

Clarinet & Saxophone

Spring 2014 Volume 39, No 1



LIVERPOOL SINGLE REED DAY in pictures

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Editor: Richard Edwards

Clarinet & Saxophone, Fron, Llansadwrn, LL59 5SL
Tel. 01248 811285, editor@cassgb.org

Editorial Team: Philip Bee, Janet Eggleden, Graham Honeywood, Kenneth Morris, Susan Moss, Stephanie Reeve, William Upton

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Membership: Andrew Smith, Tel: 08456 440187 membership@cassgb.org



The mark of responsible forestry



By the early 1980s British audiences were still waiting for two things: the revival of the big band genre, and the birth of a homespun style of jazz that wasn't a pale imitation of its American counterpart. In 1984 both of these dreams were realised in the shape of self-styled 'agitprop anarcho-syndicate collective' Loose Tubes, part jazz messiahs, part very naughty boys.

The Loose Tubes big band blended anarchic musical collages, lovingly compiled from the full extent of jazz history, with witty send-ups of tired musical clichés, set against a Monty Pythonesque sense of humour. In the six years between their debut gig in 1984 and their valedictory residency at Ronnie Scott's in 1990, Loose Tubes reinvented big band music and became the gold standard for British jazz for decades to come. "For those of you who think Loose Tubes is the best thing in the world", warned compere Ashley Slater in 1990, "well, you're going to have a very empty rest of your life".

Slater's words were soon to take on unintended significance, as it became impossible to access the Loose Tubes back catalogue, unless you were prepared to pay through the nose for second hand vinyl LPs. Similarly, there was no immediate legacy in terms of a successor, so Loose Tubes is still remembered as the best thing to have happened to British jazz, period. (I am a fan, as you will have realised, and have the vinyl to prove it. My father actually saw them play in Poole in 1990, but it was wasted on him, and it is one of my great regrets that he failed to take me, apparently because I was only

three months old.) Fortunately, its constituent members, pianist Django Bates, saxophonist Iain Ballamy *et al*, have gone on to take the Loose Tubes spirit into weird and wonderful musical territories; no group of musicians has since had a greater influence on British jazz.

As part of our celebrations for the Adolphe Sax bicentenary we're currently running a series of jazz saxophonist portraits on www.cassgb.org. Since three of our featured saxophonists (Julian Argüelles, Iain Ballamy, and Mark Lockheart) made their names in the Loose Tubes saxophone section, we thought that an overview of the band was in order. There's also the added significance that since 2010 Django Bates has been behind the release of two live CD albums recorded during the band's final residency at Ronnie Scott's, and the welcome announcement of a 30th anniversary reunion tour taking place in May and culminating in a week long residency at Ronnie Scott's (see diary section).

Jazz elder statesman Bill Bruford once described Loose Tubes as 'punk with notes', and judging by their testosterone-fuelled onstage presence, irreverent attitude, and

anarchic reputation, it's probably fair to say that had they been born a generation earlier, they would have been playing with safety pins in their ears. Happily however, the time was right for a British jazz revival, and Loose Tubes' anti-establishment bent was channelled into carnivalesque compositions, parodies of popular British institutions, funny hats, and exotic shirts. Cascading piano interjections, searing saxophone runs, and poignantly ragged brass fanfares decorated the vivid patchwork fabric of Loose Tubes' music at every opportunity.

Simply put, you can never be sure in a Loose Tubes piece what's going to happen next; just because they're in the middle of a New Orleans funeral march doesn't mean it's not going to morph into a samba, as is the case on *Village from Dancing on Frith Street* (2010). Pianist and composer Django Bates in particular delighted in setting disparate musical textures on a course for collision; take his *Delightful Precipice*, one of the tracks on their recently released live album *Süd Afrika* (2011) and also the title track of their second studio album (1986). It opens with what initially sounds like stereotypical oom-pah-pah circus music, all comic dissonances, grunting brass, and fluttering winds, until you realise that the harmony is more like something from Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and the time signature is in five rather than three. Before your ears have time to adjust, however, the music reorganises into a lilting arrangement of the theme from *The Archers*,

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