The Scratch Orchestra and The Counterculture

Richard Ascough

Richard Ascough wrote an earlier version of this paper for an uncompleted book on the Scratch Orchestra, edited by Brian Dennis, in the 1990s. He gave the paper at a Scratch Orchestra colloquium at the Conway Hall in 1999. Here Ascough provides a context for the Scratch Orchestra in terms of popular and youth culture, including some rare and perceptive remembrances of Scratch Orchestra performances.

THE PURPOSE of this lecture is to place the Scratch Orchestra in the perspective of the 1960s. Was it a true 'child of the '60s' or was it an antidote to what was happening elsewhere? In particular, I shall try to analyse its relationship with the alternative counter-culture that developed during the 1960s.

As a 'child' of the 1960s myself, whose teenage years were spent during that period, I viewed The Scratch Orchestra as a youthful group and with all the exuberance of youth. As was observed by the late Brian Dennis in the introduction to the unfinished collective work on the Scratch Orchestra, (this lecture is taken from the same work), there was indeed a child-like dimension to the activities of the orchestra. This is not to denigrate it, but to show that it was such a phenomenon and indeed a child of its time.

In fact the Scratch Orchestra was born as the 1960s began to peter out. Although this was at the end of the decade, its conception and gestation were quintessential to that period. It had a brief life—not really dying but like Marx's view of the state—it withered away some time in 1974. It therefore straddled two decades.

One should first perhaps ask whether it truly belonged to its time or whether it could have existed at any other time in the last thirty years. When one is in the 'eye' of an activity, it is difficult to place it in perspective but as time moves on then clearly one can view the activity from a distance. Often, what seems the most extreme creative activity or for that matter the most fashionable, is not always the case, and in retrospect often seem more dated. For example, Antonioni's 1960s film *Blow Up*, which was a most up-to-date and fashionable 1960s film, now seems to be far more dated than many other films of that decade.

The Scratch Orchestra also seemed the most far out of all musical ensembles, so much so that its aesthetic seemed detached from almost everything of its day. In retrospect though, the orchestra's early naive optimism and idealism, coupled with its somewhat anarchic view of freedom, belonged very much to the ethos of the late 1960s and shared the '60s spirit or zeitgeist of the time. Also, on a more down to earth level, it is inconceivable that in the current economic climate, that an ensemble such as the Scratch Orchestra could survive. Even at that time, the finances of many of the more ambitious concerts were precarious and other costs associated with the orchestra would make its viability now very unlikely.

What exactly was the spirit of the times that the Scratch Orchestra shared? Decades seldom fit neatly into the exact years allocated to them. For example; 1960-1969. Perhaps the

1960s, like Philip Larkin's view of sexual intercourse,[1] began somewhere between the trial of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and the first Beatles LP. If I had to pin it down more precisely, I would say 1963 represented a qualitative change from what had gone before. The '60s then drifted out into the less self-indulgent politically 'harder nosed' 70s sometime around about 1972 or 1973.

In retrospect the oil crisis of that year may well have played an important part in changing the economic climate, which then filtered through and permeated the social changes of the 1970s. There are many things, which contribute towards distinguishing one decade from another. Brian Dennis observed a new spirit in the work of painters and sculptors.[2] He remarked that '[t]he Battersea Exhibition was full of colour—the clean bright red geometric shapes of Philip King and so much more. They seemed to clear the air and as if by magic vanish morbidity. Shortly in the coming months 'Op Art', 'Pop Art' and the 'Hard Edged School' (again highly coloured clean geometric shapes) descended on us in the Tate and ushered in this feeling of excitement'.[3] For Michael Parsons the 1960s began when he first came into contact with the music of Cornelius Cardew in about 1963.[4] For Hugh Shrapnel and Dave Smith there were more personal reflections on the 1960s in changes which happened to them in 1966 and 1967 respectively.[5] For Hugh Shrapnel again, it was coming across the music of Cornelius Cardew when a student at the Royal Academy and for Dave Smith it was going to Cambridge in 1967. For others it was the change in the 'moral climate' that I have already referred to in Philip Larkin's poem. For most people though who were aged somewhere between thirteen and their late twenties, it was a period of explosive changes in popular culture and fashion that dictated the decisive or 'seismic' point when one decade changed to another.

What seemed to distinguish the 1960s from the period before was precisely this explosion of a youth culture. Post-War Europe had been an austere period recovering both economically and psychologically from the ravages of the Second World War. By the 1950s a perceptible upturn in economic fortunes had begun in Europe but was still some way behind the U.S. but even so the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, still proclaimed even with some irony but believed by many, 'that you'd never had it so good'.

Throughout the twentieth century, popular culture seems to crudely follow economic power. In America in the mid-1950s, and then slowly in Britain, establishing itself only fully in the 60s, youth for the first time had disposable income: disposable income equalled economic power and popular culture was therefore soon to follow. Established initially in the U. S. in the mid-1950s, rock 'n' roll was a new language dedicated to the hedonist tendencies of youth. It was something that seemed totally different in the music of older generations and therefore although it may have been an allusion; it seemed at the time that it could be a vehicle for the beliefs and ideals of youth.

At first, the youth culture of the late 1950s was manipulated by an older generation, which was at first intent solely on their own economic well-being. In other words young performers performed the music written by others. They were pre-packaged by an older generation to fit what they believed youth wanted. By 1963, this was all to change with the rock music of initially the Mersey Sound of The Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers and others and then the more anarchic sound and appearance of The Rolling Stones. This new music then brought with it its own new fashions, which in its entirety could be identified as a new movement. Initially London

---

[1] Philip Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis', *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

[2] In the introduction to his unfinished book. Draft sent by Dennis to Ascough, 19 July 1994.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Michael Parsons, in conversation with author, 1994 or 1995.

[5] Hugh Shrapnel and Dave Smith, in conversation with author, 1994 or 1995.

was seen as the centre of what became known as 'The Swinging '60s'. The fashion and pop culture was centred on Carnaby Street and The Kings Road. There were also changes in people's appearance, with men growing their hair longer. For the first time this century, young men and women did not just wear clothes, which their parents had worn, but had a clearly identifiable style that separated them from their parents. For example, when I see pictures of my father at twenty-one, he was dressed in clothes that a man could have worn at thirty-one or forty-one, and so on. By 1964 there was a clear separation which produced the term 'the generation gap'.

It was not only in popular culture however, that the winds of change were blowing. I, personally, believe the post-war total serialism equated with the austerity of its times. A belief in total control did not sit comfortably with the more let-it-all-happen view of the 1960s. In 1964 Terry Riley wrote *In C* and minimalism was born, although first of the keyboard studies and *Dorian Reeds* may well predate that work. La Monte Young also at the same time began a new phase in his work with the music of *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* (1964-). Also in 1964 Young began *The Well Tuned Piano.* Both works explore just intonation, which continues as a preoccupation to this day. Soon after, Philip Glass and Steve Reich made major changes in their compositional processes.

For Steve Reich this was the accidental discovery in 1965 of the process of gradual phase shifting which he used in the tape pieces, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966). With Philip Glass it was pieces such as *Strung Out* (1967) which identified a change from his studies with Darius Milhaud and Nadia Boulanger. This was to lead to the additive processes that he first applied in *One Plus One* of 1968 and then *Two Pages* of 1969.

It was not only in cultural terms however that there was a perceivable break with the past. Before 1960, all the world leaders had been born in the nineteenth century. Therefore, the election in November 1960 of John F. Kennedy, who was born in 1917, took on a psychological significance, mostly in the U. S. A. but also in Britain and Europe. In Britain, the election in 1964 of Harold Wilson, who himself was also born in the twentieth century and which ended thirteen years of Conservative administration, ushered in a more optimistic view of the future. Macmillan's 'you've never had it so good' was replaced by Wilson 'white heat of the technological revolution', which epitomised the optimism of that time.

The 1960s can best be divided into two distinct periods, each with its own distinctive culture and fashion. In the first period, ca. 1963-1967, London was viewed across the world, as I have already mentioned, in terms of Carnaby Street and 'The Swinging 60s'. The second part of the 1960s, beginning in 1967, was the time of 'Flower Power'. 'Hippies' had a naive political idealism in which the definition of freedom was the ability to do anything, say anything, and disrupt anything. In short, this was a period of self-absorption and navel gazing. It was at this time that the Scratch Orchestra was born and its political creed in its pre-Marxist phase demonstrated these attitudes.

One can make a direct comparison with the philosophy of 'turn on, tune in and drop out', and what was happening in the Scratch Orchestra. For example, there were periods at a typical 'Scratch' meeting, where amongst other things; group improvisation would take place. People were free to do whatever they liked. Although more sympathetic improvisers tried to 'tune in' to what others were doing, less sensitive but equally earnest improvisers believing in their total freedom, could play without any empathy for others. It did not seem to matter that in a corner of the room someone could be playing beautiful soft sounds on the cello, when these were being overwhelmed by violent percussive sounds. After all, loud sounds always exclude quiet ones, an apposite metaphor of anarchic freedom. But at that time, for the most part at least, nobody seemed to mind.

I recall going to my very first meeting at The Place with my flute, expecting to be auditioned by someone, with the possibility, therefore, that I might be excluded as not being up

to 'Scratch'. The opposite of course was true; everyone was welcome regardless of musical ability.

The Scratch Orchestra therefore, belonged to this second period of the 1960s and when viewed twenty-five years on [when this article was first written], people might wonder what crossover there could possibly have been between popular culture and an ensemble which represented what was at the furthest extremes of avant-garde music. This question viewed from the 1990s perspective, where popular culture has yet again returned with a vengeance to the manipulation of the money-men; where it is more important of how a group looks on video, rather than how innate are its creative abilities. Frank Zappa once observed the negative force that the pop video had become.[6] In the 1960s, of course, videos did not exist; in a way it was more important how differently performers looked from the older generation, than aesthetic qualities of how 'pretty' they looked.

It was perfectly acceptable for the serious music critic of *The Times* of London to write about the song-writing abilities of Lennon and McCartney. It was possible for Wilfrid Mellers to write about Beatles' songs in the technical language of a professor of music, for example, in his review in *Music and Musicians*, of John Lennon's solo album, 'Imagine'.[7] Mellers also was to write one of the best retrospective reviews of The Beatles in his book *Twilight of the Gods*.[8] The Beatles' Apple label was also responsible for recording John Tavener's *The Whale*.[9] John Lennon had shown interest in this piece but it was Ringo Starr who was responsible for its recording. Lennon's wife Yoko Ono introduced Lennon to the New York avant-garde and one of his song drafts appeared in John Cage's *Notations*.[10] On the other side of what had been the great divide, John Peel, the Radio 1 disk jockey, could include without any apparent incongruity, a piece by Webern amongst the newest rock releases he was playing. In the early 1970s, Brian Dennis had invited Peel to Holloway College to give a talk and answer questions on a whole range of 'cross-over' phenomena.

This crossbreeding of two cultures produced a number of examples from both sides of the divide. For instance, David Bedford, who had taken part in early performances of Cardew's *Treatise*, and whose own compositions were far removed from pop tunes such as 'She Loves You', worked in the early 1970s with such people as Kevin Ayres. Bedford performed in Ayres's band and wrote special pieces for Ayres' band and chamber orchestra. He also later went on to work with Mike Oldfield on the orchestration of *Tubular Bells* and *Hergest Ridge*.[11]

John Cale, who at one time had studied with Cardew, became a member of La Monte Young's 'Theatre of Eternal Music' and went on to become one of the founding members of The Velvet Underground. The latter's influence 25 years on is now much stronger than was thought possible at that time, when it was ignored as a seemingly irrelevant band whose prototype minimalism owed more to Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Tins and anti-variational films, than to the whole history of rock music. At the time, The Velvet Underground seemed to have far more devotees amongst 'serious' musicians than it did with rock aficionados. The English composer Tim Souster, a member of the group Intermodulation, was an early writer

---

[6] Frank Zappa, 'The Record Industry and MTV', undated interview, *YouTube* 12 October 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgVUei2853A> (accessed 13 May 2015).

[7] Wilfrid Mellers, 'Imagine', *Music and Musicians*, January 1972, 30-32. [adjusted spelling and date]

[8] London: Faber & Faber, 1973.

[9] John Tavener, *The Whale* (Apple, SAPCOR 15, 1970).

[10] John Cage and Alison Knowes, eds., *Notations* (New York: something else press, 1969).

[11] Mike Oldfield, *Tubular Bells* (Virgin Records, 1973); *Hergest Ridge* (Virgin, 1974).

about the importance of The Velvet Underground. In *The Observer* colour supplement on 5th October 1969, Souster made the following observation:

> It is here that the largest area of common ground has been discovered. The pounding choral pop of The Who and The Velvet Underground, is not just a link with the music of Riley and Young, it occupies the same sound world.[12]

The Velvet Underground was formed in 1966 at the instigation of Andy Warhol, the high priest of 'antivariation'.[13] His notorious films are the visual counterpart of La Monte Young's endless and varying sounds. 'The Velvet Underground sounds as though it has been influenced more by the principles of Cage, Young and Warhol and the music of Young and Riley than by anything specifically to do with "pop" music. A term which is commonly used to embrace both them and the Beach Boys' is stretched to breaking point 'to hold it together'.[14] I recall there were a number of Scratch Orchestra members who were also equally impressed. Amongst the number of sub-groups that proliferated within the Scratch, was a rock band originally called Comet but later changed to CUM, whose core members were Bryn Harris on drums, John Tilbury on keyboards, and Deryk Barker and Edward Locke on guitars. At the Wandelkonzert at the German Institute on 13 May 1971, Comet showed their appreciation of The Velvet Underground with a 45-minute version of the latter's 'Sister Ray'. On that occasion Comet's line-up included Michael Nyman on VCS3, myself as a temporary replacement for John Tilbury on keyboards, and Alec Hill on saxophone. It also included Caroline Rogers and Catherine Williams as dancers, although the programme at the time referred to their contribution as 'gyrotechnics'.

The above concert was in many respects a good indicator of so much that was happening at the time, not only in the Scratch Orchestra but also of other both related and non-related activities. The concert consisted of everybody starting together, with George Brecht's *Comb Music*. There was then a variety of activities in every room of the German Institute which brought together not only the Scratch Orchestra and some of its subsidiary groups such as PTO, CPE, Private Company, Harmony Band, The Shrapnel Wood and Metal Band and Comet. In addition, this concert included groups that were not subsidiaries of the Scratch Orchestra but were either close to them or included common members, such as the Portsmouth Symphonia and AMM. There were also other groups who were not normally associated with the Scratch Orchestra such as Gentle Fire and Intermodulation. The concert ended with everybody together on the staircase of the institute, giving the first performance of Paragraph 3 of Cardew's *The Great Learning*.

It was not, though, only The Velvet Underground who participated in this cross-fertilization. Mike Ratledge, the keyboard player of Soft Machine, was to take part in a performance of Terry Riley's *Keyboard Studies* at the late-night Promenade Concert on 13 August 1970 in the Albert Hall. This was followed by a performance of Soft Machine themselves playing 'Out Bloody Rageous', 'Face Lift', and 'Esther's Nose Job'. On the back of the album of the concert, Robert Wyatt remarked,

> We was invited [sic] by Tim Souster who had an evening using the hall to do what he liked with. I believe he had heard our second LP and asked us on the strength of that. He discovered us on the way to discovering Motown via The Who. Anyway it was brave of him to invite us despite the withering contempt of the music establishment. Before our bit I went out for a quick fag and then the doorman didn't want to let me in. 'I got to play in there', I

[12] Tim Souster, 'Through the Sound Barrier', *Observer Magazine*, 5 October 1969.

[13] Tim Souster, 'Notes on Pop Music', *Tempo* 87 (1968–69), 6.

[14] Souster, 'Through the Sound Barrier'.

> said. 'You must be kidding son', he said. 'They only have proper music in there'. Not that night they didn't.[15]

At the same time as this the English group the Third Ear Band, issued their album *Alchemy*,[16] which seemed to owe more to a language common to experimental music, rather than with rock music.

The 1960s though, were more than just a cultural explosion of rock music, it was the revolutionary ideas, which was to alter and touch the orchestra in various ways. At that time there was a very real belief that the world could be changed and changed for the better simply through people willing it to change. The first expression of this ideal was probably in the protest songs of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Donovan amongst others. By the end of the 1960s the movement had developed into a full counter-culture which briefly believed like the levellers and diggers in mid-seventeenth-century England, that they were a generation born to turn the world upside down. Mixed in with this were the views more associated with revolutionary eschatology in the pursuit of the millennium. There was talk about the Age of Aquarius in a way that might seem terribly naive now, but at that time, was held with deep conviction.

This optimism reached its peak and also its nadir in 1969, ironically the year of the birth of the Scratch Orchestra. The optimism represented by The Woodstock Open Air Free Pop Festival in the States and the Hyde Park Open Air Free Concert in England, where Mick Jagger read from Shelley and released Butterflies into the air. Even the Moon landing belonged to this optimism. In the shadows though, waiting to bring this optimism crashing down, were the Tate-LaBianca murders by Charles Manson and his followers and the killing of a fan by Hells Angels during a performance by the Rolling Stones at the Altamont Pop Festival. Optimism in regard to peaceful changes in society had already been shattered the previous year in 1968, the year not only of the ending of the Prague Spring, but the riots in Paris in May which at one time was thought to be the beginning of a Second French Revolution. By 1969 also, the opposition to the Vietnam War was in full swing. During the previous year for example, there had been a huge demonstration in London outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. Opposition to the war was even to surface at Woodstock with Country Joe & The Fish singing 'I feel like I'm fixing to Die'. 1969 was also to see the return of the troubles in Northern Ireland with the Civil Rights Movement starting the campaign which was to lead to James Callaghan, the Home Secretary, sending the troops in later that year.

These changes in the political mood in 1969 were a precursor of what was to happen in the orchestra itself. In its early days, the Scratch Orchestra seemed bound up with the hippie view of freedom in which every one was welcome, regardless of musical ability, in which all sounds and activities were equal and that in group improvisation anything was permissible (as outlined above). But with the 1960s descent from optimism, the Scratch was to turn on its own optimistic art. By late 1971, discontents had surfaced and discontent while it was open, the orchestra's own late conversion to Marxism can be seen as a reaction to the politics of that time.

Part of the hippie and counterculture experience had turned towards the East. The influence of Zen and Confucius had been important. My own *Rationalization of Realization*, which was played at the Queen Elizabeth Hall concert in November 1970, was strongly influenced by Zen ideas. Of course Cardew's *The Great Learning* was taken from the first seven paragraphs of the Confucian text, *The Great Digest* (later retitled by Cardew as *The Great Learning*). It followed therefore that this interest in the East, and a search of mystic awareness through eastern religions, would inevitably lead to China and from ancient China to the modern communist state.

---

[15] Robert Wyatt, liner notes for Soft Machine, *Live at the Proms 1970* (Reckless, 1988).

[16] Harvest, 1969.

The Scratch Orchestra was not an antidote of the 1960s but its core beliefs and activities shared a common base with the alternative counterculture and had much in common with the alternative society. The libertarian and anarchic freedoms of the late 60s were parallel to the libertarian performance ethos of the early Scratch. The open society was mirrored in the democratisation of music, with verbal and graphic scores taking away the barriers that traditional music and notation presented to many willing performers and therefore allowing virtuoso concert sounds performing alongside non-musical performance. The optimism was to flounder on its own internal contradictions just as the 1960s were to turn sour and the Scratch would then move forward with smaller but more disciplined forces towards a more radical and revolutionary opposition to society.