

# Trance Mission

## Sergeant Pepper's Transcendental Recruits

It was over 45 years ago that Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play. That's 26 years since the album came out, preceded by 20 years of going in and out of style. When the Lonely Hearts Club Band took those momentous steps, they couldn't have known how much the world would change or how their influence would extend to the utterly contemporary and original "ancestral boogie" of San Francisco's Trance Mission.

Yet the name of George Martin, the producer of the Beatles and many others, surfaces at almost every turn in conversation with the members of the group, which has released a self-titled debut CD on the City of Tribes indie that offers an elegance, accessibility, and imagination that Sergeant Pepper and George Martin should be proud to have fathered.

Kenneth Newby, who plays various Eastern flutes and reeds, percussion, and digital electronics, remembers that his "musical apotheosis" took place at the point when he woke up to music and became obsessed with it, was in 1968, when his older sister brought home a copy of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which inspired Brian Custer, Trance Mission's clarinet and toy horn player, to exclaim: "That's the exact same thing that happened with me, except I was my neighbor, who was five years older than me." Percussionist John Loose, in turn, recalls: "My brother had this pair of bongos that I used to whack all the time to every Beatles' record in 1967 or '68, when I was 4 or 5 years old." Meanwhile, Stephen Kent, the didgeridoo, animal horns, and sticks man, chips in that *Sergeant Pepper* was the first album to make an

now could it? or even like Martin's other productions, but, as Newby explains, it was the record that told him, "You can do this with music." [It was] because of the studio techniques they were using and also the way for the sense that it was constructed as one piece. The psychedelic implication was fascinating me.

"Certain sophistications that came into rock music really turned me into those kind of extensions, the things that made it more than just a couple of guitars, bass, and some drums. It also had a lot of us outside [ended up] living in Java and Bali, Indonesia because I was pointed out as a person of culture. There was a vision of the world, there was something more than what we had been fed as kids. That was the kind of revelation that

when Kent went to Australia in 1961 as the musical director of a contemporary circus company *la Cirque du Soleil*, he heard didgeridoos played live. "I realized that it was an incredible instrument," he says, "and I determined to use that kind of quality in the work I was doing. That was what got me into this particular breathing."

Newby was already playing the bongos when he joined the early rock music jazz combo the Winter Consort. "I was a good friend of Winter, whose early album *Icarus*, was produced (no surprise) by George Martin. At age 7, he was given a shot at playing Winter sideman Collin Walker's rhythm tools." There were more world percussion instruments than I ever knew existed," he recalls.

Trance Mission's music is hard to describe, even by Trance Mission. Is it rock? Custer says that it has "some rock elements," but the others chime in with a slightly self-effacing chorus proclaiming the music "ancestral boogie," "techno tribal," and "techno archaic boogie."

"Boogie is such a horrible word," Loose mutters in dissent. "Booger!" Custer responds, but Newby isn't fond of that word, either. When told the origin of the word "boogie," which comes from the Bantu expression "mbuki-mvuki," meaning to shuck off one's clothes in order to dance, their attitudes change. Kent says that Trance Mission's music has indeed had that effect, and Custer promptly relates a tale of a twosome making the beast with two backs "right in the audience." The story is perhaps apocryphal, since friends of the couple deny that anything more than making-out, or "rooting," as Kent puts it, occurred. Regardless of the truth of this particular instance, there is an intense sexual and erotic feel to Trance Mission's music.

Custer adds that the music's appeal does indeed come "from the throbbing pulse," while Kent explains that, "It really does connect with people on a deep level, and often people, especially in our culture, read that as being a sexual connection."

How does Custer feel when playing? "Entranced, ecstatic," she replies. "We have a kind of psychic connection. We had a great gig at Komotion when we hadn't played together in awhile. We just met

and played and it was the most psychic, one-mind gig I've ever played in my life. That's where people were fucking on the floor."

Mission accomplished. ■



Trance Mission (l-r) Stephen Kent, Brian Custer, Ken Newby, and John Loose

that music was for me. Those guys were stretching the boundaries. It was very expansive."

Newby admits that at first he found his main instrument, the didgeridoo (a Eucalyptus branch hollowed out by termites), to be "rather dull," grew up in Uganda, where he had heard Ugandan trumpet orchestras. A recording called *Flutes and Trumpets*, part of the Music in the World of Islam series put out by Tangent Records in the '70s, gave him

AUG. 27, 1993  
ISSUE 415

ALWAYS FREE

# BAM

BAY AREA MUSIC MAGAZINE