

REVIEWS

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Kenny Mathieson talks to drummer Bill Bruford, the rock star with a jazz agenda, about a new Earthworks line-up, Brits on a world stage, and making a "proper jazz album". . .

Bill Bruford made his reputation with major rock bands like Yes and King Crimson, but the drummer has also built a substantial following for his jazz work. The principal outlet for that has been his own band, Earthworks, which he formed way back in 1986, and with a very specific purpose in mind.

"It was technologically-driven, in that the electronic drum set I was playing at the time had become quite a beast, and was capable of playing chords and samples and heaven-knows-what from pads. It had the potential to be a serious instrument rather than a kind of toy, and the lunatic idea was that the drummer would play much of the chordal information, with a bass and two single line instruments, Django Bates on his E-flat horn and Iain Ballamy on saxes."

"That was the broad picture, but of course, Django is a great keyboard player, so we used that too. I didn't want to make it rigid, but I always like to have a blue-print for a band, from which you can depart if you want. It had some merit as an idea, but ultimately the technology defeated me."

"The overheads and expenses were too high, for one thing, and the programming time necessary to make them flexible and transparent was huge - it takes ages, basically, and in the end that was a problem."

"The technology was amazing, and could have gone further, but the chief British designer went bankrupt, and now the Japanese produce a simple version that isn't really up to any imaginative use, which doesn't interest me - it was all or nothing! I suppose I can claim that I was one of the few brave enough to take it about as far as it could go, but I'm finished with them now. I am a firm believer that time is never wasted in music, though, and it has coloured my approach to acoustic drums." The core of Earthworks remained notably stable for over a decade.



Django Bates and Iain Ballamy are highly individual players, and Bruford was happy to allow them to explore in their own distinctive directions within the framework of the band, a philosophy he intends to apply to the new line up, featuring Steve Hamilton (keyboards), Patrick Clahar (saxophones) and Mark, Hodgson (bass).

"I came to rely on Django and Iain a lot, and I'm eternally grateful to them. They were magnificent partners, and put a huge amount into the band. For me, every gig with them was a music lesson, and a lot rubbed off.

It was becoming very difficult to book Django, though, and they wanted to move on. At the same time, King Crimson got very busy, so I had to put Earthworks in the garage for a couple of years and turn off the key."

"The vehicle has always been there, though, and when I returned to it, I thought right, no electronic drums this time, but I still want to use it as a base for British talent. I can offer young players an international platform - they will get to LA and Tokyo and New York with me, and see a whole different perspective. It was fascinating watching that happen with the original band, and now I'm looking forward to it with a fresh bunch of faces."

"So I put some petrol in the tank, turned the key and started the band up again. We have re-voiced some of the old tunes without the electronic drums and tenor horn, but we also have a fresh repertoire, and that is settling in now."

"I like combinations of players which are greater than the sum of the parts when they play together - I felt that with Django and Iain, and I'm encouraging the same thing with Steve and Patrick and Mark. I also like them to do all the things they can't or wouldn't do in another band. It's a chameleon-like beast in that respect, and genre purity doesn't really bother me - I like the bastardised version too."

Bruford's conversion to jazz is more a return to first principles. He describes himself as a member of "the Jazz 625 generation", and his first band at school played the bop and soul-jazz repertoire of Blakey, Rollins, and the Adderleys.

"Jazz was my original love - we quite liked the Beatles and The Rolling Stones, but it didn't seem as happening as jazz. So I really started out playing swing cymbal, but I fell into a rock group when I left school. The boundaries were very blurred then, though - people like Mitch Mitchell and Peter (Ginger) Baker were playing jazz in rock bands."

"I've been finding my way back to jazz after many years in what was a very exciting rock industry. I had a great time playing in King Crimson, which is one of the few rock bands with imaginative drumming, but it's impossible to beat the speed and agility and lightness of jazz, the endless convolutions and permutations and variations of it. For me, that is still a breathtaking mystery, and an absolute pleasure. There is nothing outside of King Crimson that has done anything similar for me."

If anything, the new version of the band is more firmly rooted in classic jazz staples than the earlier one. Their debut album, 'A Part, And Yet Apart' (a title which reflects Bruford's sense of "being part of the jazz community, but with connections in other camps, too"), was released on Robert Fripp's Discipline Global Mobile label earlier this year, and takes a distinctly acoustic, live in-the-studio approach, with more of a fusion feel when the electronic keyboard is dominant. In addition, jazz also offered a significant tradition of drummer-leaders.

"It's a delicate game, band-leading, isn't it? As I see it, I'm bringing the vehicle, which has an audience round the world, and I'm trying to bring together interesting people, and stay out of the way. Basically, I define the perimeters, and then say let's play. For me, it's a terrific context to play in, but it's also a writing vehicle, and I love to hear my tunes brought alive, although I may stand back a little more from that once we are more established with this line-up."

Steve Hamilton is more familiar on piano than electronic keyboard, and is given plenty of space on the acoustic instrument, but has stepped into Django's role as a provider of orchestral colours and textures with immediate confidence. Patrick Clahar emulates Ballamy's power and spirit on both tenor and soprano saxophones, but without attempting to sound like him, while Mark Hodgson underpins the action in assured fashion.

"Basically, what we were trying to make was a freewheeling, powerful, proper jazz album. I sometimes feel that British jazz records can seem a little small and inward looking, and I wanted a stronger statement that would stand up to American competition, if you like. It's an outward looking album, and I'm an outward looking player. The track 'Footloose and Fancy Free' maybe sums it up best - it's not about anything other than having a good time, and that feels like a good way to make music to me."

Bruford does have a more reflective side, though, and that emerged in the very different moods explored on his excellent collaboration with Ralph Towner and Eddie Gomez, 'If Summer had Its

Ghosts', also on Discipline Global Mobile (as is his duo album with fellow King Crimson alumnus Tony Levin, 'Upper Extremities').

"Robert has a genre-breaking kind of label, and it's a great place for the slightly less obvious. The album with Ralph and Eddie, like so many things I do, grew out of my not liking something. I was becoming exasperated with the power and muscularity and athleticism that was dominating drumming in the power-fusion field, and that pushed me toward the more poetic - if we can use that word about drummers! - feel of guys like Paul Motian, or Peter Erskine in his dreamier moments.

"I wanted to make an album that had that more poetic feel, and didn't have to be full of bluster and power all the time, but had the warmth and intimacy that we tried to capture. In that sense, I was adopting a role, a bit like an actor. The album came after 30 years in the industry, and I was feeling very reflective about what I really liked."

"Funnily enough, working with Ralph and Eddie was suggested to me by a third party in a hotel lobby, which happens all the time, but the suggestions are usually entirely useless, like why don't you join Yes again, an so on. This one was intriguing, though, and I called them up. Towner is such an interesting player, but he doesn't quite fit into a conventional jazz mould, and neither do I, so I thought we might well not fit together, as it were. Eddie is just the consummate acoustic bass player, and a master soloist as well. The mistake I made was having no rehearsals beforehand - the album is very much a first reading of the material.