

The Sounding Board Interview –

From the work of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble in the '60s and '70s to his current performance and recording projects and his involvement as Musical Director of London's Community Music project, John Stevens has always followed a path of fierce independence and deep personal commitment. Sounding Board talked to him during a recent visit to Norfolk. Sounding Board

Can you explain what it was about your experience of music that led you to set up the Spontaneous Music Ensemble? Were there certain things in the jazz that you were involved in that dissatisfied you?

John Stevens:-

I wouldn't accuse jazz of it – I could never do that. When I started playing at about 16 I had this passion for wanting to get involved as quickly as possible. As a child there was loads of music around in my family – tap dancing, Fats Waller, Nat King Cole, my Mum and Dad liked all that. My main creative outlet had been painting and drawing so I had already contacted some sort of free creative flow.

When I came into music I thought: 'wow – this is free!'. Not free to the point of doing anything at any time, which is a misunderstanding that people have about that, but a situation where there is a balance between discipline and freedom. What made me want to play was the music that had preceded what became known as post-bop:- Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Thelonius Monk, Charlie Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis.

I assumed this creative freedom existed within the discipline, but what I found was that musicians were saying: 'this is the way I'd like you to play this', 'this is the role of a drummer'. I discovered that you weren't supposed to sit there and converse. A great trumpet player, far older and more experienced than me, turned and said to me, "What I'd like you to do is go: 'ding ding-a-ding chop, ding ding-a-ding chop'" which was the current fashion. That seemed to be the attitude in what turned out to be a sort of 'club' which had specific rules about how one should tow the line to be a fully accepted member.

Basically I had to drop out of what you might call the jazz profession. I had to find spaces that dealt with the music in a free way. As it happens there were quite a few like-minded people at that time. So we got together and I choose to use the term 'free group improvisation' to describe what we're doing.

I wanted to make the actual label for it very challenging. The idea of spontaneity was hard to live up to. 'Music' was obvious. I didn't like 'group'. 'Ensemble' was better, because sometimes there were only two people. (I felt that if it came to it I would carry on playing this music on my own, would sit there and play as if I was playing with the air or with the sounds in the room – just playing). It became a very solid concept, a way of playing. Having

specialised in people interacting, it spilled over into the idea of workshops, because what you take into a workshop is the idea of gradually becoming able to communicate with each other.

SB

So, to leap forward in time a bit, your involvement with community music was a logical extension of your work with SME rather than a branching off.

JS

I felt that my role within SME could be useful and exciting in terms of other people who might or might not be musicians because of the discoveries that were being made within SME. For example the feeling of freedom and excitement about how we could collaborate – instantly – to make music.

A lot of the people who were amateurs became the consistent members of the SME. Doing performances with people who weren't necessarily musically skilled in any way led to the discovery of a warmer spirit than with the official ensemble people.

For me it's not a chicken or egg question. I need a balance between performing and workshops, and the workshops keep the performance side fresh and forever question it, in case we start getting carried away with who we think we are.

SB

What does 'community music' mean to you?

JS

People who run the system decide what music you will listen to. The 'high art' that we're fed in terms of music is that which is played by orchestras. That excludes other people who might have a burning desire to involve themselves in music. The dominance of European classical music has eroded the identity of most people. Of course I respect a lot of the activities that have gone on in classical music; nobody can deny Mozart and Beethoven and Delius and Debussy. But there was this separation: 'here is the real music'.

To me community music really happens when somebody feels that they have got the energy, inspiration and skill to go and help people to create music for themselves in a free way. And whatever it turns out to be, that is the identity of that group. It doesn't have to have anything to do with what we see as being officially music. There's all this potential for new music that none of us has heard, because it's too wide for us to conceive of how it could be. That's where I see some of the aid to what needs to be a re-balance in society.

Community music is not about saying 'this is the way to do it', but going out and meeting people and using music to communicate with each other, to understand each other, to experience a community activity.

SB

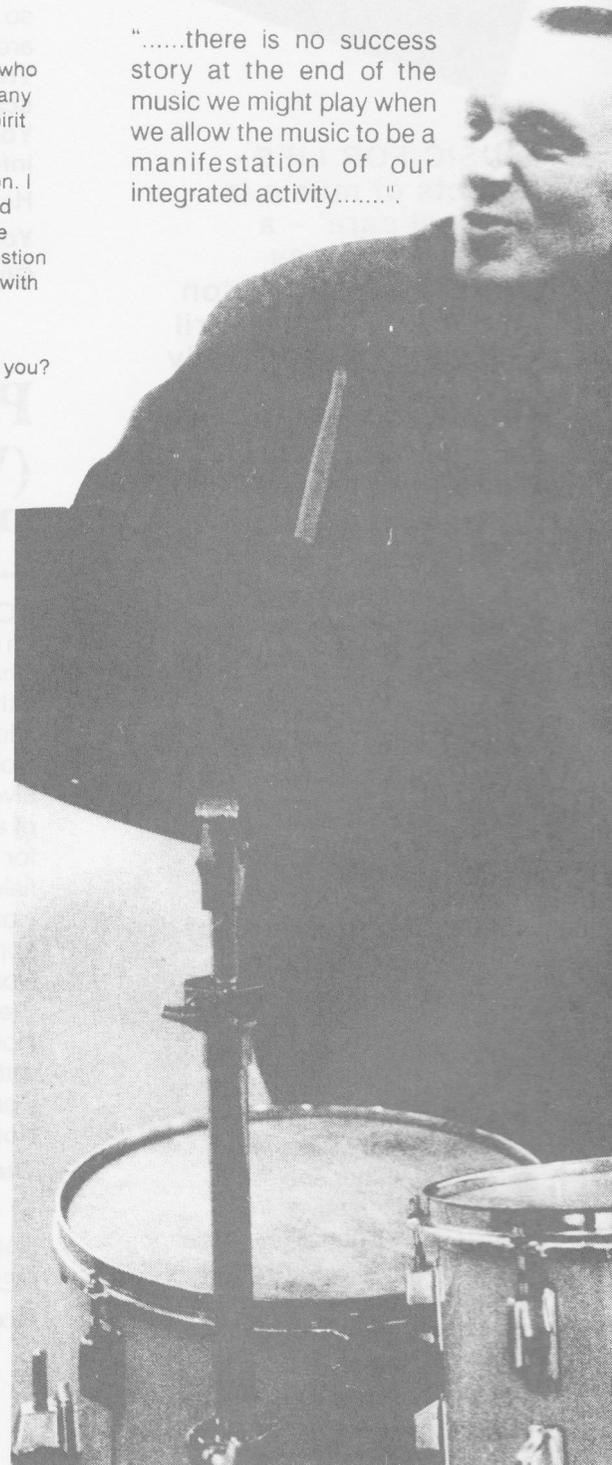
The picture that you have painted is very different from what some individuals might see as the real purpose of community music. Your

philosophy is different, it seems much more inclusive.

JS

Inclusive is probably the right word. That approach to community music is fair enough but a lot of it is to do with giving more of an opportunity to what's already there, as part of a particular genre or style. When I talk about this music that I imagine is possible, it's a music that is outside a particular direction or style. That is the simplest and most fundamental bit, and at the same time the most challenging bit because you can't look over your shoulder and say 'how did somebody do this?' It's all down to you and your relationship with the group. From that source of activity the individual chooses their own path. So the experience

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of learning to collaborate, of concentrating on fundamental disciplines outside of a particular area of music, can be useful even to people who have a good idea of how they want to sound.

There are people who function within community music who think: 'there's this group down the road. They're a good group. I want to give them the opportunity to do better with their career, so I will get money to help them make a demo, help them get the demo to the record company etc.' I'm not saying 'don't do that', that's all part of it. But there is no success story at the end of the music that we might play when we allow the music to be a manifestation of our integrated activity. The people who we work with in a hospital are not so likely to be those who want help with their careers. So people who have specific ideas about a career are not so likely to be working in a hospital where the activity of music is an aid to self identification.

SB

Would it be true to say that improvisation is a real foundation stone for what you would consider to be community music activity?

JS

I wouldn't put it like that, no. Improvisation was the key to me fully getting involved with the idea of everybody taking part. Improvisation is like abstract painting. It doesn't represent

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anything. It's an activity, and the people who practice that activity produce some very beautiful and exciting results.

The thing that took me from visual art to music was the collective creativity. I don't know the sounds that are going to come out in my workshops, but I say 'let's try this', and I am excited about these sounds that we've never heard in our lives before. But this bit that is on the free edge is the bit that is given least credibility, is the least understood, but in the end is the most significant in terms of unification, liberation, identification, collaboration, communication, intergration.

SB

You've worked a lot in Europe – particularly Scandinavia – is there a difference in attitude there? A greater openness to the way that you like to work?

JS

The fact that we live on what is becoming an increasingly isolated island seems to make this place into a hive of radical activity. But thinking of Scandinavia, the social system there hasn't been as eroded there as has been the system that we live within. It's a different feeling – less of a challenge. The aesthetic value seems to get more respect in Europe than it ever has in England, because the control in this country is such that 'art' has to be something that we have already established as being 'valid', meaning that it's almost time to start listening to what was going on twenty years ago but not quite.

So it seems to me that in Europe the role of the artist has much more credibility, and there is more respect for improvisation as an official part of the arts than in this country, because here almost everything is governed by its relationship with money. Their relationship with creative activity as an integral part of the chemistry of society is taken on board in a positive way. For instance, you go into a hotel in Norway and you are quite likely to see a reproduction of an Edward Munch on the wall. They are proud of that radical artist. But if you ask me where I want to work I'd say where I already work, because it's relevant.

SB

Do you think that what we are seeing now in community music, in terms of all the numerous projects that are springing up, is a positive thing? Or do you feel that community music now covers such a mass of different things that is not possible to make any meaningful predictions about what it could achieve?

JS

The establishment will increasingly want to try to gain control of something that is getting attention, and we rely on the establishment to support financially what we do, unfortunately.

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It can make choices about what survives and what doesn't. The parts they choose to give credibility to because it suits the way they want to see their tokenism working will be the bits that we'll see programmes about on Channel 4. I just feel that personally, I am in this for life, and if I end up doing what I do on my own that is what I'll do, regardless of what becomes the official face of community music, if I don't feel that its

free enough. But hopefully it won't get to that point.

SB.

You have recently made a record that could be described as quite a commercial production. Isn't there a contribution there in terms of your musical philosophy and what you appear to be doing professionally? Here is John Stevens talking about improvisation and being free, but how does the record fit in with that?

JS

As far as I'm concerned it's dance music, which I like because I love dancing, and hopefully it will encourage other people to dance. And it's dance music with a message, and with a large percentage of improvisation. So I feel good about the fact that its going out into the community and I want it to go out as widely as possible. Then the credibility that comes to me as part of that success will give me the sort of attention that I would like to be freer to do the other things I want to do. And I am also looking forward to doing the next single. It means that I can make another statement which is close to the way I feel. The hook words on the record are:

We can survive

With love on our side

We'll only survive

With love

Identify yourself

To love somebody else

Identify yourself

And love somebody else.

I am not in any way embarrassed about having said what I've said there, because it all ties in together for me.

SB.

Its easy to put you in a pigeonhole of free jazz or whatever, but in fact you don't belong in a pigeonhole, and you are positive about any music as long as its convictions and its intentions are honest.

JS.

Yes.

SB.

Is that why you had reservations in the past about the search and reflect pieces being published as a manual? Did you see a danger that it could be used as describing some sort of 'official' community music method?

JS.

I'm glad the manual is there. When I was first asked to compile a manual of workshop pieces I refused because I felt that the best way for what we were doing to grow was orally. A number of years later I was invited again and chose to do it. The key to search and reflect is what is said in the introduction and in Christopher Small's preface. Music can be whatever one identifies it as being. The pieces themselves are hopefully-useful inroads.

Inside I am very excited, very optimistic, and looking forward like shit to my next workshop. Deep down theres this devilish thing that I feel inside when I go into a music workshop, because they don't know what we're going to do, and I just love that.