

## EXOTICA, AMBIENCE AND PACIFICISM

### A Dialogue with Mike Cooper

PHILIP HAYWARD

Over the last thirty five years British guitarist and vocalist Mike Cooper has performed and recorded in a variety of genres. Initially a Blues guitarist and singer-songwriter, his work has diversified to include a range of avant garde rock and improvisatory musics and, most recently, film-making. Over the last decade he has also worked as a music journalist, writing features for magazines such as *fRoots* (formerly *Folk Roots*) on a variety performers (including a number of Pacific musicians). As both a performer and writer he has occupied an unusual niche, being willing to engage with both western experimental and so-called 'Roots' music styles (such as Hawaiian lap-steel guitar playing) and critical ideas about these circulating in various journalistic and scholarly contexts.

The following exchange was prompted by the release of Cooper's *Kiribati* CD (1999), specified on its cover as an album of "ambient exotica soundscapes", and engages with a number of issues raised in the recent *Perfect Beat* anthology *Widening The Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music* (Hayward [ed], 1999). In particular, the dialogue addresses the motivation for Cooper's production of (various kinds of) musical exotica; his perception of exotica's relation to various source musics; and the degree to which extra-musical elements have influenced his work. The final part of the dialogue draws these themes together in a discussion of *Kiribati's* address to a specific cultural and environmental issue.

[NB The text below comprises an edited form of a series of e-mail communications which took place during November and December 1999.]

**PH:** *You have been a colleague of British instrumentalist and sometime conceptual pop musician David Toop in the London experimental music scene over the last twenty years. The particular generic identification you give the Kiribati CD on its sleeve is one which combines the themes and preoccupations of Toop's two widely read books, Ocean of Sound (1995) which is largely (though not exclusively) concerned with various kinds of ambient music (and musical ambience), and*

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*Exotica (1999) (which is self-descriptive in its address). Toop's work always reads very much to me like a musicianly, intuitive approach to making – a certain kind of -sense of a variety of musical styles (rather than the more analytical approaches journals such as this adopt). How much do you think that your musical work on Kiribati, and other recent projects are informed by, and/or have been in dialogue with, Toop's critical writings?*

**MC:** My relationship with Toop's work goes back to an article I read in *Studio International* magazine in the mid 1970s. I was living in Spain at the time, at a point of career and artistic crisis. I had been a folk/blues/singer-songwriter with quite high profile and had recorded seven LPs, five of which were recorded for the major label Pye/Dawn. During my time with them my records had become increasingly more 'adventurous' and Pye dropped me after I formed a band called Machine Gun Company in 1972 and started to play and record a type of folk rock music.

A friend sent me a special issue of *Studio International* devoted to 'Art and Experimental Music' [v192n984, November 1976]. There was an article by Paul Burwell on his 'site specific' percussion and one by Toop which also mentioned Steve Beresford and The London Musicians Collective (LMC). The same issue also had articles by Brian Eno (a piece about Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning*) and an interview with visual artist/composer Tom Phillips, about his 'opera' *Norma*. I was so excited with what I read about Toop, Burwell, Beresford and the LMC's activities and improvising and environmental music and performance art etc, that I decided to return to the UK and try to get involved with these people and what they were doing.

The message they gave me was to have confidence in my intuition; and their interest in sound as music and improvising without recourse or reference to Afro American music also strongly appealed. My records for Pye had included some of Britain's cutting edge jazzers, such as the South Africans Louis Maholo and Dudu Pakwana, Mike Osborne, Harry Miller, Tony Coe, Mike Gibbs etc and this was very exciting. But I had a problem with jazz. I knew I would never be a jazz musician, but I loved what improvising produced. The LMC were improvising without playing jazz. It was European. I had suspected that such things were taking place but I had been moving in the wrong circles and keeping the wrong company to experience it.

It was a great comfort and inspiration to read those articles. I returned to the UK in 1978/9 and got involved with the LMC. Toop, Burwell and Beresford were a great inspiration but I never actually played with them until much later. Burwell joined me, for short while, in *Beating Time*, a group formed by saxophonist Tim Hill, in 1984. I have never been in a permanent group with Toop, only playing with him in collective improvising sessions at the LMC.

Toop's writing, over the years has certainly influenced me. He wrote often in *Musics* magazine, the LMC's little publication, and then in the short lived *Collusions*. It was he who introduced me to the writings of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead

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for instance, which stimulated my interest in Pacific culture. We also share an eclectic approach to certain ways of putting music together, especially improvised music.

As to how much *Kiribati* is actually influenced by Toop's recent writing, well, I think not a lot in fact, other than giving it perhaps a generic context. The actual musical/sound elements that I use on *Kiribati* have been in place in my music for a long time. For instance the use of 'nature sounds' you can hear on my *Do I Know You?* LP from 1970, where I used bird calls, the sound of waves on the beach and church bells. These elements also feature in my work with Lol Coxhill and Roger Turner in our group The Recedents – a free improvised music ensemble that we have had since the early eighties. I suspect that this is one of the elements that attracted the attention of Steve Feld to a performance of ours in Canada, a few years ago. I'm certainly glad that it did, since Feld's writing has been enormously helpful to me, perhaps more than Toop's in fact! The 'lift up over sounding' concept of music from Steve's writings on the Kaluli people put a lot of stuff in place for me.

Toop sees himself as a curator of music and in that role his writing has helped me certainly. By pointing out some stuff that I might not have otherwise found, writers, books, music, records and subsequently ideas and thoughts, presented in a manner that a non-academic person like myself finds approachable. My background is totally non-academic, I didn't go to university or college, I'm very intuitive as a musician, so yes, that's an appeal in Toop's writing for me, for sure.

**PH:** *Although there have been elements that might be seen as exoticist in your early work – at least in terms of Toop's inclusive usage of the term – the first 'full flowering' of this appears to have been your Uptown Hawaiians project. When I first heard the ensemble, I found their approach quite disconcerting. You were obviously not following the path of respectful affirmation pursued by Ry Cooder in his work with Gabby Pahinui in the 1970s (ie re-legitimising Hawaiian music for western audiences after several decades of extreme critical neglect). I also didn't get any sense that you were consciously revisiting the Hawaiiantesque style of cocktail lounge exoticism popularised by Martin Denny and Arthur Lyman in the late 1950s and 1960s. There seemed to be another sensibility at work. The Uptown Hawaiians seemed almost 'burlesque' in their approach, more like exponents of a latterday kind of circus music in its zest and attack. What were the original ideas informing the Hawaiiantesque/exoticist orientation of the ensemble? And how did these develop as the group performed together?*

**MC:** When I established the Uptown Hawaiians I was very wary of attempting anything 'ethnically Hawaiian' and was more interested in working with hapa haole music. Before we recorded the LP I didn't know anyone else in Britain who played Hawaiian music (although I managed to trace Kealoha Life, from British 1940s/50s Hawaiian band Felix Mendelssohn and His Serenaders – who I remember hearing on the radio as a kid – at the time we were recording). The majority of the records I had heard were those low-budget label 'Music for Pleasure' ones. I knew Sol

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Hoopii of course, but not much of his material was available, and the material that Gabby Pahinui had recorded with Ry Cooder.

The end product of the Uptown Hawaiians (as with most of my group projects) is the result of its members, not a conscious decision to play a certain music in a certain way at all. I have always chosen people to work with whom I can trust to come up with something that I like without my telling them what to do. This approach is what is referred to as a 'self-regulating system' I believe.

The members of the Uptown Hawaiians are a very interesting collection. I was introduced to French guitarist Cyril Lefebvre by Jean Rochard of Nato Records, for whom we recorded the album. Lefebvre had recorded three albums in the late 1970s and early 1980s which had Hawaiian pieces on them. His interests are very eclectic, diverse, and even arcane (see my interview with him in *fRoots* [Cooper, 1999]). He is, for instance, a member of the School of Pataphysics founded by Alfred Jarry. Lol Coxhill, who plays sax and also sings, as well as being an excellent improviser, also has a history in performance art, film performance and is a very funny comedian. Steve Beresford is also a improviser with a musical history which includes working with the Scratch Orchestra, The Portsmouth Sinfonia, Derek Bailey, Han Benninck, Prince Far I and The Slits. He also writes TV and film music and songs. Max Eastley has performed live and recorded with Toop and is one of the most important sound sculptors in the world. These four musicians were important ingredients in the end result. Frank Ricotti, the marimba player, was a member of the Mike Gibbs Orchestra in the 1970s and had often played on those cheap 'Music For Pleasure' style Hawaiian albums.

None of us, not even me, had played this particular style of music before the recording sessions. We never rehearsed beforehand and there were no charts of anything, it was all very spontaneous. I can remember asking Beresford to play like his favourite rock and roll or Country and Western player and he would respond to that. We all share a healthy love of kitsch, Dada, surrealism and the absurd, it's true. We all share an interest in humour in music and Spike Jones is one of our heroes.

**PH:** *If the Uptown Hawaiians represent one aspect of your address to Pacific themes and ideas, your semi-improvised performances of music to Robert Flaherty's silent film Moana and Murnau's Tabu represent another. What would you say is the link between the two approaches?*

**MC:** I've always been interested in finding ways of presenting styles and genres of music to an audience that wouldn't usually listen to them. Ways to 'subvert' people into listening to things, so to speak. Film is a way of attracting people into the music. I'm always amazed at what people will sit through, soundwise, in the cinema without consciously being aware of it. I suppose, in a way, that is part of the magic of cinema. *Tabu* was the first silent film that I attempted to do as a live performance. I wanted my version to be as modern and exotic as Murnau's film would have been at the time it was released. I mixed up very disparate styles and genres, from very

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Pacific-sounding lap steel and slack guitar things to very un-Pacific electronic loops, hip-hop drum machine sounds and even free improvised sections. My music for *Moana* was essentially similar in approach.

**PH:** *Not content with putting music soundtracks to these (visually/thematically pre-constituted) films you also expanded your creative oeuvre by making your own collage film – Planet Pacific: Pieces of Heaven (1998). How did you assemble this and what relationship does it have to the kind of visual and narrative approaches in Murnau's and Flaherty's films?*

**MC:** The title of my film comes from a book by Nancy Phelan, who was a visual aids officer in the Pacific in the 1950s. The book is her memoirs of working in the area and then her impressions of returning there after forty years away. My film has little to do with Flaherty's or Murnau's approaches to film making. If I was influenced by anyone in making *Planet Pacific*, it would be Chris Marker. He is my absolute film making hero, along with Raul Ruiz. *Sunless (Sans Soleil)* was the first film of his I ever saw. A quote from Ian Christie's sleeve notes to the [UK] video cassette for *Sunless* sums up the approach I aspire to in my film making:

*His material is apparently that of extensive exotic travelling, always with a camera in hand to catch a face in the crowd, a revealing kitsch icon or a poignant tableau. His method is that of the master editor combining footage shot in different continents and decades to make a telling comparison or a disturbing contrast.*

Long before I actually saw *Sunless* I copied a review that I saw of the film into one of my notebooks in Heidelberg one day. It was by Terrence Rafferty in [the UK film magazine] *Sight and Sound*:

*... the chronic melancholy of the traveller, who's always leaving places and people behind, places which, from a distance, cannot be fully imagined distinct from the consciousness of those who remain ... the traveller, better than anyone else knows that isolation from others means not seeing the same things everyday.*

That statement made me seek out the film and Marker's work in general.

*Planet Pacific* was shot in Tahiti, Morea, Raratonga, New Zealand, Australia, Hawai'i, Fiji and Italy and was inspired by an article in the June 1997 issue of the *New Internationalist* magazine about the ecology of the Pacific. One passage struck me in particular:

*The South Pacific was the last habitable place on Earth to be settled by human beings. It is now becoming the first place to be made uninhabitable.*

I present the film with live music and read my text live as well. Some of the text is factual, some memories, travel notes and some found text, and it was all shot on Super-8 film. I would like to think that I present it in much the same way as some of the early travelling cinema and lantern slide shows, like Frank Hurley or Irene West and Madam Riviera and others did. I shoot film in a fairly random sort of way, in fact, sometimes very random, like the way Robert Frank used to take photos,

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without looking through the viewfinder at all! I call my personal record label Hipshot with reference to that way of filming.

The music I have performed for *Planet Pacific*, so far, has been similar to the *Tabu* and *Moana* soundtracks. But I am working on the idea of putting the *Kiribati* pieces together with the *Planet Pacific* film and reading over that. Presenting those silent films with live music has made me want to present all my music with visuals, something which I am working on very hard.

**PH:** *The first thing that interested me about the Kiribati album, even before I played it, was the juxtaposition of the two textual/instructional aspects of packaging – the generic description “ambient exotica soundscapes” and then the statement:*

The Republic of Kiribati is an Island Nation State in the Pacific Ocean. During the summer of 1999 two atolls in the Kiribati chain disappeared beneath the surface after storms. Although the palms are often 25 metres tall the islands themselves, made from gravel and sand, are only 4 and 5 metres above sea level. A rise in the ocean level of just 15cms, as has happened over the last 100 years due to global warming, is a disaster.

*Unless we are to take the two aspects, the album’s title and the liner note as somehow separate, disassociated from the actual music, there seems to be the implication of your “ambient exotica soundscapes” being able to variously invoke and/or communicate a specific (and complex) eco-political issue. With specific regard to the (self-acknowledged) exoticist aspect of the music, I find this curious. Although aspects of the exoticist work of Van Dyke Parks (particularly on albums such as Tokyo Rose [1984]) and Haruomi Hosono (particularly on the so-called ‘Soy Sauce Music’ trilogy of albums) can be clearly seen to address quite specific and complex cultural-political topics, they almost always attempt and achieve this through juxtapositions (and cumulative) meanings generated by the combination of lyrics, vocals (and vocal personas), musical arrangements and production sounds. By concentrating on instrumental work on Kiribati, the only overt subject reference is the sleeve note. How do you think listeners can either understand the link between the music and the specific subject/topic of Kiribati and/or construct such a link? Or is it enough that you pose one by the cover instructions and music, and thereby invite the listener to make an imaginative, empathic connection to the specifically identified topic?*

**MC:** I don’t expect people to make any connections with any eco-political ideology through the music. I want them to listen to the music and enjoy it and if they happen to read the notes maybe think about what is written there. I am not saying that the music isn’t political though. I think a lot of music is political by implication.

There were a couple of things I thought about when making this CD. One was Gavin Bryars’ *The Sinking of The Titanic* (1976). Not a piece of music that I particularly like but the idea of music going on forever in the water, slowly distorting more and more as time passes, was a strong image I worked with. Another was the sound of the aftermath of whatever disaster is going to happen – post Armageddon

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soundscapes. People who have bought my CD, mostly, haven't heard of Kiribati, or where it is, so the information was a surprise for them. A further surprise was that they probably thought it was going to be 'tropical paradise' music or some tragic minor key thing, because I have never made anything like this before. I intended the music to be ambient, ie played very quietly, not listened to on headphones, that's another kind of listening. As for exotica – I talked with [Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National presenter/producer and DJ] Brent Clough about what is and isn't exotica. I came to the conclusion that most music is exotica. I wrote a review of your and Toop's books [ie *Widening The Horizon* and *Exotica* respectively] and said "Isn't all music exotica maybe? Just the product of the imagination trying to come up with something to take us away from all this." The "imagined quality of elsewhere" as Toop calls it. But I see *Kiribati* as representing a new kind of exotica. Classic exotica is about East/West or North/South and peoples relating (or not) with one another. I see *Kiribati* as being an exotica involving us (ie humans) and nature, in particular our relationship with the Oceans (so it is about Up/Down or Above/Below maybe?).

I am not a scientist but I am interested in the importance of what is emerging from our knowledge of the environment – the effect of the oceans on our climate (recent observations of the effect that temperature change in the Pacific and Indian oceans have on rain fall in the rift valleys in Africa for instance). I am also interested in other aspects such as the new life being discovered in thermal vents on the ocean floor. My music is informed by these interests – an exotica of nature past and future maybe ... an exotica of new Earthy worlds.

**PH:** *That is a very interesting expansion of the idea of exotica. But although I acknowledge this, and take your points about the relation between CD name, the information caption and the actual music, there is an issue in using, some might say 'appropriating', the name 'Kiribati', and its particular environmental plight, for a CD produced by a westerner. Given that the CD is a self-produced release, which you will presumably be fortunate to make any appreciable profit from, and since you don't sample any indigenous musics, the hard political questions that are often asked of very different (and different scale) projects such as Deep Forest or Paul Simon (etc) aren't relevant. But where does the actual 'Kiribati' – the island-nation, and its people – stand in all this. Have you sent copies to Kiribati? And has any kind of dialogue/response occurred?*

**MC:** You are damned right, I won't make any serious money from the *Kiribati* CD. As a matter of fact – before we get to the question of appropriation and who's ripping who off – I don't make *any* money from any of my currently available CDs. You are also right, there are no samples of any other person's music on *Kiribati*, only mine and nature's.

I was motivated to make the CD as a gesture of solidarity with the people of Kiribati, Pacific Island peoples in general and all people who live in a fragile environment (which is most of us really). I see the CD perhaps as being used to create a

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background for meditation on the subject mentioned in the cover notes. If I am guilty of any kind of manipulation it is probably sentimental or emotional. I could have chosen Chernobyl as my point of reference but Kiribati is more topical, less known about, and the Pacific (real or imagined) figures more in the vocabulary of my imagination than Eastern Europe does. I haven't had any dialogue or any kind of other contact with anyone from Kiribati, as yet. I only recently discovered the Kiribati web site and I am planning to send copies of the CD to the radio station and university library. If you have any contacts there I would love to have them.

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Further information on Cooper's career, including a detailed discography, is available at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages.cooparia/>