

Trance

Without termites, there would be no Trance Mission. Trance Mission's sound is anchored by the deep drone of the didgeridoo, the Australian aboriginal instrument made from eucalyptus branches hollowed out by the wood-eating insects. In virtuoso Stephen Kent's hands, the didgeridoo is transformed into a powerful rhythm instrument that propels tracks like "Bo Didgeley" out of the mundane realm of homogenized "world music" and into a new cosmos of danceable trance. Other tracks from their eponymous first album, like "Tunnels" and "Rig," burrow into serene subterranean depths, enhanced by electronic effects, exotic woodwinds, and sinuous clarinet. Trance Mission is difficult to categorize; the best their press kit can do is toss together the unwieldy label "ethnic ambient techno tribal post industrial trance music."

Clarinetist Beth Custer can't help but laugh at that description, but explains that some sort of tag was needed to indicate the nature of the group. "We don't want to be put in the new age category, we don't want to be lost in the rock bins, and we don't want to get lost in the experimental." While there is an ambient drift to some of their music, that's only part of the picture. "Everything is ambient if you tune it out far enough," muses Custer. "The world can use a little more

relaxation to music, a little more introspection...." Trance Mission's music may relax the mind—but it also invigorates the body. When Custer takes the stage with Stephen Kent, percussionist John Loose and multi-instrumentalist Kenneth Newby, they've been known to rock the house.

"It's quite a display if you see it live, because John has all these percussion instruments, I have a massive array of horns, Stephen has a huge array of percussion and about seven didgeridoos, and Kenneth has a whole electronic set-up. I think it's pretty interesting to watch. Fifty per cent of the people sit down on the grungy floor of the bar, gaze up at us and listen. The other fifty per cent stand in the back and they shake their booties, which is fine with me. Sometimes I get discouraged because I wish everyone would get up and dance."

Custer studied music in New York and Michigan before moving to San Francisco, where she joined a rock band called Polymorph.

"I started working in the record store circuit," she recalls, "got a little bit tired of that and went back and got my Masters. I started to write for myself after college." Since then, she has composed for film, theater and dance groups, and was recently commissioned to arrange a Raymond Spence piece for the Kronos Quartet. In the early '80s, she joined a group of musicians that originally included frequent Residents associate Phil "Snakefinger" Lithman. "The Club Foot," she recalls, "was this really old dilapidated warehouse club on 3rd Street in San Francisco, where all the super-underground—beneath the underground—shows happened." Ten-piece Clubfoot Orchestra, best known for performing live, original soundtracks to classic silent films like *Nosferatu* and *Metropolis*, grew out of these gigs. (Their *Metropolis* CD is timed to play along with the video of Giorgio Moroder restoration.) She also played for a time with chanteuse Connie Champagne. After a grueling national tour, Champagne's group disbanded upon its return to San Francisco—but not before playing a few last hometown shows. The group that opened for them included Stephen Kent and Kenneth Newby. Custer and Kent exchanged phone numbers and were soon improvising together on a regular basis.

Originally from England, Stephen Kent grew up in Africa. "I lived in Uganda, and spent a lot of time traveling with my family and going and visiting tribal people, learning about different things—that was my parents' interest. I was always interested in my own music from an early age, so that has dominated my creative life since I was about 13... how to arrange sound and call it music, whatever type of sound it might be. Though I've been formed by a Western classical training at a young age, at the same time as I was playing the Western classical game, I was meddling around with how to subvert it at every turn. Going to Australia gave me an opportunity to discover my own personal tribal music."

In 1981, Kent was appointed musical director of Australia's Circus Oz. "It wasn't just a straight circus, it was more a contemporary theater group disguised as a circus—and it was very concerned with the rights of aborigine people. Since I was working in music, the focus of my interest became the didgeridoo."

"At that time," says Kent, "I didn't know how to play it; I was playing brass instruments, and I learned some of the didgeridoo techniques and applied them to brass. Later, I went to the central deserts and the northern territories and I spent some months among aborigine people in different situations. That was when I got the energy... a transference of some sensibility that enabled me to start playing didgeridoo."

Kent is passionate when it comes to aborigine culture, and is pleased to report that their status in Australia has improved



TRANCE MISSION

Mission

TRADITIONAL VALUES

recently. A community of tribal aborigines sued the Australian government on the grounds that the legal basis of the Australian constitution—the idea that the continent was unoccupied land free for the taking—is patently false. Their victory, after years in the courts, led to legislation that will have a profound effect on future tribal land claims.

"It's commonly thought now that aborigine culture has been extant in Australia for upwards of 40 or 50 thousand years," explains Kent. "Recently there was evidence discovered that suggested that they'd been there for as long as a hundred and twenty thousand years, possibly longer. The idea that Australia was discovered by Captain Cook is ludicrous, since there were Arab traders and Chinese trade with Northern Australia at least 500 years back."

Like Stephen Kent, Kenneth Newby is a musical traveler who has absorbed influences from around the globe. Newby studied Eastern instruments, notably in Bali and Java, where he mastered the suling, an Indonesian bamboo flute. He is also adept on the Korean bamboo oboe called the p'iri, and on the khaen. "The khaen comes from Thailand and Laos," explains Kent. "It's like the grandfather of the modern-day harmonica, a little organ of thin bamboo pipes with reeds cut into them, and you blow through it. It's just like a harmonica in its effect, in some ways, except that it has finger holes. Kenneth's pretty much a virtuoso in that instrument. He got offered a lot, when he was living in Vancouver, to play with the Laotian bands." Kent and Newby, a Canadian, first met in a marketplace in London in 1985, where they improvised in public and went their separate ways; a year later they met in Vancouver, at Expo '86, where they performed with aborigine and Balinese musicians.

Back in Britain, Kent formed a group named Lights In Fat City with percussionist Eddy Sayer and Simon Tassano, a professional sound man who provided samples and other electronic effects. Their 1988 release *Somewhere* was a groundbreaking didgeridoo recording. When the group toured the US in 1991, Kent recruited Kenneth Newby to replace Tassano. The result was an ethereal live album, *Sound Column*, that brought Kent one step closer to his ideal of reproducing the didgeridoo's sound as accurately as possible. Their first show in San Francisco was particularly fateful, however: it was the night they opened for Connie Champagne. Newby soon returned to Canada, but Kent remained in California. Trance Mission was about to be born.

"We started to play around with different percussionists," Custer recalls, "and started doing these regular gigs at Radio Valencia, which is a really happening hot spot to see music in San Francisco. We got Kenneth Newby to come down from Canada, and John Loose, who I'd done some other studio work with, who's an

amazing percussionist. He's done a lot of early music in the New York Early Music Ensemble. After playing together for two weeks, we recorded a cassette and went on the road to the Northwest. We only had ten dates, but we sold four hundred cassettes." When the group returned to San Francisco, they hooked up with City of Tribes Records, who released their first CD, *Trance Mission*, last year. "Now we've sold ten thousand copies, which is great for an unknown band and an unknown label."

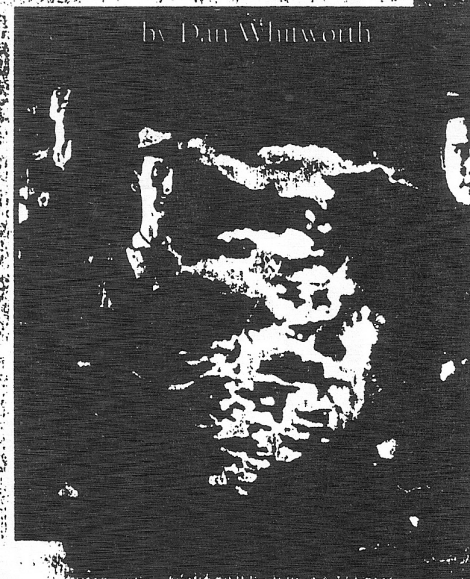
As *Trance Mission* heads into the studio to record their second album, Kent reflects upon the many traditions that have influenced the band. "We are making use of sounds and influences that we each have gained from our lives' experiences, and our particular interest in different cultures. We're putting those together with elements of the high tech culture which all of us also live in. I don't think we're looking back. As a didgeridoo player, I'm gaining a great deal of strength in the connection that I must have through it to aboriginal culture—but I see it as being a tool for now, in the modern world."

"There's a circular thing about culture, and how it transmutes and influences other cultures. I think we're living in a world where this whole process is being massively speeded up. And who's to say that the dominance of the technological and left-brain Western culture in the world cannot be subverted by those other cultures which we for hundreds of years have viewed with far more disdain. There's so much talk in this country about traditional values; I'm interested in looking at the traditional values of cultures that we have attempted to wipe out, because I think those values are probably what we really need right now at the end of the twentieth century."

Trance Mission, *Lights In A City's Somewhere*, and Stephen Kent's new solo album *Landing* are available from City of Tribes Records. *Lights In A Fat City's Sound Column* is available from Extreme Records (distributed in the US by Cargo).

Band photo ©Anne Hamersky. Original *Trance Mission* CD art by Charles Rose.

by Dan Whitworth



Kenneth Newby and John Loose.

