**Encyclopaedic Tendencies and Impossible Projects: An interview with Peter Blegvad**

**Rupert Loydell**, Falmouth University

**Abstract**

Peter Blegvad is a writer, graphic artist, songwriter, musician, teacher and broadcaster. He has been making music since the mid 1970s with Slapp Happy, Faust, Henry Cow, John Greaves, Chris Cutler, the Golden Palominos, John Zorn, Andy Partridge and others. His weekly comic strip, *Leviathan*, ran in the *Independent on Sunday* from 1991 to 1998 and *The Book of Leviathan* was published in the United Kingdom and the United States in 2000 (Blegvad 2000). A Mandarin translation was published in 2010. A French translation won le Prix de Révelation at the Angoulême Festival in 2014. He has supplied BBC Radio 3 with ‘Eartoons’ since 2002, and has won two Sony awards for his radio work, one in 2003 and one in 2012 (the latter for *Use It Or Lose It* a collaboration with composer Iain Chambers). He taught Creative Writing at the University of Warwick for seventeen years and was senior tutor in visual writing at the Royal College of Art, London from 2012 to 2015. He has taught several illustration workshops at the Die Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst.

He was Awarded the *Ordre de la Grande Gidouille* by the Collège de 'Pataphysique, Paris, in 2000. In 2011 he was elected president of the London Institute of Pataphysics.

An introduction to his life-long multi-media epistemological project *Imagine, Observe, Remember* is online at: [http://www.amateur.org.uk](http://www.amateur.org.uk/). Related works have been exhibited in Kunstverein Hannover and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2004), in the Kunsthalle Luzern (2007), in Extra City, Antwerp (2010) and elsewhere. He co-hosts the Amateur Enterprises website (<www.amateur.org.uk>) with Simon Lucas.

I first heard Peter Blegvad on LPs by Slapp Happy and/or Henry Cow at the end of the 1970s, played to me by an anarchist friend who was a devout fan of all things experimental and improvised, but over the years Blegvad has popped up all over the place: as a cartoonist, an illustrator, a poet, a sidesman, a member of various bands, a collaborator and a solo artist. He was associated with early work by Faust, no wave noise by the Golden Palominos, and more recently made ‘Eartoons’ for *The Verb* on Radio 4, whilst continuing to teach and release his music.

I was fortunate enough to work alongside him for a while at Warwick University, and have him as a guest lecturer on the writing lyrics module I taught at Falmouth. It's hard to pin Peter Blegvad down at all, but I thought I'd give it a go.

**Rupert Loydell (RL):** *So, Peter, let's talk about the mysteries of the universe. Of something, nothing and everything – which, I recall, was the title of an annual series of lectures you gave at Warwick University when we were both there. Does everything interconnect or does something hold it all in balance? And how do you fit into that?*

**Peter Blegvad (PB):** Teaching is a performance of sorts. I had no academic qualifications when I began teaching, but I’d done some performing, in bands and solo, and the experience proved useful. I taught (creative writing) part-time at Warwick for seventeen years. I was keen to bring various things I do – drawing, writing, music – together, to try to connect them somehow. An illustrated lecture was one way to do it.

For better or worse, I have encyclopaedic tendencies and am drawn to impossible projects. The series of lectures, ‘Nothing, Everything, Something’, was a case in point. The first section, on Nothing, came out of my early Zen dabblings, John Cage, etc. We looked at writers – Swift, Flaubert, Mallarmé, Corso among them – who saw ‘nothing’ as a worthy subject for their pens. I set the students the challenge of trying to describe Nothing. Then we considered its antithesis, Everything, going back through history and looking at Pliny, or Athanasius Kircher, known as 'the last man to know everything'. That section began with a projection of Boiffard’s sinister photo of a big toe, because T.O.E. stands for Theory Of Everything which physicists claim they’re on the brink of discovering. And I talked about lists that are a ‘thumbnail sketch of everything’ (Francis Spufford’s phrase) – like 'shoes and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings' – or Perec’s 'love, maracas and salami' – or the longer list in the Borges story 'The Aleph'. And then ultimately we wound up with Something. As Walt Whitman says, 'No object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheeled universe […]'. Any object or subject, if you go deep enough – doing what Charles Olson called a 'saturation job' on it – will eventually connect to everything else. Or maybe not. There are examples of Somethings that seem numinous because they connect to so many other things. But there are also negatively charged Somethings that repel connection, that are permanent fragments, like that pebble which makes the narrator queasy in Sartre’s *La Nausée.* And finally I gave an account of my own personal Something, my own saturation job, which for 35 years has been milk […].

**RL:** *My creative writing students weren't at all sure what to make of your workshop/seminar at Falmouth several years ago now. In between chanting found and nonsense poems, your asides about an obsession with milk, and having them design angel traps for words to be caught in, they were bemused; entertained but very bemused. Are you really that mystical when it comes to songwriting?*

**PB:** When I was writing lyrics for John Greaves back in the ’70s and ’80s, I didn’t want to take responsibility for what I wrote, so out of insecurity and boredom I developed an elaborate form of displacement activity, a self-estranging technique, creating what I called 'angel trap stationery' – paper painted with symbols and impregnated with scents designed to attract various powers and dominions of the air to aid me in the act of composition. I wanted to be dictated to, like my poetic heroes – Yeats, Rilke, Cocteau, Jack Spicer. It worked, in a sort of tongue-in-cheek way.

In my teens and twenties I dipped in and out of Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, etc. I’m a sceptic, allergic to gurus, but I like the poetic trappings, the mumbo-jumbo, the images, symbols and rituals of mysticism. It’s another impossible project: to ‘penetrate the veil’, to open a channel of communicate between worlds, or between one’s conscious and unconscious selves. Self-estranging techniques are useful for generating surprise in one’s creative practice. In making any art, you’re catering to your audience’s taste (and your own) for emotions of both recognition and surprise; the trick is to get the balance right.

**RL:** *You have a very interesting past, geographically (America to England to Germany), and musically. Tell us about working with Faust when they had blagged enough money to start some kind of commune and studio, Slapp Happy and their joint ventures with Henry Cow, and the bizarre collaboration with John Greaves and Lisa Herman that was* Kew. Rhone. *(Greaves 1977) issued on Virgin.*

**PB:** I’d met Anthony Moore circa 1966 at the boarding school my parents had the good sense to send me to in pre-lapsarian Hertfordshire. In our teens, Anthony and I enjoyed playing guitar together, improvising, making up riffs. We communicated like that; it was part of our bond. We played in a band with other students at an end-of-term dance. Among the blues covers I remember we played at least one original – a Mothers or Soft Machine influenced anti-social noise-music marathon which resulted in a teacher pulling the plug out of our amplifier and kicking us off stage. A few years later Anthony was in Germany making soundtracks for avant-garde films. There was money for artists in Germany. He’d befriended the producer and journalist Uwe Nettelbeck who had a deal with Polygram Records to find new talent. Uwe had found Anthony, and they’d made three albums for Polygram – minimalist, experimental compositions. Lovely things, but quite ‘challenging’ for the average listener. It was Art music. Polygram eventually asked Uwe if he couldn’t find them someone who could make records that might sell. ‘Popular’ music. At the time Uwe was also managing Faust. Polygram had financed the conversion of an isolated schoolhouse into a recording studio and living quarters for them. Faust were a pretty radical proposition too, deconstructing rock music, inventing a European musical vernacular purged of Anglo-American influences. Polygram wasn’t convinced that they would sell, either. So Uwe asked Anthony, and Anthony, bless his heart, convinced him that he and I were the ones for the job. We enjoyed pop music, we felt we could come up with something like it, a pastiche maybe, that would amuse us and might appeal to others. So I dropped out of Exeter University to join him and his then girlfriend, Dagmar Krause, in Hamburg. Dagmar became our singer. Over the next couple of years, backed by members of Faust, we made two albums as Slapp Happy, *Sort Of* (1972) and *Acnalbasac Noom* (recorded 1973; released 1980). *Sort Of* — the title suggests ambivalence. As did the liner notes on the back of the album: 'What we did last week when we had nothing to do was to slap up this platter kowtowing to our role as the champions of the Douanier Rousseau sound, naïve rock […]'. We thought of our music as a kind of outsider pop. It was a precursor of the punk DIY aesthetic. Needless to say, Polygram soon dropped us. But then Virgin signed us and another chapter opened […].

**RL:** Kew. Rhone. *has been reissued on CD over the years and in 2011 you wrote and edited a book about it, its palindromes, anagrams and diagrams, as well as gathering together critical and artistic responses to the work. The blurb says that the album 'aspired to higher things' and notes how 'curiosity about this categorically elusive work has grown'. Why do you think this is? How is it that it seems, in retrospect, to almost act as a manifesto or summary of your work?*

**PB:** I’m not sure how much curiosity there has ever been about *Kew. Rhone.* It’s a kind of U.F.O. record, known only to a handful. But I’d always felt it warranted excavation, and no one else was going to do it. When it was released in 1977 the only publicity for it was a small black and white ad in *Time Out* which said ‘for those who love a good mystery’. I think mystery is one of the places where the life lives, and the album is mysterious. Pretentious, too, but lively. It was the first and possibly most successful attempt I made to bring together the things I do – music (John’s in this case), writing and drawing. In that sense it is a kind of ‘manifesto’ as you say. My main influences at the time were Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Roussel, Harry Mathews and other Oulipo writers. Louis Zufofsky and Edmund Husserl. By combining words, music and imagery, John and I were trying to create a subjective experience that had the presence, the resistance of an object. 'Peel’s foe, not a set animal, laminates a tone of sleep' is on one level an interesting sentence, but – once you realize it reads the same backwards as forwards – it acquires an extra dimension, mathematical, it becomes a language-object. And then when it’s set to music and sung […]

Quote from the *Kew. Rhone.* book:

[The objecthood of the songs] […] was further boosted by illustrations printed on the sleeve. The words were then locked in triangular tension with both audial and visual data. The songs were now, in a sense, 3D constructs. I was aiming to create a mental object with the presence and resistance of a physical thing. Furthermore, […] the 3D construct can be seen as the projection of a hypothetical entity of four dimensions. The songs on *Kew. Rhone.* are shadows – echoes – of this Platonic ‘ideal’ song which can only be imagined.

These days, with new media, the visual, audial, and verbal are converging more and more. Soon the *gesamtkunstwerk* will be everyone’s default medium, but back then ‘interactivity’ was something new.

**RL:** *You managed to keep a Virgin contract for your first couple of solo albums, The* Naked Shakespeare *(1983) and* Knights Like This *(1985), but they are very differently produced to most of your later solo work. Were you keen to be a rock or pop star, or were Virgin? Or did it just sound like 1980s music back then?*

**PB:** I went through patches of very much wanting and striving to have a successful music career, but I didn’t know who I was or what direction to take, musically. (Not that I was particularly versatile. I was, and still am, a very limited musician.) My sense of identity was fluid, unfixed, precarious. Musically I could find something to like in pretty much any/everything. And sometimes I liked nothing. I floundered about. In that fluid state I was dangerously susceptible to well-meaning advice from producers, A & R people, record company execs, etc. With their help, I made a lot of mistakes trying to adapt material to appeal to a wider market. That said, Andy Partridge did a brilliant job as producer on *The Naked Shakespeare*. He was very quick, musically sympathetic and boundlessly inventive. I wish I’d stuck with him for my second Virgin record, but I thought change was the healthier option. I remember meeting Tom Verlaine to discuss him producing what became *Knights*. I was a big fan of his band, Television. That would have been an interesting collaboration. Maybe. But in the end I thought I could produce *Knights* myself, with help from David Lord. All my carefully laid plans for that record fell apart. It was a disaster. An ignominious end to my relationship with Virgin. But it cleared the way for me to make what I consider my *real* work, the records I made over the next 30 years with Chris Cutler, John Greaves and others for ReR, Cutler’s independent record company. No money in it, but complete freedom to experiment, to express and please ourselves.

Overall, the ‘career’ aspect of creativity wasn’t so crucial to me. I could just about scrape by on income earned as an illustrator, so as a musician I could enjoy being an amateur and indulge my non-commercial, Surrealist tendencies. Self-destructive? ‘Shooting myself in the foot’? Afraid of failure and thus of success? Maybe.

**RL:** *Even by then, punk and post-punk seemed to have passed you by. What was your perception of what happened back then? Were you still listening to what is known as Krautrock and the likes of Henry Cow? Virgin of course were busy marketing New Wave and punk and their back catalogue of Tangerine Dream and Mike Oldfield!*

**PB:** The DIY, amateur ethos espoused by a band like the Raincoats in the UK appealed to me. I was reminded of Slapp Happy’s ‘naïve’ anti-virtuoso approach, and Faust’s attempt to start from scratch. It was refreshing. In NYC, I liked Television, Talking Heads and Patti Smith, but most punk and post-punk music seemed aimed at a younger audience. I didn’t connect with much of it. I listened to Robert Wyatt’s *Rock Bottom* (1974). I liked melody and harmony, and soul. I listened to Lightnin’ Hopkins, Mississippi John Hurt, Muddy Waters. I loved the records Billie Holiday and Lester Young made together. Also *Lady in Satin* (1958), the late great record Billie made, with lush orchestral arrangements. As I recall, my other favourite records back then included the soundtrack album from *The Harder They Come* (Various Artists 1972) (I especially loved ‘By the Rivers of Babylon’ by The Melodions). Al Green, Etta James, Aretha Franklin, kora music from Gambia, Dollar Brand, Carla Bley. I always listened to whatever Bob Dylan was doing. And the Rolling Stones, bless their cotton socks.

**RL:** *Down the line, you hitched up with John Zorn on his* Locus Solus *album (1983) and as part of the group who made* Blast of Silence *(1986), one incarnation of the Golden Palominos. Do you or did you consider this a continuation of New York's exploration of music following on from the likes of Television, Patti Smith and Talking Heads or more from the Philip Glass art loft school of things? What’s your take on New York punk and post punk, as opposed to the UK standard edition? How did Zorn’s improvised jazz outings fit in?*

**PB:** Now he’s deservedly world-famous, a one-man creative industry, but when we met in NYC, John Zorn was a shy greenhorn, a precocious kid. I’m six years older, and maybe he respected me because I had a few uncommercial albums under my belt and knew celebrated mavericks like Fred Frith. In the ’70s, Zorn graciously played in a couple of loose ensembles I put together for one-off gigs at Soundscape, a venue run by musicologist Verna Gillis. We played old Slapp Happy numbers and half-finished compositions of mine, pop pastiches. In turn he invited me to join a large ensemble he put together to perform one of his first Game Pieces. His work had a punky edge to it, an anarchic glee and energy, but there was more to it than that. A deeper sensibility and awareness. I thought it was more interesting than a lot of what Glass and other minimalists had done, (though I liked that stuff too). The *Locus Solus* sessions featured me, Zorn and Christian Marclay improvising short pieces as a trio. I read bits from notebooks into a microphone, distorting my voice through a delay pedal. I’m not sure I was much good, but I loved doing it. It was less onerous than writing and performing songs. At any rate I learned a lot playing with those extraordinary people, and later with Arto Lindsay in an early incarnation of his band, the Ambitious Lovers. For Arto I learned to play a few complicated Brazilian songs on guitar, figuring out the chords by ear from records he loaned me. Some of those jazzy chords have come in handy since, when composing my own (onerous) songs.

I’d been Arto’s ‘vocal coach’ on the first Golden Palominos record. The music was a sort of mutant no-wave form of ‘free jazz’. (I also did the cover for the UK release on Rough Trade.) The incarnation of the Palominos I joined years later was a very different animal, playing a kind of American ‘roots rock’. Anton Fier was a dictatorial band leader who worked us hard. It was brutal at times, but I lacked discipline and he managed to instil a bit in me. For which I’m grateful. I got to play with some wonderful musicians in that band. And we got to tour America in a proper tour bus, complete with roadies and the whole bit. My only taste of what life must be like for a ‘professional’ musician.

**RL:** *Andy Partridge produced you in 1983, thanks to a Virgin Records hook-up. Did he bring any of his New Wave energy to your later collaborative releases,* Orpheus – The Lowdown *(Partridge and Blegvad 2003) and* Gonwards *(Partridge and Blegvad 2012)? Early XTC gigs were astonishing in the way they deconstructed pop; the slow motion wreckage as they took apart Dylan's 'All Along the Watchtower' was especially startling. Obviously he's moved on and remains a fantastic musician and composer*.

**PB:** Andy’s phenomenal. He seems able to immediately tap into vast reservoirs of creative energy whatever the project is. Unlike me, he works fast, very little dithering, and always seems to come up with something unexpected but which then sounds inevitable. We had a ball recording *Orpheus* in his garden shed studio and then doing *Gonwards* with (musician/engineer/producer) Stu Rowe in Stu’s slightly larger garden shed. On *Orpheus, the Lowdown*, Andy and I re-imagined the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. *Gonwards* began with us trying to re-imagine another myth: the myth of the blues. The blues must be the most pervasive musical form in history. We wanted to consider the blues from a new angle – not just the music but the lore it conveys. We took inventory of the characters, places and objects we associated with the blues and drew on these for the opening track, 'The Devil’s Lexicon'. We weren’t consciously thinking of the blues as the theme of every song, but we come back to it in one form or another again and again all the way through. The record ends with 'Worse on the Way' which might be called a Russian blues. (I always heard Mary Hopkins singing it – an answer to 'Those Were The Days'.)

**RL:** *Although on one level these could be considered concept albums, they are also a great deal of fun, and show off your illustration and design work, which we haven't, angel traps aside, discussed. Tell us about your visual creativity, including your Leviathan cartoons, which were originally published in* The Independent *before being gathered up in a book in 2000.*

**PB:** I always drew, as most kids do, recreationally, as a form of thinking or dreaming. My brother, Kristoffer, and I had grown up in Westport, Connecticut (full of illustrators then). Drawing was very much encouraged by both parents. The house was full of books about or by illustrators from Denmark, England, France, and the US, all of which I pored over. My father, Erik Blegvad, illustrated more than a hundred children’s books. My mother, Lenore, wrote several and was also a painter. As a product of their union, text and image always seemed natural bedfellows to me. I like how they combine to create objects which aren’t just the sum of their parts. Comics are an obvious example of this.

My comic strip, *Leviathan*, starred a faceless tot, a living tabula rasa, and his cat. Its seven-and-a-half year run in the *Independent on Sunday* ended in 1999. *The Book of Leviathan* was published by Sort Of Books (in English) and is also available in Chinese and French translations. The faceless tot was the image I gave to the complex of feelings aroused in me by my own immaturity and the state of chronic infantilism characteristic of our species as a whole.

Babies are natural 'trickster' figures, straddling the border between cute and grotesque, form and chaos, between innocence and perversity. (As St. Augustine put it: 'if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to harm, but for lack of strength'.) Yet they’re granted total exemption, *carte blanche*. We both envy and despise them for this. Babies are seers. Everything is a revelation to them. They’re in awe of it all, a state which can seem both admonitory and ridiculous to the habit-bound. Enjoying his exemption to the full, Leviathan made an excellent vehicle for the exploration of worlds inner and outer, real and imaginary. Plus, having no face, he was easy to draw.

I don't draw comics anymore. These days I’m working on another impossible project, depicting things thrice – as I imagine, observe and remember them – contrasting these three modes of perception in drawings and paintings. Pataphysical epistemology.

**RL:** *And, of course, you also made ‘eartoons’, sound cartoons, for Ian McMillan's Radio 4 programme* The Verb*, and have been involved in several radio dramas over the years. Is this a different way of working?*

**PB:** There wasn’t much demand for my songs so I thought I’d develop another line of product. Not one that was entirely new to me, in that John Greaves and I had made a record, *Unearthed* (2000), on which I read short stories over John’s musical soundscapes. I wanted to take the writing a little further, using ‘guided visualisation’ and ‘remote viewing’ as models. I wanted to see where we were in this fictional world, I wanted writing them to transport me, like Astral Travel.

The stories I came up were OK on the page, but I thought it would be even better if I could modulate the narrative voice, maybe have a drone underneath it, sound effects, seagulls, one hand clapping […] to offer more effective transport, armchair travel. I was also influenced by Ken Nordine’s *Word Jazz* (1957) and the Firesign Theater. Using sound to evoke a movie for one’s inner cinema really appealed to me, and the name, 'eartoon', was an obvious choice as an ex-cartoonist, delighted to discover that instead of having to spend hours drawing backgrounds, to give each panel depth and context […] with radio, when someone says 'Whew! It sure is hot!' you just add cicadas in the background and somehow you see it, the shimmering heat haze over the sun-baked earth. You’re there! Sound is so evocative.

The first eartoon I made for Radio 3 was about WOPs, Words of Power, which is what I called those non-lexical vocables in early rock ‘n’ roll, like awopbopaloobopalopbamboom! poppa-ooma-mow-mow, louie-louie, diddy-wah-diddy, woolly-bully […] and it featured the two halves of my divided self arguing, one half claiming they were as meaningless as the hey-nonny-nonny in folk songs, the other insisting they were potent magic formulae, evocations like Abracadabra! Or like Antonin Artaud’s incantations written in the madhouse: 'Artaud-da-poo-pah po […]' in his momo language, which seems to have been designed to effect some kind of psychic transformation.

And then I did one on phonetic symbolism, about the sound qualities in words that convey impressions of texture, brightness or size. For example, if you were shown a large stone and a little stone and asked which was named mib and which was mob, chances are you’d say mib was the smaller one. My two selves disagreed over whether there’s a meaningful relation between the sound and sense of words – as there is in onomatopoeia – or if the relation is arbitrary.

I did one about somniloquy, sleep-talk, focusing on the case of Dion McGregor. The eartoon featured excerpts from recordings of him talking in his sleep, narrating his dreams, made in NYC in the ’60s and released commercially by Decca, believe it or not (McGregor 1964). And so on. Over the years the two halves of my divided self have interviewed Loudon Wainwright, the actor John Guerrasio (who demonstrated his skill at screaming), the ghost of Sir Francis Galton, and Spring (the season). We’ve done vox pops in Barnsley, descended into the necromanteion (ancient oracle of the dead) in Epirus, Greece, we’ve milked stones, burned books and phoned the last name (Zelmo Zzzip) in the Manhattan phone book. I stopped doing them a few years ago, but I must have done almost a hundred of them in total.

Since then I’ve worked with composer and sound designer Iain Chambers on several half-hour radio plays for Radio 3’s experimental slot, *Between the Ears*. We won a Sony award for ‘*Use It Or Lose It*’, about memory loss. As the old adage has it, ‘I prefer radio to TV because the pictures are better’.

**RL:** *Let's get back to your solo work.* Downtime *(1988) and* King Strut *(1990) both showcased a more acoustic setting with more of a focus on the songs, something that seems to have carried through to the present day in your albums. Would that be a fair comment? I know* Downtime *was recorded as demos originally, but did it help you find a focus and simplicity in your music?*

**PB:** *Downtime* wasn’t recorded as demos. It was the first of four albums I made over the next 30 years with Chris, John and others for ReR. As I recall, there was no budget for it, everyone worked for free or for very little. When the studio – a converted meat locker in Brixton owned by This Heat – had free time and I had some material to record, those of us who were available would convene. It took years to record an album’s worth of tracks this way, but as a result of these constraints I think it’s my first ‘honest’ solo record. In other words, the constraints – lack of time and money, and no ‘producer’ – did indeed help me ‘find a focus and simplicity’ in the music. *King Strut* was different. There was a budget, for one thing. There were two producers: Chris Stamey and Andy Partridge. There were all sorts of wonderful musicians – Peter Holsapple, B. J. Cole, Pino Palladino, Neil Wilkinson, Danny Thompson, Michael Blair, Guy Barker among them. And I had a few years of playing with the Golden Palominos under my belt, so my playing and writing had matured. Silvertone records – backed by Zomba – financed it. Critically, it was well received, and for a while it looked like I might have a shot at a more mainstream career. But the album didn’t sell (Zomba declined to assist when I was offered the opening slot on a world tour with Suzanne Vega, which might have made a difference). When that dream dissolved, it was a relief to experience the freedom – the reality, shall we say – of making another low-budget ‘independent’ record for ReR. This one would become *Just Woke Up* (1995) in the making of which the trio of me, John and Chris really coalesced. Chris brought in Bob Drake – composer, musician, engineer, producer – who would later join the band – to mix it.

**RL:** *How does* Go Figure *(2018), which I haven't heard yet, fit into the grand scheme of things? Chris Cutler and John Greaves are back, but you are also working with Karen Mantler and Bob Drake on this release. I gather there’s also some kind of big box retrospective set available on a subscription basis?*

**PB:** [Here’s what I wrote about Karen for the deluxe 72-page illustrated booklet that will accompany the six-CD box set retrospective ReR will release later this year]:

I’m pretty sure John and I first met Karen in 1976 when we were recording *Kew. Rhone.* in the studio/home of her parents, composers Michael Mantler and Carla Bley. Karen would have been ten years old. Unsurprisingly, in that household, she was already composing and playing music of an original bent herself. Over the next couple of decades I lost touch with her, but occasionally I’d hear how great she was from John when they worked together on projects celebrating the work of Robert Wyatt. By the late ’90s I was hooked on the albums she and her band made for the label XtraWATT, of songs celebrating her cat Arnold (*My Cat Arnold*, 1989; *Get The Flu*, 1990; *Farewell*, 1996). She sang on them, played Hammond organ, glockenspiel and chromatic harmonica. And she did so with great taste, wit, economy and precision. She could swing, she could rock, make you laugh or touch your heart. So I was already a fan when we finally met again, in New York City in 1998. We were all there to take part in a tribute to Robert Wyatt (can’t have too many of those) at the Knitting Factory. Chris, John and I were performing as a trio, but on record our sound was usually augmented by other musicians, crucially by keyboards (usually played by Geraint Watkins). Karen agreed to takeover this role. We were excited, knew she’d be perfect, but it would be several more years before we’d have a chance to actually play together.

And here’s what I wrote about the album *Go Figure*:

By 2009 the itch that for 40 years I could only scratch by writing or playing songs had gone. I’d lost interest. That changed when I was invited to join the Radio Free Song Club, the initiative of singer-songwriters Kate Jacobs and Dave Schramm, and DJ/singer Nicholas Hill in New York. Among the other members were several of my old comrades from the downtown scene. The idea was that every month we would each present a new song, even if it wasn’t finished. Some sent in home recordings, others turned up at the studio when the show was recorded and performed their songs live, often accompanied by the excellent house band, the Radio Free All Stars, under the direction of Dave Schramm. The show created a community of peers, and the regular prospect of a discerning audience. It inspired me to write new songs, or dust off old ideas and finish them, so that I could participate in the group ‘conversation’. Between 2010 and 2014 I believe 32 programmes were recorded (at time of writing, 2017, they’re still available on the RFSC website). I mention all this because most of the songs on ‘Go Figure’ were written for or first given an airing on Song Club shows. I’m grateful for the incentive it gave me. I’m also grateful to my colleagues in Slapp Happy, Dagmar Krause and Anthony Moore, for reminding me what a pleasure it can be, making music with old friends. In 2016 Jan Lankish and Theresa Nink (who run the Weekend Festival in Cologne) proposed that Slapp Happy get back together with Jean-Hervé Peron and Zappi Diermaier formerly of Faust, now of faUSt— who’d been the rhythm section on our first records in 1972 and 73. It was a blast. Slapp Happy have been touring and performing quite a bit ever since. So, with my interest in making music thus revitalized, the band of my dreams assembled at Bordebasse to record Go Figure in June and July 2017. The line-up: Karen Mantler (organ, harmonica, glockenspiel and vocals), John (bass and piano), Chris (drums and percussion), Bob (guitar, vocals, percussion) and me (guitar and vocals). Working in the convivial ambience of the big room at Bordebasse, we recorded nineteen songs, sixteen of which wound up on the album. (The other three will be included as bonus tracks in the box set.) Songs were arranged by the band in rehearsals. Besides playing and singing, Bob also engineered and produced the record.

**RL:** *So, to sum up, for someone who is on record as saying 'I am a flippant individual' (n.d.), you haven't done badly for yourself! Is there anything else you'd like to say?*

**PB:** Thanks for your interest, Rupert.

**RL:** *Thanks Peter.*

**References**

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**Contributor details**

Rupert Loydell is senior lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride* magazine, a contributing editor to *International Times* and a widely published poet. He is on the editorial board of *Punk & Post-Punk*, and has also written for other academic journals such as *Axon*, *Text*, *English*, *New Writing*, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, *Revenant*, *Musicology Research* and *The Journal of Visual Art Practice*. He co-wrote a chapter in *Brian Eno. Oblique Music* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and a forthcoming chapter on *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

Contact:

E-mail: rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk