

January 2010 Interview with Pere Pons for *Jaç Magazine* (Barcelona, Spain)

**Ochs interview: questions and answers**

Quin és el punt de partida de Larry Ochs quan decideix dedicar-se a la música?

*At what point did Larry Ochs realize that what he wanted was to become a musician?*

Very late, relative to most musicians I know or read about in other interviews or biographies. And I have to say: even now I consider myself an artist whose brush is the saxophone, or a quartet of them in the case of Rova, or whose saxophone is part of a palette of sounds in any other band I compose for...In other words, I'm still not so sure I'm a musician in any standard sense of that term. But being an artist: that really wasn't something I thought I would be interested in (or capable of!) until at the earliest, the age of 22. I only first picked up a tenor saxophone at that time, in 1971, the act inspired while listening to Albert Ayler's recording called "Love Cry". Ayler was an important musician for me in many ways: his ghostly sound, his public persona, his belief in his own vision, and his willingness to play with rock musicians. I had been very interested in music of many kinds since leaving for college in 1967, but I began with rock; I went to Woodstock for example. But at some point early in my college years I went to WXPB Radio, the university's city-wide station (Philadelphia), and once working there, I began listening to a lot of blues, and then more and more of the jazz collection. Still, my way into jazz was through the energy of the newest music. I loved the energy of rock, or loved the rock that included energy like The Who, Rolling Stones, the early Fleetwood Mac and their blues-rock LPs, the earliest electric version of Dylan, Hendrix, especially Hendrix perhaps. So I was attracted to late Coltrane, Sun Ra (whom I 'discovered' live in Philadelphia), Cecil Taylor, I can't remember when I first heard Ayler; but it was not right away. Anyway: I was in San Francisco by the time I rented a tenor sax, waiting for a real radio job to open up for me. That never happened. But about a year after I did rent that saxophone, I met the poet Lyn Hejinian whom I am still living with, and she introduced me to "the art world," the world of the artist, and I have never looked back, though I would like to program a radio show some day.

Quins són els seus músics de referència?

*Which musicians have been influential to you ?*

So many; so many. I still make a point of listening to as much as I have time for, which this past year was sadly very little due to the producing of 3 recordings that took an incredible amount of creative time to perfect from the rough studio (or live) takes; so there just wasn't any energy left to listen to other people's CDs. But I take ideas whenever and wherever I can find them. Having said that, certainly in the period when I was finding my own voice I was stimulated by: The Who, Rolling Stones, Hendrix, especially perhaps; late Coltrane, Sun Ra, electric Miles, Cecil Taylor, Weather Report, Monk, Steve Lacy (huge influence), Roscoe Mitchell (and the Art Ensemble in terms of form and feeling), Braxton (huge in terms of ideas, form, and who to check out in the composer world); and of the composers: Xenakis (huge), Messiaen (huge); Feldman ( a little later, but huge), Scelsi, Webern, Stockhausen (his ideas),... These were "early" and repeated influences, but you can also add blues players: very important, such as BB King, John Lee Hooker, Otis Redding, Furry Lewis, Buddy Guy and so many more. Then much later all the European improvisers I heard, many of whom have really moved the marker; John Zorn and his musical activities, Wadada Leo Smith, and many of the composers who worked with Rova including Alvin Curran, Buddy Guy. Then the listening to jazz greats that for me happened after

rather than first, such as Rollins, especially his French recordings from the sixties, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Bechet, Andrew Hill, Sam Rivers. And then of course musicians I have had the good fortune to play with and learn from in ongoing bands: Glenn Spearman, Wadada, Fred Frith, the 3 other Rova Sax members, Lindberg, Cyrille, Amendola, Ellis, Robinson. Finally a lot of world musicians, especially blues singers of Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, especially from Korea. Yeah: I have a very large LP and CD collection.

Com ha desenvolupat un concepte propi a partir d'aquests referents?

*How have you developed your own style of music from that of the musicians that have inspired you?*

My voice was always there. I just had to leave silence and have patience so it would emerge confidently. At first, the voice was very reluctant and shy, but it was always there. That's what I heard almost immediately. See, I played piano as a kid, then trumpet for years in elementary school and high school. But not once did it occur to me that I could play music I liked. (I was not too smart!) Trumpet was just another thing I did in school. Nothing more. Then I went to college and dropped playing; I spent 3 or 4 years listening – hard. When I got to San Francisco, I first got a harmonica and wailed in an amateur but enthusiastic kind of way. Then the Ayler LP and the epiphany, and the idea to be an artist... I mean I didn't think "I am now an artist." It was still much more casual than that, but slowly between 1971 and 1973, I began to see what I wanted to do. So I knew what I wanted to do with the music before I was capable of playing it on my own instrument. I started by composing pieces that were long and complex, modeled or inspired by those long Art Ensemble of Chicago pieces and encouraged by the new music I was getting into on LP. The saxophonist; the musician; he caught up later. So I was learning to play the instrument at the same time I was figuring out a way to compose what I was hearing.

Fins a quin punt es discutible que la seva proposta no es pugui considerar jazz?

*To what extent is it debatable that your own style can be considered to be jazz or not?*

I really think this is a marketing question. I play saxophone that is influenced by Rivers, Roscoe, Braxton, Lester Young, Leo Smith, Billie Holiday, Yandé Codou Séné, Buddy Guy, Hendrix.... But... But... if you want to say that I'm not a jazz player, I just don't really care to fight you about that, as I'm also influenced by Indian shenai players, Korean p'ansori singers, electronic music, and so much more at this point. And I do not ever play in straight jazz bands; it's not where my own voice can get out; so it doesn't make sense to me, much as I love listening to that form. Wynton says I don't play jazz. Whatever.... I would not choose to argue. But there is no doubt that I am jazz-influenced and that the jazz audience, much of it, will appreciate what I'm trying to do.

Aquests debats creu que ajuden a mantenir viva l'atenció pel jazz o no aporten res?

*Do you think that these sorts of debates help or hinder jazz as a whole?*

"Jazz" with a capital J is about power and money, not about the music called "jazz" and where it is going musically. Capital J-Jazz raises this issue to keep a boundary around what is allowed in their club and what isn't. There's only a small amount of money available to capital-J Jazz, and some people want to make sure that that money goes to them. If you're impressed by the money, then the answer is yes: the debate hinders the music. If you are not, then the question is irrelevant. If someone offers me a first class ticket, I'm going to take it, but I'll get in that seat in the same set of clothes I would be wearing in economy. I grew up among wealthy people. They

have nothing on the people downtown except more money. What they also end up without is the people downtown. They end up with each other, throwing money at things that just don't bring happiness. In "capital-J Jazz," these privileged Jazz Hounds get paid well to sound "like" rather than to make sound; to be predictably a certain way rather than to "predict the way." Or rather to predict another possible way. See the thing is: "Jazz" is a great form of music, to be praised and glorified – why not? - but the cats who made it great were almost without exception put down when they first appeared on that scene; nothing changes.

Within the collective that is *really* making music to make music, we would all like to be paid better money too. We would all like many more opportunities to play and to make music. We really would like more festivals to be hiring us. But we do understand. We play art-music. The capital-J Jazz guys are more concerned with the commerce than we are, and some of them succeed at that. But it's not relevant to our concerns; and when you play art-music, you know that, like any poet who reads generally to audiences of 30 in small venues, there really is and will always be only a relatively small audience, and therefore only a handful of promoters at any time willing to book you. That fact is frustrating, but not a deal-breaker... and while I am making this wild generalization, I want to state again that I love Jazz – in all its forms and decades of development and change - when the musicians playing it are pushing the music, and there are many sincere and serious musicians who choose at this time to stay within the "classic boundaries" of jazz and make great music doing so. But it's just not for me; I knew that from the get go, that my voice was not going to be happy in that classic jazz form.

Creu que a diferència d'altres èpoques (anys 60 i 70) el corrent dominant del jazz és conservador?

*Do you consider that the current trend in jazz to be conservative in comparison to that of the jazz from the 60's and 70's?* I have to pass on this. Some people want to institutionalize and "sound like;" but plenty of jazz musicians are being as creative as ever. Many....

El cas de Sigüenza es pot veure com una anècdota o com la punta de l'iceberg d'un debat de fons?

*Do you think that the incident in Sigüenza is anecdotal or do you think that it is just the tip of the iceberg to a more complex debate?*

I thought that the incident was anecdotal and that the reaction by the police and then by Wynton Marsalis were the tip of two icebergs to a more complex debate.

Com valora la reacció de Wynton Marsalis?

*How do you view Wynton Marsalis' reaction to Sigüenza?*

I truly believe that this was some kind of publicity stunt by either Marsalis or his handlers. They just can't possibly care at this point. If Marsalis really cared about my music or it's potential to misrepresent what he does in any way, he would not have backed off a few days later, claiming that he never meant his search for the complainant in Sigüenza to go public. Marsalis is so big here in the US, why he would have any concern about musicians like me? ... no way. And not only is he the owner/controller of Jazz at Lincoln Center but he very much influenced Ken Burns

to keep any developments in jazz past 1965 out of the influential History of Jazz documentary that Burns made in the nineties.

Actually, in the USA there are a very healthy number of good educational universities that have avant-garde musicians in their music departments: Wadada Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, George Lewis Fred Frith, Chris Brown, William Winant, Elliott Sharp, Pauline Oliveros, LaDonna Smith and probably many others I am not aware of are peppered around the country, so “we” are represented; the entire history is not being completely erased by any means. But when I think about how the people aligned with WM’s thinking might talk about the musicians exploring and working in what most people would call “improvised music,” I doubt they are expressing much respect for the discipline to their students. On the other hand, the musicians mentioned above express plenty of respect for jazz.)

Quins nous projectes està treballant?

*What new projects are you working on at the moment?*

I am currently reading a book on Geology, and I am currently in the middle of the chapter on geological time, so it depends on what you mean by “new.” (!! No, I am not trying to be a wise guy here; well, *maybe* a little bit; sorry. Ok, seriously then: for me “new” can be a piece I just started, or an idea that has been germinating for years but is still waiting for its opportunity to flower, or a band that may have started three years ago but is just now really digging in. So “new” can be something I am doing for the first time or something that is still young in development, if not exactly new in terms of real time; for example the state of California, which in terms of Earth time is a pretty new land formation.

So here are the things I am dealing with right now, in no particular order:

> In late April and early May I am organizing – or still trying to organize - a tour for my youngest band called ***Kihnoua***, featuring Scott Amendola on drums and electronics (who also plays with the Drumming Core) and the very dynamic voice of a Korean performance-artist name Dohee Lee. Hopefully someone will hire this band in Spain so I can bring another “Not-Only-Jazz Band” to the Iberian Peninsula to start another debate there, or continue this one. Our first CD releases in April, in time for the tour. (You all can call Sergio Merino in Barcelona at Arco y Flecha if you want to book the band!)

> I am doing final approvals for the release of a CD I am producing by a band called ***The Celestial Septet***, which is Rova Sax 4tet and the Nels Cline Singers combined and playing 5 pieces together, all composed and arranged for 4 saxes, electric guitar, bass and drums. (on New World in March 2010). It is a great set of music, if I do say so myself, and just the kind of border-crossing CD that in my teens or early twenties would have helped turn me on to jazz and improvised music.

> I have been involved for months in the new Rova website, just now going online ([www.rova.org](http://www.rova.org))

> I am composing a new piece for Rova as a quartet.

> I am collecting ideas for a large ensemble piece to be composed for improvisers (and thus the geology reading). My 2006 CD *The Mirror World* is an example of this kind of music.

> I am thinking about a composition dedicated to film-maker Julie Taymor. See her films people! Very special!! This piece would be in the same vein as the piece that drove the Siguenza listener to report my band to the police. That first piece we played in Siguenza was a “film-scape”

dedicated to Japanese film-maker Akira Kurosawa. And it's this kind of compositional form and the use of improvisation within the form that really interests me most, and is why I say I am an artist who plays saxophone. But basically I'm just trying to keep people from coming to my concerts if they really want a "product" rather than an adventure. But I do know that any remotely open minded listener can get something positive from this music.

> I am mixing the music from takes recorded live in May, 2009, for a DVD of music and improvised film, the music – four separate pieces - composed by Ochs, Lisle Ellis, Charlotte Hug and Thomas Lehn, the film improvised in real time, and now being edited as well, by the film-maker Lillevan Pobjoy (from Berlin).

> I am talking to promoters in the USA and Europe for future tours of The Celestial Septet.

> Listening to live recordings of the quartet ODE for possible editing for a future CD (Ochs, Lisle Ellis and Trevor Dunn on basses, Michael Sarin on drums.)

> Getting the CD "We All Feel the Same Way" by the trio *Jones Jones* online and helping to get it to critics. I leave the distribution to the Russian CD label, SoLyd Recordings. *Jones Jones* is another young trio of Ochs, Mark Dresser on bass, and drummer Vladimir Tarasov.

Quines opcions de creixement i transformació te el jazz durant el segle XXI?

*What type of development or transformation do you see for jazz in the 21st Century?*

"Jazz" is what it is, and if there is now a boundary around the definition of "Jazz," if it really don't mean a thing if it ain't got \_\_\_\_\_.... Or if the configuration has to be lead instrument plus rhythm section... or if we are only allowed to play Jazz that includes the changes, then developments will be business ones. Good luck; god be with you. Jazz deserves a vibrant and continuing life. It's a beautiful musical discipline; the classical tunes and those musicians that continue to add to that repertoire... some of them are worth hearing again and again.... But that's not my ballpark to comment on.

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Alexei Parschikov was a great Russian poet of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century who died just a few years ago. I think the following quote from him is completely relevant.

"The path to poetry begins at a crossroads and then moves into an area without roads. What can we do about it? After all, poetry is not merely the ability to write a good poem. – that's the psychology of those who win medals. No, what is more important is to perceive and share the experience of creating."

Music too is first and foremost a creative medium, and those of us working at the edges come eventually to see that we have to be happy with the experience of process, with the exhilaration that comes from the creative process alone; the money goes to the businessmen. For us it has to be about sharing the *experience of creating*, as Parschikov puts it; but I think our medium of improvised music *involves* the listener too. The listener is also an active participant and gets inspiration from making sense of this creative music. But this is for another discussion.

In the "small j = jazz" universe or in the "creative music" universe, we don't care about this question either because there is SO MUCH going on now that continues to develop, needs tons of work and thought, that deserves more concert opportunities, so it can be passed on to the next generation of musicians, which will then develop things further, then mutate *those* ideas, or evolve them into *their* own personal statements and *their* own personal voices. We imbibe inspiration from world music, popular music, composed (or new) music, electronic music, film,

sculpture, poetry, painting, but also geography (!) and all other sciences. We take ideas we can relate to from wherever they come to us from, and then we incorporate them in for a time and see what we can do with them. We throw away anything we can't make art with, and move on.