

A Quest for Knowledge through Marginal Music

Interview with Matt Stokes

Carlos G. de Castro

Matt Stokes gives us the clues we need to properly contextualize an exhibition which, from an aesthetic perspective verging on the anthropological, tells us how subcultures generate and define different social groups who express their distinctive lifestyles and beliefs through music.

Carlos G. de Castro: This exhibit, included in the exhibition session *Song as a Force of Social Transformation*, consists of various pieces which examine different musical subcultures: punk, grindcore, folk, Northern Soul, cave rave, etc. Where does this interest in music in your work come from?

Matt Stokes: For me, music is a universal language, music is something that influences people and defines their points of view. The music of subcultures in particular, much more than mainstream music, speaks to us of different kinds of beliefs and lifestyles. And that ability of music to affect people is something I find absolutely amazing.

CGC: Some of the texts written about your work repeatedly emphasize the defence of the different subcultures as something vibrant and alive, thanks to the efforts of a community of followers. In this respect, pieces like your video *The Gainsborough Packet*, set in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, offer us a folk-pop adaptation of a 19th-century text: a letter written by one Jon Burdikin to his friend Pybus. How do you tend to address the relationship between past and present of a certain musical style or subculture?

MS: Right. We're talking about the connection with inheritance. In the case of Jon Burdikin's letter, on which the song of *The Gainsborough Packet* video is based, I found this document when I was doing archival research looking for new material. I stumbled across an interesting story set against the backdrop of the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, a period that had a significant effect on society. In general, in my work I've always searched for a link with history. Whether in punk, grindcore or the rest of the subculture music genres that appear in *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Time), I try to link up each musical style with its history. That's very important to me. It's a quest for knowledge through marginal music.

CGC: While we're on the subject of *The Gainsborough Packet*, the use of Jon Burdikin's letter indicates that archival research is involved in the development of your pieces. What role does the archive, the act of delving into the past, play in your creative process?

MS: For me the main thing is to bring together the people who are part of a particular musical style. With *The Gainsborough Packet*, the starting point was my discovery of the letter in the archives. But more important than that was meeting Sam Lee, a young singer and member of the Camden-based English Folk Dance and Song Society, who did Burdikin's voice for the video. He was a person who really influenced the piece, because he told me a lot about folk trends and about folk music itself. In the case of *these are the days*—another piece—which I made in Austin, Texas, I met people who had witnessed the birth of punk in that city, like Tim Hamblin. Getting together with these people is essential for me; I often like to get to know those people, sift through their stories and histories, meet with them... in addition to searching the archives. All of these things tend to go together.

CGC: So one of the primary characteristics of your working method is immersing yourself in the heart of each community, living with its members, understanding their motivations... How do you manage to infiltrate these communities in general, and how did you do it in the particular case of *these are the days*, in Austin?

MS: The biggest risk is feeling like a cultural tourist, and sometimes I've felt like that. I think this is one of the reasons why I have to feel comfortable with the situation in each project I do. Getting to know the people is important because it gives me a better understanding of what's going on in a specific place. For me—and this is personal—I have to be completely involved and absorbed in my chosen theme, as in the case of the Austin punk scene.

CGC: In Austin you got in touch with some collectors of the 80s and 90s punk scene, like Tim Hamblin, and also with members of the current subculture who appear in the videos of *these are the days*. How has punk changed since its beginnings?

MS: Well, Tim Hamblin is an important figure in the origins of punk; he's a British citizen who moved to Austin in the 1970s. In the United Kingdom he experimented with punk before moving to the US. He left right around the time that the punk scene was beginning to deteriorate in England. In Austin he was the first person who told me interesting things about punk and set me up with a lot of contacts in the city. For that reason he is a key figure in this project. Another important person was Tim Kerr, who organized a lot of punk concerts in Austin and worked with Hamblin on the organization of punk recordings. With regard to the differences between modern punk and 70s

punk, basically I would say that today punk is purely aesthetic and less concerned with social issues than it was in the past.

CGC: In the publication produced to accompany *The Gainsborough Packet*, Will Hodgkinson's essay on "The Ballad of Britain: Folk Music and the Holy Grail of Authenticity" argues that there is no such thing as authenticity in music. To what degree do you share Hodgkinson's opinion?

MS: Well, the theme of folk music is strange because as a musical style it has made a comeback from the 1960s to the British folk societies. Folk music has changed with each new generation; in fact, folk music is always changing, and in future generations the sound will undoubtedly be different or will be done in a different way.

CGC: One of the most striking pieces on display at the CAAC, given its complexity, may be *Cantata Profana*. The video installation consists of six screens which show six grindcore vocalists, arranged in a semicircle like a choral ensemble. On one side we have choral music, which we might call high-brow culture; and on the other grindcore, an exponent of so-called low-brow culture. Defending the value of low-brow culture, popular communal culture, is another constant in your work. How do you think this distinction between high- and low-brow is drawn?

MS: It's curious, because I never really set out to imitate a choral ensemble. What they are doing is essentially forming a group, but they don't imitate a choir. They do what they usually do with their bands. As far as the distinction between high- and low-brow culture, I don't see a difference. I don't think that the gap actually exists; it's people and communities who make that distinction. And for me that separation isn't important. I listen to classical music and subculture music indistinctly. I've been asked this question often, and what *Cantata Profana* actually does is shatter the dividing line between the two concepts.

CGC: For *Cantata Profana* you chose six musicians of different nationalities who didn't know each other, just as in *these are the days* the musicians who appear on screen were playing together for the first time. Why did you choose not to use musicians who play together regularly? Doesn't this generate too much artificiality?

MS: In *these are the days* it was very important that the band play immediately without having practiced first, in order to "provoke" a quick reaction. This is how Austin punk bands usually get together. The bands don't really exist; they are created on the spur of the moment, they play together, and then they disappear. With *Cantata Profana*, what we wanted was to use people from

different countries in order to focus on how they play each day, and thus reveal the international connections of grindcore.

CGC: In several cases, religious spaces are also related to your work. *The Gainsborough Packet* was shown for the first time inside an old neo-Gothic Methodist church, and *Long After Tonight* recreates the Northern Soul culture inside a church. Now you are exhibiting your work in Seville in a former Carthusian monastery. Would it be accurate to say that you have an interest in places of worship?

MS: Hmm... Actually, the exhibition here is a coincidence, and yes, with *The Gainsborough Packet* we did it in a church and *Long After Tonight* was shot in an Episcopalian church that is often used for night-time performances. Even so, the fact that *The Gainsborough Packet* was shown in a church was also coincidental. I don't deliberately seek out the religious aspect. We have to bear in mind that, as time goes by, both churches and chapels are becoming increasingly more secular. I think that in conceptual art there is no interest in shattering the religious space and turning it into a profane venue. And in my case the use of religious venues is more accidental than deliberate.

CGC: St. Salvador's Church in Dundee was the setting for your project *Long After Tonight*, a video that talks about the birth of the Northern Soul movement in Britain. Soul music, an offshoot of gospel—correct me if I'm wrong—arrived in Britain in the 1960s where it blended with the mod scene and the culture of amphetamines to produce a new subculture, Northern Soul. What connection do you see between drug use in the birth of this subculture and the religion in which gospel music has its roots?

MS: Drugs have been used in one way or another by most religions, particularly eastern religions. But I don't think that drug use is necessary for artistic creation; in fact, drugs were the reason why many mod groups broke up. In my opinion, drugs can stimulate creativity but they are not absolutely necessary.

CGC: *Long After Tonight* is a production that involved a large number people, between the technical team and dancers. In an interview with Elizabeth Dunbar, you said that you started out as a sculptor. What made you decide to make the change from working alone to working with a team?

MS: It was a very deliberate decision. Like many artists, I started out in art school, and when I finished I rented a studio with some friends, but after a time I discovered that working in the studio isolated me. I had fun with that work, I really did; I made sculptural objects and I enjoyed it, but after a while I found that working with sculptures left me feeling empty. In the end, I wanted to do

something different, and the decision to change was probably the healthiest I've ever made in my life. I wanted to learn other ways of working, and the first collective project I did was a collaborative effort with people from the music scene.

CGC: In the exhibition *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Time), the only work that doesn't contain video projections—aside from a few minor pieces—is *Real Arcadia*. This installation documents the raves that were held in the late 1980s in remote rural locations of the Lake District in Britain. During this period, marked by the iron-fisted control of the Thatcher administration, raves represented a space of freedom that contrasted with the desolate landscape of Britain's declining industrial cities. But how did these events actually unfold, and what did they mean to the people who participated in them?

MS: In the Thatcher era, people began to organize rave parties as a form of protesting against the administration; raves were oases of freedom where people could make their own decisions, albeit in a rarefied atmosphere—sometimes too rarefied... Government pressure was so intense that, in fact, the gathering of so many people in a single place came to be considered a crime.

CGC: How did you compile the material for *Real Arcadia* and what can we expect to find in it?

MS: Well, we spent a long time preparing *Real Arcadia*. Most of the information and the music recordings were obtained by contacting the organizers of the rave parties we examined. It was a long and arduous task due to the difficulty of getting in touch with the original participants; making these kinds of contacts and getting the pieces to fit together successfully is quite complicated.