonny Boy Williamson in a blues context. He was as free as anyone else I've played with. So no style of music can claim that. It's too naive a thought.

**To what extent, if at all, has your music engaged with politics, in its widest sense? (eg benefits, involvement in campaigns, experience of self-organisation in jazz, influence on music, contribution to education)**

I've done many tours for the British Council, which is part of the Foreign Office. I have done benefits for the Anti Nuclear Campaign, Anti Apartheid Campaign and for a well in a village in Africa that didn't have water.

The British Council tours to weird and wonderful places have all had some aspects of politics attached to them in the widest sense. It is the cultural arm of the government's foreign policy. So with the Moiré Music Drum Orchestra (5 Ghanaians and 2 British) we travelled to many places. We were the first band to play in Burma for 10 years. And we played there on two occasions. The first time we were not allowed to play outside the confines of the British Embassy. But some Burmese were allowed in. They hadn't danced for all those years because it was banned. We also did a concert in the Inya Lake Hotel, opposite the hotel, on an island in the lake, was the place where Ne Win (the old dictator lived) and also where his revolution started. Half way through our concert searchlights raked the building and a lot of Burmese left. This made us play even harder. When I got home a reporter from the *Daily Telegraph* phoned to interview me, and I told them the story. But in print it came out as 'it was very scary when the searchlights came on' but in actual fact I'd said 'we played harder'. When I questioned the reporter about this, he only said 'Well, that's what I thought you said'. We also collaborated with their leading pop group Emperor and recorded with them at their studio on both occasions. On the second occasion we also played in a sort of bamboo restaurant in Mandalay opposite and with some Philipina [?] girl musicians. We met the leading Burmese poet who had been just let out of jail. We also met others in the audience who valued our presence there, and were told it gave them some hope. In that same audience were secret police of the regime. So, goodies and baddies. We managed to slip in the Bob Marley tune 'Redemption Song' as a political statement. Music can be very good like that.

I remember when we toured in S Africa, Lesotho and Botswana also with the Drum Orchestra. Originally we visited Lesotho, and it was close to change over time in South Africa, but not really there yet. The black musicians union of South Africa said we cannot go there to play unless we did a workshop in Soweto. Which we were very pleased to do. We also played a mixed race club in Jo'burg and did a workshop for mixed races. In Botswana we did a workshop in a school there, and the workshops generally were to do with getting together and playing music. Once it was suggested that I could show them how to actually write the rhythms down, and who would be interested in that. *Everyone* in the class said they would be interested. We also played at a Lutheran mission. Inside they had the white tutors and students who had a brass band. So we did a concert with them. They played some rather stiff Christian type of music, and we played our much looser rougher stuff to a very polite audience. When we went outside to play there were crowds of very excited people. Really enjoying our music. Quite a noticeable difference. A festival we played in Khartoum was very interesting, because there was one day when we didn't play a concert with our own group, but mixed things up. I was asked to play with a group from Western Sudan by them, and we all had a delightful time. There were a lot of Sudanese officials sitting in the front row, and although with their turbans and beards looked like the 'heavy brigade'. They seemed to be having a good time with all the shenanigans. The young musicians there were desperate to learn Western musical tricks of the trade. Funky bass rhythms etc. All in all we had a great time with some very nice and friendly people.

The biggest project I involved myself with was a 35 piece project that had seven musicians of the Drum Orchestra and 28 from the black music and theatre group of Venezuela, Teatro Negro de Barlovento. The project took its name from a Moiré Music recording of mine called 'With One Voice' and was called 'Una Sola Voz'. We first met them in 1990 on a Drum Orchestra tour of the USA/Canada/Mexico and Venezuela. They played a concert opposite us, and then we all played together. I thought that it would be a good idea to try to do this in Europe. So a couple of years later the British Council wanted to send me back to Venezuela to stay with them and learn about the music and to help make some arrangements for a tour in Europe. At that meeting I said that I thought an African from the group should come with me as that would help the situation. And so they agreed to also send Nana Tsiboe along with me. The Barlovento Foundation is one of many in that region originally formed to preserve their African traditions once they were freed as slaves. So the music and theatre was a mixture of Voodoo practices, Christian religious ideas and others I guess. They performed a show for us and also some of their music. I was the only white person in the entire community. Then they asked us to show them what we did. So we did. Nana took advantage of the fact that he was African and made many connections through that fact. I had a little bit of a crisis part way through, but having done all this in absolute good faith I thought that in the long run I had as much right to be there. But I felt I had to work for that right beyond the fact that I could have been thought of as some sort of organiser/manager. I think I lacked a bit of courage at first, and this caused a bit of friction between Nana and myself. I think his prejudiced side came through a bit more at that point with his long lost brothers on the other side of the World. Nevertheless we managed to do some playing and touring in Europe and also Venezuela. I have many more experiences, but perhaps these are enough.

I always wanted to go to Africa with the Drum Orchestra to check out how they would relate to me within an African style context. And it was in the main a very positive experience. I know my rhythms for a start, and so once this aspect is a serious part of your music, and more importantly, the people there hear the subtleties of that easier than in Europe. This also goes for Latin America. This has been proved on many occasions. I've been cheered like mad in the middle of a solo primarily because of the intensity of what was being played, but also at a moment when you know you've done something good rhythmically with your melody. The fact that I had a drum and vocal choir basically singing and playing African style with me improvising with it (sometimes over it, but not really because I was aware of the rhythms, and later on, the songs also) so whatever I played had a relationship, *but* (and this is where the freedoms come in again) not in an African style. And to me, that was the beauty of the music. Strangely enough, back home here in England some people even said it'd be better without the sax etc. But then what you've got left with is just another African group. A kind of lack of imagination on the part of that person's opinion (who was always white) and also some kind of prejudice. I wasn't messing with anyone's music. We all came together voluntarily. Plus that kind of attitude differed than say from Nee Daku Patato's, who was the elder statesman of the band, who always took me aside and said 'Trevor, this group is important, you've *got* to keep it together'. But Nee Daku, who'd travelled all over the World with Osibisa as well as Moiré Drum Orchestra, was a true man of the World, and could fit in anywhere. When I first got the Drum Orchestra together we just improvised all of it. Nothing was ruled in or out. Ghanaian songs, jazz, improvisation and even noise was all inclusive. The music worked itself together, and that's the way I wanted it. This idea and method often gets misunderstood. Like when I had Amalgam in the 1970s and Peter Brotzmann and Peter Kowald put me down for playing 'Rock'. Ten years later Brotzmann's playing with Last Exit. Not a million miles away from the Amalgam music of the '70s.

**How far do or did you identify jazz as an American culture? Positive or negative?**

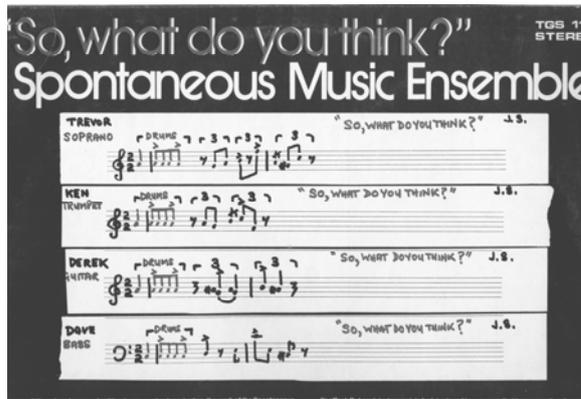
In the first place I viewed Jazz as an American culture, but I wasn't hung up on that fact. As I've said before. I also viewed it as a music that I personally related to, and a music to find my own voice within. So it eventually became my music. Sure, in the '60s we reacted against the Jazz music scene here, and the fact that you were compelled to play Jazz like an American or not at all. So the music of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble came about from the fact that we didn't want to dote on American jazz, but take the spirit of that music for ourselves, and move things along in the way *we* wanted. Quite a novel idea still in 1964! However by the '70s a lot of free and improvising musicians in Europe who began via those American jazz influences became rather anti-American Jazz and almost fascistically pro-Dutch or -German, saying this is Dutch Music or German Music now. And denied the fact that without that involvement in American jazz in the first place, they wouldn't be doing what they're doing. But that American music had led them on to where they were by then: without players like Albert Ayler and others, they wouldn't be doing what they were doing in the '70s. Instead of just acknowledging it had become an international music. That is when I started to lose interest in the free music scene. That and also all the rules that tacitly, and not so tacitly, became apparent for European improvising musicians. A rejection of anything to do with American jazz, or rhythm or melody. So being a rhythmic and melodic player it wasn't on for me. Plus the fact that some of

those so called pioneers of free music are playing almost exactly the same today as 30 years ago, and are still talked about as innovators. Conservatives more like.

So for me the association with Jazz as an American culture was a positive one that I could take from in a natural way, and develop it how I liked. Even today when you go to America, jazz is more prevalent everywhere. More accepted than here.

**In what ways, if at all, has British (and/or European) jazz developed indigenous voices or forms?**

Collective pointillistic improvisation a la SME is a definite. And various other groups like AMM. So much more from that end of the spectrum.



SME album *So What Do You Think?*, with John Stevens' phrasing for musicians including Trevor Watts (top line, soprano sax), 1971

**Do you feel your colour or ethnic identity is important in jazz? Does it inform your playing/repertoire? Perhaps your national or regional identity is important—if so, how does it manifest itself?**

No. But others probably do. I don't relate to colour for anything. Just whether a person is good at what they do, or is a good or bad person, that's all. There is one thing though. I wanted to play with African drummers because of the traditions they uphold, and knowledge from an early age. So they play those rhythms with a certain feel born out of that long term preservation of culture and practice within it right from being kids. So most of them happen to be black because of where they come from. This isn't to say white people cannot play with a good feel, and many do, and as far as playing percussion, many more white people now are studying rhythm in the right way, and so many more white people will be playing with a good feel. And even what we conceive at the moment as an African type of feel. Primarily a historical thing I think. Rather like the slow change over in giving black people executive jobs in the U.K. More are suitable for that type of thing than ever before. But in both cases a prejudice has to be overcome.

**Does it mean anything to you to be male or female in jazz? Jazz performances in Britain on stage and in audience are seriously male-dominated—is that significant to you?**

No. A good player is a good player. And I'm not one of those people chosen to dominate the stages here. I hardly get a gig in the U.K. And I don't think I'm a female! I would prefer there to be more women in the audience than there are.

### **Is jazz alive or dead?**

*Dead.* See my reference to Wynton Marsalis and Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

### **Is there anything else you wish to add?**

I did this in one sitting. I could have written much more. Especially about all the different tours, and the dynamics of the Drum Ork. Not only Drum Ork but SME. But as you'll be interviewing loads of people I didn't want to hog the space. And also just mention if you want more elucidation on any aspect of it.

Maybe I should have written a book??

Every question made me groan in a way as there's so much to say when you've had such a long and varied career as I have had. And to write it down takes a long time. I hope this has been of some help.

All best wishes,

Trevor.

**Trevor Watts (Moire Music Group/Celebration Band/Arc Records U.K.)**

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*Follow up email correspondence, January 2003. In response to his invitation, I asked Trevor a number of other questions, including a sensitive one about the Drum Orchestra's line-up (white man solo front line blowing over a black African group of drummers), and whether this could be seen as replicating rather than challenging or bypassing colonial relations, and this was his reply.*

I've just scanned your new questions. I really didn't expect this amount of info required. Trouble is, in trying to answer your questions, you'll either think you have understood my answers—that's if you think I've made myself clear in the first place—or the answers will lead onto a load more questions. Don't you think also that you'd try to make the answers fit into ideas that you may already have about doing British Council work, for instance? So I've got to be careful here not to misrepresent myself and experiences I've had. Personally I'm not interested in what people think about whether Colonial perceptions about us whitey English boys have been even more cemented by the fact I was the leader of the Drum Ork etc, etc. As it tells me more about them than it does about what's actually really happening. I.e. one of the drummers Nana Tsiboe had a much more privileged education and up-bringing than myself, for instance. His Mother was a politician in Ghana, his Father owned a newspaper there, and he was sent to England for a good education. I was brought up in a Northern working class town in the 40s & 50s and left school at 15 after a bad education. So unless I went into everything in miniscule details, chances are I'd misrepresent myself on questions like this. See what I mean. I'm trying to write music, record it, get some work, which is, and always has been tough. So how much time have I got?? In the end it's your work I'll be helping. I won't gain anything very

much out of this whole exercise. Not really. So although I appreciate your interest I may give it a miss. You're far better off talking to more politically motivated musicians in the improvised area of music like Derek Bailey or Evan Parker. I'm sure you'd get lots out of them! Maybe not, but have you given it a try?

## **Eddie Prévost**

**Percussionist, founder member of AMM, long standing improvisation group in Britain, improvising educationalist and author**

**Email correspondence 1 Nov 2002, telephone interview 15 Nov 2002**

**What was it about jazz/improvised music that attracted/attracts you to it? Actually, do you feel your music comes out of jazz anyway?**

Certainly my involvement with music came through being able to make music outside of education and prescribed forms. I actually played skiffle and trad. Jazz, skiffle first and then trad, drumming, as a youth in South East London and then the East End in the late 1950s. Ken Colyer more than, say, Acker Bilk, though I really identified with Alex Welsh, I thought he was a better trumpeter than Colyer. The weird purist thing I didn't really understand—there are a lot of rednecks in jazz! It's technique partly, manifestly so. But I had as a teenager been drawn towards modern jazz—through a school friend's parents. They were middle class and played lots of jazz music. It seemed to have more bite, impact and mystery than other forms of music for me.

On the radio at the time the BBC played music that was twenty years out of date, and this may have led to the skiffle boom, where young people just decided to play something new themselves. The excitement, the energy, and unfamiliarity of jazz and other related forms was part of the appeal.

**Many musicians and enthusiasts talk of jazz as a music of 'freedom'. Do you agree?**

It is true up to a point. Maybe this is the initial attraction. But it has its own rules. Its own 'operating qualities' just like any other. The more interesting question perhaps is what kind of 'freedom' it might reflect and represent. Is it a freedom to speak and a freedom to work with others?



Distinctive AMM artwork by Keith Rowe, from an early poster, also appearing on the cover of Prévost's 1995 book *No Sound is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention: Meta-Musical Narrative: Essays* (Harlow: Copula): 'Apart from its "meta-reality" we had been especially intrigued by the object in the top left corner' (p. iii).

When AMM started out it was the sixties after all. Audiences couldn't believe we were being serious—they would be angry or dismissive or offended. If you had to deal with that playing context, and also, you know, with your own doubts about the music you were involved in, because making the music was very much a kind of process of exploration, then you had to be strong, convinced, mentally. AMM's use in performances of both silence and darkness did give us an austere aesthetic which was part of the experimentation of the times even if it appears so different. Hoppy was one of our biggest fans—he'd be rolled up in a blanket on the floor, rolling a few joints in the dark. The silences just happened, and they could be incredibly intense. I had never even heard of John Cage at this time, we weren't exploring his ideas, we didn't even know them! And to be honest, the darkness was rather more pragmatic than may have appeared. We liked it because it just took away from the soloist thing—it supplied intensity and anonymity, broke down any egos within the group.

**To what extent, if at all, has your music engaged with politics, in its widest sense? (eg benefits, involvement in campaigns, experience of self-organisation in jazz, influence on music, contribution to education)**

I have always avoided 'agit prop'. However, I have over the years been engaged in workshops, writing and lecturing on the subject. My general views are well rehearsed (!)—that the music most strongly reveals itself through heurism and dialogue. If you've seen my book *No Sound is Innocent* then you'll recognise the general line. In brief I think that it can be a music for self definition and group definition. It can also (sadly) allow itself to be used for other purposes. Mostly market forces.

I was never an anarchist, and I suppose as I'm getting older any optimism about a social revolution, or even its desirability, has, well, waned. But in general political terms, I continue to believe in values outside of individualism, and the only lever I have ever had to engage or develop this has been music. It has always been about collective playing, engaging with an audience, and building something! The way you do things is important—if the civil society can't be seen in the very music you make then the music is bogus. All of this is important with AMM of course, yes, because of the early period when Cornelius Cardew was involved, and his heavy espousing of Marxism. Cardew's idea of projecting to the workers, from his extraordinarily privileged social position—it felt very uncomfortable at the time, and with hindsight seems so wrong.

The kind of music I play was then [in the formative period of the 1960s] frankly despised by those in control, the culture establishment. The Arts Council and the BBC alike have both since made minor patronising attempts to support our ‘free’ improvised music, but I have rarely found their commitment convincing. Our music *is* outside the mainstream, but over the years we have developed an audience, a community, a group of people all around the world now, who believe in it. The attraction, even the politics, of AMM and similar music can’t just be put down to its outsiderdom. Links with jazz quickly dissolved too: I remember we did a jazz workshop once, Eddie Harvey was brave enough to invite us to some college to work with the music students. It was a fairly hostile environment: they were saying to us ‘Well, why don’t you tone it down a bit?’ We laughed about that on the way home, it’s stuck with us. I think I was thinking, ‘Well, why aren’t you all a bit more adventurous?’

You could see a sort of link between us and the punk scene of the 1970s, I suppose, though its radicalism was quickly found out. Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth said ‘AMM did everything that punk music promised but didn’t deliver’. Well, after I heard that quote I listened to some of their records, but to be honest the attitude, the interest in improvisation, wasn’t really translated into the music.

**How far do or did you identify jazz as an American culture? Positive or negative?**

There is no doubt in my mind that the current phase of improvised music in the world arose from the impetus of American jazz. In respect to the history of the American peoples in their various struggles for cultural identity and social justice the music clearly has played a part. However, Wynton Marsalis probably reflects the burgeoning ‘middle class black aspiration’ rather than any thought of distributive justice for all. In that sense American jazz has moved from being positive towards a negative situation.

One cannot underestimate the attraction of the Americanness had for British youth after the Second World War. A friend of mine used to receive food parcels from relatives in the United States—and the idea of getting a stick of even real American chewing gum was exciting! [*Laughs*]

But the idea of the USA as a *problem* came after, and through things like the Vietnam War and the counterculture movement’s protests against it. In terms of jazz, people were so patronising about *British jazz*, even the idea of it—you weren’t supposed to *play* such a thing. For instance, Tubby Hayes was one of my real heroes, a fantastic, an amazing British saxophonist at the time. But Tubby basically wanted to *be* an American jazz musician. What we were trying to do quite quickly with AMM could be a response to the difficulty of the American roots of the music: we were young men in London in the 1960s, not Harlem or Chicago, and we became more courageous with our music-making. I’ve often said that the music of Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler gave us *permission to disobey*.

**In what ways, if at all, has British (and/or European) jazz developed indigenous voices or forms?**

There has always been a view that the German, Dutch and British improvisers were the strongest voices in improvised music from the 1960s onwards. Each grouping definitely had a particular voicing—although of course there were overlaps where there were collaborations. It seems wholly correct that variations should develop to mirror the local conditions and individual creative responses to situations.

**Do you feel your colour or ethnic identity is important in jazz? Does it inform your playing/repertoire? Perhaps your national or regional identity is important—if so, how does it manifest itself?**

Ethnic identity has been very important for black American jazz musicians. Although I note how many of them have been surprised how African musicians are often uninterested and indifferent to African/American music. My own view is that the ethnic/colour stratification is a localised way of dealing with class struggle (there's an old-fashioned term for you!). National and or ethnic identity is of no importance to me at all. Even when we were starting out, in our young romanticising way we probably were expressing our own alienation, but we didn't want to bolt that on to Africa-American experience in their music, no. All my experience is that young intelligent people in this (albeit homogenising) world of ours, can accommodate each other very productively, in a non-exploitative situation. I have been running a weekly workshop in London now for over three years in which time there have been musicians of at least twenty different nationalities. Never has there been a particular problem in musical communication. Quite the reverse.

**Does it mean anything to you to be male or female in jazz? Jazz performances in Britain on stage and in audience are seriously male-dominated—is that significant to you?**

A dozen musicians involved in the entire thirty-odd year history of AMM, and they have all been men. Yes, we are conscious that there have been no women *ever* in AMM. When we were starting out, women in the scene were more involved in the feminist movement than in improvisation, and we would have felt that it would have been playing at politics. Also, AMM was quite a fierce, no-holds-barred experience, and it needed a strong personality to impact on the music. There were very very few women musicians around then who could have done that.

In improvisation, the balance of gender is changing. Slowly—perhaps still too slowly. But there is a shift. I see it reflected in my workshops where I could never get all the women to come in the same day. So that normally there might be only one or two women in a class of 12-15. Last week however, I had four women in a class of twelve. Progress—maybe! The only thing that maybe is surprising is how long this has taken. After all, there seem to be so many particular practices—‘operational qualities’—in collective improvisation that reflect feminine aspirations. What I mean here is that part of the music-making process is the development of a social relationship between the musicians, and for women coming to the music *that* is an attractive element to them.

**Is jazz alive or dead?**

It depends what you mean by jazz. All the jazz taught and nurtured at jazz festival and our club level I think is now completely immersed in market forces. Success is only measured by the bank balance. And, it has been the nature of jazz business only ever to be able to support fully three of four major saxophonists, for example.

## **Mike Westbrook**

**Pianist, composer, bandleader**

**Written interview, 16 January 2003**

I first became interested in jazz at school in the late '40s—began collecting '78' records—Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, boogie woogie, Fats Waller, etc. It was much more exciting than any other music around. It was also subversive: jazz was banned at my school. Jazz was mostly American, but the New Orleans revival in Britain, in its purist days, was important. Part of a new, alternative proletarian culture that acknowledged black American music as its inspiration. Likewise blues and skiffle, before they metamorphosed into pop. After school I began to hear more modern jazz. In this post-war period people went out dancing to big bands. This was a time when 'progressive' jazz seemed a part of building a new socialist Britain. In the '50s one or other of the touring bands would be playing at Torquay Town Hall, for dancing and listening—Dankworth, Ronnie Scott's ten-piece, and so on. Ted Heath was resident for the summer at the Spa ballroom—mostly commercial stuff, but always some good jazz. The music was mostly copied from the Americans—Stan Kenton, Ellington, Basie. Eventually we were allowed to hear the Americans live. The first I saw and heard was Lionel Hampton—a revelation.

I was teaching myself trumpet and piano, and through National Service and a year at university continued to listen, practice and occasionally play in a small band, 'mainstream' style. At Art School in Plymouth in '58 formed a band with fellow students.

In London in the '60s I formed my first regular band. I was writing my own compositions by then. We were becoming more experimental, very much inspired by the American New Wave. Just as we were starting up, the modern jazz scene was collapsing—clubs went over to the more accessible Rhythm and Blues. The Marquee, which initially presented jazz seven nights a week, gradually changed over till there was just Sunday (Joe Harriott), then that went. So we had nowhere to play—the search began to find new openings—this became, and remains, very much part of one's work as a composer/bandleader. On the plus side, the great American soloists like Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, could be heard at Ronnie's. The American influence remained strong. But the changes in the scene forced one to be very strong in one's convictions, to question the American orthodoxy and to work on developing an independent voice. I had a sextet and occasional big band to write for throughout the '60s and was lucky to have a platform at Ronnie's 'Old Place'. I started to write extended compositions, including an anti-war piece, *Marching Song*.

By the '70s, despite some success, the British jazz scene was still very restricted. Fortunately there were opportunities in the theatre—not only the straight theatre (such as *Tyger* for the National Theatre) but, more importantly, in fringe or alternative theatre. Writing and playing music for the Welfare State, among others, required a new approach. This led to the formation of the Brass Band in '73. The idea was to be able to play anywhere. So the music was acoustic, mobile, and open to all kinds of situations. We played in the streets, shopping centres, schools, hospitals, factory canteens—anywhere that anyone asked us. To find suitable material, I drew on New Orleans, folk songs, early music, anything at all that would work with that line-up, or was suggested by a member of the band. Songs and improvisation were included. It was the most natural kind of music making, but in that rock-dominated scene, quite provocative. It was anti-elitist, democratic, populist, yet High Art—for all of us, I think, a fusion of our musical and political philosophies. We played in Community Arts events (at that time there was some Arts Council support for Community Arts), Tribune rallies, demos, benefits, and the Communist Party's Moving Left Revues at the Round House.

At the Moving Left Revues we were on the bill with Henry Cow and Frankie Armstrong. We teamed up with them and formed the Orchestra. This toured in France and Italy, where the Cows were well established in the alternative scene. In these countries there was a link between revolutionary politics and the avant garde. This was never really the case in the UK—as a Brass Band tour organised by the Communist Party of working men's clubs showed. Sadly. For the Brass Band, political songs were important—Brecht/Weill, etc—but the main rallying point was the William Blake song 'Let the slave' which we performed everywhere, and which became our anthem. Notably we played it at the *Rute Lieder* Festival in East Berlin.

The Brass Band continued to play street music alongside concerts and festivals around Europe. *The Cortège* was a large-scale composition that grew out of this experience and expressed, in epic form, many facets of the Brass Band's musical and political stance. By this time—'79—the Brass Band had moved into Jazz Cabaret, with *Mama Chicago* and other shows that followed. This music-theatre approach—based in jazz, with improvisation all-important, as a vehicle for political song, satire social comment, original song-writing—has run through all the work generated by Kate Westbrook and me ever since. There have been small bands—our Duo, the Trio with Chris Biscoe—as well as music-theatre, opera and such large scale works as *London Bridge has Broken Down*. This last, which grew out of Trio travels in Europe, explored political theatre in sections devoted to London Bridge, Wenceslas Square, the Berlin Wall, Vienna and Picardie. 'Belle Vue Berlin Wall', we were told, was playing on a local Berlin radio station in 1989 as the wall came down.

## **Keith Tippett**

**Improvising pianist, bandleader  
Telephone interview, 29 January 2003**



**Keith Tippett**

### **Jazz and me**

I first heard ‘Midnight in Moscow’ by Kenny Ball, and went out and bought the sheet music, and that was my introduction to jazz. While other kids at school were forming Shadows-style guitar groups, I played in a trad band. I moved on to bebop. There were no jazz summer schools then—you learned through playing on the stand, and of course through listening to records. All through this time though, these early jazz years, I studied classical piano, was a chorister, played the church organ as well.

After I’d moved to London, I went to the Barry Summer School in its second year. Pat Evans had started it, and he’d suggested I apply to the MU for a scholarship, and I did and got one. I met a lot of people there—Mark Charig, Nic Evans, Elton Dean, for instance—and it wasn’t that long before we were back in London, and we had a residency at the 100 Club, supporting other better known players. There were a lot of little pockets of activity in London, not that they were separate, a good amount of cross-feeding went on. But there was Ronnie Scott’s, the Little Theatre Club, the Musician’s Cooperative, and the Blue Notes. Quite by luck really, although Chris McGregor was the de facto leader (and as another pianist, we never got the chance to play together), musically and socially the Blue Notes was the grouping I gravitated towards.

What happened with the 1980s in Britain—and in America—was a consolidation of earlier jazz. Nothing as radical came out during scene as there had from the ‘60s. I think that’s a pretty commonly held view.

I draw a line under the jazz tradition before you get to improvised music. Improvised music means for me no preconceived architecture, it’s not a given—if it’s free jazz it can still have a head and then go off for solos, and also there’s generally some sense of rhythmic attention. But improvised music is different—many European free improvising musicians have never even played jazz, nor wanted to. I think the important thing though is that we do have to put our hands on our hearts and thank black Americans for keeping improvisation in the frame, within earshot, in the twentieth century.

### **Centipede**

Centipede was formed in 1970. I had this idea of writing a piece virtually for all our friends to play. We knew a lot of people from different musics. Julie was from a soul/R&B background, there were the jazz musicians, string players from western classical music, and then those playing what goes by the label of progressive rock. Those sorts of people hadn't really worked together at that time. So we formed Centipede, featuring them all. There were fifty musicians involved, but actually there could have been 100—there was a lot of enthusiasm for it. It was done innocently, we were all friends, we were all young, no-one was doing it for the money—actually the first gig, at the Lyceum, was a benefit, for the never to happen Jazz Centre.

This was a time when youth had power, but I'd stress that the project was quite innocent. Of course we were in the midst of a cultural revolution at the time. People born just after the war were shaking off their parents' attitudes, and [in the 1960s] the music, the whole scene, was changing, evolving. And the world was different because everyone had jobs, you could afford to experiment, the music business allowed you to take more risks.

It wasn't an American model we were using, because nothing quite like that had been done before. But I didn't see it as a European or a British model of music either. It was more simple: it was a glorious musical circus, that happened to exist from a bunch of musicians who happened to be British.

### **Education**

I am involved in education in a small way, but I'm not a teacher, by the way. I work at Dartington Summer School, though there are no auditions for that, it's all-comers, with very varied ability, across the range of ages too. That's a large ensemble, and by necessity broad brushstroke approach: we create an architecture, and they look at building a vocabulary. My second main education work is at the Royal Welsh College of Music. There I take mainly classical musicians in spontaneous composition—no time, no key, nothing fixed, just there and then, and listening [to each other]. It's purely about being a sound sculpture. I recognise the reservations some musicians have about teaching jazz in colleges—you know, the 'Would Thelonious Monk have got into Juillard?' type question. Jazz was introduced into conservatoires as a result of market forces—but jazz courses are a curate's egg. Of course, the danger is that students can be all taught to sound the same, and you just can't apply the same criteria to jazz as to western classical music. I say to students: 'Would your mother recognise you on the radio?' It should be remembered too that what's out there for music students when they leave college is only the concert pianist for very, very few: for the others it's working in the theatre, cabaret, film music, and so on. If it was up to me I'd have them in year two out on the road—*having* to play 'Autumn leaves' seven nights a week, with the flu, staying in a grotty bed and breakfast!

### **Maggie Nicols**

## **Improvising vocalist, educationalist**

**Telephone interview, 23 November 2002, written revisions 5 February 2003**

### **Early days**

I was born in Edinburgh, moved to London aged 11. Hmm, Scottishness in improvisation? Well, it's true that improvisation is everywhere, so why not Scottish music. Actually, Ken Hyder drew my attention to some of the possibilities in Scottish music. He was influenced by John Coltrane's statement that line jazz is folk music. It was a chance for us Scots to make those connections with our own folk music.

My mother is half Berber and half French. The Scottish, French and Berber are all a part of my culture and are in my singing in some ways.

I was a dancer too, and I danced at the Windmill Theatre in London at age 15 and then at 16 I sang in a strip club, Arthur Fox's Revuebar in Manchester.

### **Jazz in London**

In London, I fell in love with jazz. Actually [*laughs*] I had a huge crush on a trumpet player. It was Jimmy Deuchar. I've always been grateful for that crush! He was one of the finest trumpeters Scotland produced and he played with Tubby Hayes amongst many others. I liked the risk, the intensity and the imagination of the music I saw people playing.

My first introduction was through the white British musicians playing at Ronnie Scott's—Tubby Hayes, Jimmy, Stan Tracey etc! There was an incredible aliveness in the London scene at the time, from 1963 on for me, it was perfect timing for me to be around in that period of important jazz history. I was 15 or 16, the music spoke to me creatively (I wouldn't have put it like that at the time). I still feel that: improvisation reaches out, breaks down barriers, challenges frontiers. Music is about liberation, jazz is about liberation, that's the word to focus on.

Not long after I saw many great black and white American musicians at Ronnie's.

I remember early on seeing the Blue Notes at Ronnie's original place, this was before the band had settled here permanently. To be honest there was some resistance from the London scene towards what they were doing, because the Blue Notes weren't playing be-bop and there was some snobbery about their technique. I loved them, but I was very young then, and maybe rather held my enthusiasm back because of the criticisms some of the be-boppers were making.

It's true that it was a male-dominated scene—because I didn't see many other women there, and it was also a time of awakening sexuality for me, and to be honest I did idealise the men, and I was pretty young, but it was exciting with all these men around.

I was socialised, we all were: women sing, men played instruments. It didn't even occur to me that I could do something different. I'd never seen, say, Kathy Stobart, so there were very few models for aspiring women in the scene. This is probably why I

came to use my voice like an instrument. All that passion for instrumental music got poured into my voice.

I started singing jazz music with Dennis Rose on piano, who had been a real innovator in the British bebop scene. We played standards and ballads, in pubs. Later I worked with other great jazz musicians who were doing weddings and firm functions to make a living. I went away for a year as a dancer, came back, and found the Old Place [one of the two experimental venues in London at the time]. I saw Mike Westbrook's band playing there, and I thought I can hear a voice in this, I want to do this. Someone told me that John Stevens, at the Little Theatre Club, worked with voices, so I went there, in 1968. I saw Norma Winstone singing, wow, what's this! A week or two later, Trevor Watts invited me to play with him and John there. It was a life-changing experience and I sang for almost two years in John's Spontaneous Music Ensemble.



**Centipede (most of it), from the album cover for *Septober Energy* (1971); Maggie Nicols standing just left of centre, holding daughter in arms (I think)**

In [Keith Tippett's big band] Centipede, I worked with Dudu Pukwana, Mongesi Feza. The South African musicians brought new life to the British scene, and it was an explosion at the time. The interaction between Keith, Elton Dean, Nick Evans and Mark Charig (a new generation of white jazz musicians) and the predominantly black South African musicians created such an exciting new music. Funnily enough, Joe Harriott I knew less of. I did see him and Shake Keane a few times. But most of the Jamaican music that influenced me was ska and blue beat in the 1960s. It's looking back on it that I realise the importance and really supreme musical originality of Harriott's work.

### **Improvised music and revolutionary politics**

By the late 1960s, I kind of *knew* things were going on politically in the outside world, but I was immersed in the music. John's music had a political dimension, but the politics were expressed or explored in the musical relationships between the players, so I wasn't looking outside. Actually it was when I got married, my husband Harry turned me on to revolutionary politics, in the very early 1970s. He had questions *and* answers! He was totally committed. I joined the Workers' Revolutionary Party in 1971-72. This was based around class politics, and women's liberation was treated with some suspicion by many members—all feminists were middle class, it was diversionary, single issue politics didn't produce fundamental change, those sorts of things. Also round then our daughter, Aura, was born.

I brought John Stevens along to meet Gerry Healy, the General Secretary of the WRP. The party was putting on a performance about the Russian Revolution at Alexandra Palace and Gerry was keen that I should be free to follow through my improvisational musical ideas. I brought John along to talk about his unique approach. As John spoke about music and peace I became nervous about what Gerry might be thinking and then Gerry turned to me and said ‘Comrade, there’s nothing like internal peace for waging external war!’ John was a bit disturbed by that but I found that dialectic inspiring.

Around 1977, I left the WRP. I sort of ran away, well, avoided them till they got the message. I’m still connected to my former comrades—I’m writing a series of songs for their strong youth movement at the moment. I think if an ideology becomes too fixed I can’t breathe. You can’t just say that creative types can’t take the discipline of the party, there are musicians who have longstanding commitments to political beliefs. And I wouldn’t want to say there was an over-centralised hierarchy oppressing artists [who were members] either. The WRP for all its organisation and hierarchy I found to be much more open than the anarchist movement I had some involvement with later. You might think there would be strong links between anarchism and free improvisation, but some of them were culturally pretty conservative: if it wasn’t some sort of thrashy punk music they weren’t interested, didn’t want to listen. In organisational and personal terms as well, in spite of the ideology, they were rife with their own hierarchies, too—you just had to look harder to find them. I think it is the case that liberation movements can quickly turn into their opposite, and for me, to overcome that, we need to maintain our improvisatory approach, so the music has certainly to that extent informed my politics.

***Q: In your involvement with the WRP was there ever any criticism of you working with ‘jazz’-related culture, that is, any leftist expression of anti-Americanism around jazz?***

A: No, but I was too busy doing party work to have time for much else. However I actually developed incredibly as a musician through my experience as a party member especially learning about nature, society, contradiction and change, etc.

### **Feminist Improvising Group, and gender and sexuality in improvisation**

Well yes, I absolutely agree: Derek Bailey’s book *Improvisation* is male centred, any women involved, not even on the margins, but as innovators to the scene, are just totally absent. They aren’t acknowledged in the book. You know, Irene Schweitzer, she was in there at the beginning, and me, I was a pioneer of the voice in improvised music.

I was running workshops at a community centre at Oval House, Kennington. In the canteen one day I found *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, and there was one particular chapter, ‘Fear, loathing and disgust’, that spoke clearly to me about my experiences. I’d thought for years that I was the problem, it was in me, some of the casual sexual mistreatment experienced with some of the men on the jazz scene, but this book told me that there was a pattern of oppression, a socially built culture of patriarchy. And *then* I got another crush. I saw a lesbian at a performance at the Drill Hall in London, and fell in love with her. I became immersed in the lesbian

movement. I identified as a lesbian for fifteen years and it was a crucial period in my life. I stopped worrying obsessively about male approval.

So, 1977. I'd never until then had an intense relationship with women in music, apart from Julie Tippetts, of course, but not across an entire band. I was at some festival and here it was all male musicians playing, and it just popped up, wouldn't it be great if we had an all-woman band. Actually we called ourselves the *Women's Improvising Group*, but when we got the leaflet back for the first gig we were doing, it said *Feminist Improvising Group*. So the original strong political statement of the band's name never even came from us! But we just thought, 'OK, they've called us feminist, we'll work with that'. We got all these dykes to come along. That first gig was an absolutely incredible night for us, it really was, it was mind-blowing. I always *wish* it had been recorded. It was at a festival for a new campaign, Music for Socialism. The dykes we'd invited were all into disco and soul, but they sat there through all the other improvisers, until we came on. They laughed their heads off; it was performance, music, comedy, a really great mixture, so liberating and open, accessible, and with a focus on women's experience, mundane daily things. At the end, there was a big discussion with the audience, a perfect musical-political combination. The second-generation improvisers like Steve Beresford, David Toop were there in the audience, and I really feel that FIG was tremendously influential on all of that scene that soon developed. And I've said it before, I know, and I'll keep saying it—FIG is written out of the history: we're all socialised, and music is just another history, and it's passed down the *male* lineage, and we have been written out.

Our music was very intense, and the humour was passionate, manic even, and very socially critical, whereas, say, Steve's use of humour was maybe more ironic, a bit detached, commenting on the music, so there were distinctions to be made. Within FIG too, there was a range of approaches in the band—even as basic as divisions between the musicians' different class, race and educational backgrounds. But also a range of musical technique, and expectations of what we might do: we were a mix. The politics of FIG were in our social and physical relationships. We were comfortable with physical intimacy. What we had was a *social virtuosity*, a way of being different, and I think we developed a confidence in that. We would play at parodying men, totally improvised, and some couldn't take it, felt threatened. The most notorious was Alex von Slippenbach. We did our set and the audience loved it, but he complained about 'these women who can't play their instruments, etc'. I mean Irene Schweizer, accused of lacking technique—*please!* But even attacking us in those terms, you could say that this was a man who felt threatened by our irreverent approach to technique and tradition.

***Q: Do you think there's something gendered in jazz and related forms in particular, a masculine imperative to solo, men feel they have important things to say, and the time to learn how to do it?***

A: I wouldn't want to stereotype women and men, though. Gender expectations are socialised, and if nothing else I'd say that you know, women can play phenomenal solos as well! Dialogue and interaction are always there in the music, or in the workshop, and I learned that from a man, John Stevens. I've been lucky in that, musically, I have been supported by some great men. Dennis Rose, John Stevens, and then Keith Tippett opened his heart and his music to me, filling in the gap between

Dennis's bebop and John's free work. At the same time, in a music like ours of collective communication, women have a lot to offer because of their history of social interaction and group communication.

When I hear about the People Band, they were doing kind of what we were, in terms of the performance aspects of FIG. They challenged a lot of the same closed formal attitudes as we did and a lot earlier. In the sixties they were also part of the radical People Show who I knew from the Oval House, so we shared some similar influences.

I think that gay men have quite a hard time of it I jazz. Most male jazz musicians declare themselves to be strongly heterosexual (I find that a bit suspicious). I wonder if they fear the intimacy produced in their own music-making. Or maybe that's just the way they get close... There's an instrumental thing here too: men that *do* open up and use their voices, they are more open, more vulnerable. Actually less men than women come to my vocal workshops [*laughs*].

### **The Gathering**

This is something important, an achievement. Every Monday night for twelve years we've been running what's got called 'the Gathering', a kind of informal musical, social workshop drop-in, in a room above a London pub. There's no fee, and no-one gets paid. It's not a workshop and I never say it is but people always assume it is. Improvised music is at the heart of it. The Gathering isn't fixed, it's fluid depending on who shows up, and that changes over time. The fact that it has lasted so long shows its value, and that it's needed, and that it is a long-term process, commitment. I've missed maybe ten nights in twelve years, which amazes me. It originates in my experience at a very frustrating London Musicians' Collective meeting, where there was some tension, bit of bad feeling, people wanting to go in different directions. I just said 'Wouldn't it be good if we could meet in a different way, maybe a gathering'. Sinead Jones, violinist and vocalist, said what a lovely word, better than a meeting. Loz Speyer (trumpeter) said we could bring instruments and trumpeter Ian Smith went out and found a pub for us to play in. The first evening no one was quite sure if we were there to talk or play and it was that very *uncertainty* that I feel has made it such an unusual combination of social and musical interaction. From that very first session it was totally inspiring. It was LMC members to begin with but it gradually widened out, and it's still going The Gathering has a political dimension, it's creative, it's community. It feels like home.

## **Steve Beresford**

**Improvising pianist, commercial musician**  
**Telephone interview, 28 November 2002**

## American music

Racial impersonation has been central to the development of US society.

From personal observation as well as endless discussion with Americans, the USA is the most de facto apartheid state I've ever been in. But it's also the case that jazz wouldn't have got as far as it has, or did, if it weren't for American capitalism. It's an ambivalent form: look at the way the Soviet Union veered towards it in Stalinist times: first they say it's the decadent, hedonistic soundtrack of the west then it's the music of the people, of oppression. And the fact is, jazz is *both* of those. At the same time. I think we all have ambivalent relationships with America. I don't think it's just my old hippie side coming out, but I continue to believe that music *can* be a uniting force, and jazz is *a music that connects*.

## Jazz, other musics and me

I come from a musical family. In my childhood, my dad had a great collection of American dance band 78s, and he was—still is, at 82—very knowledgeable, very discerning about music. He was a semi-pro dance band guitarist. Rumour has it that my great-uncle Jim Hands—what a name for a pianist—played with Louis Armstrong when he was over here in the early days. So jazz was all around. The first album I bought was Glenn Miller. One of my early bands was when I joined a soul band, playing Hammond organ, to be honest though I was a bit of a snob about it, like 15 year old boys can be about music. In the mid to late sixties I was a mod, but I switched to having short hair, big boots, rolled up jeans—the skinhead look, before I knew there were unsavoury political associations with that.

For some reason I then started wanting to listen to the weirdest music I could find, which meant Cage, Ornette. At university (York, BMus, 1968-71), I came into contact with the hippie thing more, and *tried* to listen to the Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, all that. I tried to like them, but I couldn't do it. I liked *singles*, you see, that pure pop rush of mostly black music—soul. I mostly played with people from *outside* the Music Department, I was pretty unhappy in there. I stayed up north after my degree for a while. We started putting on improvised music gigs in York—Evan Parker and Paul Lytton, Derek Bailey and Han Bennink, I really remember those two gigs. In fact those were two of the *life-changing* gigs for me at that time. Sounds grand or pompous but it's true. There were two others, really important nights for me musically, in York. First was seeing AMM at the arts centre, when Cornelius Cardew was in it. Second was Bob Marley and the Wailers, the originals, with Peter Tosh and Bunny, on their first tour of Britain, 1972. Actually there were musical similarities between those two gigs for me: the Wailers were playing really slowly at the time, they had a fantastic simmering energy, and AMM had this slowness too, this deliberation without loss of spontaneity. So my post-student musical life there was so much going on musically, and we were conscious of that at the time, were trying everything: reggae, soul, slowed down Terry Riley, etc.

In 1974 I moved to London, with a soul band, we thought we were *going to be stars*. I played with the Portsmouth Sinfonia for three years, was introduced to the Little Theatre Club in its later days. Then I joined a band called Roogalator, on bass. I got sacked just before they did a gig when the support band was the Sex Pistols on their

first gig [*laughs*]. Come 1976 and the founding of the London Musicians' Collective, at the same time as the punk rock scene was starting. I did feel there were connections between punk and the free improvisation scene, though maybe that was to do with attitude rather than the music played. At the time you'd read in NME about all these great new bands and none of them had recording contracts so you didn't know what they sounded like. And when the first Sex Pistols record came out I remember being disappointed, thinking, oh dear, the music sounds just like the Rolling Stones. When I heard punk music it didn't match the interest that was around the whole scene. I did like some of the more chaotic stuff.

### **Black white**

I think there's a danger of imposing an issue here, from where I am now in the improvising scene (it might have been different in the early days of jazz in Britain, with the ODJB and white jazz from America): to break it down into black *or* white is too rigid, simplistic, and very dangerous. You've got to look at these things individually.

I grew up in Shropshire, the English countryside where you might expect folk music, traditional, what you might be calling 'white' culture to be the norm. But I wasn't raised on traditional music at all, I didn't know about folk, and to be honest I don't much like English folk music anyway. I am conscious of and can enjoy the folk influence in classical English music, Vaughn Williams, Elgar even.

There have been, continue to be, critics in Britain who totally valorise the black contribution to the music, even if it means overlooking the white one. But consider the case of the development of American free, or experimental, jazz in Europe: look at guys like Steve Lacy and Roswell Rudd, they're absolutely central to that bridge between modern Monk and something much looser, and also to its rise in Europe, especially Lacy, and they are white. That says to me that jazz is one of the places where we might be able to transcend modern problems around the issue of race.

### **Improvised music and the London Musicians' Collective**

Now I remember that entire debacle of the Jazz Centre Society in the 1980s. This building in Covent Garden that was going to be the centre for British jazz, rehearsal rooms, performance, space for hanging out, all that, right in the city. All these promises, and it was, 'Oh yeah just give us another million quid and we'll be ready'. And like Clive Bell says, in all that time, with all that money, the Jazz Centre never put on a single gig, and we at the LMC were organising *hundreds!* Gigs, festivals, British and international musicians, multi-media events, we did the lot. It's insane: the LMC, *this* is where the real thing happens. Okay, there were no toilets in the building for years, you'd have to run over the road to the pub, but the *music...* There are amazing numbers of improvising musicians in London, and musicians come from all over, the US, Japan, and comment on the thriving energy of the scene. I have this sort of semi-joke answer to people who ask why there's such a scene here: *it's because there's no money in it*. We don't get the grants, we get sidelined by fucking everyone in the arts establishment, the media—but, you know, we've been a continual presence for more than a quarter of a century. One small recent example: the London Improvisers Orchestra has been around for five years or more, a fluid big band that

really gives a focus to that part of the scene. We were invited to play at a big festival in Switzerland, and they applied to the British Council for funds to support the trip, application rejected. That's always happening.

The scene supports itself better now, socially and artistically. Of course we're affected by economic climate. No, we don't stay in this field because it's anti-establishment or rebellious: we get really pissed off, and there are some musicians who've been doing this for thirty years, recognised elsewhere in the world, and they may be alcoholics or have psychological problems, because of the near total lack of support and respect. So we have to supply that for ourselves, from within. One advantage I suppose is that we don't need to take any of the bullshit traditionally associated with the established art avant garde, but like I say we don't have the profile or opportunities it has either. For myself, I'm lucky in that I have a foot in commercial music in many ways, so don't have to totally rely on improvising.

### **Gender, sexuality and the politics of improvised music**

There is a real issue here, a worry at the heart of the improvised scene. It may be getting better, or it may be that the history of the scene, as mostly male dominated, is perpetuating itself. At the last LIO recording, one woman came. When she walked in, she said 'Oh my god, I'm the only woman here!' We all looked around, and she was. Yet, at the same time, there are numerous features of improvisation as a cultural and social practice that have been or may be of particular interest to women: I'm thinking of intuition in playing the music (I *don't* mean by this to suggest women are intuitive, flaky, whatever), of its non-hierarchical aspirations, of the way it offers the opportunity for cross-dialogue in music. You might think all of these would or could appeal to women looking for creative opportunities for music-making. But, in proportion, they are not there. On the other hand, go into the classical scene—which is frankly more hierarchical, more authoritarian altogether—and there are, comparatively speaking, many more women musicians. Also there are very, very few out gay men on the scene.

Is it entirely fair to talk about these, what you're calling 'limitations on the assumptions or inscriptions of liberty' in improvised music? *We're not in utopia!* It's just a music scene in a problem society!

Twenty years ago, I guess early on in the process of us establishing ourselves, there was an intense period of discussion about politics, about technique in the music, about our relation with and difference from the so-called 'first generation' free improvisers. And that was when we were doing all those thing like Music for Socialism gigs—they were hilarious, Evan Parker, Sham 69, the inevitable Henry Cow—when FIG were bringing the politics and music together too from their position in the Women's Movement. But lots of us have moved on: the music is the one thing that's stayed with, constantly changing, and it's the most important thing.

## **Kate Westbrook**

**Vocalist**

**Telephone interview, with written amendments, 9, 16 January 2003**

### **Women in jazz and related music**

The consistent lack of women in the whole jazz scene, and the wider one of which we are part, has troubled me, of course. For instance, when I first joined the Brass Band and we did festivals around 1973-75, sometimes I was the only woman playing in the entire festival. There might be one American woman singer, but often not a woman instrumentalist. The situation is improving but even so there remains a pathetically small number of women, especially instrumentalists, and I think it is difficult for those that are there. The way I personally address it is not by being militant, but by working through my art, and sticking at it over the years. Other women approach the situation differently—good luck to my militant sisters. We played with Henry Cow (who were from outside the jazz scene) in 1976 for some concerts and tours. There were women in the band—Lindsay Cooper and Georgie Born, both terrific improvisers—and there was something liberating and powerful in that for me.

There has been some sort of postfeminist argument, and I'm paraphrasing so forgive me, along the lines of women can't really *do* instrumental improvisation, their bodies don't cope with it. I don't subscribe to that at all.

### **Marching politics**

We were involved in a lot of left wing events with the Brass Band. The big Grunswick demonstration in the 1970s, we were on that. I remember Cornelius Cardew and Keith Rowe and others were all on the back of a wagon, handing out lyric sheets, singing tunes in support of the striking workers, singing perhaps rather banal tunes for such sophisticated avant garde musicians. The Brass Band was marching along, playing numbers by Jelly Roll Morton, an Elizabethan piece arranged by Paul Rutherford, 'Hot jamboree' (a Welfare State tune).

### **Europe, Englishness and America**



**The Westbrook Trio on a cross-channel ferry, musically looking to Europe more than to the United States**

I have made a point of singing in different languages. This developed from working with the Brass Band in Europe. In order to communicate more directly I wanted to use the language of the audience if I possibly could. The first Paul Eluard poem I performed in the original French was in I think 1976. This interest has developed over the years since then, and now I perform in French, Italian, German. When we performed our first Brecht/Weill in German in both East and West Germany, it was in true Westbrook style, which meant that we were irreverent not slaves to the original musical score. I think our German audiences found that pretty refreshing, our eccentric English take on this rather ‘sacred’ repertoire. This approach did generate controversy here in the UK at the time. I remember when a friend, at my request, translated the lyrics of Cole Porter’s ‘Love for sale’ and I sang them in German—it somehow became tremendously political for the audiences. This was a song that had been banned in the US originally. When it was performed in the theatre there, a black woman, rather than the intended white woman, had to sing it. Us doing it in German in the late 1970s—well, there was a lot of soul-searching going on in the country still, to do with their own past, and that song really touched a nerve. We really like putting our inflection on an American standard like that. Last year [2002] playing in Portugal I did sing in Portuguese, which I find a difficult language, and there was some trepidation before going on stage. But I feel it’s important to put in the time and energy to be able to perform in that way.

In terms of our English identity and music, a lot of people see the William Blake programme as where we come from.

## Tony Haynes

Leader, Grand Union Orchestra and Music Theatre Company

Telephone interview, 15 December 2002

### Jazz

There's an ambivalence in American culture itself. I think it's the other way round—jazz can absorb all sorts of other musics in a fraternal way—there *are* paradoxes in that, but it's tracing the elements of real music freedom through jazz that's important.

There's a curious old fugeyism now—Marsalis and all that—I think that's horrible! I *do* think jazz is still a progressive force, though I'm not really recognised as within the jazz mainstream so ...

I was a jazz pianist, made part of my living out of playing it. But I was a theatre musician, providing live music for theatrical productions from the late 1960s on: I was MD at Nottingham Playhouse, and worked at the two Leicester theatres, Liverpool Everyman. I worked with John Arden's plays, with the 7:84 company for a while [political theatre] writing original scores. When we formed Belts 'n' Braces it was as an independent, cross media company, which went three ways after a while. One of these was Red Brass, in the 1970s, a political musical project.

### The politics of music-theatre

What Grand Union does, taking individual styles and forms, creative essential elements of different styles—improvisation obviously, a balance between order and chaos, the voices of individual musicians. The freedom relies on structure. This has an incidental relation to politics—it does encapsulate freedom, but I don't think it's very deep. I absolutely resist and resent the idea of a message! There is always within our work primarily an artistic purpose, not a community-centred or social one in the first instance. It's no use me articulating this, that's your job, in a way. My job is to talk through music. It's more a question of moving people through your art. I'm nearer the Brechtian position than I am jazz: it's a complicity built up between the audience and performers.

It's lyric based—lyrics have always played a large part in my work. And increasingly the language of the lyrics is not English. There's only a limited amount you can do with singers in the English language—so Bangladeshi or Chilean experiences are sung about in their own languages. How do you communicate that to the (British) audience? There's a compromise for the purpose of communication, which is to use the other language *and English*. The difference between us [and other music-theatre approaches] is to do with time and with the *cross-cultural* nature of our work: Grand Union has 12 to 15 years of working as a group of Caribbean and Asian and white players, and this gives us an entrée to *all* communities and audiences across the UK. This is an extraordinary social and cultural advantage. We've tried to develop our audience within the Turkish, Chinese and Asian communities, and—in the big cities

at least—this has worked. By contrast, the jazz audience is small and, well, a bit miserable! We want further to develop our audiences, and widen it out, to get more coverage.



**Grand Union's multi-culti music-theatre, 2002 CD *Now Comes the Dragon's Hour*: multiracial politics, touristic, exoticising?**

Grand Union does what nobody else does at such a scale, it combines music from different backgrounds: very large-scale projects are funded, and many amateurs and young people are involved. But this is not really highly regarded, nobody values it in the critics' world, for instance: because of the categorisation of Grand Union as presenting community events, we don't receive artistic recognition.

It's a hippy thing to say, and it does sound so daft, but music can dissolve all the differences.

## **Gary Crosby**

**Double bassist, bandleader of Jazz Jamaica Allstars  
Telephone interview, 2 December 2002**

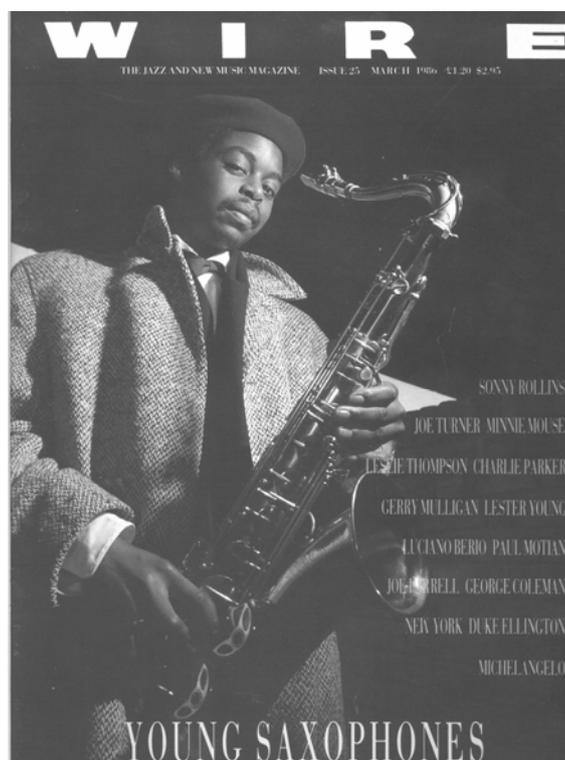
### **Musical and cultural background**

When I was a child there were a few pianos around the houses of family members, and the music we had at home was mento then ska—we had nearly all Prince Buster's records. Rhythm and blues too, and while there was jazz around, it wasn't modern, not bebop or Coltrane. But I didn't feel I came from a musical family: for my parents music was functional, it was for pleasure, not for education or something like a career. There were lots of American soul records around later, Atlantic and Stax, but I was

listening to the Beatles too—actually after listening to them I made a guitar out of cardboard so I could pretend to play along with them [*laughs*].

I was totally aware that there was a Caribbean culture—for a start there would be lots of family members coming from and going to there all the time. Jamaica was called ‘home’, we all used that word—and I think lots of youth of my generation got hung up on that term, it made it difficult for us to locate ourselves. There were a couple of family members around who were sort of Garveyites on the quiet—one in particular did introduce me to those ideas. He would occasionally talk quietly to me about Garvey, and you know he was a DJ too, had an amazing record collection. It was him who introduced me to all the music coming from Studio One. The first improvising I took notice of would have been the solos in Jamaican music—Rico on trombone, Roland Alfonso on sax. In my late teens, 1972-73, I was still in my Rastafari phase, and we would have long and many discussions and arguments about colonialism and civil rights. You know, the Vietnam War was still going on then, and we went to all the marches—and all kinds of issues and campaigns from black power at Olympics, the Mangrove 10, the Spaghetti House siege, the New Cross fire. At the same time I heard jazz then, that did turn me on. A lot of young blacks born here felt that we didn’t belong in Britain, and one way we dealt with that was by looking to our own black heritage, for comfort, for inspiration. The element of black nationalism in jazz was attractive to me at that time, it spoke to me in my position in England.

### **Black British jazz of the 1980s**



**The cover that signalled a British modern jazz resurgence: Courtney Pine, *The Wire* no. 25, March 1986 (thanks to Nick Cooper)**

In the 1980s I was working with the big band the Jazz Warriors, and sometimes with musicians from the other camp too—Loose Tubes. I never had any problems working

with musicians black and white. At one level, I think it doesn't really matter what musicians say, it's in the end the music that matters. Because I was a bit older than most of the new generation of black British musicians that sprang up in the early 1980s, it surprised *me*: I didn't know where Courtney Pine, Steve Williamson musicians like that, came from! It was as much a shock to me as anyone else. I think some of it was to do with a particular schooling that these guys got in London in the 1970s—there were schools where there were good music programmes that encouraged pupils to listen to and play jazz, and maybe that paid dividends fifteen years later. A number of musicians came up from the Weekends Arts Centre as well, that was important. Once success came with the Jazz Warriors, well, success breeds jealousy, even paranoia, and there was a bit of that around. There weren't really two camps, but some things did get said that were probably regretted later, and they were quickly seized on. Actually I think the press *wanted* there to be separate black and white jazz scenes, even a split, it confirmed something for the critics. It's true that there were stylistic differences: the Jazz Warriors played original music from the black diasporic experience, I think the only standard we did was 'A night in Tunisia'. Loose Tubes were more beginning to explore new European sounds. One regret is that perhaps we didn't work enough together to develop a new urban English (not really British) sound of jazz. There were some crossover projects, like Ashley Slater's The Big Blender, a big band with musicians from both Loose Tubes and the Jazz Warriors, but looking back it was an amazing period, when maybe we missed an opportunity too.

The black side of the Jazz Warriors is one part of the band's story that's survived, and seems to have become more significant than certainly *I* thought at the time. The more important factor really from those two big bands is not so much that one was black and the other white—actually I never really thought about the Jazz Warriors as exclusively all-black, and can hardly remember a gig when there wasn't some white presence in some way—but that *our parents were working class*, we were descendants of poor immigrants. They came over to Britain in the mid 1950s, early 1960s, and not many of us were encouraged by our parents to become musicians. There was no money or desire to pay for private lessons, to go to college, no extended family support networks so that an uncle would find you an old instrument to learn on, none of that. Even my uncle Ernest Ranglin, he acted as an inspiration, but he was in the States. So quite a few of us in the Jazz Warriors were self-taught, and a number of musicians couldn't read that well—but remember, a number of the guys in the band could read, had been to college. That got picked on by some sections of the jazz scene, there was a bit of criticism from the pro[fe]ssional side, the acoustic jazz side weren't always helpful, the established British jazz scene, musicians press and promoters. And to be honest, there was some hurt in the band because of various comments. There was resentment because it appeared that we weren't having to pay our dues like all the other British jazz musicians had! You have to remember too that we *were* allowed to jump decades of experience because of the interest in us because we were black. I would not say that that has harmed us: most of us from back then still have a positivity towards making music, we've used that exposure and built on it for our careers.



**Advertisement for the first album, 1987. The bass at the heart of a collection of black African symbols.**

The fact that all this happening during the 1980s so-called Thatcherite revolution is complicated: it *was* an 80s attitude that provided the Jazz Warriors with an outlet, the professionalism of the behind-the-scenes organisation and financial support did help. Some people were good at getting funding, selling culture, being entrepreneurial, and we were a big band after all, we were expensive to run. The acid jazz, the dance jazz side of the new promoters that had felt shut out by the jazz circuit—a bit like us—they helped us out, we helped each other really. There’s been some serious money made on the back of that experience, though not by us, not by the musicians! What that taught me though was the importance of jazz being more than blowing—and out of that experience came, the commercial development of the solid business we’ve built up based around the various music projects: our record label Dune Records, the band Nu Troop (and yes, there’s definitely a Nubian thing, an Egyptian thing going on there, a reference back to the old Rastafari period). Some of these have received good financial support, from organisations like the Arts Council (let’s skip the rejections, they don’t get on to the website!). It *is* the case that our music is relatively accessible, and especially with Jazz Jamaica the idea is are the audience having fun.

### **Jazz education**

‘Jazz Warriors’ as a name came from Courtney, and we kept it for Tomorrow’s Warriors. There is something heroic about it, I suppose it *is* fighting, for better music! But it’s not just music: it’s also the case that, more than any other music, you see in jazz mixed racial groupings, and I like that. Tomorrow’s Warriors is like an alternative education network, we support young musicians. In the mission statement we use the word ‘streetwise’ to describe who we’re aiming at, rather than black—it is a sort of code, I suppose, though it’s become more multiracial. We have found it really hard to find young women musicians, who will join and see it through. That’s because jazz is still so male-dominated, and there aren’t enough female role models. It’s changing, slowly.

Playing with John Stevens round then too. He found me, I’d had no involvement with Community Music or any of his workshops. I didn’t really have an appreciation of free music, it wasn’t until after I’d seen him and Courtney Pine playing together that I realised there was something else. Playing with John *did* free me up. I would groove a

lot in that music, and then John and I would try and destroy it, working together on bass and drums. The scene misses him, his energy and character.

## **Ben Crow**

**Sociologist, member of the Big Red Band in London in the 1980s, a socialist street band formed for the purpose of political activism during the Thatcher era in Britain**

**Email interview, 16 October 2002**

*[My thanks to Tim Butler of University of East London for putting me on to Ben in the first instance]*

### **What were the origins and the dates of activity and of the Big Red Band?**

I think it must have started 1982 or '83. It was going strong by the time of the Miners' Strike which I guess was '84. I left UK in 1990, and the band continued for a few years. But I have heard nothing for 6-8 years.

As for the origins, it depends how far you want to go back: Trevor Evans and I got together a few people associated with a communal house in Hackney. Trevor's brilliant idea was to constitute it as an evening class. For that purpose it was called, on paper, the Hackney Community Band, or something like that. With backing from the evening class system, we got a room and money to hire a part-time teacher/arranger.

Beyond that, it started when I got sick on a bus in central Pakistan in 1981. I had to spend a night in a small town half way between the archeological sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. In the town market I found a stall selling musical instruments and found I make sounds on a wonderful old colonial sousaphone. Rather than buy that instrument a plane ticket back to UK, I decided to get one when I got back. That gave me the idea of trying to create a band to play music on political occasions.

I had tried to join bands on the CND marches when I was a teenager, but could barely get a note out of the trumpet I then carried.

### **What was the line up of the band, in terms of both instruments and people involved?**

There was a core of 5, sometimes up to 35 people. Trumpets, trombones, saxophones (alto, tenor and sometimes bass), sousaphone (occasionally two), bass drum, various percussion. For a while, there was a separately organized Big Red Choir, but it never gathered the momentum of the band. Band members were a wide range of leftists, 2-3 working like me at the Open University. Some unemployed people.



**Big Red Band saxophone section, demonstration 1980s**

### **Repertoire?**

Everything we could find from collected books of left songs, folk songs, feminist songs, anticolonial, international, US labour movement ... Victor Jara from Chile, Beatles ... whatever we could lay hands on, and could persuade our teacher/arranger to put in a form we could play.

### **What kinds of events did the Big Red Band play at?**

Pickets, demonstrations, occasionally festivals and pubs. Mostly demonstrations. My shining memory is playing the Internationale standing at the entrance to Downing Street when Maggie [Thatcher] was P[ri]me M[in]ister as the foundation for many tens of thousands of miners from all over the country. There was an extraordinary elation to being drowned out, at our most extended volume, by the rich, harmonious voices of thousands of miners. It was great music at a very emotional event.

Early morning pickets at some of the East Coast power plants were more difficult, but also very rewarding. Frozen fingers trying to move nearly frozen valves while edging closer to a brazier losing the battle against a wind from the sea.

### **What do you think was the impact of a band like the one you were involved in on political demonstrations?**

It made political events much more pleasant. The band did not have great technical skills. Most of us were novice players. But the fact that we had songs to fit the occasion made our contribution valuable, even when much more proficient bands were around. Often even the great miners' bands had no repertoire suitable for the occasion.

We got on TV and in newspapers periodically because we provided a visual and vocal element that enlivened coverage.

### **Was the band professional/amateur, and how booked/funded?**

Amateur. Funded by London rate-payers through the evening class programme.

**Is the Big Red Band's history written about anywhere?**

Not that I know of.



From Ken Colyer through John Stevens, Mike Westbrook to the Scratch Orchestra and beyond, many British improvisers have been involved in, and/or played benefits for the peace movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which makes this cover for a 1969 selection all the more extraordinary

**Deirdre Cartwright**  
guitarist

Telephone interview  
5 April 2004, amended by DC

**Ivy Benson, and big band legacies**

I recorded one album as part of Ivy Benson's band, as a teenager, in 1976. I met her one day in a music shop in Chiswick. I was in there trying out guitars and she saw me and asked if I played bass. 'No, but my sister does'. My sister, Bernice Cartwright, went on to play bass guitar with her for ten years. She left school and joined Ivy straight away, thrown in at the deep end like many teenage musicians with Ivy.



**Ivy Benson, 1940s. source:  
www.ivybenson-online.com  
Used with permission**

What Ivy did was something special. I do think about that. In classical music, there may be prejudice and discrimination against, for instance, women, but at the same time you know where you can go—there are grades, exams, orchestras, structures or lines that you can follow to get some sort of career or recognition. For young women wanting to start out in jazz that simply was not the case—except for Ivy. And she was so important for that, there was a sort of presence there, and there was an identifiable route for progression. Because she offered a professional band, with high standards—it was an opportunity, for training, for getting taken seriously. We’ve talked about this and I’m fairly confident Annie [Whitehead] feels the same, too. She was with Ivy, and left the band the year before Bernice joined, 1974, I think.

Lydia D’Ustebyn’s Swing Orchestra was in a way a tribute. Lydia was a fictional character of course, but she was vaguely based on Ivy Benson—a strict, feared and also admired bandleader. We would have running jokes at gigs, apologising to the audience for the late appearance of Lydia, she’s missed her train or something. Not that Ivy was ever late for a gig, but the whole thing, a 12- or 14-piece all-woman dance band, was modelled a bit on Ivy, and our memories of working with her.

The Sisterhood of Spit big band was 22-24 strong, so there was certainly an element of scale, of impact with that. Ruthie Smith came up with the name, I think—a nod to the Brotherhood of Breath big band that had long been active, obviously, but there was also a reference to punk in it: it was 1981 or so, and there was a sense we picked up from punk of ‘Yes, we can get up and just do it’. The punk thing was more in terms of its ideals than any musical aesthetic. The Sisterhood came out of the women’s movement directly: the Dutch saxophonist Angèle Veltmeijer, who was also in the Feminist Improvising Group, was running a saxophone class at the Women’s Arts Alliance, I had run a guitar class there for a short while. The sax class came together with some friends and other musicians to form the big band.

It probably is significant that some of the musicians involved in these large all-women ensembles had been with Ivy; she gave us a template, and we carried something on. For her, I mean!

But in a way there was another trigger too, that was clear from my experience playing with the very political, very popular all-women jazz and rock band Jam Today [in the mid 1970s]. All the feminist politics that had been coming over from America and

changing the ways women in Britain thought led to campaign groups, conferences and organisations up and down the country. Even the Trades Union Congress would put on a women's caucus event. And lots of those conferences had entertainment in the evenings and organisers started booking all-woman bands. To put a women-only band on the stage during these years was itself a political act—in a positive way at things like women-only benefits, which were happening for the first time, in a more charged way at some of the punky gigs when some men would be shouting abuse at us for just being women playing guitars and drums and things.

### **Guest Stars, repertoire, organisation**

We didn't have anything to follow, there was no female tradition as such, so yes, we had to create our own genre, and at the beginning it could be difficult. But it's probably fairer to say that our repertoire came about because of the influences we all brought to it. It was around the start of the world music scene, and we were interested in postbop jazz—Mingus and Monk; soul vocals and harmonies; and African sounds were fresh to us. To our mild surprise people quite quickly began to dance at our gigs.

We organised ourselves differently to most jazz bands, a bit more like a young rock or pop outfit. So there were regularly rehearsals, up to three a week, and we played together *all* the time. The group was like a support network, too. Even when someone wrote a new piece for the band individually, we'd all arrange it collectively, during rehearsals. Though there were lots of leadership issues in that band, there were no individual leaders. Some reactions to us were curious: people were even very surprised that women could get on, and not argue. That sort of expression constantly surprised us; we'd never anticipated that we couldn't all work together.

We were sometimes criticised for forming a band along gender lines. But it wasn't like that. It was originally the Guest Stars because it would be a trio with changing featured artists—guest stars, lots of whom were men. It happened that more of the guests stars began to be women, and I think that's because women were more available—because we had less work! When we folded the band in 1987-88, we did have a feeling that the Guest Stars had done its job: it had allowed us women the opportunity to get valuable new experience in music-making. We all then went off to work with other musicians, male and female. I suppose we felt that there were by then lots of women musicians, so there wasn't the same need for a separate project. Getting together again in 2004 to reform, we've noticed that actually not that much in the jazz world has changed. The lifestyle of hanging around, the ad hoc nature of things, the lack of rehearsal and band continuity, the word of mouth way you get gigs—women still really lose out in that kind of situation.

Lots of women in jazz don't want to talk about politics—they want to get on and play, they know most of the musicians are men, they don't want to get a reputation for being moaners or anything, and they do want to get gigs. Politics though are thrust upon women in jazz all the time. No one asks a male musician why he only plays with other men, for instance, and is that part of some social comment.