

Curatorial > PROBES

In this section, RWM continues its line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view, organised into curatorial series.

Curated by Chris Cutler, **PROBES** takes Marshall McLuhan's conceptual contrapositions as a starting point to analyse and expose the search for a new sonic language made urgent after the collapse of tonality in the twentieth century. The series looks at the many probes and experiments that were launched in the last century in search of new musical resources, and a new aesthetic; for ways to make music adequate to a world transformed by disorientating technologies.

Curated by Chris Cutler

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At the start of the seventies, Chris Cutler co-founded **The Ottawa Music Company** – a 22-piece Rock composer's orchestra – before joining British experimental group **Henry Cow**, with whom he toured, recorded and worked in dance and theatre projects for the next eight years. Subsequently he co-founded a series of mixed national groups: **Art Bears**, **News from Babel**, **Cassiber**, **The (ec) Nudes**, **p53** and **The Science Group**, and was a permanent member of American bands **Pere Ubu**, **Hail** and **The Wooden Birds**. Outside a succession of special projects for stage, theatre, film and radio he still works consistently in successive projects with **Fred Frith**, **Zeena Parkins**, **Jon Rose**, **Tim Hodgkinson**, **David Thomas**, **Peter Blegvad**, **Daan Vandewalle**, **Ikue Mori**, **Lotte Anker**, **Stevan Tickmayer**, **Annie Gosfield** and spectralists **Iancu Dumitrescu** and **Ana Maria Avram**. He is a permanent member of **The Bad Boys** (Cage, Stockhausen, Fluxus &c.) **The Artaud Beats** and **The Artbears Songbook**, and turns up with the usual suspects in all the usual improvising contexts. As a soloist he has toured the world with his extended, electrified, kit.

Adjacent projects include commissioned works for radio, various live movie soundtracks, **Signe de Trois** for surround-sound projection, the daily year-long soundscape series **Out of the Blue Radio** for Resonance FM, and p53 for Orchestra and Soloists.

He also founded and runs the independent label **ReR Megacorp** and the art distribution service **Gallery and Academic** and is author of the theoretical collection **File Under Popular** – as well as of numerous articles and papers published in 16 languages. www.ccutler.com/ccutler

PROBES #19

In the late nineteenth century two facts conspired to change the face of music: the collapse of common-practice tonality (which overturned the certainties underpinning the world of art music), and the invention of a revolutionary new form of memory, sound recording (which redefined and greatly empowered the world of popular music). A tidal wave of probes and experiments into new musical resources and new organisational practices ploughed through both disciplines, bringing parts of each onto shared terrain before rolling on to underpin a new aesthetics able to follow sound and its manipulations beyond the narrow confines of 'music'. This series tries analytically to trace and explain these developments, and to show how, and why, both musical and post-musical genres take the forms they do. In **PROBES #19** we continue to look at the importation of exotic instruments, in this case from Africa, in pursuit of a specifically non-American expression of culture and politics.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the last episode, we were looking at the increased use of percussion in the first half of the twentieth century, and its importation from far Eastern and South American sources. Influences from Africa – discounting the imaginary Africa of American exotica – came only at second-hand through the Caribbean and Latin cultures of the African diaspora. Contemporary African instruments didn't feature in any of the expanded orchestral percussion sections, nor were they included in popular or dance music until the mid fifties, when a handful of black jazz musicians began to take a political interest. There had been some limited presence before: Prince Efrom Odok, a master drummer from Nigeria, had been teaching African music and dance in Harlem since the twenties and, in the thirties, he put together an all-African drum ensemble which made a number of very visible public appearances. Another Nigerian master drummer, **Baba Moses Miannes**, had come to America in 1933 to perform and had passed on some of his knowledge to students but, in general, African instruments remained confined to ethnic dance ensembles and museum displays of national folk art. Until 1954, when the Ghanaian master drummer **Guy Warren** arrived with the express ambition of bringing African rhythms into jazz. His manifesto recording: *Africa Speaks, America Answers*, was released in 1956, an innovative and sophisticated mixture of languages, quite unlike anything else around at the time. And although it was praised, it sold in tiny quantities and had little visible impact. The complaint always seemed – to Warren at least – to be that he wasn't really 'African' enough; meaning, one assumes, that he didn't play to stereotype. Looked at in hindsight, he was probably a little too African, by which I mean not American enough. It's worth trying to hear the whole of this very varied and highly original record because it's impossible to select a single representative track. But here's an excerpt from the more obvious 'Eyi Wala Dong'.

[Guy Warren, 'Eyi Wala Dong' (excerpts), 1956]

And, call this a footnote – because it's not strictly on topic – but I would like to play a little of 'Ode to a Stream' from the same LP. Remembering that this is a 1956 jazz album.

[Guy Warren, 'Ode to a Stream' (excerpts), 1956]

Perhaps the most influential personality, and certainly the most visible, was a Nigerian student, **Babatunde Olatunji**, who had come to America in 1950 to study diplomacy. To help pay his way he formed a percussion group and when, in 1954, he moved to New York to take a course in public administration, he kept the group going. The producer **John Hammond** saw him at Radio City and invited him to record for Columbia. The result was *Drums of Passion*, which not only had a huge impact on the black jazz community but also on the public at large. It was a massive hit. Here's its most celebrated track, 'Gin-Go-Lo-Ba'. Although the instruments are African – Olatunji brought them back with him from Ghana – all



[Max Roach]

the additional musicians are American. I'm sure the impressive sound quality of the recording played a part in its success, as did its conformation to stereotype – in which respect it differs from the Guy Warren LP. Critics accused Olatunji of being more about presentation than tradition – which is possibly a little harsh – and for oversimplifying, which is probably fair enough. Whatever the truth, it was this record, more than any other, that brought African instruments, and the idea of an African identity, into the world of black avant-garde jazz.

[Babatunde Olatunji, 'Gin-Go-Lo-Ba' (excerpt), 1959]

Drums of Passion went on to sell 200,000 – or 5 million – copies, depending on whom you believe [the record company says 200,000, Olatunji says 5 million]; in either case its maker didn't reap much financial reward having, like so many, been persuaded to sign away his rights. But it won him work. The following year, Max Roach invited him to play on his controversial, and now much honoured, album *We Insist* – a highly political five-part suite with texts by poet and songwriter Oscar Brown. Here's one of the drum interludes from that record which mixes African and Latin-American percussion. Other than Roach and Olatunji, the percussionists featured – both Americans – are Ray Mantilla, a Latin-American specialist, and Taiwo Duvall, who also played on *Drums of Passion* and was an ex-student of Baba Moses Miannes.

[Max Roach, 'All Africa' (excerpt), 1960]

Max Roach, Olatunji and five other percussionists were then invited to contribute to Randy Weston's mammoth *Uhuru Afrika*, a highly ambitious big band project with texts by the poet and novelist Langston Hughes. Weston, like Roach, had a clear political agenda and this record helped to clarify a sense of identity that was forming in parts of the black community around the notion of an African homeland. I'll play an excerpt from the opening track, which is far and away the strongest musical statement on an album otherwise composed of pretty straight-ahead jazz. It's the texts and the sentiment – and the title – that deliver this album's message, not so much the music.

[Randy Weston, *Uhuru Afrika* (excerpts), 1960]

Drum orchestra material had been part of Sun Ra's repertoire for some years, and when he relocated to New York in 1961 it wasn't long before several of his band were earning money on the side playing in Olatunji's drum ensemble. Ra was no purist: his Africa was an Africa of the mind, and throughout his career he would be found experimenting with new instruments, new sonorities and new ways of putting sounds together regardless of their origins. And everyone in Sun Ra's band played percussion: European, African, South American and home made – all stirred up together. Here's a fragment from 'Watusa' – an Arkestra percussion vehicle that dates back to the late fifties, although this particular iteration is from a concert recorded in Paris in the early seventies. You can immediately hear that they're more interested in colour and texture than folk-authenticated rhythms.

[Sun Ra and His Arkestra, 'Watusa' (excerpts), 1962]

And here's the small drum orchestra of rhythm logs, talking drums and African percussion that Archie Shepp put together for *The Magic of Ju-Ju* in 1967, essentially eighteen minutes of solo tenor saxophone and drums.

[Archie Shepp, 'The Magic of Ju-Ju' (excerpt), 1967]

By this time, Olatunji had set up his influential Olatunji Centre for African Culture in Harlem, organising classes for the local community in African dance, languages and music. By 1980, lack of funds forced him to close the centre and return to Nigeria. But a few years later, a second wave of interest in African music brought him back. The invitation came from Mickey Hart, one of the Grateful Dead's two drummers, who asked Olatunji if he would agree to open for the band at their 1985 New Year concert. Hart, in parallel, was pursuing a larger ambition to bring together percussionists from around the world and develop a unified language of rhythm. Olatunji was signed up to this and Hart's first international ensemble, 14 strong and of glittering calibre, made its record debut in 1991 with *Planet Drum* – a percussion-only release that won the world's first World Music Award. It turned out to be a fascinating project that probed the



[Yusef Lateef]

possibilities of timbre as much as of rhythm. Here, for instance, is 'The Hunt', which mixes West African, Indian and Brazilian instruments.

[Planet Drum, 'The Hunt' (excerpt), 1991]

So we seem to have come full circle. Much like the early ragtime and vaudeville drummers at the end of the nineteenth century, globetrotting percussionists at the end of the twentieth were picking and mixing from what they found around them. Only now there was an awful lot more to choose from.

And before we move on, one curiosity. This song, 'The Jungle Line', by Joni Mitchell, which is floated over a French ethnographic recording of the Royal Drummers of Burundi. It's a prescient use of what John Oswald would later call a macrosample – and it would be many years before anyone else would follow its example. This was released in 1975.

[Joni Mitchell, 'The Jungle Line' (excerpt), 1975]

Drums were not the only African instruments to be imported into the jazz of the fifties and sixties. Wind and string players too were busy, although their emphasis was less ideological and more connected to the music of North Africa, Asia and the Middle East – or with the purely sonic attributes of the instruments they chose. A notable pioneer in this respect was the saxophonist, Yusef Lateef. Born William Huddleston, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Lateef made his first record as a bandleader in 1956 featuring a variety of exotic instruments right from the start, including the arghul – a double-pipe single reed woodwind, the shenai – an Indian double reed oboe, the shofar – a Jewish ceremonial ramshorn, and the xun – a Chinese cross between a flute and an ocarina. Typically, these appear on just one or two tracks of any given LP – or as an introduction to a more conventional piece. They are interludes, and lend a spot of colour to records of otherwise pretty straight-ahead jazz. There's no sustained attempt to integrate the straight and the exotic tracks.

This is 'Anastasia' from his 1957 LP, *Other Sounds*, featuring the arghul, the rebab and various shakers and gongs.

[Yusef Lateef, 'Anastasia' (excerpt), 1957]

Or here's 'Sounds of Nature', also from 1957, with an Indian reed whistle, an ocarina and an earth board – that's a long wooden 3-string instrument that Lateef built himself.

[Yusef Lateef, 'Sounds of Nature' (excerpt), 1957]

Obviously, authenticity is not as important to Lateef as sound. And he seldom tries to mix his probes with his day job, but here in 'Sister Mamie', he does stick to his guns and make it work.

[Yusef Lateef, 'Sister Mamie' (excerpt), 1964]

After the Second World War a rash of small independent labels sprang up, mostly catering for regional or ethnic audiences. Amongst them was the Nor-Ikes label featuring the music of the Nor-Ikes, an Armenian dance band, founded in 1948 by Charles Ganimian, along with other second-generation members of the New York Armenian diaspora. Ganimian, who was an accomplished oud player – that's a species of North African lute – even chanced his hand in the world of pop with the mildly parodic novelty hits 'Daddy Lolo', and this: 'Come With Me to the Casbah' – which mixes Eastern cadences and growly rock saxophones in a not entirely serious – but also not entirely frivolous – way. Many years later he would be drawn further into the world of jazz by Herbie Mann, with whom he played the oud on several records and tours. But this is from *Come With Me to the Casbah*, the only album he made as a bandleader, in 1959.

[Ganimian & His Oriental Music, 'Come With Me to the Casbah' (excerpt), 1959]

And here he is again on 'Swinging the Blues'.

[Ganimian & His Oriental Music, 'Swingin' the Blues' (excerpts), 1959]



[Pharoah Sanders]

Also active in the late fifties was the bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik – born Jonathan Tim to first generation West Indian immigrants. A major figure in the new jazz, he worked with Art Blakey, John Coltrane, Thelonius Monk, Randy Weston and a host of others. He too was an accomplished oud player, and made serious efforts to integrate it into the language of jazz. Here, for instance, is ‘El Harris’ from his first LP, *Jazz Sahara*, released in 1958.

[Ahmed Abdul-Malik, ‘El Harris’ (excerpts), 1958]

And here, two years later, he’s playing the bass while Bilal Abdurrahman plays what’s credited as a Korean reed flute, but is clearly some sort of double reed instrument. This is from ‘Nights on Saturn’, released in 1961.

[Ahmed Abdul-Malik, ‘Nights on Saturn’ (excerpt), 1961]

And finally, although primarily a horn player, here’s Marshall Allen who, in the late seventies, brought a Kora – that’s a West African cross between a lute and harp – into the Sun Ra Arkestra. He made no sham of playing it in the traditional style, although he was clearly familiar with normative playing techniques. Instead he mines it for sound. This is from a concert in Detroit in 1981.

[Marshall Allen, ‘Kora’ (excerpt), 1981]

Mbiras – or thumb pianos – also popped up everywhere around this time. Here, for instance, in 1967, on *Kulu Sé Mama*, the last LP John Coltrane released in his lifetime. This is from the title track, written by the percussionist Juno Lewis (that’s him you can hear singing). It’s nineteen minutes long and, like a lot of music from this period, impossible to excerpt a representative chunk from, but here’s how it begins:

[John Coltrane, ‘Kulu Sé Mama’ (excerpt), 1967]

In similar but more multicultural vein, here’s Pharoah Sanders. This is the opening of his 28 minute *Sun in Aquarius*, released in 1969, which features a reed flute, thumb pianos, gongs and assorted shakers and percussion.

[Pharoah Sanders, ‘Sun in Aquarius’ (excerpt), 1969]

Per Tjernberg has made the point that there *are* tunings for the mbira, which, like the gamelan, vary from place to place and player to player, but in jazz contexts, since they were mainly used for atmosphere or ethnic identification – rather than as part of an organised music – the tunings were typically random. To complicate matters, the English ethnographer and musicologist, Hugh Tracey began to manufacture his own redesigned version of the mbira in 1954. This was tuned diatonically, in the key of G and the tines were arranged to read a descending scale by shifting alternately from right to left, moving inward, with the lowest note in the centre. It was this version of the mbira, thanks to some very effective marketing, that rapidly spread around the world, and its brand name, the Kalimba, has now come to stand as a synecdoche for all mbiras. Here’s the blues singer Taj Mahal playing one.

[Taj Mahal, ‘Kalimba Interlude’ (excerpt), 1972]

The seventies soul, funk, disco, latin, pop, gospel band, Earth, Wind & Fire, also made a feature of the Kalimba on all their albums, as well as in concert, making it sound a little like an electric piano. Since it’s a very small and quiet instrument, and stadium rock bands are very large and loud, it wasn’t an obvious choice. Here it is on ‘Kalimba Story’, from their 1974 LP, *Open our Eyes*.

[Earth, Wind & Fire, ‘Kalimba Story’ (excerpt), 1974]

And here, in Bill Gilonis’ ‘All Thumbs’, it’s the absence of a systematic tuning system that gives the work its substance. His is an economical probe into randomised polyrhythmic microtonality, created through a calculated agglomeration of unsynchronised mbiras.

[Bill Gilonis, ‘All Thumbs’ (excerpt), 1972]



[Earth, Wind & Fire]

[Phone]

- Phone voice: Love the show
- Thanks
- Are you going to do Indian instruments too? My dad says they were big in the sixties.
- We are. That'll be topic of our next programme.

‡ Played by Sikiru Adepaju (Nigeria), Mickey Hart (USA), Zakir Hussain (India), Airto Moreira (Brasil), Babatunde Olatunji (Nigeria), T.H.'Vikku Vinayakram (India)

02. Notes

On length and edits.

The purpose of these programmes is to give some practical impression of the probes we discuss. This necessitates for the most part extracting short stretches of music from longer wholes, which, of course, compromises the integrity and disrupts the context inherent in the original works. I have also, on occasion, edited different sections of a longer work together, better to illustrate the points under discussion. So the examples played in the programmes should not be confused with the works themselves. Wherever the word (excerpt) appears after a title in the programme transcript, this indicates that what follows is an illustration, not a composition as it was conceived or intended. If something catches your ear, please do go back to the source.

Notification

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04. Acknowledgments

Thanks to Dave Petts, William Sharp, Per Tjernberg, Peter Dennett, Ben Piekut, Brian Pace, Warrick Swinney and Chris Wangro.

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