

spaces&places

John Surman is one of the totemic figures of British jazz, one of the select number revered and admired in Britain and abroad, both for his technical skills and for his audacious approach to jazz and improvised music. His latest album *The Spaces In Between* is just one of a raft of new projects that Surman is involved with in the coming year, showing a wide range of the saxophonist's interests.

INTERVIEW :: DUNCAN HEINING

Throughout his 40-year career, saxophonist John Surman has pioneered innovation in jazz. His desire to create new spaces where improvisation can happen has been a driving force in his work and has kept him at the forefront of the music. He has developed the use of electronics in solo and group performance and used it to create a wholly unique compositional and improvisational style. And he's worked with everything from brass ensembles and choirs to string quartets and full orchestras.

A few years ago, John moved permanently to live in Norway with long-term partner, singer Karin Krog. The immediate reason for this interview is his forthcoming CD, *The Spaces In Between*. However, with so many other projects coming together over the next twelve months, 2007 will offer an embarrassment of riches for John's many fans.

The new CD features John with bassist Chris Laurence and the Trans4mation string quartet and is a follow-up to *Coruscating*. Good though that album was, *The Spaces In Between* is a totally successful integration of written and improvised music and of jazz, folk and classical styles. Indeed, it's one of the finest albums John has ever made. I ask him how this project has changed since its beginnings seven years back.

"I think it's developed. We did a number of performances after we recorded *Coruscating*, and we had done a few before it. I think a lot of the music has grown out of working together. I've realised what the strings can do and they've got

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used to the way that I'm looking at writing. So, the two things have gone hand-in-hand really."

John had tried writing for strings before but felt it lacked that special thing to "make the music come alive."

"You could say it needed a bass but actually it needed the 'one and only' Chris Laurence to do it. He's got that incredible link between working with orchestral string players and being a perfect improviser and someone whose playing I know very well."

John is spot on. Chris Laurence is the bridge both between those two worlds and between John's reed instruments and the strings. But it's also, the opportunity to work consistently with a core group that has transformed the music.

Apparently, some promoters have wanted to take shortcuts and make savings by backing John and Chris with a local string quartet. As John explains, they are missing the point.

"These musicians are really important to this project. There's a touch more to making this really work and that's the way in which Trans4mation, who were also fans of Chris' and my music anyway, take care of themselves while Chris and I go off on flights of fancy. We don't have to nurse them to make sure they come in at the right place. Now, they know instinctively when to play the written parts and how, in a way, we will use them as a rhythm section. A normal 'romantic' string quartet will bend the time, so when we go off on a flight of fancy, we don't always end up in the same place together."

If composition has become an increasingly important aspect of John's work, it is as a means rather than as an end in itself. For John: "The writing just creates these different places and textures and ways of setting off improvisation." That in turn makes it essential that projects like *Coruscating* or *Proverbs and Songs*, with its organ and choir, are allowed to grow almost organically. In John's opinion, the constant demand for new work stops that process of natural growth.

"I'm afraid there is this quest for novelty and new projects, whereas I think a lot of pieces, like *Proverbs and Songs* benefit from being performed. The more we've played it, the looser it's got, the more it's revealed, the more freedom. But people say, why don't you write something else? But for me, it's a case of 'Wait a minute!' This isn't a set piece of music that will be performed the same way every time. It's a piece that's living and if you don't keep playing it, it



won't go anywhere." The title track of the new CD not only illustrates this beautifully but reveals the part that improvisation plays in John's life as well as in his music.

"If only I could live my life in such a structured way that I knew where things were leading and what their purpose was. But I really don't. You've got this quite long solo piece that Rita Manning plays in the middle of *The Spaces In Between* simply because it emerged as we were playing together. I thought it would be really nice, if I could play the violin. I thought, what would I play if I could do a violin solo? So, I wrote something to see what would happen. So, it's really what I would play but I've written it out for Rita who plays it magnificently."

I think John is talking about the openness to possibility that lies at the heart of his work. Call it "improvisation" or "chance", it allows things to happen, that otherwise might not. *Proverbs and Songs* is a case in point. Commissioned by the Salisbury Festival in 1997, it was performed by John with John Taylor on the cathedral organ and the Festival Chorus conducted by Howard Moody. That connection leads us to another new album, due in the autumn featuring John and Howard, who is a highly talented organist amongst his other skills. When John Taylor was unable to make performances of *Proverbs*, Moody would stand in.

"Howard would do it and do it very, very well. He's an improviser too and so, we've become

more musically acquainted. He also runs the Sarum Orchestra, which works on a project basis, and has commissioned several pieces from me over the last few years. Having done several improvisations together in the process of doing *Proverbs*, it seemed a good idea to have a crack at doing a record and it's great. I really enjoy playing with an organist. It takes me back to my youth as a choirboy (laughing)."

Howard Moody was an organ scholar at Oxford and that prompts me to comment on the part played by improvisation in church music and Baroque music in general.

"Absolutely. When I was growing up the only area that any kind of improvisation took place was as an organist in church, filling in those awkward gaps here and there. That improvising tradition only really stayed alive in that area. For any other kind of orchestral player or 'classical' player, you just didn't do it. They do now because it's starting to appear in music colleges. Improvisation is becoming part of everyday music making and a good thing too."

I ask him, if he's heard the marvellous *Conway Suite* CD made by Dave Stapleton and Deri Roberts featuring sax and church organ. "Yes, I've heard it. I actually met Dave on one of the *Take Five* developmental projects." John's taken part in these programmes over the last two years and is full of praise for the young musicians he's met and for the breadth of their interests and range of their projects. In fact, John

seems really energised by the experience.

"This year there was this vibes player, Corey Mwamba, who's really out there and Tom Arthurs, who's very interested in Braxton-style music. Then, you've got other players like Finn Peters, who was more interested in rap and bringing that into it, and Nikki Yeoh, who seems to cross over a lot of different areas. Last year, there was Dave Stapleton, who's a freer player, and Gwilym Simcock and Julian Buckley, both very schooled musicians writing very sophisticated orchestral music. And again from last year Dave Okumu, who I ended up working with at the Electric Proms last year because I liked his playing. They said, 'Would you like to do it?' and I said, 'Yeah, I'd like to play with him'."

John says that he's now worked with 16 young musicians involved in the initiative and that if anyone asked him where jazz was headed, he could name 16 different directions just from them. "I don't know who got most out of it – whether I got energy from them or they got something from me. There's no question that there's a future out there – for them and for this music."

It won't surprise then that teaching seems likely to play a greater part in John's future life in music. "On the road stuff becomes less and less attractive now. It's reached a stage where a couple of weeks of that and I need to lie down in a darkened room with a damp towel. It's hard work flying and that thing now about taking

instruments on planes. It was never as bad as it is now. At least five or six times last year, my instruments haven't arrived and it's getting worse and worse. So, the possibility of spending a bit more time in one place and doing teaching looks good. One or two people in Norway have made interested inquiries, as to whether I would like to do a bit more teaching. I do enjoy it."

John's mother was a schoolteacher and John trained as a teacher himself after music school. He's already running a regular workshop band at Rainbow studios in Oslo which attracts a lot of young players and he and Karin have also been working with a Big Band in Bergen featuring a lot of young musicians alongside more seasoned jazzers. So, it seems like a natural progression and, given John's voracious enthusiasm and desire to grow, I can think of few better people to make that kind of contribution to future generations of musicians.

I suggest that the music scene is getting healthier after that period where everything became so retrospective. Though John agrees that things had become somewhat stagnant, certainly stateside, he still thinks there's a place for the traditional jazz repertoire.

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but it would be terrible if the whole thing stood still or just went round in circles. It has to keep going."

As long as musicians like John Surman have their say, there's no chance of the music stagnating. The diversity of his music throws down challenges to his own generation as well as to those coming through now. Another album due out later this year sees John's third collaboration with ex-Hilliard singer, John Potter, on the latter's Early Music Dowland Project. Called *Romaria*, it shows that the source of fresh ideas can sometimes lie in the past as well as in the present. Given John's interest in folk forms, his involvement is hardly surprising. Again, it's the improvisational quality of the music that attracts John.

"You've got the freedom of fantasy and you don't have the Mozart police breathing down your neck. Of course, we realise that to play this music on a saxophone involves a certain licence because it wasn't even dreamed of back then. But there's also the thing that this was a kind of folk music in the sense that a lot of it must have been passed on orally and the compositional side of it is more basic. It was expected that these simple notes would be decorated and developed in some way. As written composition developed the details started to get filled in until you reach the point of Webern where every nuance is refined to the smallest detail."

For John teaching music orally is a valuable way of helping musicians learn more than just the notes on the page. He compares this with the way that Mingus and Monk developed their musicians' capacity to play their compositions.

"Take Monk, like with Rollins and Coltrane or whoever, you went to Monk's house and he didn't give you the music. He just kept playing the tune until you learnt it. That way you didn't

have the barrier of the written note between you and the performance. To bring that back to *Coruscating*, my point about working together is that, after we've played those pieces a few times, the string players aren't really looking at the notes and counting. They hear their part. Then, once they're hearing their part, they're freer to play with us."

John, Chris Laurence and Trans4mation premiere *The Spaces In Between* at the Norwich Festival on 12 May and, as John says, the music should sound fabulous in that setting. Hopefully, other dates will follow. Not that he's short of work. He's also touring Europe in the autumn with Anouar Brahem and Dave Holland and also with Jack DeJohnette's Ripple Effect project. Whether these will get to the UK or not remains to be seen. And then there's a tour of Norway with a group of Norwegian musicians, so that all makes for a pretty full dance card.

I ask John about the recent spate of reissues of his late 60s and early 70s work. "I don't follow that a great deal because they come and go. The great joy of ECM is that you make the album and there it is and it's available. They're things I did in the past. I'm not a great listener of my own things anyway. Once, I've done an album it goes on the shelf and that's it. I'm concerned with what's coming next. I did a long interview with Sonny Rollins for the BBC. He doesn't listen to his own things either but we both agreed, laughing at each other, that maybe we should listen to those old things because maybe we could learn from them. Karin tells me the same thing. But from my point of view I can stand it for a while but then it's, 'Oh, no! Not him again!' A hundred percent was given when we made them. I did my best. So, if there's anything there that interests people, then fine. And a lot of good playing goes on alongside what I was doing." ■

