

Anna Lacy interviews Rob Lavers – April 2009

(<http://www.roblavers.co.uk/media.html>)



AL: How did music become a part of your life?

RL: Well I started playing when I was six years old; I heard someone playing the piano, and that was the first instrument that I thought I'd really like to play. After that, I learned classical guitar for about five or six years, and then I got more involved in song-writing and performing on the guitar; I became attracted to it because of the music that I listening to at that time, which was the Rolling Stones, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Leadbelly, old blues stuff and early rock. I became interested in the saxophone whilst studying painting at university; I also played in some bands, and in my final year I decided that I wanted to specialise in music, so after graduating I started to perform in bars and clubs in London, where I really learned how to play the instrument, and what jazz was all about. It was a mixture of learning on the job, reading books, studying scales and finding musicians to play with and picking their brains, and getting out there and playing.

AL: Why did you become interested in jazz?

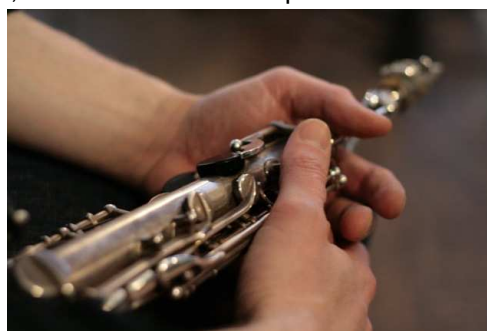
RL: I've been very interested since I heard [John] Coltrane and [Sonny] Rollins, they're my earliest memories of jazz. The saxophone being such a huge part of the jazz tradition, it's a natural style to becoming involved in, I guess. My primary interest is in improvisation; I like the freedom in jazz. I like the fact that you can express your personality, that every gig is different, that every time you say something you have to think, you're responding to the moment; you're very much in the flow of what's happening right up to this minute, whereas with classical music, it's more about reproduction and interpretation. Jazz is a very free and expressive art form; I draw a lot of parallels between painting and improvisation in jazz music, because there are many similarities to the way that I approach both.

AL: Aside from jazz, what other musical styles do you enjoy exploring?

RL: I've played in orchestras and contemporary classical music a little bit; I've played Cuban music in salsa bands; I've performed with African musicians doing original style of music. I've been involved with a lot of electronic music, dance, house, disco music; I've played free jazz, and have also worked with flamenco artists. I like to be flexible when I play; I don't really see jazz as any one particular thing. My definition is this: jazz is music which is improvised. It doesn't matter if it's 'rinky-tink' or reggae-dub-ska, Afro, or classical. That's how I define the difference between jazz and classical music; classical music is written and notated, but if there's an element of improvisation, then it's jazz.

AL: Have any of these other musical interests played a part in any big projects that you've been involved in?

I think everything; that's why no two musicians sound alike, because their career paths are completely different. It helps to have a good grasp on other styles of music. Say, for example, I take a project with a tabla player, and a sitar player and I've done four gigs with them; after those four gigs, I'm not the same player, I've actually absorbed and learned quite a bit from them. I assume that's how you learn, really; it is partly theoretical and analysis, and it's partly reading books and knowing your scales, but I'd say a huge part of development as an artist, or developing an individual style, is down to the people that you work with and the styles in which you're involved.



AL: Do you offer tuition at all, and if so, how much of your time is dedicated to it?

RL: Yeah, I do; I've got about seven or eight students that I teach privately, so that ticks along and helps financially. I also run workshops with children, old people, not so old people and mature musicians; they can generally be about music, or improvisation, and introductions to jazz. It's nice to be in that position. Teaching's a great thing; I don't know any musicians who don't teach.

AL: Describe your teaching style.

RL: The first thing that I do is to find out where they are with the instrument, how much they know, how much technical facility they have, and how much I can help them improve upon any technique aspects; just a general ease of comfort of playing, which I think is a good place to start. Then I ask what they like to listen to, what they want to learn, and start to build upon that. Do they want to read charts, do they want to improvise, are they listening to a particular player, do they want to transcribe stuff – what are they getting out of music, and what do they *want* to get out of music? Help them enjoy music, really.

AL: As a professional musician, how do you practice?

RL: It depends, really. If I've got to learn a set for a gig in two days time and I haven't really done much work on it, I'll absorb myself in one particular thing. If I'm working on a chord sequence I'll try and memorise it so that I'm able to improvise fluidly, without having to use the music. Other times, I might put on a record and listen to certain aspects of the player, and try and absorb their playing style; I might order a book from Amazon and get really involved in a certain harmonic aspect of playing, and work on that for a couple of weeks; I might go back to [Charlie] Parker's stuff and play in different keys. Quite often I'll try to sketch out ideas for compositions, try out ideas on the piano, chord sequences or melodic patterns that I'm working on and try to incorporate them.



AL: Have you got any recordings that we should know about?

RL: I recorded with some really nice musicians in 2004: there was a double bass player called Zoltan Dekany; he's Hungarian and studied with Charlie Haden. I was lucky to work with him, because he's a fantastic player. There was a piano player called Terry Collie, who is a really fine London-based musician; and a drummer called John Perry, who's a mate of Zoltan's, and they sound great together. That was the first time I'd put together a whole series of compositions for that particular line-up, and that became my first album, which is called *Stretch*; I aimed to have very strong melodic hooks and chord sequences, and then to gradually dissolve the harmony and create a free form style of playing, which I equated to stretching out the music, stretching your mind, stretching one's comfort zones. It's not for aerobics or anything! [laughs]

In 2007, Jazz Yorkshire got me a date in the studio, and I managed to fly out this cool drummer over from Paris, called Laurent Robin; we worked together, rehearsed the music and then incorporated pianist Jamil Sheriff, plus Zoltan, and recorded an album called *Small Creature*. After recording that, I get 33 Records put it out on their label, so they printed it up and everything, which saved a lot of money. It features the talented Rachel Brown on cello, one track has a French horn player, and on a couple of the others you can hear a clarinetist Kate White as well.

AL: If people want to get their hands on any of your recordings, where would be the best place for them to do so?

RL: If they come to a gig, they can buy one directly from me (and probably save themselves a few quid). If they want to buy it online, they can buy them from jazzcds.co.uk; they could buy them from Amazon, from iTunes – I think one or two of my albums are on iTunes; the last album, *Child's Eye*,

is on there, so you can download that digitally. You can buy them from my website... just 'google' the name and they come up!

AL: Why is composing original material important to you?

RL: If I was still painting, I wouldn't be reproducing Picasso's; I'd be trying to develop something individual and original. I think it's strange in music that it isn't the 'norm' for people to write; it's a natural expression. I've never recorded a standard – maybe I will do sometime – but right now I'd rather discover what I'm about inside. I think if you write original stuff, it's ultimately more expressive, it's more creative...I'm not doing down playing standards, it's just not where I'm coming from. I like to dream up things.

AL: Have you got a favourite track, or a track that you feel a particularly close attachment?

RL: Not really, no. Your relationship with your own stuff is a strange thing; a part of your mind is always thinking 'I can make that much better'. I see making albums as documenting a particular time in your development; and then the commercial aspect comes in, because you've made this thing, and perhaps shelled out money to make it. You've paid the musicians, you've paid the studio, you've paid the production costs, and you have to try and bring your money back, and that's where the promotion comes into it. That's a completely separate entity, really, to why the whole thing is created.

AL: In a world where downloading is rapidly becoming the norm, where do you think this leaves the CD recording?

RL: If you talk to any musician, they'll tell you the same thing: no one is selling CDs anymore. The whole market surrounding sale of music is in flux at the moment; it's a harsh time if you were reliant upon CD sales to generate your income. Most jazz players aren't, because they aren't going to bring in that much money, unless you're touring consistently. Having said that, I think gigs are the place to sell them; but even then, sometimes people don't bother, because they think 'I can just listen to that on my laptop'. People feel like they don't need to buy them.

AL: How often are you able to perform your own material in public?

RL: More so now than before, but the problem that I have, is that if I choose to work with a drummer from Paris or a bass player from London; it makes it increasingly difficult to afford to do so. And right now there are real issues with venues giving gigs to upcoming musicians. Most venues are just booking people that they know will be able to sell tickets for, and the Public has heard of, (because they've been well marketed). It means that a lot of the music being created in this country isn't being showcased; musicians are setting up their own venues now to showcase their own music, because other clubs are too scared that they'll make a loss. Money from the government, the Arts Council, or the lottery, isn't being filtered through because it's all going to the Olympics, so anyone that hasn't got a big name isn't being put on, and it's become really hard to find showcase your music.



There are quite a few venues popping up in Leeds, and the ones that are putting on interesting music are the ones which are run by musicians; in a way, it's cool that musicians are taking this into their own hands, but I think the government needs to take jazz more seriously, and filter more money into these jazz clubs, to take the pressure off them to sell tickets; 'cause if a band is just starting out, they're putting all their time into writing and rehearsing and making ends meet, and so they don't really have *time* to market themselves properly.

AL: You mentioned the issue of venues in your Foreword in Issue 1 of YJS. How do you think that we might be able to deal with this situation in York?

RL: York is a bit of a strange place where you can't really get to the bottom of it. It's called a 'city', but it's not really the size of a city; it doesn't have the same cosmopolitan feel that, say, Leeds does, and it doesn't have the same wealth of venues. I don't know if there's enough *demand* in York for a jazz club; I'm not sure that culturally it's ready, and I don't know how that could change, unless there were more people interested in the arts in general. There's not even an arts centre, the arts centre folded; it was putting on some really good music and theatre down there, and it closed because there was no support from the council. I think it's a mixture of size, and abundance in tourism, which is strange, because in a city like Prague, they have jazz everywhere; for some reason, it seems to be an integral part of the whole tourist 'sell' in Prague – it's incredible – but in York, it isn't something which is part of the cultural heritage.

AL: Have you done anything with the other art forms?

RL: I studied music composition for film and TV at Kensington College, so I've written music for short films and animations, and some commercial things. I've also composed music for theatre shows; I did one quite recently in York Theatre Royal, which was a play about this guy who collects people's dreams, called *The Dreamsnatcher*. I went through the script with the director, and we pinpointed the parts we both felt would work with music; once we figured out what was going on at those points, I found a mood, melody, hook, or sequence of sounds to fit. I wrote from the script, basically. Then I put the band together, which was a trio with drums and keys; the keyboard player was playing all sorts of sound effects and noises, which was great. I wrote the music down, and we recorded about nineteen tracks for the whole thing; I gave the CD to the Director, who played it to the actors, and they liked it, so we had it in the bag before they'd even rehearsed! The cast rehearsed to the CD, and so the band just had to reproduce it live behind a screen, either using a part, or what we had learned by ear.



AL: Are these cross-art collaborations something which you might like to pursue in future?

RL: Oh yeah, it's brilliant; I definitely want to write more for film and theatre. It's a great challenge, it's really rewarding, and it's nice to put music in a context where you do have a visual element as well. In film and theatre, the music provides a bit of background, but if it could be something that was part of a show with imagery and music, then it would be a great project to do.

