

DEAD BABY MICE

Alan Dunn on Jeff Young
Images by Leila Romaya

Jeff Young is a Liverpool-based artist whose practice spans theatre, radio, sound art, writing and television. *Carandiru*, recorded in a Sao Paulo prison, was nominated for a Sony and he has been shortlisted for Prix Italia and Prix Europa awards. Alan Dunn interviewed him about two recent live spoken word pieces. *Ouija* (April 2012) was presented in collaboration with Moongoose at Metal, a former railway station on the edge of Liverpool's Lime Street. *Sputnik Jesus* (September 2012) was presented with Martin Heslop and Vidar Norheim during an event at the top of the Liverpool's Radio City Tower.

AD: *Ouija* was originally a 28-part piece, when does it date from?

JY: I've been writing *Ouija* for about eight years but it grew out of particular pieces I'd written for radio in which I tried to write a sort of autobiography based more on fevered memories than actual events. Certain memories have fallen into my thoughts over the years - a haemorrhaging horse, an escapee from a psychiatric hospital running over a potato field, the roar of football crowd voices coming over the rooftops when I was in bed, a floating woman singing lullabies outside my bedroom window when I was eight, these sort of half remembered dream

visions. I started writing a sort of epic poem in 28 parts, inspired by Kenneth Patchen's *Journal of Albion Moonlight*, which is a key text for me. Patchen's imagination was like a menagerie and there is a vernacular robustness to the heightened, Romantic and fabulist world he created that feeds into what I do. Patchen was a radical precursor to the Beats. Mark E. Smith of The Fall is another important writer for me. These people are awkward, mis-shapes and hallucinators.

AD: Can you locate *Ouija* within your output? What else were you working on and absorbing during its gestation?

JY: *Ouija* connects with radio plays such as *The Hunt For Billy Casper* and *Red Rock, Grey Rock* which were broadcast by BBC Radio 3 and 4. I wrote four radio drama documentaries that tried to paint a picture of four stages of my early life. They were montages, or collages, of memories, which used dissonant juxtaposition of clashing styles and tones as a modus operandi. I thought that if I jammed a story of a dying grandfather with maggots in his turn-ups up against a fleeting vision of Billy Fury walking on water on the Leeds & Liverpool canal, up against the Milky Way clinking like xylophones, glimpsed through a skylight in a Liverpool terraced house, up against readings from favourite books and so on it

would make more interesting radio than the usual.

I was writing stage plays such as *River Fever*, which were based in similar landscapes of blighted industrial zones, ruined warehouses, bonfires on wastelands and half demolished asylums. All of this is now called *edgeland* writing and there is a touch of psychogeography about it but as far as I was concerned I was just trying to get across a sense of a boy in Liverpool, slightly unhealthy, medicated, bed bound, dreaming of travelling fairgrounds and Waltzers and dodgems on fire. *River Fever* used imagery such as polluted canals and ramshackle caravans to get across a sense of hallucinatory fever.





It comes close to surrealism and is non-naturalistic.

I was drawing more on paintings such as the work of Ensor and outsider artists such as Madge Gill and Henry Darger. Joseph Cornell's boxes and Kurt Schwitters collages also feed in. In literature I was drawing on Ted Hughes's *Crow* poems and the prose poems of Rimbaud. I quite like 'bad influences' such as Burroughs and Ballard. I don't like polite, English lit. I'd rather 'read' Franz Masereel's woodcut books or look at Leonard Baskin's illustrations for Hughes's *Crow* as they fit the fever better. Humphrey Jennings' *Pandaemonium* is a book I've used for twenty years and even wrote a puppet show in 1995 inspired by it. I fill my house with nightmare clutter and hope that it seeps into my imagination.

AD: Could *Ouija* be described as a séance with former family members and if so, are séances something you experienced as a child?

JY: *Ouija* is certainly a séance. I remember countless visits to hospitals, which used to be Victorian poor houses where we'd visit dying grandparents. Butcher's shops and abattoirs figured strongly in my childhood because quite a lot of uncles were butchers. There was a lot of meat around! I wanted to try and communicate with those people and invite them into the *Ouija* texts and inhabit it. Most of all though it is a séance with my younger self. I have a very real sense that the boy I used to be is still alive. There are two of me, one is me now, one is the boy

in the past. I try and get back into the incidents of my childhood and also to let the boy I used to be crawl through my imagination, through the texts. Whether I achieve that or not is for others to say.

We used to pretend at séances as kids and there was a make shift Ouija board. There was a garage where we used to act out fairy tales such as *Rumpelstiltskin* and a derelict refugee camp where Polish immigrants had been housed during the Second World War. We used to hole up in these places and frighten the life out of ourselves with imagining the dead.

It's amazing how much death there is in childhood and I suppose *Ouija* is an attempt to bring the dead to life.

AD: You performed parts 1, 2, 4, 8 and 22 from *Ouija* as a spoken word piece at Metal, a former railway station engine room located on the platform of Edge Hill Station, on the cusp of Liverpool Lime Street. It's an example of industrial architecture being adopted by culture on what is one of the Britain's most historic railway lines, the Liverpool to Manchester link.

JY: I worked with Liverpool band Moongoose who had a rare track called *Don't Play!* and we selected five *Ouija* texts to make a sixteen minute performance. To perform it in Edge Hill Train station was perfect because the texts are set in dereliction and post-industrial landscapes. The

railway cuttings leading into Lime Street Station seem to be of the same world as the *Ouija* texts. There is something about the ferns and buddleia growing through the cracks, nature returning and overwhelming the city. Mike Davis's book *Dead Cities* is an important book for me. In it he talks about Bomber Ecology and how blitzed cities burst to life with fireweeds - buddleia and rose bay willow herb blooming on derelict wastelands in blitzed cities. This fits the world of *Ouija* perfectly. It would have been better if there had been a burning locomotive collapsing on Platform 2 but you can't have everything.

AD: Can you describe what we might call the range of *Ouija*?

JY: If you make a story up it comes to the point where you actually remember it even if it didn't really happen. Some of the texts are invented, or distortions of the truth, but I can remember them happening. There is a story about a horse bleeding to death outside Everton football ground. I can remember this vividly and it's haunted me all my life but my mother told me just before she died that it was her who saw the horse dying when she was a child, not me.

There is nostalgia at play here. Nostalgia is a bit like influenza, it's not healthy but it's actually incredibly useful for generating feverish imagining. There is a brilliant book by Svetlana Boym called *The Future Of Nostalgia* in which she talks about it being a 'hypochondria of the heart.' It's a longing for a past that can never return but if you conduct the séance in the right way you can taste and smell it. I don't believe in ghosts and I don't believe in the soul but it suits my creative purposes to kind of pretend I believe in them. That way I can summon up ghosts and memories and stoke up the fever.

AD: Do you hear music when writing?

JY: Music is important. I write listening to everything from *Trout Mask Replica* to Sun Ra to doo-wop. It has to be extreme and anything that destabilises. I'm not a musician but I work with lots of musicians. I imagine music for the various places and characters in the stories, usually distorted lullabies and imaginary soundtracks. There is a touch of David Lynch here, Thelonious Monk there, and remembered music such as Tamla Motown and early reggae. My teenage years were spent observing a nocturnal world of canal banks and railway tunnels populated by *Clockwork Orange* droogs, sound-tracked by the sonic surrealism of Lee Perry and The Upsetters. In reality it was a suburb of Liverpool but in my remembering of it, it's hallucinatory.

AD: How do you see a performance such as *Ouija*

relating to Patti Smith, William Burroughs or Jim Morrison?

JY: I wanted to write like Patti Smith's spoken word stuff such as *Piss Factory* as far back as the mid 70's. William Burroughs' spoken word stuff such as *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, Beefheart's spoken word interludes on *Trout Mask Replica* and *Apes-Ma* on *Shiny Beast* but that period of Beefheart in general, these are all more important to me than conventional poets. I would like to have seen Patti Smith in her early performing days reading at St. Marks in The Bowery. There is a delinquency about this kind of work that makes most published poets look anaemic. I also like Anticon stuff like cLOUDDEAD. I don't know much about that world of hip-hop but it's left field and a bit fucked up and it connects somehow. Mark E. Smith in general. John Cooper Clarke's *Beasley Street* is important too. With the performance of *Ouija* I hoped to invoke the spirit of this kind of work. We knew that it would be the only ever performance so that heightened the sense of occasion.

AD: And Moongoose?

JY: Yorkie who runs Moongoose is a Liverpool legend, very much a part of the post-punk culture. *Don't Play!* was released as almost an art object, sealed between two bathroom tiles and you could only play it if you smashed the tiles. It has a nocturnal menace about it as a piece of music, which perfectly matched the spoken word. Moongoose usually perform strictly instrumental pieces so to collaborate as a 'voice' was an honour. There is a version online with archival images assembled by Mark Moongoose and the ghostly images of lost Liverpool evoke and enhance the texts beautifully.

AD: Frightened children, death, baby mice, comic books, there are some recurring themes through your work.

JY: Comic books such as *Doc Strange* and a warehouse full of burning *Eagle* Comics, war comics such as *Victor* and *Hotspur*, these are vivid, flickering rememberings. My dad witnessed the destruction of a warehouse full of every single issue of the *Eagle*, a hundred copies of every edition on fire because the printing factory needed the storage space. That's another memory that I can remember even though it happened to someone else. I had a butcher uncle who used to lock my sister and I inside a walk-in meat freezer so frightened children creep into the world. Elsie Barmaid was a floating woman who used to hover outside my bedroom window singing men's names. I discovered years later that it was actually the barmaid from the pub next door, having sex with customers down the back alley. The

saucepan of dead baby mice is true. We found a nest of baby mice on a pan and took it out onto a piece of derelict land in Kirkdale where we sat around watching them die. It's all haunting, all part of the phantasmagoria.

AD: If you were given free reign with the education of young people in Higher Education in relation to art and literature, what would you introduce?

JY: I teach at Liverpool John Moores University and one of the things we do with students is to get them to engage directly with the city. It's difficult for students to break through the confines of the immediate student experience and I encourage them to explore Liverpool more deeply. We walk the city, make maps and drawings and scrapbooks and listen to the city's noises. If I were given free reign I would encourage young people to see themselves as artists and writers and to engage actively in the culture – establish creative relationships with working artists, make work, live in the city as well as study. An institution that teaches art and literature, creative writing and so on should be commissioning work, bringing the public in to the building and also sending the students out of the building and into the world.

AD: Can you tell me about *Sputnik Jesus*? You performed it accompanied by Martin Heslop and Vidar Norheim at the top of Liverpool's Radio City Tower, the city's futuristic beacon that is both private and public. It was set in 1969 and floated Neil Armstrong over Liverpool amidst 'metal rainbows' and sadly foresaw the arrival of 'the future.'

JY: Neil Armstrong was a childhood hero of mine, and still is. He's been mentioned in loads of stuff I've written and in every script I've ever written I think there is a reference to the moon, Yuri Gagarin, Sputnik, the 1950s and 60s or sci-fi. I followed the space race through the 1960s and I was eleven years old when they walked on the moon. I like pulp sci-fi novels and there is often a sci-fi element in the mix. A metal rainbow is something poetic and evocative like the xylophone Milky Way I mentioned earlier. It's a world made by Chad Valley, Triang Toys and bits of old Meccano.

AD: You conjure an image of a child sitting in wonder, peering out at the tower from his bed, seeing it as a space beacon, as Dali looked at the telephone handset and saw a lobster. The child climbs the tower, as a throat, up to its eyes.

JY: I couldn't actually see the Radio City Tower from my bed but I could imagine it. I watched it being built. The old Liverpool market was a magical labyrinth full of caged animals and exotic fruits

and fabrics. The city visionaries – or philistines - demolished it and replaced it with this futuristic edifice and old men watched the demolition and rebuilding of the city. I reckon old men were killed by this brutality. Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark* is a huge influence on me, and the tower as throat is nicked from that. Lots of the buildings in the city, especially the gothic Cathedral, have faces; Brutalist modernity, astronauts and cosmonauts, comic book imagery, it's another collage of dissonance. Liverpool's powers that be have often conspired to ruin our glorious cityscape. They're doing it as we speak with their systematic flogging off of the city to property developers. The more they flog off the more the city dies but its ghosts will come back and haunt them.

AD: We're also interviewing Claire Potter who performed at the same event at the top of the Radio City Tower. What are your memories of her piece?

JY: I think Claire Potter is an astonishing artist. My memory of the piece is vivid. I couldn't work out where the performance stopped and the reality began and neither could anyone else in the tower. It was emotionally so raw and vulnerable that I wanted to protect her but I was scared of her intensity. At one point the whole space lapsed into silence for an uncomfortable length of time and we couldn't work out if she'd stopped performing or not. She made me feel conservative and that was a good thing. I came away from watching her and wanted to take more risks. She's amazing.

AD: Billy Bragg's track *The space race is over* is a man trying to tell his son there will be no more missions, only cyber space, and there is a similar sadness at work here; wonder replaced by melancholia.

JY: Yes, there is nostalgia here again. It goes back to that feeling of looking up at the moon with your dad or your school friends and realising with a sense of wonder that there are men up there walking on it. The moon used to follow me home and now there is a man walking there. It's beautiful.

AD: What were you absorbing when you wrote this?

JY: Sun Ra. Seeing Sun Ra and his Arkestra perform at the Liverpool Bluecoat in 1990 was terribly important. *The Night of the Purple Moon* by Sun Ra is just deranged. The music for *Sputnik Jesus* by Vidar Norheim and Martin Heslop was vibes heavy and suitably Sun Ra-esque. And Alice Coltrane's *Astral Meditations*. I was dipping into Alfred Bester's books *The Demolished Man* and *Tiger, Tiger* and a bit of Ballard and Philip K. Dick. It's useful to think *What would Ballard do?* and then to dip into him at random and try and *do a Ballard*.



AD: Imagine for a moment you were brought up in Rio de Janeiro, Auckland or Dakar – would you be making the same work with the same references?

JY: I think so. I'd be responding to the place in the same way, absorbing the sensory and sensual atmospheres. Essentially what I do is hang out in a place and get to know it and sooner or later something about the light, or the architecture, or perhaps someone I observe or eavesdrop on or interview...that feeds into a rough outline of a piece into which I pour any of my own memories and experiences that resonate with the work in progress. Out of that I assemble a finished piece. I did a Radio 3 project in a prison in Sao Paulo and it was an assemblage of materials including fragments of stories that happened to me, thousands of miles away from Brazil in Liverpool. I'd be doing the same in Dakar, Rio or Auckland yes. But having said that, I prefer places where it rains.

AD: As can be seen on the video footage, as you read Part 3 of *Sputnik Jesus*, the sun started to go down and everyone appeared mellow as the rhythm slowed. This was the Tower as space station and the audience as space travellers?

JY: The best thing about the event was that magical moment when the rain stopped and the sun broke through the clouds just in time to set beyond the river. The sun did its bit beautifully and everyone

was excited and moved by its appearance. It was the perfect light show and we were in a space station temporarily anchored over the rooftops.

See jeffyoung26.wordpress.com. Links to video footage of *Ouija* and *Sputnik Jesus* - alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html