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Global Ear

A survey of sounds from around the planet

From the Fluxus-inspired anti-art movements of the 1960s to present-day below-radar strategies,

Leeds

is maintaining its reputation for quiet yet stubborn resistance. By Bruce Davies



Jonny Fryer aka These Mountains live at Leeds Holy Trinity Church

Scratch beneath the surface of the official history of Leeds – Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, Sisters Of Mercy, Kaiser Chiefs – and you start to uncover a more radical and political history. *Thin Air: The Psycho-Vocalic Discoveries Of Alan Smithson*, by audio-visual artist Paul Rooney, is an artwork commissioned by Leeds Metropolitan University. Part-lecture, part-audio-visual installation, it concerns the chaotic anti-art spirit emerging from Leeds Polytechnic during the early 1970s in the wake of input from Fluxus members George Brecht, Robin Page and Robert Filliou. Smithson was a 3D design student who became obsessed with capturing Electronic Voice Phenomena in the recently vacated H Block at Leeds Met.

At one of several presentations of this artwork/lecture, I bump into artist and lecturer Alan Dunn, whose current project seems to share similar non-material concerns as those working at Leeds Polytechnic in the 70s. Dunn has curated a series of CDs that he refers to as a continuous self-portrait; in the process of putting these albums together he has created documents that combine contributions by Leeds students and lecturers alongside the work of established musicians/artists. Dunn has also established a yearly masterclass at Leeds Metropolitan University, with sound recordist Chris Watson: Yorkshire's past extending a helping hand to the county's potential future.

In a very different vein, my first encounter with Improv musician Jonny Fryer, aka Onward The Indian/These Mountains, came three years ago on a warm, late summer Sunday evening. He was perched on an unplumbed lavatory, and surrounded by the paraphernalia of performance – guitar, laptop, Loop Station and keyboard – while old Super-8 films projected onto the walls created a womblike feeling of nostalgia. The music had the familiar motifs of solo Improv: gradual build towards orchestral climax before the inevitable falling away. This all took place in The Bunker, a student basement in the Hyde Park (LS6) area of Leeds. Operating only at weekends, The Bunker housed photographic exhibitions, zine art and

installations alongside music and performance art. As the performance drew to its close, the warmth of the evening sun and the hiss of bottles being opened coaxed us outside for a drink.

Hovering in a similar temporal zone to The Bunker is Leeds's Black Dogs Collective. Formed in 2003, their practice involves "exhibitions, publications, events, interventions, workshops, social engagement and curatorial activity", and most recently the production of an audio almanac. The individual practices of the Black Dogs are wide ranging, so the production of an album seems quite natural for a collective known as much for Situationist-style events as for its exhibitions. "Objects are difficult because of their potential slippage into commodities, but that's not to say they can't be deployed responsibly," says Andy Abbott of Black Dogs and Leeds experimental rock outfit That Fucking Tank, for whom the DIY ethic is writ large in their *modus operandi*. The DIY ethic of Black Dogs is evident, too, in That Fucking Tank's attempts to explore alternative avenues to the mainstream in terms of production and performance.

Entering the city from the south you experience the *Light Neville Street* project, a sound and light installation by Hans Peter Kuhn designed, in part, to smarten up the approach to the city. In recent years Leeds has seen other high profile commissions such as Bill Fontana's *Primal Soundings* installation at Leeds Art Gallery and the rather lavish opening of Opera North's Howard Assembly Rooms, a much-needed, dedicated music venue. While these projects are worthy, they appear to be weighed down by their civic duty, and are vulnerable to cuts in the current economic climate. In contrast, one cannot underestimate the importance of self-funded events such as The Man Who Saved The World, a daring film/gig event featuring Home Of The Brave, a Morricone-inspired jazz Improv outfit featuring Joost Hendrixx (drums), Seth Bennett (bass), Richard Ormrod (sax) and Jonny Flockton (guitar). The project finds the group placed at the centre of a vast vacated TK Maxx store, surrounded by a ten-screen recombination of

a film dubbed *The Turkish Star Wars*, chopped up and re-presented by Eoin Shea and Derek Horton. The original material itself is a bizarre mash-up of men with tinfoil swords running around a desert intercut with stolen frames from *Star Wars*, the perfect backdrop for the Spaghetti Western surrealism of Home Of The Brave.

Three years after Jonny Fryer's Bunker performance, the venue is no more than a memory and I find myself outside a cafe in the city centre discussing his latest project with him. Gone is the Onward The Indian moniker, along with the Loop Station, replaced now by human collaborators. The intervening years have seen an interesting trajectory: 11 self-released albums; an expanded instrumental palette to include kalimba, berimbau and sruti box, and a trail of performances ranging from the Rendezvous Festival, Portugal, to the art-orientated North By Northwest at Tate Liverpool. Lately he has been working on a collaborative sound art piece for an exhibition at that vacated branch of TK Maxx as well as a music performance for a gallery space. In a twist on the usual gallery performance idea, Fryer will present a film documenting the making of a particular album accompanied by the finished recording; the idea being that an album is not conceived as a fait accompli but is in fact the final stage of a process you rarely see.

There is a certain amount of suspicion between the various camps in Leeds surrounding motivation – musicians are wary of art venues wanting to promote music, artists are wary of empty shop unit based projects wanting to promote art, and the establishment is wary of anyone tagged artist or musician. But for all the internecine bickering, there is a positive outcome that one may not expect, and that is longevity. Lydia Lunch once described New York as a "beautiful ravaged slag". Leeds cannot look back on its past through such rose-tinted glasses, but the spirit of Fluxus persists to this day in a city whose underground is simultaneously riven and driven by division and dissension. Vive la révolution! □