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*Composition and Experimentation in British Rock:1966-1976. Workshop – “Compositional Technique in Progressive Rock Bands”**

Soft Machine as a band worked mostly as separate musicians, as composers, each person would work on a piece at home and then bring the piece and present it to the band. And then, when the piece was rehearsed and we'd gone on playing in concerts, then of course it would get changed, we'd improvise parts, we'd change pieces, we'd take pieces out. So sometimes the original idea was very simple, and it might develop a lot, and then in other cases the original composition was completely composed and scored and it didn't change much at all.

And it also depended upon the different musicians, because different people have different training and different approaches. For me, I didn't learn music, I wasn't taught music, I learnt it by listening. I mean hopefully I know a bit more now, but in those days I used to write really by playing with the instrument, I'd work out a theme, maybe work out the chords, but for other people in the band it would be different. Mike Ratledge, the keyboard player, he was trained classically, he had a lot of study in classical music, modern classical music and also “classical” classical music, and so his approach was much more correct, if you like, correct if that's the right word, well mine was much more chaotic.

The piece we've just played in the middle section, which I wrote a long time ago is called *Facelift*, and I wrote completely sitting at the bass guitar just working on what sounded nice in a melody, I had no idea of harmonic structure, in fact it can be, what you can consider as just a modal piece in E minor and it was not until later that people asked me “what happens here?, what happens there?”, because when you present it to another musician then they have to know what they've come to do in a particular place. So, but in the first place mostly I just would compose something because I liked the sound of the way the melody went.

[*Evasioni Totali*] harmonically it's very simple, in two occasions there are two ostinato riffs. But I think that a lot of bands in *progressive* time, they would do a lot of complicated things but also there were always moments where they would just do something very simple for a very long time, like the Grateful Dead or something like that, they would go just on and on with the obligatory free cut in the middle. We gave you just a snapshot, a really short version so we had a tiny free cut of about two seconds.

Daavid [Allen] was a big influence on me when I was young, probably a bad influence most of the time, he introduced me to loops, real loops, making loops, making soundscapes, he also introduced me to various illegal substances. All of each combined to make my first musics.

Daavid is a very creative person, he's of course completely crazy, but then who isn't? It's great that he's still playing music, he's doing different versions of Gong. The last time I saw him was in London with Acid Mothers Gong, it was a complete wall of sound and noise. Because there was five completely mad Japanese guitarists, plus Daavid and Didier Malherbe, Josh [Pollock], Gilli Smyth who's been with Daavid for a long time and Gilli Smyth Spun after the concert described it as a kind of Jackson Pollock of the ears, and it was. I think Daavid is great. I mean, he's 67 I think, and he's still doing interesting things, he's always been a person who's outrageous, he never wanted to be comfortable, and I think he's an important person.

* This is the transcription, taken from the original audio recording of the workshop, held in Palazzo Cittanova, 21st October 2005, and from the Round Table “Le procedure compositive all'incrocio tra i generi”, 22nd October 2005.

I think we [Soft Machine] really wanted to be not part of the surrounding environment, the reason that Soft Machine didn't have a guitarist is because every other band had a guitar, so we really wanted to do different things. We had no desire to be part of, just doing normal things.

When we were playing it wasn't called progressive rock, as I think Gianmario [Borio] said the other day, we didn't call it progressive rock when we were listening to it, we called it underground, and progressive is a label which came from a journalist or something after the event. Which always happens. I mean, I was born in Canterbury, in Kent, so I'm probably one of the two musicians who can call myself "Canterbury", but Chris' is called Canterbury music, he's never been to Canterbury in his life. This is a simplification of what always happens in generalism and in the study of music, I have to say, because it's easier to say "This is Canterbury music", this is the label, and also helps us because, if I bring out a record, a record shop could easily put it in the Canterbury part of the shop. It's a simplification but it's natural in life, we like to find an easy label for things.

1966 was Beatles' *Revolver* and psychedelic music really becoming more than just a small interest. Just recently I heard the wife of John Lennon, Cynthia Lennon, talking at the radio, she was presenting her book, describing how before the Sixties everything was in black and white, like in black and white films, then suddenly in the Sixties everything was in colour.

For 1976 it's true that suddenly the music press was taken over by the phenomenon of punk, at that time I thought it was just a complete construction by the press, I didn't realize it was a real thing. It didn't stop us continuing to do the music we'd always done, but it's true I think there was a change in the spirit, particularly in England, musically, and I guess that's coming up to the years of Maggie Thatcher, so also politically there was a change as well.

It's a natural progression [the decadence of the progressive rock], I think, from people sitting with acoustic instruments as soon as you start bringing technology into it. There are so many possibilities of course, the logical evolution at the moment is computer and internet and people don't go to concerts so much, they don't buy CDs, they don't live music, it's becoming more a personal thing just for that one person, of course he might share his mp3s with his friends, it's not the same tradition of going to a concert and it's not the same tradition of making music with your hands.

For different purposes, in each band you brought different influences. It's certainly true that I knew Mike Ratledge in Soft Machine, he was a very learned musician, he knew a lot about XIX Century music but he also knew a lot about different kinds of music.

And when we were at the age of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, we would listen to all sorts of music: free jazz, contemporary classical music, electronic music. I would be hearing a recording of Stockhausen, *Kontakte* it was, which today you do in a half day, they took around six months, for the technologies really have gone so far till then.

It really wasn't an awareness, and it was more an invention for some bands were more influenced than others, some people were not at all present in their music but I'm sure it was there in the atmosphere around.

Before I forget, I'm glad to say that Mario spoke about the melancholy and the minor chords. It's so true because I remember when in 1969-1970 when we were writing for Soft Machine, we had not written a constitution because you must have a melancholy, you mustn't have a singing in 4/4, it wasn't written down but at least almost all music was in minor tone, so many variations too.

From the point of view of rock musicians in most of the rock bands and pop bands, I think we can never forget that in most of the bands' life the members were in conflict with each other, they weren't in love with each other to work together. But I think that probably.... but in the Henry Cow's case because they made it up to work together in composition.

I mean, for a long time the main problem with Lennon and McCartney was that they were like that, they worked together. I read stories about conflicts with each other, there was a great rivalry. As soon as Paul McCartney wrote *Paperback Writer*, that was part A of that single, John rushed home and wrote *Rain*, and so it became the double track of that single because they really

were full of arms. Maybe when it first started they really liked each other, but then in 90% of the bands' life they were in war with each other.

My experience is that in most of the bands it's like this most of the time, of course they would improvise together but I think it's very, very rare that you get real true composing together. I mean, usually there's one person who's in command, there may not be the same person to write each composition, but that's my experience that it's more an exception than a rule that people in a band actually compose together, they may improvise together.

One of the questions was, you've been interpreting how to become a contemporary classical composer. We all had those possibilities around us, I mean contemporary classical writing and electronic music but we hadn't any other bother than really not to sound like a country music band, not to sound like anything else.