

CHINESE WHISPERS

THE MAKING OF PERE UBU'S *LADY FROM SHANGHAI*

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II.

THE MAKING OF IT

Chinese Whispers

Chinese Whispers is a party game in which a whispered message is passed around a circle in the expectation that, in the telling, it will become comically distorted or exaggerated by the time it completes the circuit. In various countries it goes by different names, which are often variations on the idea of a broken telephone. In English, Chinese Whispers has become an idiomatic expression describing how a story passed from person to person will, inevitably, evolve or mutate in unpredictable ways.

With *Lady From Shanghai*, the goal was to meticulously apply a Chinese Whispers methodology to the composition and recording of a coherent and complex musical work.

Choosing a Method is the starting point of any Musical Activity. Method shapes the sound, the art and the Narrative Voice. Chinese Whispers allows for a means of production that will twist the straight line of the Axis of Method into a Möbius strip.⁶

The first purposeful steps towards realizing Chinese Whispers as a practical methodology were taken during the David Thomas and two pale boys recording project that yielded *Erewhon* (1996), but its genesis is earlier.

Between 1982 and 1987, I experimented with methods and techniques of improvisation. Improvisation in its idealized form amounts to standing on stage with no preconceptions, responding and reacting in the moment to immediate internal and external stimuli, and making sound happen accordingly. In practice this often results in plinky-plonk music and lyrical rambling. Good things can happen; snippets of compelling narrative can be produced, but the exercise is frequently wasteful, an analog of onanism. As well, I am suspicious and leery of any method that elevates the self and emphasizes the subjective. I am happy to aspire to the Platonic Ideal of it but I fear that pure improvisation is a pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone.⁷

At the end of the '80s, after a series of collaborative projects that included the diverse Pedestrians, Accordion Club and Wooden Birds groupings, it occurred to me that a song is often at its best as it is played into existence, before Error can manifest.⁸ The musicians are focused on The Moment, cooperating

⁶ See *The Book of Hieroglyphs*, pages 252 – 253. In short, the Axis of Method joins two poles, the Hierarchical Method and the Folk Method.

⁷ The Philosopher's Stone has been the pursuit of alchemists and like-minded persons from ancient times. The search for it achieved a frenzied peak in the Middle Ages. The Stone, or mechanism, or formula, or process, was said to be capable of turning ordinary metals into gold. Also bundled into the notion was its purported ability to bestow immortality and act as a truly Universal Solvent, among other things.

⁸ I should here note a personal bias that exposes this entire essay as merely a tawdry conceptual rationalization. I hate rehearsing. The tedium and grind of it chips away pieces of my life and wastefully exhausts my talent. It too is an analog of onanism.

to bring order to chaos, to coax Meaning out of the shapelessness of Nothing. The Unexpected is not troublesome. It is a natural event that enlightens the experience. It reveals possibilities, as does the unfolding of a road map on the warm hood of a Blue Fin Mystery that's been pulled off the side of the highway. There are no mistakes. Vistas open. Idea fireworks erupt. Most importantly, the Unexpected counteracts artifice. A simulacrum of the Real World is forced on the process via accident and unforeseen circumstance. Regardless of whether the effort is improvisational or rehearsed, the musicians are excited and eager and there's nothing to remember or get right. The hitherto secret rules of a peculiar spacetime universe reveal themselves in the moment of their creation.⁹ It's heady and intoxicating stuff.

But how can such clarity be achieved without the sort of hit-or-miss rambling that gives improvisation a justifiably bad name?

The answer is Spontaneous Song Generation. This was the remit of the David Thomas and two pale boys project.¹⁰ The trio would pursue purposeful improvisation. It would not rehearse, plan or plot. Albums and concert sets would be thematically and conceptually cohesive over the years but each iteration would head off in unpredictable directions and seek a unique perspective. The trio would pursue the Song but one that is structured in the moment with as few preconditions as possible.

All musicians know instinctively (or should know) what a Song is. It's the natural path for musical expression. The Song provides Shape. It establishes an alpha and omega across which a narrative curve is invoked. As Nature abhors a vacuum, so a Song abhors Meaninglessness.¹¹ Knowledge of the mechanics and mechanisms of a Song is a fundamental craft skill.

Natural order is the progenitor of freedom.

The freedom of jazz was dependent on the Song template provided by the blues. It's a misconception that the blues has strict structural rules. Twelve Bar Blues is a shibboleth. American bluesmen came to England and were backed by local pickup bands, young British musicians who had been devouring their records, playing along in bedrooms, learning at the feet of Masters. These pups deconstructed the songs, counting out measures and extrapolating. If beats were missing or measures incomplete in the source material then these 'errors' they fixed. Structure was regulated and ironed out. Visiting bluesmen were bemused, if not outraged, to hear corrected versions of their own songs.

"What the hell are you playing? Don't count, listen!"

⁹ 'Spacetime' as applied to music and constructed sound is described in *The Book of Hieroglyphs*.

¹⁰ The David Thomas and two pale boys project began in 1994 with a lineup of David Thomas (vocals and melodeon), Keith Moliné (MIDI-guitar) and Chris Brierley (violin). In 1995 Andy Diagram (trumpet and electronics) replaced Brierley.

¹¹ "It's Pavlovian. There is no alternative to 'Making Sense'... The bell rings. Humans salivate Meaning." *The Book of Hieroglyphs*, page 50.

Blues evolved according to the spacetime principles of Folk Music and the Folk Method. Blues musicians were amateurs, i.e. self-taught. They operated outside the realm of the Professional. More often than not they were what we would today call ‘singer/songwriters’ – solo performers accompanying themselves musically as best they could. Many were skilled players. Others were not, hanging on for dear life as they pounded on a guitar or pumped out a rhythm on a melodeon. Many were just not good enough to play ‘right.’ Success, if not survival, in a crowded honkytonk on a Saturday night meant devising and sticking to basic musical building blocks laid out in repetitive and memorable patterns. It depended on the Song. The Song was a bulwark, the firewall against failure, humiliation and unemployment.

In either case, skilled or unskilled, for the amateur playing ‘right’ was not the paramount concern. What mattered was Meaning. Meaning flowed from the Narrative Voice. The spacetime of folk music dictates that Musical Activity follows the singer. The singer mandates the Song. He organizes time and structure on the fly. Musical Activity suborns itself to an idiosyncratic master immersed in his own self-conceived Moment through which Musical Activity is funneled. Confident in his own Destiny he filters and channels it. It is stamped and fixed, frozen in aspic, by the rigid inflexibility of the rules and psychophysical laws that are the logic of the universe of a mad man, of a genius, of an idiot savant, or of an Everyman.

Now, imagine being such a man; a stranger in a strange land, crowded in by a roomful of pups trying to explain to you how in your own damn song the fourth bar of the fifth measure is supposed to be four beats and you can read it in their eyes that they think the passage comes out wrong every time because of something *you* don’t understand and they keep talking, not looking at you, about how there’s a beat and a little bit more – which can’t even be measured – that’s being dropped, and, jeez, it must be *you*, cuz they’ve counted it out.

“Don’t *count*. Listen!” you shout, but it’s all in vain. Who can argue against the utter rationality and clarity of mathematics?

Twelve Bar Blues is born as a shibboleth, not in the Mississippi Delta, or even Birmingham, Alabama, but in the bedrooms of Birmingham, England.

The singer, sole possessor of the Right Stuff in the spacetime of Folk, is coerced to buy into the Meme of Error.

(I am not a musicologist. I have no research or references to cite as proof for the preceding paragraphs. I have a conversation with Robert Kidney, a man qualified to speak authoritatively of the blues. Though, to be fair, the conversation had the quality of an after hours bar stool ramble. Still, we find ourselves at an identifiable point in cultural history and we had to get here by some very specific route. I quote Sherlock Holmes, “Whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”)

It’s interesting what happens as the Blues metamorphoses. Jazz bands replace the singer with an alto sax or trumpet or some such instrument. They oust the mad man and put in his place one of their own; a guy who can count and be relied upon to hit the change ‘right.’ Still, they remain firmly grounded in the blues sense of what a Song is. Immersed therein, at ease with the organ-

ic aesthetic that is born of the amateur, the jazzmen play Songs. That there is such a thing as a Song shaped by its own rules is the very thing that permits improvisation of a wild and ‘dangerous’ kind. The musician will know where he is within the Song at every moment, tracking its progress in his imagination. A lead player, and the entire band with him, can head off in abstract directions with confidence that all will be re-channeled succinctly at an approaching and identifiable moment.

Rules make for freedom. The only consideration is the quality and nature of the Rules. Improvisation as an art flourishes. Time passes. Then other things happen and improvisation enters a troubled period. That’s another story.

The first Pere Ubu manager told me, as we prepared to record *Dub Housing* (1978), that a song has to have three things.¹²

I said, “What things?”

As if with a dismissive wave of the hand, as if spoken out of the side of a wet-cigar-clenched mouth, as if these were the words he used, I remember, “*Don’t bother me, kid!*”

A song must have three things. You got three things, you got a Song.

Verse, chorus, bridge.

A setting, a statement, and a shift in scale.

This thing, that thing, the other thing.

It doesn’t matter. Three things.

Everybody knows what a verse is. It has a shape. It’s meant to tell a part of a story in a particular way. How the story will be told is fluid and varies widely depending on the story and the storyteller. All this information is apparent (or should be) to the musicians involved.

After a verse comes a chorus. Everybody knows what a chorus is. It has known and knowable characteristics as if these things were embedded in DNA and a dog, any dog, will always behave like a dog and look like a dog and bark like a dog because it’s... a dog.¹³

The musician knows that verse and chorus will repeat (or not) in a pattern (or no pattern) and inevitably a bridge will appear wherein the instrumental people get to do something and the singer drinks beer and poses with sensitive and/or pained expressions.

The root skill of any improvisation is awareness. The moment a horn player or singer breathes to change a chord or tempo, the intention should be apparent to all other musicians because the shape of the Song has dictated that a change is nigh. What kind of a change that change should or could be is indicated by the immutable laws of the unique, and possibly mad, universe of

¹² Cliff Burnstein went on to manage a number of very successful heavy metal bands, among them Metallica. In 1978, he brought a newly formed heavy metal group, Def Leppard, to study how Pere Ubu conducted sound checks.

¹³ Unless the dog is a whippet... in which case all bets are off.

the Narrative Voice. Countless nanoseconds exist – more than enough time – for musicians to organize themselves, as individuals and as an ensemble, in order to deliver the Good Stuff (structure, focus and dynamics; poetry, vision and passion), and avoid the Bad Stuff (tedium, indulgence and predictability).

Most commonly, any musical change is felt or recognized because a song has been charted out as a strict pattern of measures. Its organizational chart has been memorized through routine and rote during rehearsal. Improvisation relies not on the memorization of and obedience to tablets of stone brought down from the mountain but on an understanding of, and respect for, the *principles* of the Law. Improvisation is based on recognition of a pattern and of a Rule that rationalizes the pattern.

The structure of many Pere Ubu songs becomes inscrutable to band members when revisited years later.

“How in the world were we supposed to get from the bridge to the next chorus?” somebody asks nobody in particular.

The musical time is counted out.

“Oh, we dropped a beat-and-a-half there.”

“Why did we do that?” somebody asks, perplexed.

“We must have been high.”

Or “That’s what Scott said to do.”

Or “Maybe it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Then the band will spend two hours of rehearsal trying to play the ‘wrong’ thing ‘right.’

A song has a life cycle. It evolves, reaches maturity and then, inevitably, becomes stale, unfocussed and weary. The Narrative Voice wanders, or begins to doubt itself. Musicians remember too much. Rehearsal is called for and it becomes a frustrating process of trying to recapture and recreate what was generated spontaneously and organically in the first place. In the heart of the flame, the spark is dissolved. Mistake and Error are granted license. The garden is poisoned. Artifice blossoms as weeds. The song must be shelved until it is forgotten and can be revisited afresh. Alternatively, strategies must be deployed to reinvigorate it. The same holds true for a band.

RULES OF CHINESE WHISPERS

Chinese Whispers is a strategy that allows and requires a large band, organized along traditional lines, to operate as a small improvisational combo. Each instrument locates itself within the gestalt of any Musical Activity as both an integer and an integral. Each voice retains a unique identity apart from but still immersed within, and submissive to, the Song.

Chinese Whispers sez...

Don’t rehearse.

The complete ensemble is never to gather itself together in the same place at the same time unless such place is the stage and such time is the moment of performance in the presence of an Observer Audience. Rehearsal is never to be

taken past achieving basic competency in Musical Activity, i.e. the ability to move from Point A to Point B without a train wreck.

Pere Ubu has evolved to the point that I don't rehearse with the band. If there's a musical problem, I pick a musician best suited to deal with the problem and tell him to find a solution. "Don't talk to me about it," I say. "Don't ask me questions. It's not right and that's all there is to it. You have my authority. Go work it out with the rest of the guys." I go off and take a snooze or eat a sandwich. I come back later and ask, "Is it all sorted out?" I don't want to hear about it or listen to the resolution. If the answer is "Yes" then the next time I hear the song is in performance. If there's still a problem I choose a different band member to deal with it. "You guys need to fix this," I warn them, "Else I gotta do it and you *don't* want that!" My solutions, inevitably, are methodical rather than musical. "You're not allowed to use that patch on the synthesizer." Or "You can't play cymbals." Or "You're not allowed to use that chord." *Et cetera*.

In a large band, rehearsal is an obligation policed by the Meme of Error, which is the guilt-fringed sense that there is a Right or Wrong way to play a song or to give a musical performance. In a small improvisational combo, rehearsal itself is the Error. The aura of the Amateur, the Idiot Savant, is like an exotic perfume. It thrills the audience with a promise of danger and the unknown. An audience should be encouraged to experience fear and uncertainty. Will the show fall apart?¹⁴ What is happening? Is this *supposed* to be this way? Unpredictability engages and stimulates the Hieroglyphic imagination.¹⁵

Chinese Whispers sez...

Remove composition from the provenance of rehearsal.

At rehearsal, the organization of a composition is subject to artifice and reasoned consideration. The Meme of Error operates. Instrumentalists are understandably inclined to organize a composition in such a way that it is 'right.' They are understandably concerned with getting from Point A to Point B without train wreck and the consequent professional embarrassment. Rehearsal

¹⁴ An Australian fan wrote, "That was a great show from you guys. We were a little worried when you called the band off stage after a couple of songs – but whatever you did, it did the trick." I responded, "Since we see ourselves as amateurs we have no front to protect. Given that, it's still possible to get into a panicked frame of mind when it seems that things are going wrong on stage. In this state you quickly lose perspective and the ability to concentrate on the immediate task. It's far more productive to simply excuse yourself and leave the stage for a few minutes to have a drink, talk over things, correct any technical problems and establish contingencies. You regain your confidence and level-mindedness and since you're not protecting an image, you lose nothing in the eyes of the audience. And it's always good psychology to worry the audience a little – as long as you can deliver the big payoff, and we *are* the sort of men who can deliver the goods."

¹⁵ See *The Book of Hieroglyphs*, page 228.

exerts a reactionary drag on the process of composition. Subtle and not-so-subtle restraints are placed on the mad man spacetime of the Narrative Voice. A mad man is never embarrassed by his own madness. It is counterproductive for others to even suggest such a possibility within range of his hearing.

Chinese Whispers sez...

The Producer shall command the Narrative Voice.

Only the Producer should be allowed to consider the Big Picture as it unfolds, shapes itself or is intended.

For the *Lady From Shanghai* project, I took on two distinct roles – one as Producer and one as band member. As much as possible I pigeonholed these roles. I erected Chinese walls in my mind. As the band member who is the principal singer and lyric writer I am nominally, and rightly, in command of the Narrative Voice as well. Yet Chinese Whispers requires that the Producer shall be the only one allowed to contextualize this Voice. The techniques I employed to short circuit this paradox included arbitrary choices, impulsive changes of direction, swaths of empty time in which to forget, and disciplined intuition. Vocal parts, including lyrics, were composed and recorded according to the Folk Method. There were no vocal retakes or reconsidered and revised words. Lyrics were improvised phrase-by-phrase, verse-by-verse, from kernel ideas. There was no going back to tidy up phrasing, narrative coherency or poetic facility. Meaning formed itself over the course of the composition without undue intervention.

Chinese Whispers sez...

Isolate the musician.

In the studio, the individual musician must be sequestered, provided with the minimum of information and protected from suggestion and influence. All that he can know must be restricted to the state of the composition at the stage of its evolution that the Producer chooses to engage him. As much as possible, composition should occur during the recorded performance. To facilitate, the Producer may need to lie, misdirect, misinform or confuse the musician. It may be helpful to move the goal posts at the last moment. The musician should not be allowed to see the Big Picture until the composition exists in a near finished form, and, ideally, only after he has contributed to it. The musician should be alone with his thoughts, uncertain but determined. Isolated. The goal should be to capture the unique and distinctive voice of the individual as he struggles to cobble Meaning together out of a soup of confusions, contradictions, hopes and fears, information and misinformation. Such is the nature of real life. Real life is the only worthwhile ambition for Art.

Only once over the course of the entire *Lady From Shanghai* project did any two band members find themselves in the same building at the same time. Even then, Michele and Robert were not in the same room at the same time for more than thirty-seven seconds. Neither heard what the other was playing. Conversation was limited to pleasantries. I shooed them away brusquely.

The more cozy and comfortable a musician is and the more he settles into a routine, or is subject to the Meme of Error, the less likely the process will be to successfully draw out the ‘danger’ of his unique voice, the peril of You Being You. The goal is not for the musician to play a part that exists in the Producer’s head but to be ornery, strong-minded, determined – to express his own take on the proceedings at hand.

Chinese Whispers sez...

Never let the left hand know the right hand’s business.

The need-to-know rule applies to everyone but the Producer. Song ideas are generated individually by band members and submitted only to the Producer in the form of demo recordings. Requests, deals, favors, ambitions and desires are a confidential matter between the Producer and any band member.

A musician presents the Producer with an idea who then ‘adjusts’ it, or contributes to it, and passes it on to the next musician who, in turn, adds another perspective, or enforces a different scale, and then passes it back to the Producer, who, in turn, passes it on to the next best musician to move it on from that point. Around it goes, taking on unexpected shapes, growing in unpredictable directions – yielding to no one person’s preconceptions. The Producer, operating in the role of conductor via his grasp of the Narrative Voice, is thus continually thwarted in any attempt to introduce a subjective Meme of Error. He is forced into dealing with a simulacrum of the Real World in which he doesn’t, and can’t, get everything his own way. Chinese Whispers is analogous to the Constitutional system of checks and balances.

Chinese Whispers sez...

Anything that can be explained isn’t worth doing.

The Producer must operate according to a strict need-to-know policy. His *modus operandi* should emulate that of the Central Intelligence Agency. Whatever is said to a musician by way of guidance will, inevitably, corrupt the integrity of the process. The less said the better. Co-workers will have been chosen, it is assumed, on the basis and in anticipation of a hoped-for chemical reaction. The nature and outcome of that reaction is not predictable or contrivable. Put interesting people together and something worth doing is bound to happen. Surround yourself with the exceptional and the outcome will be unique – as long as the integrity of the Method is maintained. The goal is Reality.

If a musician can explain what he’s doing with a song then he’s in the wrong business.

In the late ‘70s, there was a musician on the periphery of the underground scene in Cleveland. He liked to talk a lot about his music and what it meant. The last I ever heard of him was a story about how he bought a pair of sunglasses to wear getting off the plane in New York City. He was heading there to make something of himself.

Chinese Whispers sez...

Don't worry, it'll work out.

Why? Because there is no alternative. Failure is a man's best friend. Reach a separate peace with Failure. An overwhelming sense of personal failure is a solid motivational tool. The past fills up with failure. People who are competent believe they are always teetering on the verge of failure. People who are incompetent think they are great at what they do.

An Alexander Technique teacher is a drinking buddy at my local pub. We periodically go through the same argument. The pursuit of confidence, I say, is evidence of an artistically fatal flaw. Confidence is evidence of incompetence. It is certainly an irrelevance as regards performance. Musicians who have achieved a certain level of mastery have one thing in common – they lack imagination. They are unable to perceive a better life for themselves. The difference between a musician and a civilian is that the musician will go out on stage in front of 10,000 people and make a complete ass of himself and then go out and do it all over again the next night without a second thought. The civilian will think to himself, "I shouldn't be doing this."

I say to my Alexander buddy, "It appears to you that I have so much confidence that it borders on arrogance. No, that's not what's happening. I simply know that everything I do will fail. I'm okay with that – I just want to get on with it and get it over with. I have no fear of failure. On the contrary, I am resigned to its inevitability."

Contemplate the Zen of the following: "We call it disaster so nothing can go wrong."

Chinese Whispers sez...

Don't reinvent the wheel.

I don't experiment. I know what I'm doing. *Lady From Shanghai* is the realization of a decades-long, reasoned pursuit of a particular methodology. Across the years I have traveled many roads. I have set out across fields where there is no road because, off in the distance, I can see a road I want to be on. Or, across the fields I know there must be a road that goes somewhere and I want to find it. I don't build roads – I find them.