INTERVIEW

**RUPERT LOYDELL**

Falmouth University

**Open for Investigation: An interview with Stephen Mallinder**

**ABSTRACT**

Stephen Mallinder is regarded as one of the key influences on contemporary electronic and popular music culture.

The first release by Mallinder’s group Cabaret Voltaire, *Extended Play* in 1978, represented the first domestic release for Rough Trade Records, the UK's foremost independent label. It was followed by a contribution to *A Factory Sampler*, the debut release for the seminal British record label, Factory Records (Various Artists, 1978). The group went on to make over 30 albums for labels including Virgin and EMI, and recently reissued a series of box sets though Mute Records, all to critical acclaim.

Stephen has recorded and toured extensively in Europe, USA, Japan and Australia and continues to record and play, currently recording and touring as Wrangler, with recent releases under the names Hey Rube and Kula, Cobby & Mallinder.

He has collaborated with a host of artists and musicians including Afrika Bambaataa, Marshall Jefferson, Adrian Sherwood, and worked with poet John Giorno and with William Burroughs at the Final Academy in the 1980s. He has also established a number of production companies, record and video labels including: Doublevision; Plastex; and Off World Sounds (Australia). His works have been performed at Tate Modern (Turbines) and the Barbican Centre.

He has worked as extensively as a journalist and broadcaster covering both electronic music and popular culture, and as an academic who has published a number of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters. He holds a PhD in popular culture, and is currently at the University of Brighton teaching on various arts and humanities courses and managing projects in the arts.

**KEYWORDS**

Stephen 'Mal' Mallinder

Cabaret Voltaire

post-punk

DIY

remix

cut-up

electronic

funk

For me, Cabaret Voltaire were first and foremost an avant-garde group; a band who adopted William Burroughs' cut-up techniques for rock music; DIY purveyors of doom and gloom and unease – a less polished, more difficult Joy Division if you like; or perhaps a more accessible Throbbing Gristle. I'd like to claim I rushed out and bought my copy of their *Extended Play* EP when it was released by Rough Trade in 1978, but I can't. I bought it at a later date in a charity shop, along with my copy of *The Voice of America* (1980b).  But I did tape a friend's copy of *Red Mecca* (1981) just after release, and bought the LP soon after.

*Red Mecca* is still my favourite Cabs album. Its ghostly voices, murky rhythms and seemingly complex layers still intrigue and delight me. It builds on the simplicity and repetition of both *Extended Play* and *The Voice of America*, which are raw and [dare I say] 'amateur' in sound and execution. But part of their charm was the fact that we all thought we could probably have made that music too, if we wanted to. [In fact I seem to remember spending a few weeks with secondhand reel-to-reel tape recorders trying to do just that – and disproving my point above completely.] Anyway, this was cerebral music, borne of *ideas* and *angst* ­­– at the time it seemed both experimental and socio-political: after all, this music, wrapped in grey and black photos *was making important statements*, and would surely help bring down Western Civilization, or at least the record industry that Rough Trade and other independents were challenging in the wake of punk.

They didn't of course, and soon Cabaret Voltaire abandoned the black & grey and got interested in other things. My second favourite Cabs album [or is it a 12" EP? I've never known, even though it plays at 33] is *Three Mantras* (1980a). 22 years on I still don't know where the third mantra is, but 'Eastern Mantra' is superb, with tapes from Jerusalem market and extra percussion, along with better production, producing a new, brighter CV with mystical interests. 'Western Mantra' is more what one expected, but is also a great piece of music, which builds and investigates its stated musical theme. And then, in 1982, there was *2 x 45*, which should now of course be called *1 x CD*, but isn't. In its original vinyl incarnation it had a massive fold-out flap with Neville Brody graphics in orange, silver, black and grey. When this came out, it seemed part of the tribal/post-punk/world-music thing that was happening, all skittering basslines, percussion and horns. 23 Skidoo, Pigbag, Rip, Rig & Panic, Hula, Bourbonese Qualk, SPK and others all seemed to latch onto something at around the same time. It was great: intelligent funk with enough jazz, rock and 'intellectual' bullshit mixed in for white boys like me who simply didn't 'get' real funk, and hated disco and dancing [actually, I still do]. *2 x 45* is full of layers, collage and cut-up, dark lyrics and chants buried in the mix [deliberately – obviously – for this is still crystal clear production], was still po-faced music made by men in grey longcoats obsessed by media and conspiracy theories.

Cabaret Voltaire would go on to sign with Virgin records, via Stevo of Some Bizarre records, which at the time was seen as a storming of the major record companies' citadel. *The Crackdown* (1983) and *Micro-Phonies* (1984a) albums were squeaky clean, throbbing electronic dance music, complete with carefully selected samples [including William Burroughs, of course] over the top. *Drinking Gasoline* (1985) was a double 12" of similarly inclined electro-funk [one track was even called 'Big Funk'] with the fourth side/piece 'Ghost Talk' retaining something of early Cabs' strangeness. The singles from the two albums – particularly 'Just fascination' and 'Sensoria' – worked well as isolated tracks, too. 1987's *Code*, is now heralded as early trance or techno music, although to these ears it removed everything that was edgy or interesting for the sake of smoothing out and glossing over.

Later Cabaret Voltaire music tends to burble along happily, offering some low-level collage-with-beats. I like 1994's *The Conversation*, but reading the small print shows that it's basically a solo album by Stephen Mallinder rather than a group project. Before long the band ceased to be, although both Mallinder and Richard Kirk carried on making music under a number of names. There have also been some fantastic reissues, compilations and archive live albums from the band. Cabaret Voltaire were more than white funkateers or proto-ravers; they made complex, haunting, beautiful serious music; made industrial noise and political statements; made me happy with their misery, and sometimes still do.

•

**Rupert Loydell**: In the early days of Cabaret Voltaire the three of you had little equipment, but were busy experimenting with loops and sounds and noise, as evidenced on the *Attic Tapes* (2002) box set and the demo tapes that have been illegally distributed for download online. Did you feel constrained by your equipment, or were you too busy making music? Did you have a DIY ethic at the time?

**Stephen Mallinder**: No we didn’t feel constrained as we didn’t look to conventional instrumentation as a way of writing and composing, in fact those very terms meant nothing to us, so it was all out of reach, beyond our means. We did perhaps have the wish list of generators of sound – EMS technology, or processors like echo and reverb – but we made do. Eventually we acquired those but by using a microphone, homemade and domestic technology, plus bits and bobs from second hand shops like cheap guitars and basses, we were quite capable of making otherworldly sounds.

Apart from home improvements I don’t think the term DIY had even been used at this point so we didn’t feel inadequate, but largely because we didn’t feel competitive – no one really was doing what we were, or so we thought – success or audience wasn’t a consideration when we started. An audience was merely unsuspecting others who we didn’t want to impress merely annoy.

**RL**: To begin with, Cabaret Voltaire were renowned for antagonistic and provocative gigs or events, happenings maybe, which drew on the tradition of dada as evidenced by the band's name. When did you decide to take a step back from this and compose or construct songs or music?

**SM**: I don’t know that we ever made a conscious decision to change or stop provoking but there was an understanding that what we were doing had to somehow progress, so it needed context. It was fun experimenting but it had to be more than just indulging ourselves.

The early shows were just as confrontational but in order to actually do them we had to have a framework – even we understood that noise for its own sake was ok but if we were going to perform or make pieces of sound we needed to build our own frame of reference.

The other consideration was that we were the generation of popular culture, of TV, of pop singles and the album. We understood them so they became forms that we could parody and distort. By using and corrupting we could go further in getting the ideas across. We understood the power of image and perception.

**RL**: I used to go the London Musician's Collective in the late 70s and early 80s, and although I think I learnt to listen there and saw some fantastic music being made, part of me at the time always felt it was often 'research' that could have been applied sonically, or texturally, to more accessible musical forms. Was that ever part of your thinking? Where did ideas such as tape loops, musique concrete and abstract sound come from?

**SM**: It came really from our own investigations. Sonically, like many other people, the entry point around 1972-3 was Eno, David Bowie and the music press who would expose everyone to some of the ideas of cut up, collage, Burroughs, Gysin and so on. It was a question of joining dots, following from one thing to another – Stockhausen, Varese, Eric Satie, Ballard, anything different.

We all read, were into art and young so naturally drawn to stuff that shunned convention. But I think we took the more experimental route in part as we were all exploratory, curious but importantly we lacked any skills or training so we felt like primitives who didn’t even know the rules let alone conform to them – working class, broke and outsiders the rather DIY approach was a natural process.

**RL**: The sleeve designs of the first four Cabaret Voltaire singles (1978, 1979a/b, 1980c) utilized a range of fairly common post-punk DIY methods and tools – Letraset, collage/photomontage, halftone screens etc. – though their use here demonstrated a stronger understanding of 20th century art and design history and techniques of visual communication (particularly the *Seconds Too Late* sleeve) than many of the group’s counterparts. Can you outline the process of putting these sleeves together? Were the whole band involved? Was there a collaboration with a designer?

**SM**: Well we were all into the montage work that George Gross and John Heartfield had done but also from a more conventional collage approach of Kurt Schwitters and Max Ernst. This was becoming an ‘of the time’ process – Jon Savage and Linder were making great montages; it was the time of the Xerox, fanzines, flyers and guerilla promotion. But I think it was as much a visual extension of ‘cut up’ that we’d used in text and spoken word, and splicing sound and Super-8 film.

We all collaborate to make the first *Extended* *Play* EP for Rough Trade – three people sat over a table, cutting, splice and lettering.

After that we each did sleeves – Richard had spent time at art college doing his Foundation so took the lead – he did *Voice of America*, Chris did *Seconds Too Late*. I did *Silent Command* and *Three Mantras* which weren’t collage – I didn’t want to emulate anyone’s approach so was more interested in something different, a clean, graphic style, rather than montage. But all were done in a very lo-fi way – I did mine on the kitchen table at the Hula Kula house, with card, paint, Letraset, pen and ink.

By the time of *Red Mecca* and *Eight Crepuscule Tracks* (1988) we’d begun to work with Neville Brody, who worked with those processes as well and refined much of it but the principles remained. Neville became very important in how we came across, but he understood us – that’s why it worked.

**RL**: And you also applied these ideas not only to your cover art but also your videos; and went on to play with Burroughs, Psychic TV, 23 Skidoo, and others as part of a loose conglomeration concerned with [then] new media and art forms and who was controlling them. Is there a parallel of sorts between the early CV artwork and the group’s approach to sound and composition?

SM: Oh I think it all aligns. The ideas remain consistent it’s just the mediums that change. The intention being to draw new meaning and understanding from existing texts, whatever the medium. Obviously we weren’t simply using found sound, texts or images to create work but layering and juxtaposing them with our own. We were quite distinct from artists like say Kraftwerk who built their work on a kind of purity, we incorporated Duchampian ‘other’ elements into our work – it was a fusion. We wanted to make sense out of the world by building elements of the existing world – television, radio, newspapers – into our work.

**RL**: You even started one of the first independent video labels, Doublevision. How does that seem in retrospect? Am I right in thinking only the Cabaret Voltaire has been reissued on DVD? (2004)

**SM**: Richard and I, along with Paul Smith who helped bring that together, are really proud of what we did with Doublevision. It was I believe the first independent video label. We saw the potential of video at the time as a way of getting into people’s homes. Television was opening up but there was a limit to how much we could infiltrate it but with VHS, which everybody had back then, we could offer sound and music to play when TV finished, usually by the time people had come home from the pub or club.

It was an antidote to the record company promo videos of chart artists – we were a self-contained industry. Along with having a recording we set ourselves up to edit (and also shoot on Super 8 then transfer to video). It became a process that fitted in with making music and live visuals, so it made sense. It was a very ‘live’ immediate process that worked with how made music.

**RL**: Why is cut-up such a great tool? I mean, it's a century old technique now, and has predecessors in the visual arts with collage and cubism. How has it become part of remixology and mash-up in the 21st Century? It's moved on from that random Dada process of words in a hat, hasn't it? And should we blame Burroughs for its dissemination into indie rock?

**SM**: Perhaps it’s because like energy nothing is really created, nothing is lost, and everything becomes transformed. Everything in essence is a remix, a recontext.

I think Burroughs and Gysin were the entry point for most people in terms of text but the whole Duchampian idea of ‘ready-mades’ gave us the opportunity to see what mass production and mass media offered in terms of resources at our disposal. The shift was when digital arrived and everything could be cloned, plus everything is out there to access and use. It’s a question of subjectivity, how we each filter and apply these resources.

**RL**: Your older music certainly (and perhaps more recent music too) concerned itself with pornography, religion, terrorism, and other taboo subjects, sometimes filtered through an occult lens. Is cut-up and juxtaposition especially suited to those kind of topics? Or were those just the issues of the day?

**SM**: Pre-digital these were either prohibited or policed through the media, so understandably we were drawn to them. They were things that got a reaction; it’s natural to explore those elements. I think it was very much of the period, we wanted to put them in full view to provoke discussion, but the internet has had a dual effect of, on the one hand, normalising them and on the other hand pushing them into liminal spaces. It’s information, all media. Personally I’m quite exhausted by it.

**RL**: Nowadays, in retrospect, you are either grouped under the title electronic music or post-punk. Both seem valid but it doesn't cover the associations Cabaret Voltaire had with both the industrial music scene and the band's move towards funk. I lived in Cheshire in the early 1980s, and was amazed after I moved there to find out that the punks and 'alternative' bands and musicians I got to know there were listening to a mix of Hawkwind, Chrome, anarcho-punk, Nurse with Wound, Crass, The Pop Group and Cabaret Voltaire, plus tapes from the burgeoning cassette-meets-mail-art scene. This was very different from (my) London at the time. John Everall, who went on to run the Sentrax label and work with Mick Harris and others, was sitting in his bedsit making music on a four track TEAC recorder. What is now called post-punk offered a musical freedom that was allowed to ignore the primitive hard-rock tendencies of mainstream punk and revisit prog rock, acid rock, improvised music, keyboards and saxophones, music that had been declared out of bounds by many.

I know you have resisted being labelled simply with regional or genre types, but something *was* happening in the North (or Sheffield and Manchester at least) that put an angular, noisy funk into your music. And it wasn't just you – there was Hula, Portion Control, Clock DVA and lots of forgotten others, making an industrial-sounding, harsh-edged music you could dance to. What caused that shift?

**SM**: I think perhaps it was an area of music that was open for investigation – it was ok to be funky as long as it wasn’t poppy. It was happening in New York with James Chance, and Arto Lindsay, that sort of brittle funk. Over here, stuff like the Pop Group, Manicured Noise and ACR were having a big influence. Rhythm was becoming a more dominant element than guitars. We were enjoying that fusion of drum machines and live drums and percussion. It made sense for us, as Richard and myself were old soul boys before we got into more experimental, arty, things, so it felt natural to embrace some of those tropes into the electronic chaos.

**RL**: At the time you signed to Virgin, via Some Bizarre, there was a cliché and kneejerk critical response about Cabaret Voltaire selling out and abandoning their grim inner city roots and indie credentials to sign to a major label. Yet now, *The Crackdown* (1983) and *Micro-phonies* (1984a) are seen as some of the highlights of the band's career. Where you simply ahead of the game? Or stuck in somebody else's pigeonholing of you as shabby men in long grey coats?

**SM**: Well we always wanted to stay one step ahead and were quite happy to fly in the face of people’s preconceptions but also there was a perfect synergy between our process, or sound, with emerging technology and formats.

Synthesisers, drum machines – and the shift to 12" singles – worked perfectly for our repetitive beats, simple bass lines, looped approach to making music. It offered beds for found sound, vocal phrases, and abstract parts so we felt we moved forward but still retained essential elements of earlier work.

Going onto Some Bizarre offered us the opportunity to develop our ideas and ambitions. We wanted to upgrade our studio and the deal with Virgin allowed us to go to 16 tracks – it was that simple.

The other part of the deal was Stevo offered to loan us five grand so we could set up Doublevision as an independent video and record label if we signed. There was a well considered strategy to all of it. To say we sold out was ridiculous – signing to Virgin via the autonomous Some Bizarre, bought us a new studio, new label, video equipment and sustainable independence. We weren’t daft, trust me.

**RL**: There's also the suggestion that you never quite captured this music in the studio, that it was better live, a theory somewhat supported by the release of the *Archive #828285* box set (2013a) and the download only *Archive (Live 1982-1986)* made available at the same time (2013b). Both show the band in brilliant and energetic form. Do you feel relieved, or vindicated, that that music is out there now?

**SM**: I think some of the records captured the energy of what we were doing at that time but I guess it’s nice to think that live we could surpass some of it, that’s why you play live – it’s in the moment.

**RL**: You are Dr. Mallinder now. What did you write about for your PhD, and what have you been researching since? What goes on at the Art Design Media Centre in Brighton where you work? Is there something strange about the music of y/our youth becoming an academic subject? (I have to admit when I came across *Punk & Post-Punk* journal a few years back I could hardly believe it.)

**SM**: Well my thesis was called 'Movement: Journey of the Beat', and is about how rhythm moves through time and space and how it shapes cultural formation.

(It’s available online if anyone wants to wade through it: <http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/4866/> )

I’m used to being part of an academic thing – we’ve been the topic of lots of doctoral theses – and I have published quite a bit of work and some of my research is used on various Undergraduate and Masters programmes but I don’t see myself strictly as an academic. It’s just part of what I do.

The Art and Design Centre closed years ago (I don’t know who does my Wikipedia page, not me, but sounds like it seriously needs updating). I still do a couple of days at Brighton – I teach on Sound Art and supervise on Fine Art Critical Practice, plus other bits and bobs. But music and my own work keeps me too busy to do a lot of academic work at the moment. But I like the atmosphere, Brighton retains it’s ‘art college’ energy and identity so it’s great to be surrounded by creative people – students and staff.

**RL**: I mentioned remixology earlier, and teach a whole module now about writing back, sampling and remixing texts in creative writing, but could you talk about how you think remixing has changed? Cabaret Voltaire quite early on revisited and remixed their own music. Sometimes you gave previous work an almost pop sheen that it didn't have at the time, or you constructed what appeared to be almost new songs from previously separate tracks, such as the 12" single *Sensoria* (1984b).

**SM**: It has always been part of the process to rebuild, recontextualise. This ‘remix’ ideology sits perfectly with a wider, global, aims – I work with architects, designers, product makers and they are committed to repurposing – taking what we have and reshaping to our current needs. The idea of a circular economy, making things sustainable and reusable… the idea that everything we could need already exists and we don’t need to create from scratch and add to the waste and energy problems that are currently destroying the world.

Remixing in art is a powerful trope if you choose to see it that way.

**RL**: And how do you feel Cabaret Voltaire and your earlier solo work have informed your current band Wrangler? Tell us about them and any other musical you are making at the moment.

**SM**: Oh blimey, that’s a whole world of connection really although it’s funny as people refer to Wrangler as the new thing I do, but we’ve been working together for over eight years. Essentially we are electronic and our reference points are no different to the Cabs, but decades have past since we started so we function in a world that I, along with everyone else, have helped make.

The funny thing is Wrangler use a lot of the technology we, originally, could only dream of owning. But funnily enough, like the Cabs, we invariably usually end up working with all the wonky, lo-fi, broken and dysfunction bits of gear we have lying around – that’s the stuff with character.

We seem to be working non-stop but on such varied projects – we have just finished premiering a performance/play with Jane Horrocks for Manchester International Festival, and a project for the BFI where we made a (never completed) sci-fi film from the 1970s and performed the soundtrack live on the South Bank and at festivals.

We’ve just completed an album with American artist John Grant (under the name Creep show) now we’re recording an album for the New York club/electronic label Minimal Wave (Citiworks) and doing gigs.

**RL**: And finally, in addition to saying thanks for your time, I have to ask this question, as I know I'm not alone in being intrigued by this: Where is the third mantra on *Three Mantras* (1980a)?

**SM**: Well I did say the third mantra is the one each individual creates for themselves – the interlocking of East and West circles. But in truth Chris, Richard and myself left it in the pub one Saturday afternoon in 1981.

**REFERENCES**

Cabaret Voltaire (1978). *Extended Play* [7" EP]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1979a). *Nag Nag Nag* [7" single]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1979b). *Silent Command* [7" single]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1980a). *Three Mantras*. [12" EP]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1980b). *The Voice of America.* Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1980c). *Seconds Too Late* [7" single]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1981). *Red Mecca*. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1982). *2 x 45* [2 x 12"]. Rough Trade.

Cabaret Voltaire (1983). *The Crackdown.* Some Bizarre/Virgin.

Cabaret Voltaire (1984a). *Micro-phonies*. Some Bizarre/Virgin.

Cabaret Voltaire (1984b). *Sensoria* [12" single]. Some Bizarre/Virgin.

Cabaret Voltaire (1985). *Drinking Gasoline* [2 x 12"]*.* Some Bizarre/Virgin.

Cabaret Voltaire (1987). *Code*. EMI.

Cabaret Voltaire (1988). *Eight Crepuscule Tracks*. [Les Disques du Crepuscule](https://www.google.co.uk/search?client=firefox-b&dcr=0&q=Les+Disques+du+Cr%C3%A9puscule&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3MMwysTCJV-IEsZPKy4qNtESzk630c0uLM5P1E3OSSnOtchKTUnMAs-GQezAAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiKvpWKn4TXAhWI1RoKHSJaAmsQmxMIiwEoATAO).

Cabaret Voltaire (1994). *The Conversation.* R & S.

Cabaret Voltaire (2002). *Methodology '74/'78. Attic Tapes*. Mute.

# Cabaret Voltaire (2004). *Doublevision Present; Cabaret Voltaire* [DVD reissue]. The Grey Area/Mute.

Cabaret Voltaire (2013a). *Archive #828285*. Intone.

Cabaret Voltaire (2013a). *Archive (Live 1982-1986)*. Intone.

Various Artists (1978). *A Factory Sampler* [2 x 7" EP]. Factory.

**SUGGESTED CITATION**

Loydell, R. (2018), 'Open for Investigation: An interview with Stephen Mallinder, *Punk & Post-Punk, x.x, pp. xxx-xxx,*

**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 has written for academic journals such as *Punk & Post-Punk, New Writing, Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, Revenant, The Journal of Visual Art Practice*, and contributed a co-written chapter to *Brian Eno. Oblique Music* (Bloomsbury, 2016).