History of the LMC

Clive Bell

"It's funny we do all these interviews with Melody Maker and NME and the fanzines, and we try to talk about this real underground of London, improvisers like Evan and Derek, Lol, Mahola, the whole African contingent—and of course none of them have ever heard this music. It's kind of a bummer: it's such an underground music. It's very serious but it's also very humorous. It's very alive."


In the end of the 90s, the free music world can still seem a wonderfully well-kept secret, a genuinely underground art activity. For 25 or 30 years there's been a scene there, all those club concerts list usted monthly on the London Musician's Collective Calendar, the LMC Annual Festivals—but is it a musical genre? Sometimes it feels like you can pin it down. At Derek Bailey's annual Company series, even though the musicians ranged from classical French horn player to thrash guitarist, you could see a simple listen-and-get-on-with-it approach. But even here the low key presentation, the strange theatre of encounters between musicians who had never met, and the outbursts of completely unplanned musical brilliance all combined to bewilder and undercut neat theory. The qualities of Company were often down to Bailey's personality and style. As in the world of jazz, strong individuals stamped their character on musical encounters. And the LMC was born because individuals wanted to band together for everyone's benefit.  

"The group of people that were working around the SME (Spontaneous Music Ensemble) at that time—John Stevens, Derek Bailey, Trevor Watts, Paul Rutherford—were working on a method that I could call 'atomistic', breaking the music down into small component parts and piecing them together again in a collective way, so as to de-emphasize the solistic nature of improvisation and replace it by a collective process. But at the same time A&M had what I would call a "laminar" way of working, where although the solo had been lost and the emphasis was on a collective sound, an orchestral sound if you like, it was not done by breaking the music into small components but by contributing layers which would fit together and make a new whole."

Evan Parker, talk at Actual Music Festival, ICA, August 1980.

"An obstinate clot of innovation", was how the Wire magazine described the LMC in 1997. The LMC has shown remarkable powers of survival, but it was not the first grouping of its kind. Richard Leigh: "The Musicians' Cooperative was set up as a pressure group for a clearly defined set of musicians, usually referred to as the 'first generation', of improvisers. These included Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, Paul Lyttton, John Stevens, Tony Oxley, Howard Riley, Paul Rutherford, Barry Guy and Trevor Watts" (Quote from Resonance Vol 2, No 2). This was around 1971, and concerts were held at the Little Theatre Club in Garrick Yard and the Unity Theatre in Camden Town.

Then, in April 1975, came Musics magazine, which Martin Davidson remembers as resulting from a phone conversation between himself, his wife Mandy and Evan Parker. The editorial board in summer 1975 was Bailey, Parker, Steve Beresford, Max Boucher, Paul Burwell, Jack Cooke, Peter Cusack, Hugh Davies, Mandy and Martin Davidson, Richard Leigh, John Russell, David Toop, Philipp Wachsmann and Colin Wood. I remember Colin Wood remarking that Musics was the first thing this crowd had found that they could all agree about. And I'm sorry about these lists, but if you want to make enemies with a history like this, all you have to do is leave out someone's name.

"STOP PRESS REVIEW SECTION: Three years ago ten music students from Cologne sat in honeshow, one end of fine Wren church in Smith Square, sang ninth chord all evening, sound mixed and rarely left by man in nave. Last Saturday ten religious men from Tibet sat in honeshow on same spot, sang tenth chord all evening, no sound mixture."

Colin Wood in Musics No 4, October 1975.

Musics came out six times a year and ran for 23 issues. In its coverage of improvised and non-western music alongside performance art, it reflected the broad interests of a so-called 'second generation' of improvisers, and provided a convivial focus point. Interested outsiders were welcome to share in the work of pasting the magazine together. In those pre-word-processing days pasting meant paste, as well as glue, scalpels and unwashed mugs. These days the unwashed mugs are the only survivors of the era.

"The LMC was formed by the slightly newer lot of people, a generation which had the experience of enormous power. Suddenly the mysteries of group improvisation and experimental music were opened up—velts fell from eyes, and the sheer joy of music-making seemed accessible to all. I recall one musician warning me that after a John Stevens workshop he had observed that most of the male participants had erections. I couldn't really see what was so wrong with this—maybe this music wasn't so cerebral and abstract as some people made out!"

In 1975/76 the London Musicians Collective emerged from a series of meetings, and mailed out its first newsletter in August 1976. The Collective was separate from Musics magazine, but involved many of the same people. It was hoped that an organisation would carry more weight in dealings with other organisations, institutions and the press. And these musicians had a lot in common: nowhere to play, and no wider recognition of their music.

A major difference from the Musicians' Co-op was the LMC's openness to anyone who wanted to join, Richard Leigh again: "It was always seen as a network drawing more and more people from varied backgrounds into the scene". Improvisers were dipping their fingers into the many pies of mixed media, dance, film and performance art. And in fact at this time, just before punk and its DIY ethic erupted, there was a remarkable burst of energy in the underground arts scene. Dancers founded the X6 Dance Collective and New Dance magazine at Butler's Wharf, while film makers started the London Film Makers Coop. These too have survived and are with us today, in the form of the Chisenhale Dance Space and the Lux Cinema in Hoxton Square. For musicians, the venue crisis was becoming acute. The Little Theatre Club had folded and the Unity Theatre burned down. The usual expedient of hiring a room in a pub, college or community hall was dependent on the whim of the landlord, and would not allow performances to be run on the musicians' terms. A space with maximum flexibility was needed if the work was to develop freely.

"We had been looking for premises (I remember surreally dealings with the Diocesan Committee for Redundant Churches). Actually a lot of the connections between the LMC and UMC happened through informal contacts, for instance I had fallen in love with Annabel Nicolson when she and the Film Co-op were still in the Dairy in Prince of
We trivialise each other's contributions. The collective is a morass of impersonality. For many others, the collective spirit was a little, er, exuberant. I remember watching some way as not especially to do with the idea, as the LMC 'office' and meetings were a little, er, exuberant. I remember watching

Improvised music, but simply "astonishing...a remarkable, and for the next ten years an average of 200 public performances a year were organised, almost entirely by unpaid administration. Nearly every day of the year the space was in use for rehearsals. This was a musicians' initiative, run on musicians' terms, so the chaos was often high, but there was plenty going on. The National Jazz Centre in the 1980s, by contrast, spent half a decade and untold sums of money not organising a single gig.

By anyone's standards the LMC building was a flexible performance space, little more than a shell packed with potential. Members spent hours darning all over it, trying to render it habitable. Sylvia Hallett installed electricity and wiring, and Annabel Nicholson contributed a wooden floor from her flat to build a wall. The floor was as hard as you like: you could flood it, light a bonfire on it, burn the concrete rocks off it. And after the show no staff would grumble, because there were no staff to grumble.

"was the LMC really like? Personally I always imagined it:"

On my second day here I went to an Environmental Music Festival, where I met some musicians who played on canal boats, and others who played the piano with their feet, and I thought: what a different attitude towards art, so playful and free.

1. The wall blocking the railway bridge at the rear of the building has been demolished.
2. Jumble leftovers are to be cleared from the loft.
3. Health inspector and surveyors will be contacted about the toilet (to be installed). It was noted that relations with the Film Co-op are deteriorating.

TOILET. The Gulbenkian Foundation say nothing, about our application for financial assistance.

DOORS: Stuart Boardman will put handles on the doors to the performing space."

LMC Newsletter, December 1979.

But behind all the glamour and the razzmataz, what was the LMC really like? Personally I always found it a rich source of friendly and healthily eccentric people. Joining was like running away to join the circus. The place was a model of self-help and an opportunity to experiment in ways impossible elsewhere. As an organisation, it was most riven by factional strife when the membership was most active, of course. A dead building it was a bottomless pit into which you could pour your unaided time. There was always some administrative headache to deal with the membership of running a London experimental venue in a bare loft. Noise: the laundry downstairs and the Kings Cross main line out back ensured there was noise coming in. As for noise going out, there were flats across the road, our soundproofing consisted of closing the windows, and some of the concerts were a little, er, exuberant. I remember watching the Dead Kennedys building an immense PA one sunny afternoon, in preparation for an unbilled gig which had people queuing around the block. I cycled away before the mayhem was unleashed. Then there were fire regulations ("You can't do that in here"), charitable status ("You can't give you subsidy to do that"), and a lack of toilets. There were toilets in the Film Co-op next door, but there was a British Rail toilet under the building, there was a toilet in the pub opposite... OK, let's admit there were no toilets. This became a conundrum, a problematic fortress against which successive waves of voluntary admn would charge uphill, only to reel back down in stunned defeat. Benefit concerts, grant applications, sympathetic landlords—nothing seemed to work. Let's just hope it added to our beatnik loft-dwelling cred.

"When we joined the LMC two years ago we did so in the belief that it was a collective—built on the political tenet of collectivism. We find in actuality a club up a hill to celebrate individualism. We feel that the newsletter must call for collective involvement from its 'collective' membership, yet in doing so we are accused of being sectarian. However, under the constant cringing criticism that we receive, we shall continue to coordinate the newsletter and until removed by the LMC participating in a lively criticism of any member who had actually done any work. The problems of collectivity are well known. These days we shake our heads and think we know better, but the LMC's factional struggles were a simple result of a large number of musicians all being passionately involved and trying to get a hand on the steering wheel. In this piece I am deliberately giving my personal view of what the LMC was all about—in the early days there were many different agendas. Many British improvisers were, and still are, highly politicised, in all the different Marxist and anarchist hues. For many others, the collective spirit still expresses important truths about the cooperative and non-hierarchical nature of improvised music, and the importance of musicians taking creative control of their own music. A glance at life inside an orchestra, with its composer-driven hierarchy, is usually enough to remind us of the alternative."

The dynamics of the current magazine meetings depend more on pointed silences, emotional blackmail, mumbled aside and semi-sneers than on direct statements. The Music collective is frightened of growth, frightened of taking and using power. There is no sense of history, of where the music is from and why people play it. The collective is a morass of impersonality. We trivialise each other's contributions.


In 1980 factional struggle and good old-fashioned personal rowing resulted in several resignations from the LMC and the demise of Musics magazine.
Burwell’s friends were hovering nervously around pyrotechnics and barely controlled arc-welding new music. The place was packed for this riot of Ensemble, climax of Sylvia Hallett’s 1983 debut performance by the Bow Gamelan and downright life-threatening event was the Bop Club in the LMC. Possibly the most spectacular of all the many “floor percussionists” might be setting street whenever the wind got up. Inside, one of the roof above the entrance, singing eerily to the months Max Eastley’s Aeolian harps were fixed to pinging string quartet, and a discussion led by anthropologist and film maker Hugh Brody. For several years of concerts, we were informed we had no standing in! In total part one will cost £9,000... As long as last September we discussed the possibility of a...
dear to common sense, but maybe it had never been ambitious enough. The first sign that this might be about to change was a small glossy leaflet splashed in orange and white, advertising the LMC "Autumn Collection," a series of ten concerts from September to December 1991. Someone had invented word processing and graphic design, and the LMC had noticed. Then came the December newsletter—in place of the one-sheet catalogue of despair, cascading the membership for its lethargy, this was a 16 page magazine bullying with record reviews, advertising and a substantial interview with Alabama guitarist Dave Williams. There was even a trailer for an interview with 84 year old calypso singer The Roaring Lion, to be published in Variant magazine. Phil England and Ed Baxter had arrived.

"The venue was unconventional—a swimming pool, complete with water and hot, chlorinated atmosphere. The number of acts was uncommon—nine, and to describe their repertoire as diverse would be a highly misleading understatement. Judged in brutally logistic terms, the event was a resounding success. The auditorium was packed, the concert started almost on time; the proceedings managed to accommodate the activities of a BBC TV crew without serious disruption. I think we can all agree that the general impression was more reminiscent of a night at the music hall than a concert of leading-edge state of the art experimentation. But that's no bad thing in my opinion."


LMC funding had been devolved from the Arts Council to the London Arts Board. By 1991 I suspect that LAB saw an opportunity to offload a flaky client, and more or less threatened to withdraw funding unless the LMC proved itself to be more than an ageing crew of indignant but impotent improvisers. Nick Couldry assembled a new board of directors, including newcomer Ed Baxter, who had been looking into Cambewell Bus Garage or Butlers Wharf as new LMC bases. Baxter picked up the LAG gauntlet and set about promoting events much more ambitious in scale.

"Flume" was intended to create a splash, as it were, about the potential still within the LMC. United in the swimming pool were new arrivals like Siâned Jones and John Grieve alongside old favourites Charles Hayward, David Toop and Max Eastley, and Frank Chickens. For many the eerie beauty of Lol Coshill's bald and bespectacled figure playing an almost submerged soprano saxophone was enough. Above them all was the kind of crazy avant garde extravaganza the media loves, and the coverage was enormous.

The next step was the First Annual Festival of Experimental Music, five days in the Conway Hall, Holborn, in May 1992. Fresh-faced youths shared the stage with names from the jazzic early seventies. Visitors from abroad notably included Ikue Mori (New York drum machinist, formerly of Arto Lindsay's DNA) and Sainkho Namtchalak (Mongolian throat singer wearing vinyl LP headdress). Baxter had the vision to see that if the LMC's health could heel weight of sight of relief: "Cardew was wise to stake out and defend his ground by spelling out the social dimension to his music. His purpose was not, of course, to defend "his" property rights, but to fight a corner and to express something human, faced with what Phil Ochs called the "terrible heartless men" who still run our lives. Cardew's music is not concerned with entertainment or self-gratification, and I suppose in the wake of the collapse of communism and the triumph of capital (don't you just hate it when that happens?) few will take an interest in these recordings. Listening to them now, I am overwhelmed, rendered inarticulate and revitalised."

Great stuff. The newspaper is full of details of how long "Starlight Express" has been running. It's all quite clear. "There is only one lie, there is only one truth. Whey hey!"


Later that year (September 1992) the burgeoning festival was finally upgraded, superposing like, into the pilot edition of Resonance magazine, under the editorship of Keith Cross and Mick Ritchie. Picking up the threads 12 years after the demise of Resonance, the magazine improved even more afterwards. Seven years later its thought-provoking mix of interviews, reviews and theoretical articles now comes with the tempting bonus of a cover CD. Unlike the promotional fluff of most cover CDs, however, Resonance features recordings unavailable elsewhere, usually culled from LMC live events. The magazine has been creatively steered through the hands of a series of guest editors by Phil England. By keeping the editorial team small it has avoided the factional gang warfare that crippled Musics. And the sightlines have always been aimed wider than the confines of experimental music, trying rather to locate that music within a wider debate about culture.

Phil England became part time administrator in the summer of 1992, as the LMC stopped squatting in members, flats, and took office space in Kings Cross. The office moved to Community Music in Farrington for several years, and has now settled, south of the Thames for the first time, in the Leathermarket complex near London Bridge. Ed Baxter tried to give up his programming post in autumn 1992, and has been trying unceasingly to give it up ever since, as the LMC's activities have grown ever larger in ambition.

Meetings open to the whole membership were finally abandoned as hopelessly inefficient—"If project coordinators failed to turn up the meeting must not be attended by anyone who fancied a debate on the purpose of the organisation, while practical work would be shelved. A team of directors with particular responsibilities was tried instead. Any member could still put themselves forward as a possible director. Slightly modified, this system continues today, with about eight directors having skills in marketing, law, website management, and so on. The AGM remains a chance for all members to kick up a fuss."

There are only four or so musicans currently among the directors, and this is a direct result of the Chartist Commission ruling that they cannot be remunerated for LMC activities; in other words, no paid gigs for directors. I suspect this is actually strengthening and professionalising the organisation, as directors bring in a wide range of skill and experience from the outside world. At recent meetings directors have virtually been quizzed up to make professional-style presentations involving laminated boards and highlighter pens. No laptop animations or corporate sweeteners yet, but it can only be a matter of time. Discussion has been tightly focused, pragmatic and good humoured—as a veteran of Collective meetings it all feels odd, but strangely sane.

Backed up by a team of dedicated work hard and work (Rob Storey, Dave Ross, Mick Ritchie, Steve Noble, Caroline Kraabel et al), England and Baxter have been administering and steering the LMC since 1992, which is considerably longer than any comparable team. Having observed them at work in the office, I have nothing but praise for their ability to combine mind-numbing paperwork with the seizing of initiatives. These are ferociously creative people who would have a major or impact on whichever organisation they found themselves in, and the LMC is lucky to have felt their boots on its backside. Of course this tiresomely positive view is my own—feathers have been ruffled. Resignations have been handed in from time to time, but no LMC in 1999 has no shortage of vision or ambition.

"Running throughout Resonance 107.3 FM was Peter Cusack's London Soundscape. Listeners were asked to send in or tell of their favourite London sounds. Surprisingly some of these included arcade machines and even traffic. From the vast response Big Ben was the favourite, but it was often the case that a collection of sounds was chosen. Who ever hears a sound on its own anyway? The recording of Deptford Creek was particularly memorable with the power station hum and the Thames brought together.

Tom Wallace writing about Resonance 107.3 FM radio, in Resonance magazine Vol 1 No 1, autumn 1998.

In spring 1999 it feels like the LMC is pausing to catch its breath after a year of extraordinary activity. It was hard to believe there was not a secret back room packed with full time workers somewhere, rather than the slender part time employment of two people. The Annual Festival, increasing steadily in international stature every year since 1992, finally moved out of Conway Hall to the South Bank Centre. Charlemagne Palestine and Pauline Oliveros visited from the States to great acclaim—their first appearances here in 25 and 17 years respectively. Vainio, Fennesz and Rehberg divided the audience with their fierce brand of Powerbook-driven electronics. Canny fundraising ensured that for the first time the Festival actually came in on budget.

Resonance 107.3 FM was the Collective's very own radio station broadcasting for four weeks in June 1998 as part of John Peel's Meltdown Festival. This colossal and unique project, instigated by Phil England, was London's first station dedicated to Radio Art. Over 300 people took part in creating 600 hours of material, including live broadcasts, children's shows, drama and historical works of radio art from station archives around the world. Described by New York's Village Voice as "the best radio station in the world", Resonance FM was nominated for the Sony Music Station of the Year Award. Provocative and often wild, this was the LMC at its most reckless and visionary.

Fifty programmes were specially made for...
Resonance FM at LMC Sound, the LMC’s new studio in Brixton, which opened formally in November 1998. A carefully nurtured Lottery funding application has resulted in a fully equipped digital studio, which now bids in the market for commercial work and enables Collective members to devise recording projects there, or simply master their CDs. A small team of enthusiastic engineers is kept under control by project manager Mick Ritchie. As I write, the studio is in the midst of recording 30 hour-long shows dealing with London’s alternative music scene, to be broadcast weekly in the New York area by WFMU station. A sharp learning curve for all involved, hopefully these shows will be taken up elsewhere. Also launched in November 1998 was the website <www.l-m-c.org.uk>. This is not only a source of information about concerts and current activities, but also a potential arena for creative work. The first live webcast by LMC musicians took place in February 1999, and the appointment of a website Artist In Residence is imminent.

“...but again you see, John Edwards has a repertoire of sounds—a language which tries to subvert the instrument (double bass) in a way in which most classical players don’t ever engage. If I am working with improvisers I don’t want them to sound as if they improvising. This is the frustration about being a control freak. For instance, when John produces these fantastic sounds, I would rather place them exactly where I want them as opposed to where John might place them at the time. This is in no way a criticism of John’s playing, his playing is wonderful. But it is the idea of placing a particular phrase and perhaps repeating it or putting it in a different area.”


While writing this piece I arranged to meet LMC administrator Phil England to find out what was currently on his mind. Not so much an interview, more a rumination over bowls of yogurt soup in a 24 hour Turkish café. England stressed the strategic thinking behind much LMC activity in the last seven years. Fighting against any tendency to parochialism, the strategy has been to raise the profile of the music to the highest visibility possible, as a way of benefiting the alternative musical community and its individual constituents. Rather than talking always to its own audience, the emphasis is on reaching out and placing LMC activities in a wider context of cultural debate. The way that improvisers work and collaborate locks in to many other cultural subgenres and tiny currents in society, and music must be part of that wider picture.

This strategy becomes all the more crucial given the chronic undervaluing and underfunding of this musical area. Inviting saxophonist Evan Parker onto a TV arts programme to react to a Jackson Pollock painting? It makes perfect sense to me, but it’s unthinkable because Parker’s entire musical genre is virtually invisible. Phil England points out how the Arts Council’s own reports recommend exactly the type of musical activity promoted by the LMC, and how these reports are then ignored by Arts Council panels. This music, so distinctively British in some ways, is supported by a fraction of the funding offered to contemporary composition or electronic music. Is it because it’s a little more working class? Because it doesn’t use as much sexy technology? Or simply that it deals too much in the provocative, the unexpected, the damn weird?

At a grassroots level the music carries on all year round in a gaggle of club spaces run by persistent promoters. A new LMC initiative aims to help out with publicity or PA equipment for these small but established clubs. Established, but not necessarily cosy—the last time I played one was at Hugh Metcalfe’s long running Klinker, in an Islington pub. After some initial confusion (Hugh was convinced his van and PA had been stolen, having forgotten where he had parked it), the evening’s mix of performance, poetry and music ran smoothly enough. I played a delicately coloured duet with violinist Susanna Ferrar, enjoyable chamber music if I say so myself. Then the final act was so ear-bleedingly loud I had to flee the room, and immediately a fight broke out: broken glass, a wet floor, a half-strangled promoter. As I stepped out into the cool night air half a dozen police rushed past me into the performing space. At least no one accuses the Klinker of opting for the easy life.


Above Left: Keith Rowe 94
Above Right: Alan Tomlinson and Sainkho Namchylak 92
Left: Paul Burwell & Steve Noble 93, Elliot Sharp & Zeena Parkins 93, Maggie Nichols & Pete Noble 93