

Interviewed by Brent Keefe for UK's Drummer Magazine – 29th April 2004

Bill Bruford's Earthworks is probably one of the longest running quartets in British jazz and, with his progressive rock days behind him, Bruford is now firmly in the jazz camp. Earthworks continues to be a vehicle for British jazz talent, much like Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers were for U.S. talent.

The last 2 Earthworks CDs were both live recordings. Do you feel the band performs better live than in the studio?

Yes. The studio is a more terrifying occasion! Live recordings are quicker and less painful. On the first day of studio recording you spend time getting equipment set up and everybody gets psyched up. I would rather add an extra date at the end of a tour and, instead of going into a studio, make a live recording. With modern technology, the sound of a live recording is as good, albeit different from, as a studio recording. Recording live gets the job done without everybody getting self-conscious, but the important thing is to make sure that the music is played in first.

What prompted the change of Tim Garland replacing Patrick Clahar on saxophone?

Indirectly, it was the arrival of the computer! The arrival of the computer meant that I was able to do everything; manager, road manager, travel agent, bandleader etc. Consequently, I had less time to write music for the band. I am too busy answering emails on anything ranging from my stick choice to dealing with foreign promoters. I needed a bit of help, so Tim is here for his compositions and, also, his multi-instrumental ability. He is also one of the few British musicians that works on the international level, having played with Chick Corea. Unfortunately, we still perceive that British players need to be recognized or endorsed by the American "gods" before they are taken seriously. That's a shame because British guys are as good as any. His energy, stature and ability to write made him an obvious choice. It was also a request from Tim that prompted a return to some of my older material. He said, "We've got to do some of the old stuff". I replied, "You'll never make that work. It's too electric and guitar based". However, he went away and came up with the new arrangements. We play 'One Of A Kind' and 'Seems Like A lifetime Ago' on our new CD *Random Acts Of Happiness* and we also recorded a new studio version of 'Beelzebub' for a new CD called *Drum Nation*, which features various drummers.

Does your playing change significantly between the regular Earthworks and the Earthworks Underground Orchestra?

As a rule of thumb, the more people there are on stage, the fewer notes you play. I will almost certainly play less than in the smaller group, and there is also more responsibility so all kicks and accents need to be very clear. I have to behave myself!

Are there any plans to record the Earthworks Underground Orchestra?

The BBC recorded our debut gig at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival for a radio broadcast and I would like to record the band, but it will depend on finances. We will be playing at the Rhythm Sticks festival at London's South Bank on July 25th, so that may be an opportunity for recording. We'll then be taking it to New York City in December for a 6 night run at Iridium.

What is your compositional process?

It is very inconsistent. There have been times when I really wanted to write something for a particular ensemble. For example, I wrote a lot of stuff for the Bruford band in the late 70/early 80s. I also contributed to other people's tunes and I would encourage all drummers to get stuck in with a piano or with a bass player. You can be writing music much sooner than you think you can.

I spent a fair amount of time studying mallets and, later, piano, and learning harmony out of a book, but I can't remember a time when I didn't know what a 12 bar blues was. In general, you just have to assign some pitches and, before you know it, you will have a bass line. For example, you come up with a drum groove that you like and want to play. The best thing to do is get a bass player on your side. If you assign some pitches to the bass drum pattern or part of the groove, you can get the bass player to play along with a part that fits your drum groove. If your guitarist or keyboard player is inspired to join in, you will soon have the beginnings of a tune and you are one third of the writing team. I started out like that with Yes and King Crimson. After that, it was sheer terror and the fear of humiliation that got me writing! If you have a studio full of musicians for a recording project, you have to provide some music for them to play.

When I first started writing on a bigger scale, it was for the Bruford band and I spent a lot of time at the piano. Later, I moved onto a digital system, when MIDI was invented, and started to produce cheap and cheesy demos and now I use a computer and Sibelius software. The last block of writing I did was a few years ago for the Earthworks CD *The Sound Of Surprise*. I wrote most of the album and was pleased with the music, but I find it very hard work. The difficulty I found, as an untrained musician, is that you end up writing the same song and you reach a point where you need a new influx to move you on. It could be different personnel in the group or perhaps a writing partner. Over the years I have had several partners. In Bruford, Dave Stewart, our keyboard player, helped considerably and in Earthworks, Steve Hamilton often looked over my shoulder and corrected my schoolboy mistakes! It's difficult for a drummer to write for an extremely competent pianist like Steve or Django Bates because they look at the music and say "Well, I did this when I was at Primary School". Consequently, I try and come from a strong rhythmic angle; I start with a drum beat which will suggest a bass line which, in turn, suggests a harmony, which suggests a melody. They are unlikely to think rhythmically like I would, so I can offer rhythmic ideas that may interest them. In general, if my tunes are up-tempo they have started as a rhythmic idea and if they are slow, they have originated from a harmonic progression which suggested a tune. I love ballads. In fact, one of the favourite things I have done is the very slow, almost funereal 'Come To Dust' from *The Sound Of Surprise*.

Your posture is very upright. Is that something you worked on?

I used to have terrible posture but, somewhere along the line, I learned to straighten up. It is something I have thought about; where your bum is on the seat, where your legs are and how straight things are, being aware of not dropping one shoulder; but I don't really think about it much now. With better posture, you tire much less and, now, I can play all night without tiring. I am not a hard hitter, and I like to make playing as effortless and understated as possible. I have also thought a lot also about wrists and fingers and foot position on the pedals.

What are your views on drum clinics?

I used to do a lot of drum clinics, but I think that the best clinic is to see a concert incorporating a drummer playing with musicians that he/she wants to play with. It's a strange irony that as pop music requires increasingly simpler drumming, the more hyper-qualified drummers tend to play fewer concerts, and are more in demand as clinicians, playing to other drummers. If I play in a given city, I may have an audience of 300 people for a jazz concert, but 500 for a drum clinic!

Are there any plans to re-release your back catalogue?

Absolutely, we have big plans. It's just a question of time. I now have two record labels: Summerfold, which caters for Earthworks and new material (from 1987 to the present) and Winterfold, which will deal with my back catalogue up to 1987. I have some excellent old recordings that have not been previously released and am intending to expand, repackage and remaster all of my earlier output. Summerfold's first release is the latest Earthworks CD *Random Acts Of Happiness*, and both labels will be distributed by Voiceprint.

How was the experience of participating in the 'Burning for Buddy' (Rich) recordings?

Like so many of my recording experiences, it was terrifying! Initially, it was like a dentist's waiting room with a room full of top drummers, including Steve Smith and Steve Gadd, and they were wheeling people in and out every two hours; set your drum kit up, one quick run through, two takes of two tunes and out. It was really fast and everybody was brilliant. When it came to my turn I said, "I don't mind playing one of Buddy's tunes, but how about you playing one of mine?" They agreed, so we started rehearsing this terrific band and, after about three minutes, there was a train wreck. I had written some very tricky broken triplet stuff between the sections of the band. The timing between the various sections has to be incredibly accurate; it sounded great on my computer! Consequently, I decided to prune the arrangement and just about got away with it. It was a frightening experience but I always say that I think I probably did as well with the Buddy Rich Orchestra as Buddy would have done in King Crimson!