

Invisible Jukebox

Every month we play a musician or group a series of records which they're asked to identify and comment on – with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear



Current 93

Tested by Mike Barnes. Photo by Mattias Ek

Current 93's David Tibet first made his mark in the "Industrial" culture of the early 1980s, even though he was sceptical of the Industrial formula equating inept noise with socially 'transgressive' acts. His early reading habits, which included a fascination with Aleister Crowley, seeded his interrogations of occult and official belief systems and their rituals, which have informed much of his work as Current 93. The name itself is a Crowleyan reference, being one of the many tenets of the Law of Thelema. He formed the group – briefly known as Dogs Blood Order – in 1982. The first Current 93 record proper was the 1983 single, "LASH TAL", which was followed by a series of dark loop/soundscape albums.

Concurrent with Current 93's fledgling years, Tibet was also briefly a member of Psychic TV. He participated in their first two albums, plus the set of Tibetan thighbone trombone music included with early copies of PTY's 1982 debut *Force The Hand Of Chance*.

But his most significant meeting in this period was with Nurse With Wound's Steven Stapleton. Subsequently, Stapleton has contributed to virtually all Current 93's releases (already numbering more than 30 albums), while Tibet has appeared on almost all of Nurse With Wound's. Since 1986 Tibet has pursued an 'apocalyptic folk' direction, mixing traditional elements with more avant experimentation. Guided by his spiritual leanings and his esoteric tastes in music and literature, Current 93's body of work partly constitutes an idiosyncratic exploration of hidden or suppressed aspects of British history. Through his record label and publishing imprint Durtro, Tibet also champions outsider or overlooked artists he feels most passionate about, among them musicians as diverse as Shirley Collins, Tiny Tim and Nature And Organization, and writers such as Count Stenbock. The Jukebox took place at Tibet's home in East London.

YŪGWA MONKS

"SANGWA DUBA"

FROM TIBETAN BUDDHISM: TANTRAS OF YŪGWA

(ELEKTRONISCH EXPLORER) 1975

Well it appears to me to be a Tibetan monastic ritual. My knowledge of Tibetan is not great but with a chant like this it's not easy to get any of the words anyway. But if I saw the text in Tibetan I could identify more easily the bodhisattva or the deity involved. It sounds more like it's going to be an earlier form of Tibetan Buddhism, so it might be Nyinmgapa or it might even be Bonpo. But it sounds like it might be the Mahakala ritual or a protector deity ritual, it's got that darker nature. (Looks at CD) I actually have this on CD and vinyl. I was wrong – this is a Gelugpa one, but it is a tantric ritual that comes from Padmasambhava's teaching, who was the founder of the Nyinmgapa sect. It's the introductory part of the Mahakala ritual, Mahakala being a protector deity, a wrathful deity who crushes enemies of Buddhism.

You studied Buddhism in Nepal: what drew you over there?

I was born in Malaysia so I was brought up in Asia and so I was really interested in Asian religion as a child. Then, when I was still in Malaysia, I got interested in Tibetan Buddhism because of Lobsang Rampa. He was a great introducer of Tibetan Buddhism to the West and he sold millions of books. He wrote a book called *The Third Eye*, which I think was his first book, where he claimed that he had an operation to open the third eye, the pineal gland. As his books got more and more outlandish – including a book that was written by his cat and transcribed by Lobsang Rampa – there was a good expose of him in the *Fortean Times*. They discovered he was in fact a plumber who lived, I think, in the north of England called Cyril Henry Hoskins. I think he had originally been a surgical truss salesman before he became a plumber.

You know how people always become interested in things that are foreign to their culture? I became interested in two things: Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. I spent time in Kathmandu and I studied Tibetan Buddhism under a lama, Chimed Rigdzin Lama Rinpoche, who was a tantric master of the Nyinmgapa sect, which was fundamentally the oldest branch of Tibetan Buddhism.

I released an album by him, which was a solo Tibetan chant. The lineage he was a member of were non-celibate and he was also a ferocious meat eater. I took him in to record some tantric rituals. There's one called Chod. Originally this would be done sitting on top of a corpse in a graveyard. Chod is the Tibetan verb 'to cut' and the point of it was to surround yourself with terror and then to cut the ego; cut yourself up and reassemble yourself in a purer state. He said, "Can you go and get me a snack, David?" The engineer was a vegan and I'd earlier told him I'm bringing in a highly respected Buddhist lama chanting some of the truly important Buddhist rituals. I came back with a blue plastic bag of raw steak that had been chopped into big cubes. So Rinpoche was there eating all this raw steak whilst blowing on a thighbone trumpet and banging a skull drum with blood trickling down his chin. I wish I had it on video.

WHITEHOUSE

"SHITFUN"

FROM ANTHOLOGY 1, COME ORGANISATION ARCHIVES 1979-81 (SUSAN LRAWLY) 1981

Oh, Whitehouse. It's certainly one of my earlier ones. I'll get it when the singing comes in. [Distorted howling commences] It's "Shitfun", [originally] from Erector, William Bennett [of Whitehouse] and I used to be good friends. The last time I saw him was outside an Arthur Lee/Love show and I haven't spoken to him for seven or eight years. Again, this had an incredible simplicity of sound and an incredible venom. It's really disturbing music with so little; just an affected voice and high and low frequencies and space to make such an impressive, unnering sound. I actually think it was quite

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subtly put together compared to recent examples of total machine noise. Could you turn it down a bit? The cats get unnerved by the high frequencies.

Did the confrontational aspect of the group override the aesthetics of the music itself?

Obviously the person to answer that would be William. He really would concentrate with great care on anything he did, from flyers, album design, live shows, even the pressing plant. I remember one of his early texts was: "The listener to this album will experience the most extreme reaction possible because this is the most brutal and extreme music of all time." He would also say that he came from a completely libertarian perspective, so some people thought that he was extreme right wing. But I knew him well and as far as I knew him, that wasn't the case. He was an expert on De Sade, an expert on Roman decadence, a very, very intelligent and educated man.

There were obviously a lot of groups who came after Whitehouse and just did the shock tactics. That was really tedious. But I think William and his project, it was a super-personal thing. He followed his own star and was never bothered that magazines wouldn't do an interview with him, or that he might get banned from various things. He had absolutely no sense of compromise.

At the time [in the early 80s] it was really exciting going to see Whitehouse play for 15 minutes, then seeing the police dragging the audience away. They did an amazing show at a place called the Reobuck. [Nurse With Wound's] Steve Stapleton knew the form and when to get out before the blood started to flow, but even he had a glass thrown at his face and had to go to hospital.

WILLIAM LAWES

"PAVAN, CONSORT SETT A 5 IN C MINOR"

FROM FOR YE VIOLLS (VIRGIN CLASSICS) 1638-40, RECORDED 1991

John Dowland, "Flow My Tears". No, it's William Lawes, the opening phrase is very similar, it quotes it. Is this [Early Music group] Fretwork playing? Is it from For Ye Violls? I would say he's my favourite composer of all time, but it's so difficult. [Dowland's] "Flow My Tears" was one of the greatest songs, in my opinion, ever written. Lawes was a partisan of Charles I during the [English] Civil War. He was killed at the siege of Chester by a stray musket ball and Charles I, who himself was a great viol player, wept.

With Lawes, for me, there is such a terrible sense of yearning in his music. This is the death knell of a certain England. It's so stately and melancholy. If you listen to Purcell who came later, listen to his *Funeral Music* – it's solemn, it's funereal, but this is just the most autumal music I've ever heard. It's pervaded by a sense of absolute transcendence – it's so timeless it could be written now. In its transcendence is its immortality. Which sounds really pat and clichéd. It's just nobody wrote music like Lawes. I did an album called *Of Ruine Or Some Blazing Starre* [1994] and I was obsessed by three figures: William Lawes; Louis Wain, the Edwardian cat artist who went insane and died in the asylum; and Charles Sims, who was an Edwardian society painter. His son died in the Great War and he started having hallucinations and doing these bizarre and terrifying "Blakean spirituals", as he called them.

I gather that one of your favourite albums is *Anthems In Eden* by Shirley & Dolly Collins, which was groundbreaking in its day for bringing period instruments to English folk. How did your interest in these areas develop?

They came separately. The person who introduced me to Shirley's music was [graphic artist] Savage Pencil. He just said to me, "You'll like this, Tibet", because my interests were in folk stories, fairy tales. It was a time when my music was becoming a lot less atmospheric and moving to a simpler form. Shirley is beyond folk, it's more than that. She's like the presiding spiritual genius of folk to me. The artists I most admire, I felt like they were manifestations of God, not an incarnation, but a

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particularly pure manifestation of the purest art possible. It was totally unannounced, there was never any pretence in her voice. She sang as she thought, as she felt. Put a pair of lips on the heart and that's what Shirley sounded like.

My accountant is an expert on Milton and a great fan of Renaissance music, and knowing my emotional and religious interests, suggested William Lawes. I was already very fond of Dowland and the Carolingian English mystical poet like Henry Vaughan, [Richard] Crashaw, George Herbert, so Lawes fitted absolutely into that emotive realm. I got to meet Shirley — the continuation of the obsession is to actually meet the people that I idolise — I did the same with Tiny Tim when I became obsessed by him and then got to release a couple of Shirley's albums on Durto. Lawes unfortunately I can't get to meet.

I tend to be influenced by people whose art is their life. It wasn't folk music that influenced me, it was the aesthetic area around folk — the simplicity and purity of narration, arrangement. The emotions involved are the profound ones: jealousy, betrayal, murder, lust, searching for God, the timeless themes, but put in a way without theological speculation or psychological speculation.

HILMAR ÖRN HILMARSSON "AÖFLUG/DRÁUMUR"

FROM ENGLAR ALHEIMISIS OST 90RUKU 2000

It sounds like folk music to me.

It is a soundtrack.

It's not Don't Look Now is it? I didn't think it was. Was this a hit as an album?

It's not a big film, but you know the person who wrote the music.

It's not Graeme Revell? It doesn't sound like him. What country are they from?

Iceland.

Ah, well then, it's Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson. Is it *Children Of Nature*?

No, but it's the most recent film by the same director, Fredrik Thor Fridriksson: *Angels Of The Universe*.

I haven't heard that. He's an old friend of mine, but he promises to send me the albums and they're never going. Not that long ago Hilmar rang me and said, "I'm going to send you this album, it's me working with Sigur Rós". So blame him for that. Now I've got one wrong and it's Hilmar's fault. But it's got that simplicity and emotive touch that Hilmar does so well. The only one I've got by him is *Children Of Nature*, but he used on that some of the music that he and I did together for an album called *Iceland* [the Icelandic name for Iceland]. It's very Hilmar-ish now that I hear it. I hardly ever watch films. *Spinal Tap*, I know the soundtrack of that and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which is another of my favourite films.

As Current 93 with Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, we did a 12" EP called *Crowleymess* [in 1987] which was a mistake of [Aleister] Crowley and his worshippers. It was a disco thing. We always got so many letters from people saying things like, "You're into Crowley, can you show us how to join an organisation that will give us Power?" — with a capital 'P' of course — and magick this, magick that, it was really pretty tedious. So we did a disco tribute to Crowley which backfired because we started to get even more letters saying, "How cunning of you to use the pop disco dance form to spread the Great Beast's ideas..."

Did you cross paths with Hilmarsson in *Psychic TV*?

No. I was there during the recording of the first album and jumped ship during the recording of the second album and Hilmar joined about a year later. The person that actually introduced me to Hilmar was Rose McDowell from Strawberry Switchblade, who has worked with Current.

What did you play in *Psychic TV*?

I can't really play anything. I played thighbone trumpet — anyone can play thighbone trumpet. You just play your lips to it. It was an odd time. It was something I'm always fairly tight to

speak about. Some of it was really good, some of it was really not at all good, but it was an interesting and instructive period [laughs]... You had to have been there.

The mind boggles.

It did indeed. Lots of things boggled — some of those things haven't stopped boggling.

KEVIN AYERS "OLE OLEH BANDU BANDONG"

FROM JOY OF A TOY (BIGO) 1969

I know this. Kevin Ayers. They're singing in Malay.

I've always wondered what the lyrics mean. Do you know?

My Malay is hopeless now. I showed it to my dad, who has departed now. He said it might be Indonesian, which is similar to Malay. I showed it to my mum and she didn't know, and her Malay is good. This is an *Joy Of A Toy*. The one I really like by Kevin Ayers is "Lady Rachel", which is on this album, and "Song From The Bottom Of A Well" from *Where'sheersing/sing*. This is a song I really like.

I was wondering if you liked this turn of the decade English underground stuff typified by the Harvest label?

Pete Brown's *Piblotto*, Quatermass, Tea And Symphony...

The Edgar Broughton Band?

I quite like the early Edgar Broughton Band. Third Ear Band, my favourite album was *Macbeth* and my favourite track on that album is that vocal track ["Fleance", with vocals by a young Keith Chegwin]. Steve Stapleton is a big fan of The Third Ear Band. They were a band I liked the idea of, but their music is a bit too frenetic. There is underground wuf-out stuff I like from the 70s, but again they had to be more spacious. Some of the German bands I like a lot, like Sand, Alcatraz, Anima; Mahogany Brain from France. They were really great. Do you know that English underground band Comus? The darkest, most acidic and frightening acid folk album ever made, *First Utterance*. They were a big influence on me. It's a really disturbing album.

JACK SMITH FEATURING MARIO MONTEZ

"SILENT SHADOWS ON
CINEMAROC ISLAND"

FROM SILENT SHADOWS ON CINEMAROC ISLAND:
56 LUDLOW STREET 1962-1964 (TABLE OF THE ELEMENTS) 1984,
RELEASED 1997

I haven't got a clue what it is, but I immediately think it could be Timothy Leary. Could it be Angus MacLise, something like that?

Getting close.

New York underground? [Tony] Conrad?

Conrad and Jack Cale play on it. In fact it's part of Tony Conrad's Audio Arkive series.

You can hear Conrad and Cale noises like the guy [reiter] I can't identify because he's trying to sound like a groovy cat. Who's the guy?

Jack Smith, film maker and proto-performance artist.

This general New York underground era: I know people are fascinated by it but it never did it for me. My favourite out of that whole New York minimalist art area is Charlemagne Palestine. I love his music and we put out an album by him on my label [Karenina]. This area is historically interesting and I can see why people are fascinated in it, but it's not really for me.

Some of your own music employs recitation...

What I'm doing, I'm aware people think it's a narrative, but in my own way I'm singing. It's a delivery. I certainly wouldn't say I was doing this, which is just a straight narrative which doesn't ride... there's not really music for it to fit in with. I've done a couple of things like that, I've done an album called *I Have A Special Plan For This World*, where the text was written by an American horror writer called Thomas Ligotti, and I read that over factured music done by me and Steve. There was a

lot of treatment on the voice, we were using extraneous clicks and effects so in that way the voice, although it was recognisably saying words, was still being used as an instrument, so it wasn't a straight narrative, it was an instrument with a narrative force. Maybe a bit like when [Peter] Frampton used to do "Show Me The Way", so it was guitar but it was his voice.

Your big influence revealed.

I didn't like him but I remember a kid at school saying, "Have you been hit by the Frampers Phenomenon yet?" I thought, if it's called the Frampers Phenomenon, even if it's good, I really don't want to be part of it.

ANIMA-SOUND "N DA DA UUM DA"

FROM MUSIC FOR ANIMA (TALGA MARIGHERI) 1971

Is this Anima? I like Anima a lot. Steve Stapleton used to play me a lot of [Krautrock] stuff, nearly all of which I hated because it was haircutting insane on soling with Marxist dialectic over the top, which sent me crying and running to the toilet. But Anima, there's so much space in it, it's acoustic and it's really sincere. I play this to people and they say I shouldn't like it because it doesn't fit in with other things I tend to like. But I thought they were really catchy; they did have a pop sensibility, in a way. It's very simple, really quite inspired. They travelled around in a little bus to play shows, didn't they? [*Ultrasonic Seraphim* by Sand, rereleased on Tibet's Durto label] is my favourite German album of all time. Thirty Moon are a group I like a lot, and Alcatraz, as I mentioned before: *Vampire State Building* is a great record.

Cosmic music's fine but it's difficult to do really well and [Tangerine Dream's] Zeit, for me, that was the ultimate. That and also *Nosferatu*, the Popul Vuh soundtrack. That's not cosmic in the same way but it got a trippy feel to it. It's not a kind of music I play a lot, but I do when my girlfriend is out of the house.

CHARLEY PATTON

"PRAYER OF DEATH PART 1"

FROM SCREAMIN' AND HOLLERIN' THE BLUES (REVENANTS) 2001

I'm better on the gospel than this. At first I thought it was Charley Patton... but it's not?

It is Charley Patton.

Oh fuck. His voice isn't normally quite as high as this, it's normally a bit more slurred... I was thinking, it's not Blind Lemon Jefferson and it's not Leadbelly [distorted by music]... beautiful. My real favourite in this area of blues/gospel/raw Americana is Blind Willie Johnson. I do tend to prefer ones with a religious feel, like [Johnson's] "I'm Going To Run To The City Of Rufes", that's absolutely stunning.

The feeling of transcendence you mentioned in the music of Lawes, manifests itself in the blues in a different way. It's life absolutely on the edge and judgment just around the corner. It's certainly something that's been at the forefront of my own thinking. Specifically, for me it's not just mortality, it's judgment, because we think we are all judged by God. If you were going to draw a true difference between blues and early gospel, the blues tend to be connected with the problems of the here and now, whereas gospel deals with the problems of the hereafter. But they both do dwell with the problems of the unrighteous. And the people who sing the blues were very much in the position of being trampled down by the unrighteous. Mortality and judgment: for me they are two things that human beings should constantly consider.

The blues is always about people being smashed down by landowners, drink, whatever and getting up again. Even with Charley Patton's "Oh Death", the blues are always about defiance, not resignation. It's the sound of someone being kicked in the face a thousand times and is still saying, "I'm going to get up, it's another new day", and I love that. □