

Interview with Joe Milliken December 2003.

*1) I have learned that you received lessons under Lou Pockock of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at an early age. Who were some of your other early musical influences?*

I heard a lot of different music as a kid, from three strong sources. My older sister had all the white pop of the day (late 50s to mid 60s), from Connie Francis to Elvis Presley to the Beatles. I can still remember where I was when I first heard "Hound Dog". My parents were keen ballroom dancers and show tune people--Sinatra, Bennett, The King and I, Oklahoma, West Side Story, all great stuff. And the older students at school were hooked on jazz--all the American boppers and hard-bop greats, but also the soul-jazz guys, Bobby Timmons, Adderleys, and the Riverside label from California. Also a ton of R'n'B -- I was growing up in the British blues boom, with John Mayall, Mick Fleetwood, Eric Clapton. I loved it all, the whole darn thing, but I really liked jazz.

*2) Have you been able to take anything from your progressive rock days with Yes, King Crimson, and Genesis, and apply it to your current jazz format?*

Of course. We are all the products of the musical environment we've chosen. Much of King Crimson was a music lesson inside a music laboratory, and altered my very understanding of what it meant to be a musician. Genesis and Yes, less so. Learning to expect the unexpected--as much a skill for the musician as the audience; accepting that your first response is probably the best; allowing yourself to "not know"; strong attention to dynamics, and by extension, the drama of a particular passage; all good stuff, all of which informs my current efforts with Earthworks today.

*3) You have shared drumming duties several times including tours with Brand X, Genesis, Yes, and the double-trio version of King Crimson. What is your approach in this type of setting and what do you take from the experience?*

Double drummer work is paradoxically more confining and more liberating; confining in the sense that if you've agreed to play it, you've got to play it, and liberating because if one of you has the simple, the other can offer the complex. With King Crimson, Pat Mastelotto and I opted for two big areas, sometimes simultaneously. The first was metrical stuff--meters within metres, wheels within wheels-- the effect of a big slower pulse with a small, quicker pulse running around inside it. The band with two hearts...These developments in metric modulation, superimposition, and illusion, well demonstrated by Billy Kilson with Dave Holland, or Trilok Gurtu, or Gavin Harrison, will certainly provide the next big series of challenges for us rhythmists. The second area was timbral---comparing and contrasting electronic to acoustic, mallet to stick, wood to metal, big and slow to light and fast. This stuff, of course, doesn't just have to be with two drummers. It works fine with the bass player, so long as he is of independent spirit!

*4) The first U.K. album you recorded with Allan Holdsworth, John Wetton, and Eddie Jobson in 1978 remains one of my favorites to this day. Can you tell us something that stands out from that project?*

I sometimes cite Holdsworth's first solo on the CD, in "In the Dead of Night" as a model of how to build a solo. Radiant and luxurious at first, wallowing in the swagger and confidence of his own amazing sound. And then the general ratcheting of tension as the ideas come faster and with more aggression. Astonishing development, unorthodox scalic leaps all over the fretboard, tons of ideas, it had it all. I knew he was not well known in the US then, in the late 70s, and I also new that that solo would scare American players half to death and put him on the map in a big way. But generally it was a good album , with all four guys, for probably the first and last time, pulling in the same direction.

*5) Upon forming Earthworks in 1986, how did the collaboration with Django Bates and Iain Ballamy come about?*

Earthworks, born 1986, was based areound the idea that the electronic drumset, recently able to play all manner of chordal , sampled , pitched or un-pitched rhythmic material, had come of age, and was a serious instrument that could be used seriously in jazz. The idea was that I would play much of the chordal material, and that I would find some young open minded players from the growing UK jazz scene, which was very hot at the time, and have them play single lines on top. I knew a brilliant local tenor player that I'd used on some demos, Ian Ballamy, and he introduced me to the astonishing Django Bates. I liked both individually, but better still they were very close as people, a musical double act, a real partnership. They were essentially the backbone of the first edition, and we are now on to a second, acoustic edition of the band .

*6) In the early days of Earthworks you played a hybrid kit using both acoustic and electric drums, as well as electronic pads to trigger keyboards. Was there a particular drummer or "model" that you followed in creating this percussive format, or was it completely created from necessity and desire?*

Trying to do the harmonic stuff from pads was a self -inflicted punishment that drove me crazy. Wisely, no other drummers seemed keen to leap into that particular quicksand. Any musician worth his salt always wants to push these new instruments past their design capabilities, and the manufacturer always wants a high level endorser to get behind the instrument, in my case Simmons electronic drums, often before the equipment is really ready for the market. A recipe for disaster. I spent months with hexadecimal midi-code, trying to get reluctant instruments from several manufacturesrs to co-operate, and it was a heavy ride. But the results could be spectacular--"Industry" and "No Warning" from King Crimson, "Stromboli Kicks " from Earthworks' "Dig?", "Bridge of Inhibition" from "Earthworks", "All Heaven Broke Loose" from the CD of the same name. But in the fourteen or fifteen years I was actively on board, I suppose I gave rise to no more than a couple of dozen compositions which were absolutely a function of electronic percussion, and whose charm arose uniquely from that instrument. At about one a year, that's not a great output, given the time it took. But I don't regret a minute of it, and it was driven by both the necessity and the desire to find interesting things to do on a drum kit.

*7) How did the collaboration with Ralph Towner for 1997's "If Summer Had It's Ghosts" come about and what did you take from that experience?*

After all this electronic mayhem, I was looking for an intimate "chamber " kind of musical environment that could stress the more poetic side of the drummer, rather than just the muscular. This is an area Pete Erskine functions well in. I have always admired, as many have, Ralph's work, from the first hearing on "I Sing the Body Electric" with Weather Report, and felt that we have both occupied the "no-man's land" between rock and jazz, or perhaps classical and jazz in his case, and as such neither of us has ever quite "fitted in". We were both part of something, but apart from it. The rock guys I worked with always thought I was too jazz, and the jazz guys probably think I'm too rock, whatever any of that means. Given that it was a trio, we needed a first -class bassist who was keen to solo--Eddie knew Ralph, so seemed the obvious choice. I learned two invaluable lessons: 1) You need to rehearse before a studio date -- we did the CD with no rehearsal, and the takes are pretty much first time readings -- and 2 ) A 12-string guitar never stays in tune for more than about 5 minutes!

*8) I read that you were beginning to work some older Bruford material into your live sets such as "One Of A Kind" and Beelzebub" (I think "Five G" would be great to develop!). How has this come about, and worked out ?*

Tim Garland, my partner in Earthworks, grew up with a lot of my older music, and wanted to try the ones that best suited our acoustic instrumentation. On the new Earthworks CD "Random Acts of Happiness" (Summerfold SFVP001) we have nifty re-arrangements of "Seems like a Lifetime Ago" and "One of a Kind". And there is a cracking version of "Beelzebub" on a new CD " Modern Drummer Presents--Drum Nation" on Magna Carta. These pieces are welcome in so much as they provide a link or bridge back to some of my earlier work.

*9) You have been an active clinician throughout America and Europe since the early 90's. What do you enjoy most about teaching and has it enhanced your own playing or philosophies in any way?*

I prefer teaching small groups in an academic atmosphere, as I do at a couple of Universities here in the UK. Better than the in-store drum clinic, which tends to have a blood-on-the-floor / fastest-gun-in-town sort of mentality, which I'm not very good at. We are , of course , all teachers and students of music, and you realise how little you know when you try to pass the knowledge on! My feeling is that the best music lesson or clinic any musician can give is in concert. The way he conducts himself on stage, his demeanour, his relationship to the instrument, the music, his colleagues--all this speaks volumes.

*10) Name a musician whom you admire and would want to collaborate with, and why?*

I always struggle with this one. I admire the work of hundreds of musicians, but don't necessarily feel I could contribute any more than is being offered by the current drummer, who's usually doing a great job. I particularly like some of the "downtown" New York stuff - Dave Douglas, Tim Berne - both of whom have just been through London with excellent groups, but I don't necessarily feel I would have much to offer over and above what's going on. Now, Tim Garland? With him I could do a lot...!

*11) When starting your Winterfold/Summerfold labels in 2003, I understand that one of your primary goals was to help bridge the gap between the fans of your older progressive/rock days with those of your later Earthworks and jazz ensembles? Do you feel you have accomplished this aspect?*

Well, its a work in progress. The two labels have some 22 titles in total now, and it has been fun cataloguing, adding tracks, and reviewing archive video and audio material. I'm also into the newer format of DualDisc, with one side audio and the other side video, which we used for the new World Drummers Ensemble piece. That worked well. Look for similar releases in the future - we're considering audio / video Anthologies of Earthworks, perhaps in two volumes; one from the 1990s and a volume of the 2000s bands.

*12) On your recent Earthworks Underground Orchestra release, several of your Earthworks compositions are expanded upon, through the pallet of Tim Garland's "little big band", the Dean Street Underground Orchestra. Did this new instrumental setting effect your music in a way that may have surprised you, or caught you off guard in some way?*

Its a rule of thumb that the more musicians you have on stage the more the more concise and accurate the drummer has to be, so that was a golden rule. Added to which just the roar of all those guys is a real thrill and pleasure--its not often we get to play in a larger ensemble with all that fire-power. Playing with a big-band is a skill in itself, so it was all a pretty fast learning curve. We had top line New York guys--including Robin Eubanks and Steve Wilson from the Dave Holland group.

*13) I have to be honest and say that I have not yet heard the World Drummers Ensemble release , but obviously when I read who appears on the disc, yourself along with Chad Wackerman, Doudou N'Diaye Rose, and Luis Conte, I am quite confident that I will enjoy something unique and unusual. What would you say to the listener who is putting "A Coat Of Many Colours" on for the first time?*

The concept of listening to percussion only is new to some, but its a breeze! After a while you begin to hear melody in the pitch of Luis' congas or Chad's pitched drums and cymbals. Some of the material is very tightly written and some--mostly the African stuff of Doudou's--is very open-ended. Think of four guys in conversation, but they are new to each others' ways of thinking. Yes, they all have interesting things to say, but in slightly different dialects--the African Senegalese, the Cuban American, the British and Australian American odd-metre power fusion guys..! Holland as a country is mad for percussion--the group played to 8000 people in 4 nights. It's an essential listen for anyone interested in the percussive arts.