

RECORDING WITH THEIR ETHNO-FOLK HYBRID ensemble Trance Mission or under their other banners (Lights In A Fat City, Beasts of Paradise), Kenneth Newby and Stephen Kent have been, are, and probably will be for a long time, two of the most innovative and influential musicians at the borders of new electro-acoustic music. The following conversation allows some insight into one of their more entrancing guises.

Can we retrace your early steps in music? Stephen, I understand that your personal and artistic education is international in the true sense of the word.

KENT I was born in Southwest England. When I was a few months old my family moved to Uganda, my father was working at setting up an art course at a university there. That whole time has maintained its presence and is relevant to what I do now.

When I was seven, we went back to Britain, where I had a fairly normal, rural upbringing, except that I was exposed all the time to many art forms. When I was eleven, my father took me to London and I bought a french horn. That was the first instrument that I started studying. A musicologist named Jean Jenkins, who had done recordings all over Asia, introduced me to Balinese music. I began making music with friends at school, which reflected my influences from Africa and Indonesia as well as the fact that we were learning classical music and I was beginning to play guitar. Then we finally formed a rock group called Furious Pig and put an album out on Rough Trade in 1980 (entirely a cappella). We were playing all kinds of strange idioms, along the likes of Raincoats and other new wave combos, with quite a bit of punk energy. We were connected with people from Henry Cow and listened to a lot of Zappa and Beelheart.

How did you get the idea of devoting yourself to an Australian instrument that was still widely unknown in the West at the time?

I skipped college and was hired as the musical director to an Australian agitprop circus, a group of intellectuals who perceived popular theatre as a method of getting across a political message, in particular about the role (or the lack of a role) of the aborigines in Australian society. We travelled all over Australia for two years and the first time I heard it I immediately got interested in the sound of

didgeridoo. I was looking for inspiration for the group and figured if I learned some of the techniques of the didg and applied them to brass instruments I would give the music a very powerful foundation. I figured it would convey something about the quality of Australia. I started writing and arranging music focused around the playing of a musician called Donato Rosella, who also played didgeridoo. I learned the same technique myself until, abandoning the circus, I moved to the north with Donato, who was a big influence on me and had access to various aboriginal settlements. I had the privilege to accompany him to some of these places and got to live in the bush with aboriginal people. That was a big change in my life. It really got me into the didgeridoo. At the same time the bigger picture of being there elicited bigger questions. I started doing some

knock at the door and five Indonesian guys with gamelan instruments walked in, and so on. We developed a friendship. Around the same time we were developing this group in London, called Lights In A Fat City, which was basically Eddy and myself and the sound engineer, Simon Tassano, and that took over one year later as my main focus. We put out our first album in 1988. It was a cult success. It was unusual in that it was music based on the didgeridoo—probably the first time in the contemporary scene. We performed all over Europe at a lot of festivals—jazz, world music, folk, new music, avant garde—the music defied boundaries. We came to the States in 1991 and invited Kenneth to play with us. He gladly joined the group and played a few gigs here and in Canada. The tour over, I decided to stay in the San Francisco Bay Area, and I've been

here ever since. The meeting with Kenneth was really the beginning of the development of Trance Mission.

Kenneth, your turn. What were your beginnings?

NEWBY I was born in Vancouver, received classical training since I was five, always had an interest in alternative music and was turned on by the psychedelic music that was around in the '60s. It made me excited that you could be creative in the studio, that one can work with sound. I set myself to compose music that used the recording technology in some creative way. At the same time we started to hear a lot of music coming from the rest of the



major philosophical thinking of my own, who I am, why I was here. I had an awakening that brought me to playing didgeridoo, although most of my playing actually occurred when I returned to Europe.

How did you form the partnership with Kenneth Newby that eventually led to your most important works?

I met Kenneth for the first time in the summer of 1985 in London. I was playing with a percussionist, Eddy Sayer. We used to play marketplaces just for fun, while I was still working with another circus. We met Kenneth the following year when I was invited to Vancouver at this big party. It was like the party at the beginning of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. There was a knock and ten aboriginal guys walked in with didgeridoos. Another

world. I was studying philosophy, a degree which I never finished, when I started doing free improvisation for sax, bassoon and oboe with the New Orchestra Workshop, an ensemble which has been a focal point for creative musicians. I then switched to a contemporary scene that was very focused on technology, on cutting-edge interactive methods. A big inspiration on me was George Lewis. We met in 1979 and we've stayed in touch over the years. A revelatory experience was my trip to Indonesia, encountering a culture that was radically different from the one I was raised in. I ended up forming a long-term relationship with balinese and javanese music and spent two years altogether in Indonesia. What was most intriguing to me was the fact that balinese music is

mainly an oral tradition, it does not rely on scores, as opposed to notation-based Western music. I found myself trying to reconcile the unstructured and the structured, looking for a fine balance between Eastern and Western traditions. And of course I found the gamelan stimulating conceptually, with its subtle tunings...the more you dig into it the more subtle you realize it is. I felt that maybe I could translate all these ideas into the electro-acoustic realm, so I started composing in a new style that was influenced by Indonesian instruments without being truly Indonesian. Around this time was the meeting with Stephen in London and our subsequent development. I was working professionally in Canada as the music composer for a dance company called Cymbali, a cooperative ensemble that did festivals and put out a couple of cassettes. My partner, Lorraine Thomson, is a choreographer/dancer for Cymbali and we have often collaborated.

KENT I should interject that I too had been working with dance and theatre during the mid 80's, when I was in Barcelona. It is part of our common, combined experience. I think that's very important in the context of what we do today because it enhances the visual sense of our music. People see it as music that is inspiring at the image level, true soundscape. I have always maintained an interest in art that's involved with movement.

How did the second LIAFC recording happen?

NEWBY We recorded it in 1991 here in San Francisco, the first recording collaboration that we did. It was a very simple project. We just put a microphone inside these huge hollow pillars of the rotunda of the Palace Of Fine Arts. It was a very foggy day. I had a small hi-fi system to play the samples and we put the microphone six feet high in the air and plugged it in a little portable DAT. The most powerful piece is totally improvised. It's music that sends people to a very deep space, almost asleep. People who love gamelan say that they love it because it puts them to sleep.

By this time you were ready to embark on the Trance Mission project...

LIAFC fell away but there had been some jam sessions with local San Francisco musicians, one of whom was Beth Custer, a connection that Stephen cultivated.

KENT It was an interesting time for me because I had just decided to leave Europe

without really knowing what I was going to do here. Then we found John Loose. We played as a trio on two or three occasions, then we invited Kenneth down and in April 1992, took a portable recording studio up to the wine country and recorded a tape of our improvisations. 'Trance music' wasn't really the invention of anyone of us—music is created by consensus. Tassano was called in to produce the second album and the difference is quite striking; it has very much to do with how we operated in the studio. The first album was about the acoustic interactions that we were perfecting in the context of a small environment. The second was very much a studio project, using the same process in the studio, and in addition using the studio itself (that's Simon's part). Because we're all very busy with many projects and because we have our private lives and

she takes a different approach when she plays with us. And now she also plays the trumpet.

Can you brief us on your own 'solo' projects as well?

KENT A few years ago I started hiding in caves and woods to play and record didgeridoo solos. My didgeridoo playing had become quite focused as the instrument had become my main vehicle for expression. In late 1993 I decided that there was space in the world for an album that was based on this instrument. The didgeridoo has not really been explored in the way that I was capable of doing it. I wanted to present different aspects of the didgeridoo that I didn't feel had been exhibited anywhere else. My style is very different from aboriginal playing, it's a contemporary style. I see the didgeridoo as an instrument that has an or-

chestral sound in itself, both a percussive instrument and a wind instrument. It takes up a lot of space and it gives back space, it has phenomenal dimensions. I invited Kenneth and Eda Maxym, who is my partner in life, to help out in the studio. I am very pleased with the way the record came out.

What about Beasts Of Paradise?

We met harpist Barbara Imhof when we played a Mondo 2000 celebratory party. She used to work for Mondo 2000 (Kenneth himself later took over her place at the magazine) and wanted to interview us. The two of us started jamming Barbara and Eda, who has this wonderful voice, started playing as a duo,

then somehow this evolved into The Rocking Horse People, then Beasts Of Paradise. The band loosely, gradually happened. For the first album it was a seven piece group, but it was not very coherent. I wasn't even a member. I was invited to join after the recording sessions. Then we became a five piece, with Barbara, Eda, and percussionist Geoffrey Gordon. The real band was formed after the record, in a sense.

Kenneth, I consider Ecology Of Souls one of the milestone recordings of this decade. Can you elaborate on how it was created?

NEWBY It really started as a multimedia opera in Vancouver that included dance and video projections. The whole focus was to let people explore the deep spaces that are associated with psychedelic music: to feel the kind of experience they might have if they ate a lot of mushrooms, to embark in



because Kenneth is not living in the area, it seems that this will be our preferred way of working for a while. We seed ideas and arrangements to take into the studio. Right now we're rehearsing for the third album, which will also be along those lines. It should be released around this spring. There will be many new sounds.

What was exactly Beth's contribution to the whole?

NEWBY On the first recording Beth had a very melodic role and very much centered around the clarinet playing. The work we did on *Meanwhile* was much more layered, textured. She certainly added an acid jazz quality to the overall sound that I quite liked. Her role is ever changing. On each album you get a snapshot of where she is at now. She does her solo work, well represented on her recent first album, but then

shamanic explorations of their own consciousness. The music is largely inspired by Lights In A Fat City of 1991, directly inspired actually by the improvisations for *Sound Column*. But it's truly an opera because the voice is such an integral part of the music. There are vocal samples throughout from different places, altered to the degree that you may not be able to recognize them in most cases. **Are you planning a continuation of the concept?**

Possibly. I come up with new ideas, but haven't found the time to work on them yet. **What new projects are on the horizon?** We're planning a collaboration with Steve Roach for Fathom that's scheduled for release this fall. We have lots of ideas and we'll spend ten days or so in the studio to materialize them. The spark flies and ignites the fire when and where you least expect it. **KENT** Music is out there. A musician simply absorbs it and translates it into a recording format.