

Written by Scott McKeating
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Alex Neilson has drummed with an incredibly long list of vital artists like Jandek, Bonnie Prince Billy, Daniel Padden, as well as helping his own regenerating avant-folk outfit Directing Hand. As comfortable channelling the alchemical equation of blood-and-soul improv as he is backing these players, Neilson is in-demand for a reason. Neilson was first [interviewed](#) by Scott McKeating in early 2006 for a now since defunct website, so think of this piece like a Part II of that conversation. Currently on the road with Baby Dee in the US, Alex talked about some of his most famous collaborative work, his first foray into song writing, playing with Baby Dee, a forthcoming C93 tour and his love for the Everly Brothers.

Scott McKeating: So, how is the Baby Dee tour going?

Alex Neilson: Very fun. I am typing this from a really weird warehouse in San Francisco owned by a local odd baw called Chicken John who used to play with G.G Allin. This place really needs to be seen to be believed - kind of looks like a cross between a scene from the *Dark Crystal* and some Z grade gonzo porn flick. Frisco has a weird vibe; it's a bit like a bigger scale Brighton but with crystal meth instead of Babycham. Otherwise, things are fine. It's a great band and Dee's songs are so beautiful. I'm not so keen on the looooooong drives and some of the identikit culture in America.....I guess, the saying goes 100 miles is a long way in the UK and 100 years is a long time in the US, but it is a great privilege to be here and I get to visit NY, LA, New Orleans, Austin, the Yod space etc.

SM: How did you and Ben Reynolds [who will play bass on the UK leg of the tour] get the job?

AN: There were various connections but I was approached by a good friend called Richard Guy who owns a couple of great venues in Coventry (Taylor Johns House and The Tin Angel) to play with her. It was his initial intention to simultaneously rehearse for a UK tour and try to re-record some of Dee's songs, which was a tall order for Ben and me considering the depth and emotional complexities of Dee's music and the time constraints. The recording didn't really work out but I think there are plans to do more recording in Cleveland around winter time.

SM: That new Baby Dee album is incredible, and feels like a really personal album. When you are playing music like that does it feel like you are bringing your own perhaps similar experiences to her lyrics or sinking into her story?

AN: Some the lyrics are so personal and relate to such specific events in the life of Baby Dee that it would be nigh in impossible for me to empathise 100%. I have never fantasised about Jesus assaulting my mother in a confessional booth or witnessed two adult men demolishing a piano with sledge hammers or had my winkie lopped off for that matter. However, I do respond very strongly to the sentiment of a lot of Dee's lyrics. They are so vulnerable and penetrating, with such naked grace and poetic candour that it makes every hair on the back of my neck shudder to hear them. Her delivery reminds me of a cross between Gerard Manly Hopkins, Shirley Temple and Tommy Cooper. Also, her sense of rhythm is very natural to me – very organic and tidal and subject to change according to her emotional necessity at that time. I can just skitch a ride on the back of her leopard print coat tails and hope that all my appendages are intact when the emotional rollercoaster of the song crashes to a halt.

SM: You're well known as a keen collaborator; let's touch on a few of those relationships. How did you first team-up with Daniel Padden?

AN: I met Daniel initially though Neil Campbell - that guy has more connections than Heathrow - after seeing Volcano the Bear perform at the Termite Festival in Leeds. I was really blown away by their performance as they seemed to unite certain superficially disparate musical strands that I was interested in; home spun sea shanties, devolved Art Ensemble style hoe downs, Cabaret Voltaire style actions and weird Wyatt-esque rock. I was very tempted to launch in on the drum kit vacated by Aaron while he was crawling across the floor doing his serpent-perpetually-eating-it's-own-tail-on-yage routine. I was about 18 at the time and about to move to Glasgow and Neil said that Daniel lived there and would put me in touch. He pulled out an address book that made Allen Ginsberg look like Rupert Pupkin and Daniel was receptive to my gushing interest, so to speak. I used to pay night visits to Daniel's flat in Hyndland and we would smoke grass and listen to some of his solo works in progress and we decided to try and play together quite quickly after that.

SM: I noticed some members of your avant-folk Scatter collective are playing with him, has that project come to an end?

AN: My memory is a little hazy as I have played in a lot of bands and smoked a lot of grass since then but I am pretty sure that I recommended Peter, Chris and Aby to Daniel to play in the One Ensemble (those guys were all playing in Scatter at the time).... so blame me for that! As for Scatter, we haven't performed together since the Green Man Festival 05. There was some animosity in us parting ways and I didn't really speak to the other members for a couple of years but we have just started to hangout again and even tentatively jam again so who knows? Maybe if ATP's *Don't Look Back* offered us an exorbitant amount of dough then we could consider it? I have started to play with George and Aby again in a new song based group called The Trembling Bells.

SM: You recently toured with free jazz legend Sonny Simmons, did you manage to get

any recordings of the tour?

AN: There are some recordings from the Tight Meat / Sony Simmons tour. I know that my good friend in London, Pete Coward, recorded the show there and there is a Glasgow recording which I haven't heard yet. I also commissioned a friend to do a DVD of our Bristol performance (Architects of Harmonic Rooms) so we might put together some kind of multimedia package and tour it around IMAXs this summer. That was one of the most laugh-out-loud tours I have ever done. Sonny's irrepressible and incredibly funny, so the combination of him and David Keenan [Tight Meat's sax player] together was really combustive. He came up with nicknames for us instantly on meeting us - I was Red Planet, David was Relentless and George Lyle [double bass player] was Big Chief Thunder Cloud. I read a review of one of the shows which described George as looking like 'an arthritic Alan Silva' which I thought was a good one as well. One of the really funny things about Sonny is how quickly his stamina built up over that week of dates. He could only manage about 20 minutes during the first show but by the third night he was the last man standing - blasting 40 minute sax solo's while the Tight Meat team were languishing on the sidelines panting for dear breath.

SM: You're well known for your role drumming with Jandek, how did the line-up with Phil [Ashtray Navigations] Todd go? Did they differ much to those with Richard Youngs shows?

AN: It was such a thrill to get to play in that context with Phil because he is such a good, old friend and has introduced me to a lot of music over the years and I love his guitar playing. We were like the Ginger Trinity for a couple of nights in Amsterdam and Aarhus. Someone at the gig had travelled from Atlanta to see it and compared us to the Jimi Hendrix band which was pretty cool. I guess I think of the group including Richard as the original and the best though. We got a really good wild energy going after playing shows in succession around ATP 06. We played a great set to about 15 people in Mono in Glasgow but apparently the recording was corrupted so that one was just given up to the air. That was the last time we played in that context.

SM: So, you've just started up a new group, The Trembling Bells, what has pushed you into making the move to writing traditionally structured songs as opposed to improvisational material?

AN: Bob Dylan. Listening to him pretty obsessively over the past year or so helped liberate me from the tyranny of traditional folk music that my life had been gripped by since I was a pluke farming teenager in the late 90s in West Yorkshire. He indicated a way to harness that material more creatively by internalising the language, imagery, tunes, sentiment, and dynamics and use them as cornels of inspiration to extrapolate a whole catalogue of more personal visions. So the anthems of old England are still encoded in the DNA of this new music that I am working on as well as a whole clutch of other renegade spirits (Walt Whitman, Yeats, Blake, David Munrow, lots of crazed rockabilly and anonymous doo wop comps., Sinatra, The Boss etc etc etc). I feel like over the last few years I have been lucky enough to serve some 'apprenticeships' with some uniquely talented song writers (Will Oldham, Baby Dee, Richard Youngs, Alasdair Roberts, Jandek and Josephine Foster) so now I feel ready to try and throw my ticket out the window too.

SM: The tracks I've heard via the session you did for Radio Six International are pretty stupendous, you must have a pile of awful songs that you had to go through creating before you arrived at the good stuff?

AN: Thanks a lot, its a very new experience for me and what you heard is really my first foray into that kind of activity since I was 15. But, like most creative activities, I have a compulsive attitude towards it which can make things frustrating. I really have no concept of musicology or how notes correspond to make chords or any of that stuff - it always seemed like algebra to me. I can hear very clearly in my pud what I want but have to rely on the patience and support of other people to manifest the ideas. It is a very protracted, Beefheartean approach with me humming melody lines etc but the folks involved are very capable and so it is a leap of faith for all involved.

SM: Can you talk a little more specifically about your lyrics? Where did 'Joy as a World' come from?

AN: The lyrics for that song came from my attempt to re-animate my teenagehood and the place I grew up and relocate it to some vague, mythic land where basic human predicaments are enacted and conquered. Kind of like how certain American singers I admire can eulogise their native landscape and elevate places as mundane as the New Jersey Turnpike, the Rock Island Line or Nebraska to these mysterious, death defying netherworlds. I wanted to do the same thing for Yorkshire. I also wanted to write words which actually describe the basic sensation of feeling. I remember years ago reading a quote from Patti Smith on William Blake, that he made 'intense pronouncements on the violence of inspiration'. To try and identify, catalogue and describe musically the actual sensation of feeling inspired was very desirable to me and that was one of the things that initially attracted me to improvisational music.

SM: Have you left / will you've leaving holes in these songs for improvisation?

AN: Not really much room for improvisation as I imagine the material panning out for this project, but I do hope to invest the playing with some of the vitality and singing-into-the-pit emotional acumen I have learnt while investigating improvisatory music for the past decade. I imagine the songs to be very concise with clearly delineated harmonies and lots of backing vocals and brass lines and stuff... like David Munrow conducting the Everly Brothers with Leonard Cohen sitting in ocarina and racking up shots of Lagavulen. Having said that, my attention span isn't really conducive to repeating the same things over and over. So maybe there will be a degree of spontaneity there.

SM: Do you find it easy to slip between the improv mindset and playing preordained tunes? Do you hunger to bust loose?

AN: Not really if it is something that I really like then it's all Charlie Feathers to me. I am lucky enough to have played with some people who I really admire and whose output has really influenced my playing. Such as Will Oldham, who I practically developed my whole drumming

style by listening to his records and playing along. Getting into Will's music seemed to foreshadow an interest in improvisation and traditional folk music before I had any awareness of folk or improv. It seemed to contain the essential elements of these musical forms; the loose, precarious way the songs were presented made it seem like everyone (the players and listeners) were discovering the idea for the first time and in doing so it seemed to draw attention to the actual act of creativity itself. This combined with these arcane melodies and Old Testament, language was very revelatory to me.

SM: What records are you enjoying at the moment?

AN: I have been getting into a lot of new stuff.... lots of early/ medieval music (rocking it like it's 1499!), lots of rockabilly and rock n roll, Frank Sinatra, Everly Brothers, Rocky Erikson, Lou Reed, Dylan and then reconnecting with titans from my teens when I was first becoming aware of alternative culture....The Doors, Leonard Cohen, Captain Beefheart, VU, Nick Cave, Bruce Springsteen.... the usual things that get you through puberty.

SM: The Everly Brothers?! What attracts you to them?

AN: I picked up one of their CDs under Will Oldham's coercion after playing an instore at a record shop in Las Vegas last year, so I have a lot of happy memories of listening to them while careening past the blurry Max Ernst-esque sand stacks in the Nevadan desert. I love how these beau harmonies can be streamlined and accommodated into such compact songs (each track is like two minutes long) with not a stroke out of place. I really like the production too but most of all I have been responding to the sentiment of the songs - they are all so lovelorn and forsaken and that is a river I have been forced to swim in recently. I have been listening to lots of music of a similar hue and now every time I go into a record store I always beast straight into the Oldies bin, so to speak.

SM: What are you're plans for 2008?

AN: I have been doing so much travelling this past couple of years and that doesn't look like abating for the next wee while. I am touring with Josephine Foster and we did some recordings together in Spain last month, touring with Baby Dee in Europe, touring with Six Organs of Admittance in Europe, maybe doing a solo vocal tour in Ireland over the summer. Directing Hand are touring as soon as I get back to the UK in March. My main plan would be to focus on getting some of my songs down as The Trembling Bells and hopefully record an album before the end of the year. I have records coming out with Bonnie Prince Billy, Tight Meat (hopefully Tight Meat will tour too), Jandek, Greg Kelley, Directing Hand and probably some others that I am spacing on just now. I am going to be doing so much flying that my carbon skidmark is going to be the size of Birmingham by the end of the year! I would also like to organise a Peter Bellamy tribute compilation in a similar style to the Lal Waterson tribute album this year that I was involved in. I have also started attending change ringing classes in Glasgow and would like to fulfil a long-term ambition to start to do stained glass and ceramic painting. Maybe have a holiday in my beloved Cornwall or Lisbon if I have time/ money? Oh, and touring with Current 93 in Europe (going to Russia!) and playing with Rickie Lee Jones for the support too.

Brainwashed - Alex Neilson: Pronouncements on Inspiration

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SM: What will your role be on the forthcoming C93 dates?

AN: I am going to play drums with Current 93 on their forthcoming European tour. I am really excited about it because David (Tibet) and I have been talking about it for a few years and now our schedules have finally aligned and it is coming to fruition. I am not sure if I can disclose the other band members at this point but it is a really diverse and exciting bunch of people and should be a really fun experience. There is some talk about maybe contributing to their next record but that is someway in the future. Dee has heard some of the basic tracks so far and I am very excited to hear it.