

Todd Jenkins for Downbeat, written October 2002 appeared May 2003.

1) One major hallmark of the original Earthworks lineup was your creative application of electronic drums, at a time when no one else was using them in a jazz setting. What led you to include them originally, and why have you now discarded them in favor of an acoustic kit? That has drastically changed the perception of what defines Earthworks, yet the band still sounds as original as ever.

The background here is that I had spent 7 or 8 years wrestling with this particular beast (electronic drums), in the 80's with King Crimson, and the instrument had just got to the point where it had become interesting. Specifically, the arrival of sampling, MIDI, and the multi-assignment of samples to zone sensitive pads meant the ambitious drummer was technically able to provide the harmonic or chordal background to the music in real time, for the first time. Seemed like a good enough reason to form a jazz group around. I felt the instrument had "grown up" from its early adolescence in pop music, and someone had to treat it like an adult in jazz. Rashly, I volunteered! I remember Jack DeJohnette and Bernard Purdie in front of the bandstand at the Montreal Jazz Festival in 1990 both with a look of astonishment mixed with pity. I thought the results were really interesting, but came at a heavy price of many hours spent trying to get one instrument to talk to another, and then the whole lot to work on the gig, having flown halfway across the world. After King Crimson reconvened briefly in the mid 90's, it appeared that all further technical development and support from the manufacturer had ceased, and the new instruments these days are, while more reliable, infinitely less imaginative. So, I moved fully acoustic with the second edition of Earthworks in 1998, and life became logistically very simple again. I almost began to enjoy soundchecks, but not quite.

2) Some time ago, I asked Derek Bailey why he often chooses to play with lesser-known musicians when he can draw from an enormous pool of more experienced players. He told me that the freshness and unpredictability of interacting with younger musicians adds excitement to the encounter, along with the "mentor" aspect. In your case, Django Bates, Mick Hutton and Iain Ballamy were all fairly unknown, Loose Tubes aside, when the first Earthworks came together. The present members have similarly strong profiles but are still not comparatively well-known. What is it about playing with such young, relatively unfamiliar players that appeals to you?

They tend to be local, available to play, available to rehearse, keen as mustard, not set in their ways, and without a recording agenda of their own. Did I ever tell you how long it took to put Ralph Towner, Eddie Gomez and myself in a studio together? I think the young guys bring a freshness and vigour to the thing, and I can reciprocate by giving them an international platform. Seems to work.

3) While watching the DVD, which was the first time I had ever seen you in action, I immediately noticed the low, linear setup of your kit. All of the drums look to be at exactly the same level, flat with no tilt, and the cymbals seem but a few inches above the drums. Nothing appears to be higher than shoulder level, which is quite unusual for a modern drummer. Is there some particular functional reason for such a setup? Have you used this arrangement for a long time, or is it something you came up with later in your career?

That particular set up is a year or two old. Its based on the 5 tympani layout of a classical musician; I just find it easier to swivel a little to the left to open up the left side of the kit, rather than reach forward to the toms positioned in front of the snare as in the traditional set up. Additionally , you lose that right-hand- over-left hi-hat thing, which always seemed a bit awkward. The set is symmetrical in the sense that there are two toms and two cymbals to the right of the central snare and hi-hat, and a similar setup, although different pitches, to the left. This makes for some nice combinations, or would do if I was ambidextrous. I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous. Plus, the less sophisticated listener tends to listen with his eyes first--with my set you can clearly and easily see which stick is hitting which drum.

4) Your compositions for Earthworks often don't sound like they were written by a drummer. That is, the drum parts are clearly vital to each piece, but they don't utterly dominate the music as is so often the case with drummer-led ensembles. Your sense of melodic and harmonic structure is remarkable, and the rhythms on tunes like "Revel Without a Pause" are so intriguingly complex it's hard to pinpoint the "one". What does your compositional process typically involve? Do you compose from the drum part up, or do you build melodic sections and then craft drum parts to suit them? How much do the other players contribute to the end results? Do you write with individual players' styles in mind, as Ellington and Mingus did, or does the music get reshaped through their interpretations?

A lot of questions there. I write both ways, bottom up and top down. I may well fall over something on the drums that appeals and seems open to further embellishment. I find it a bass movement of some nature first, then a basic melody, and the two will imply some basic harmony or other. This raw material gets worked on, and worked on, till it sounds acceptable, but its a slow process for me. Often the original idea that got the ball rolling will be removed as the material takes on a life. (Triplicity, Revel Without a Pause) . With slower music, where the rhythmic element is less prevalent, its top down (Sarah's Still Life, Come To Dust). Typically my stuff gets checked over by my partner Steve Hamilton, who will upgrade the harmonic movement if necessary, add, change or remove some notes, and print out a chart. A rehearsal is called, at which everyone complains its unplayable etc, etc, and , like trying on a new suit, we tailor it to fit particular instrumentalists and their suggestions. Another chart is prepared, another rehearsal, and same again if necessary, before going out on the road to learn how the tune wants to be played. It will have its own character by now, and it could be pretty grumpy to start with. Only after a dozen or so dates does it spark up, and then, in an ideal world, is the perfect time to record it. I think the best takes for a CD are the ones on which the individuals, and better still the whole band, discover how to play it. The moment of discovery.

I also am restless until I have the right title for a new piece. It doesn't really exist for me until I've found the right title, and when I've found it, I'm unshakeable. It's as if it always wanted that title. Those few words at the top of the tune can offer complete instructions on how it should be played (Sarah's STILL Life). Many of my titles have allusions to singing and or dancing in them, which is what I think I'm doing on the drum set.

Finally, I'm glad the tunes "don't sound as if they were written by a drummer"! I hope they sound as if they were written by a musician!

5) You have never sounded like a prototypical rock drummer, no matter what the setting; there always seems to be some hint of Elvin Jones, Kenny Clarke or some other jazz giant in your style. And in your compositions, besides the occasional influence of Fripp, I sense definite flavors of Coltrane ("Some Shiver"), Monk ("Original Sin"), Balkan or Middle Eastern musics ("Bridge of Inhibition"), and other styles. What are your principal inspirations as a composer and a drummer?

I think probably everything that come out of my record player, and a whole lot besides. As a drummer nothing has changed; I'm still polishing away at a fairly grimy diamond, trying to remove the muck so it will shine a bit more brightly. Its a process of refinement, of trying to leave out the things everybody else does so well, of looking under stones that may have been left unturned. If you write, you can control the environment in which your drumming is heard, you can "set it up", as it were, and carve out your own patch. That's great, but of course you need to guard against a correspondingly diminished ability to interpret other peoples' music quickly and effectively.

As a composer, I am keen to bring my own roots to jazz. Outside of my art-rock background, which would lead you to expect lots of dramatic light and shade, and twists and turns, in the music, my roots are, of course, no roots. Earthworks reserves the right to find its jazz wherever it can, from the gutter to the souk.

6) Neither you nor Tony Levin are part of the present working lineup of King Crimson, yet I noticed your albums are still being issued by DGM. Have you permanently parted ways with KC in favor of Earthworks, or is there a likelihood you will return to its unpredictable folds in the future?

As Robert Fripp tends to say, the door is always open, but I feel that somewhere around 1998 I crossed an invisible divide which means I am unlikely to sit in front of large amplifiers for long hours in a rehearsal room again. To travel to the other side, it's eventually going to become essential that you leave the shore on which you are standing. I think I've left the shore. I've certainly irritated enough progressive rock musicians by playing jazz on the stand, so perhaps I should make, or have made, the albums I would have made 30 years ago if I had known how.