

THE TALKING DRUM - AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMIE MUIR

Under the Terrascope's ever-widening lens, one fascinating field of music yet to be covered is that of the avant-garde percussive improvisationalist. Who better to talk to than former King Crimson member and one of its foremost British exponents JAMIE MUIR, who our correspondent David Teledu recently tracked down for a suitably broad question and answer session:

PT: When did you first get involved in music, Jamie?

JM: I was brought up in Edinburgh. I started piano lessons, rather ineptly, at a school in Fife. Then I went to another school where I started French horn; I got fed up with it after a while, there was an extremely limited repertoire and I found it quite boring as an instrument. I then became interested in jazz and played trombone. I added string bass to that until my budding bass career ended when the thing fell five stories down a stairwell in Edinburgh. I went to art college and started playing in a band - at first it was trad. jazz and then it became more modern. After a while I couldn't take any more of that - I was interested in improvisation and being in the wilds of uncertainty. Playing in keys with five sharps and so-on seemed like intellectual masochism, getting in the way of the creative process.

So I gave up trombone and started playing drums. I was a beginner again. I practiced hard and used to listen very closely to recordings of American jazz drummers such as Tony Williams and Kenny Clarke. After a while I realised that you've got to be yourself, with complete confidence and conviction; have confidence in your own source of creativity and husband that.

I got back into playing with some of the same people as before, this time on drums. It seemed just the same - the bandleader calling some insanely fast tempo and so-on. I decided that the music was a dead duck and stopped playing it.

I can remember hearing records of musicians like Pharoah Sanders, the New York Art Quartet and Albert Ayler on the ESP label. Albert Ayler was an extraordinary musician. Another musician I admired was the American percussionist Milford Graves. I also used to listen to a lot of ethnic music in the Sixties. That was it; I just had to improvise. The first time it felt really dangerous, like the sort of thing you had to lock the doors and close the curtains on because if anybody saw you, God would strike you down with a thunderbolt. But I took to it like a duck to water. I started working with a trumpet player and then we added an altoist and did quite a lot of work together, calling ourselves The Assassination Attempt. This was in the early Sixties in Edinburgh. We had about sixteen people at one point, including a poet and a couple of dancers. I once went down to London to check out the lightshows that were just starting at the Roundhouse, and developed one of my own for the group.

PT: Towards the end of the Sixties you became involved in entirely improvised music and joined Music Improvisation Company?

JM: At the art college in Edinburgh someone arranged for some London groups to come up and play. I was in a supporting band, with Bernie Green I think. Derek Bailey was one of the visiting musicians. He seemed to like my playing and asked me to come down to London. At the same time I'd become acquainted with a musician who was part of a visiting London act at the Edinburgh Festival. He asked me to sit in and play with them, which I did. The leader turned out to be Lindsay Kemp, who asked me to come down to London where they'd lined up a residency for a week. So myself and Bernie Green went. I don't think we ever got paid, but that was okay because Kemp was very enthusiastic and entertaining. He still is a very flamboyant character. This was around 1965-66.

Then I got in touch with Derek Bailey. John Stevens was one of the people who'd started the Little Theatre Club in London, a tiny place off St. Martins Lane. Some great music happened there in the beginning. Derek sort of split from him and went with myself and Evan Parker - we started M.I.C. as a trio, later adding Hugh Davies.

PT: And there are two albums documenting that group?



JM: The recording we did for ECM was when the label had just started. I don't think they'd formulated a musical policy then; obviously they have subsequently and it's quite homogenised and new-agey, silky and satiny. Some of it's good but the lumps and grime get sieved out. But back then it was a new label and improvised music was good at that time. It was really a record that had some of the spirit of the time - urgency, vitality, a sense of direction. The Incus album? I haven't heard any M.I.C. for a long time - that label is Derek's thing. He

liked a painting that I'd done in the early Seventies and asked me if he could use it for a record sleeve. That's the one on the '68-71' cover. The painting has no title.

PT: After several years, M.I.C. disbanded and you got involved in Boris (once described as "controlled ugliness which subliminates itself into a weird beauty")?

JM: Whilst still a member of M.I.C. I'd become interested in exploring other areas such as rock music. Improvised music seemed to have its limitations - it was fine for intricacy and detail, but from a distance it often tended to be the same shape. Before Boris I'd played in Pete Brown's Battered Ornaments who'd been up at the Edinburgh Festival. I was quite mystified at first, playing rock. There were some good players in that band, quite well-known r&b musicians.

Boris was really a very good group. The main man was Jamie Peters who played bass. He'd played with Georgie Fame and Dusty Springfield. I met him completely by chance and we got together to play some pretty wild improvised music. Then there was a guitarist, Jim Roache (ex-Collosseum) and a tenor saxophonist, Don Weller, both of whom had been in Major Surgery. And myself on drums.

Boris just collapsed through lack of work really. It was a good live band playing improvised music with lots of lunacy. We did do a demo: some American film company had a project to make a film about the rise of a rock band from nothing to stardom and had been all over Europe interviewing groups. They came across us and decided that we were the ones; took us out for a fancy meal and we did a demo for them. It was a very rushed job, we only had about four hours. Anyway, it fell through because they ran out of money. That was when I learned not to waste your time getting your hopes up or to believe something until it actually happens. We broke up for various reasons, but it was a good band. Jim and Don produced some magical music.

PT: After Boris split up in late 1970 you were a member of the Afro-rock band Assagei for a while?

JM: That was pretty awful! The leader of Assagei had been in Osibisa. He was kind of strange... there were all sorts of weird hassles and mind games. It was a nightmare, actually.

PT: And then you went on to form the provisionally titled 'Sunship' which included Alan Gowen and Allan Holdsworth?

JM: Alan Gowen was the keyboard player in Assagei actually, that's how I met him. He was a really nice guy and a good keyboard player. There wasn't much work around at the time, I think I found a bit in Germany or something, but we played together and somehow the bassist Laurie Baker got involved as well - I can't remember exactly how. Allan Holdsworth had just come down from the North where he'd been doing commercial work. We had a rehearsal group in my house. I remember, that was the year of the electricity strikes. Laurie's wife would be making great vegetarian concoctions in the kitchen downstairs by candlelight, while we'd be upstairs rehearsing. Allan had come down wanting to do some sort of crucial music and I'd been involved in so-called Art Music and wanted to explore other areas - we were approaching it in some quite tongue-in-cheek ways and we had a lot of fun - we spent more time laughing than playing music. Laurie Baker was very much into art music on the intellectual side but in the right mood he could play some monstrous bass.

PT: And in the summer of 1972 you got the offer to join King Crimson?

JM: Robert Fripp was looking for a new band and I got a 'phone call from him. I think it was Richard Williams from Melody Maker who suggested me to him. I was rehearsing with Alan Gowen and others at the time. They were rather upset with me for leaving, actually...

King Crimson were the only really famous band I'd been in. Fripp was open and believed very much in getting disparate musical elements together, a mixture to produce interesting music, although this was difficult to hold together as the history of King Crimson would suggest. When we rehearsed, we thrashed about and tried to make things work in an improvisational way in the studio. Fripp was definitely the boss, there's no question about it. And that was fine, he seemed to me to be a very good band leader. I think I was a wee bit too much for him, simply because I was so involved in improvisation. He was very much concerned with logic and function, he always worked his solos out before playing them. He had very fastidious and tight sort of habits.



We did a tour and recorded the "Larks' Tongues In Aspic" album. It was very difficult to get that sort of improvisation on record. We were interested in group potential and creating monstrous power in music. Where I started playing drums on the album should have been a lot wilder - sheets of tin rattling and ripping, piles of crockery breaking, those sorts of sounds. One or two things that Robert would have found just too much. For a person like him it was a very admirable creative decision to actually work with somebody like me.

Touring with King Crimson wasn't a lot of fun for me. I had a lot of equipment, and when I was in improvised music I'd set it up myself, play the gig, and put it all away again. With King Crimson the drum roadie would start to complain bitterly and get shirty because of the problems of setting it up and putting it back down again. We had difficulty getting together a road team that was any good. Another major thing I remember was trying to get the percussion audible at rock concerts, because percussion was not miked up by direct injection. I've seen this at so many gigs and it can be really soul destroying.

Bill Bruford and I got on very well together musically it seemed to me. He was a solid, tight, thinking studio type and I was very much into doing imaginative odd things.

PT: After a second British tour in early 1973 you left the group. Why was this?

JM: The reasons why I left were to do with my interest in Buddhism. There were experiences over a period of about six months which caused me to decide to give up music, so one morning I felt I had to go to E.G. management and tell them. It was difficult of course, a whole year of tours had just been lined up. I cleared my house and went up to a Tibetan monastery in Scotland, became a monk and took the robes. I didn't feel too happy about letting people down, but this was something I had to do or else it would have been a source of deep regret for the rest of my life. I did a lot of meditating - which is more active than some people seem to think - and spent a lot of time in retreat.

PT: Robert Fripp had apparently been involved in Wicca during the early 1970's, and subsequently in the Gurdjieff mystical teachings. Do you have any opinions about that?

JM: I only vaguely remember something about that. My attitude is that it's important that we should keep open to us any way of exploring the mind. I do also realise that there are some inhospitable, hostile and aggressive sects out there... my God, it's a dangerous world. If you really care about the human race you should try to find out what is wrong. So Wicca, Gurdjieff, Buddhism are all good. Let's see as many good people as possible going into it and exploring these things.

PT: After a number of years away from performing and recording music you seemed to appear again in free music settings?

PT: Around 1980 I returned to London. Coming out of a retreat, it was quite a shock. Derek Bailey dragged me back into group improvised music. I didn't really want to get involved, but he was going through a slightly difficult patch and wanted a friendly face from the past. I eventually relented. It was all pretty unenjoyable actually, apart from a few gigs with Evan Parker and Barry Guy who's a very good bassist, and perhaps one Company tour. Improvised music seemed to have lost its

vitality and a lot of the musicians seemed to be using it for their careers and posturing and posing.

I think group improvised music is one of the great forms of 20th Century music because it's so radical. It should be listened to live and not in an acute intellectual way. A lot of other music is quite absurdly intellectual.

PT: I heard a reference to your having been involved in a soundtrack with Michael Giles, King Crimson's first drummer?

JM: After a few rather dreary gigs with Derek I tried to get a few projects together, but nothing really came of it. In the early Eighties people seemed to be into doing their own thing and were not prepared to commit themselves to other people. So I developed a sort of pre-production type studio at home. Basically, I got involved in multi-tracking. It wasn't a natural thing for me. I bought a sequencer, did some sampling and one or two other bits and pieces. Mike Giles, David Cunningham and myself did the music for a film called 'Ghost Dance'. I also did the music for a sculpture film, one or two video pieces and a film called 'E.E.T.C.'.

I felt frustrated and distracted by the requirements of technology, they seemed to get in the way of the creative process. I did remain interested in the computer 16-track sequencer since once you learn the mechanics of it you can work very quickly. I was bored with the avant-garde and arts side of music really. I got into dance music and explored pure melody and rhythm. I've got disks full of music that never got anywhere; when I looked out into the music world in the early Eighties it just seemed like a pit of snakes. Very aggressive, strident (party-orientated) politics seemed to have seeped into the arts in general. I think it's still true to some extent.

From my own experience I'd say that musicians get treated badly by the film industry and paid even worse. They get treated marginally; you're not part of the real process.

PT: Can you say something about your appearances in the Eighties? You were on a radio session with Evan Parker broadcast on BBC Radio 3, did some record sleeve designs and were on albums by Company and in a duo with Derek Bailey.

JM: Evan Parker asked me to do the radio session. The Quiet Violence album 'Requiem' (on the Impetus label) was recorded at my studio and I did the sleeve design. A Japanese musician friend of mine, his mother had just died and he wanted to make a record to commemorate her death. He got completely ripped off by the company in England. It was a very shameful piece of behaviour, really tacky small-time conning, the sort of thing you expect in the big hard commercial world but not in the avant-garde. I felt very badly for the guy but there wasn't much I could do about it. I designed three or four sleeves for Incus and one for John Russell's album 'Conceits' (on the Acta label). The album I did with Derek Bailey at my studio was

recorded on a pair of stereo microphones. The sleeve was a bit of a disaster - the colour came out all wrong! The Company thing I really don't remember now.

PT: Do you still have your percussive equipment?

JM: I've got rid of nearly all of it. I sold a lot to get some money together to go to the States in 1989. I kept the sequencer and a few basic bits so that I could write music, but I don't do so. Throughout the Eighties I'd been swinging back and forth between painting and music. I don't play any music these days, I stopped about two years ago. I paint all the time now. I just work in the studio day and night, and live very reclusively. It's part of the territory of painting really.

Interview: David Teledu

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A JAMIE MUIR DISCOGRAPHY:

The Music Improvisation Company (s/t) (ECM 1005)

The Music Improvisation Company - 1968-1971 (INCUS 17)

King Crimson - Larks' Tongues in Aspic (Island ILPS 9230)

Derek Bailey/Jamie Muir - Dark Drug (INCUS 41)

Company - Trios (Incus 51)