

**Evan Parker is thinking** back to the first time he left England when, as a 14 year old, his father took him to the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels. "I know you'll immediately be thinking Xenakis and the Philips Pavilion," he teases, referring to Greek composer Iannis Xenakis's electronic composition *Concret PH*, premiered in the pavilion alongside Edgard Varèse's *Poème Électronique*. "But what you probably won't know is that Sidney Bechet also played at the same Expo. In that same short visit I heard Bechet and I heard Xenakis. You could say I've spent the rest of my life trying to make sense of those two experiences."

Parker is enjoying discussing these rarely disclosed slices of his prehistory, and drawing a trajectory between Bechet's aroused soprano saxophone and Xenakis's feral electronica opens up his memory as though he's been eating a slice of Proust's madeleine cake. "I saw Lonnie Donegan play when I was a little younger and he was also a remarkable performing presence, like Bechet," he continues. "You just know when you're in the presence of somebody who's at ease with 'this is what I do'. Of course you're going to like it, because they're comfortable with playing for people. I got that from Bechet and Donegan."

And a final reminiscence: "Numar Lubin, the boss of Nimbus Records, who lived in the same Paris apartment block as Bechet in the 1930s, told me that he heard Bechet practising. Day after day after day the routine was the same. He'd play scales and arpeggios, and then make very strange animal noises. One day he asked Sidney, 'What's all that stuff at the end?' And Bechet said, 'You know, I sometimes wonder if what they call music is the real music.' Where sound and noise turns into music, and where music turns into sound and noise? That's a very interesting place to be."

Music and noise are the polarities that continue to define Evan Parker's work to this day. As we sit around his kitchen table in the Kent town of Faversham, where he's lived for two years, Parker is thinking about how the rest of 2007 is stretching out before him. He's about to throw himself into the spectacular sonic unknown in a six-date tour given the tag 'Free Noise', pitching his saxophones against Yellow Swans, John Wiese, Metalux and C Spencer Yeh (aka Burning Star Core), with only bassist John Edwards and drummer Paul Hession to cover his dignity. Later in the year, at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, he will unveil a new incarnation of his longstanding Electro-Acoustic Ensemble, this time with Peter Evans (trumpet), Ko Ishikawa (sho) and Ned Rothenberg (reeds) interweaving between the ensemble's labyrinth of electronic signalling and in-the-moment sound processing. The clarity of The Electro-Acoustic Ensemble's soundscaping is the antithesis of 'noise' – at least noisy noise. This noise is transparent and evolves with a tactical meticulousness, as if the sounds were being directed by David Lynch.

"I think there's a general consensus that what we're trying to do in The Electro-Acoustic Ensemble should not be possible," Parker reflects. "That was articulated very early on by Tim Hodgkinson, who seemed sure there was a good theoretical reason why this approach to improvisation couldn't work. He

wrote in a review that it can't happen because the relationship between the signals and the musicians is too slow. It's certainly true that the speed of interaction at the level of specific detail just isn't there. But it's not like we don't realise. What there is, however, is something other than that, so why not look at what we can do? Because of this relationship between electronics and instruments it wouldn't make sense to do 90-second pieces. It's for concert length. It's my relationship to symphonic form. Well, that's tongue in cheek, but that's as serious as I can get about symphonic form."

Look back to 1996, the last time Parker was interviewed here (The Wire 144), and there's an agnostic outlook to his thoughts on some aspects of emerging digital technology, especially methods of post-production. However, being represented as an unplugged Luddite strikes him as unfair. "Don't forget The Electro-Acoustic Ensemble started in 1990 and before that I had no specific problems with electronics," he counters. "The duo work I'd done with Walter Prati made me aware of new developments in computer based technology, and there were always people around me like Barry Guy, Paul Rutherford, Paul Lytton and Hugh Davies doing stuff with electronics that I found interesting. Before that, I'd met the Musica Elettronica Viva guys in Italy at the end of the 1960s, and watching how they'd change their instruments was a litmus test of where the technology was headed. What interests me is how people can come along and make a difference – like Spring Heel Jack's Ashley Wales and John Coxon – rather than coming along to fit in."

"There's lots of ways to understand 'electronic music', from something very primitive to something absolutely sophisticated," he asserts. "It's not that I've been invited to IRCAM to work with some magnificent mainframe computer. 40 years ago it was Hugh with contact microphones and ring modulators, then it was the DX7 for a while. But in the meantime George Lewis and his Voyager program cracked the walls down, and the whole need for mainframes is not what it was. I'd say that I've had a continuous relationship with electronics."

Parker's friendship with Spring Heel Jack has been as unlikely as it's been fruitful. Beginning their association on Thirsty Ear Records, Parker's appearance on *Masses* (2001) is as one voice in a choir of improvisors dominated by New Yorkers like Mat Maneri, Roy Campbell, Daniel Carter and Matthew Shipp. As the Parker-Spring Heel Jack relationship has evolved, a more specific patois has emerged. In 2003 a UK tour featuring Parker and Spring Heel Jack with Shipp, William Parker, J Spaceman and wild card drummer Han Bennink created a magnificent counterpoint of groove based jazz, improvisation and electronica as each party played to their strengths; The Sweetness Of The Water in 2004 paired Parker with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith for a more noticeably austere and benevolently cut-throat experience. Then, later the same year, came the disarmingly charming Evan Parker With Birds on Spring Heel Jack's own Treader label, featuring Parker's chirping saxophones against Coxon and Wales's forest of birdsong soundscapes. Just as our conversation turns to Spring Heel Jack, Parker's mobile phone rings and John Coxon's

name lights up the caller display. After he's hung up, Parker praises the duo's enthusiasm, suggesting that he sees something of his younger self in their idealism and appetite for new musical experiences. The evolution of The Electro-Acoustic Ensemble has been documented on ECM Records, beginning in 1996 with *Toward The Margins. Eleventh Hour*, the latest instalment, embedding FURT duo Richard Barrett and Paul Obermayer into the line-up, was released in 2005. Reports that The Ensemble's appearance at the 2006 London Jazz Festival projected a busier and craggier music than their recorded history makes me wonder what impact the ECM ethos has made on the project. Parker sees it more as a fortunate meeting of minds than the group being moulded after the ECM vision. "We're working so much already with reverbs and delays that to add overall reverb isn't really necessary," he thinks. "Clarity and reverb are, anyway, two ends of the same thing. If you drive reverb to the limit, clarity disappears, so perhaps the idea that you can have reverb and clarity has been the great ECM discovery."

How does Parker view the set-up of the ensemble, compared to a conventional improvisation group? "For Huddersfield," he says, "I've already abandoned one broad structure because it's far too like a particular Scelsi piece, and enough versions of that idea already exist. The thing I'd like to avoid is playing better at the soundcheck than at the concert, and I'm trying to understand why. I think probably I have to let go more and be happy with what happens."

"With this ensemble I can go almost to the point where I'm not playing the saxophone," he elucidates. "If it can sound as I want it to without me doing anything then that's perfect. If I have to nudge it into place, that's acceptable. I like the sound of improvisation, so already there's a horrible contradiction between me being the leader and that thing I like – the sound of people doing what they feel like doing. In practice, it works because I've thought carefully about the combinations."

Those combinations – are they timbral, structural, instrumental? "All of the above, but I don't think we play enough with The Ensemble for the music to evolve from gig to gig," says Parker. "There's more a sense of starting from scratch than with any other group I've worked with. The software based instruments are constantly evolving, so the musicians are always looking to try stuff that technologically they couldn't do last time. I turn up with a saxophone and it's still a saxophone, but these other things perpetually change. I like that very much."

The paradox that Parker has spent 40 years refining one of the most individual saxophone sounds around to sink it in an ensemble where "I'm not playing the saxophone" is laughed off with a shrug. But he's right – the textures in the ensemble linger in an enigmatic noise/music hinterland where too much instrumental gerrymandering would tip the scales explicitly towards the syntax of conventional music. If Parker abdicates hardcore soloing duties in The Ensemble with good reason, it's possible that the forthcoming *Free Noise* tour might have a similar effect by cock-up rather than conspiracy. What strategies can be deployed against white noise? "It reminds me of something that happened recently at an event to mark the passing of Paul Burwell, when