

## Different Places Everywhere

*Ark Hive of A Live*, Andrew Poppy (4 CD box set, False Walls)  
*Jelly*, Mister Poppy (CD, Field Radio)

Music by Andrew Poppy and his current alter-ego Mr Poppy just gets better and better. *Ark Hive of A Live* gathers up and thematically links mostly unreleased live music together, beautifully packaged up with a detailed and informative book that includes Poppy's own programme notes, composer's notes, poems, photos and asides, and informed writing by Paul Morley (who signed him to ZTT back in the day), performance artist Rose English, composer and musician Nik Bärtsch, and 'music creator and writer' Leah Kardos. *Jelly* is more akin to Poppy's 2019 release, *Hoarse Songs*, presenting five songs, each around the 12 minute mark, everyone a solo composition and recording, layered-up by Poppy in the studio.

If *Jelly* is situated somewhere close to 'contemporary electronic and sample based genres', it is music still rooted in experimental classical music. Voices drift and emerge from slow-moving or static textures, telling fragments of unfinished stories, before setting off into song above the echoes and beeps of pulsing sound. Sometimes there are moments when something like a chorus almost emerges, but the track sabotages itself, with voices diverging and mutating away into rhythmic abstraction; elsewhere there are poetic images and dark asides.

Poppy suggests that the voice on *Jelly* 'is contained and free floating but not anchored', which is one way of putting it. Personally I find it more connected to the music than that: for me the voice spins and dives and twists around and weaves through, in counterpoint and melodic digression and asides. He also suggests that the voice 'is embedded in an endless and static electronic throb that doesn't acknowledge the human presence or breath', again suggesting that the music and vocals are more detached than itself; also that the music is somehow inhuman and relentless. It's certainly pulsing and ever-present, but warm in tone and engaging too, offering up sonic intrigue and fascination to those prepared to listen. Hopefully that will include fans of electronica and ambient music as much as contemporary classical listeners.

Meanwhile in the *Ark Hive of A Live* book, Leah Kardos suggests that Poppy's music crosses even more genre boundaries, stating that he freely draws 'from the sounds of contemporary classical, experimental, jazz and pop music' and moves 'confidently between forms and formats, from concert music to pop records, operas and oratorios, dance and film soundtracks', meaning that 'Andrew Poppy's diverse oeuvre resists easy categorisation.' Paul Morley, in the opening essay, notes that Poppy

could explore and extend his range by being both composer and performer, working out where one ended and the other began, all at once pianist, band leader, musical director, listener, conductor, writer, multi-instrumentalist, singer, implementor, soloist, interpreter, producer, dreamer and

communicator.

and discusses how although Poppy 'was as ZTT as any act, hit, remix, sound, t-shirt or scandal and made great musical use of its resources', it may have diverted him from his natural place in the scheme of things, which he calls 'avant-garde homelessness', a phrase I would dearly love to see on Mister Poppy clothing and posters!

Whatever Morley thinks, he is fascinated by the continuing twists and turns of Poppy's music, live, recorded and performed, noting that – in relation to 'finding yourself' – 'Andrew Poppy keeps getting lost, and he keeps coming out alive.' As ever Morley throws out lists of musicians and composers he thinks Poppy is influenced or inspired by, personal anecdotes, and ambiguous apologies which might be either self-promotion or self-deprecation. He notes how Poppy's early music (solo but also in Lost Jockey and Regular Music) might have sat comfortably with the likes of Eno, Cornelius Cardew, John Adams, Michael Nyman etc. (in fact most of the crew that Eno released on his Obscure Label) and more uncomfortably with the likes of Soft Machine, Henry Cow, John Cale and Jimi Hendrix. I can't understand that second list in relation to Poppy at all, but the later inclusive list of contemporary classical composers such as Cage, Ligeti, Reich, Birtwistle and Satie makes perfect sense, as do AMM and Cabaret Voltaire from his mercifully short list of bands at a 'musical crossroads'.

But then it's easy to construct a cat's cradle of influences, theories and relationships between musicians, composers and bands. I'm partial to it myself, but in the end it's shorthand to help us find a place for something in the digital chaos we find ourselves in, listening, reading, watching and trying to filter and comprehend the sensory overload. Perhaps more useful is Poppy's own suggestion that '[s]omehow musical experience becomes a collage bleeding back to many different places everywhere.'

He also writes about how archive became ark hive in his head, how 2020's lockdown became a place to consider and reflect (as well as work), and how the story of the Noah's ark suggested an idea of safety, a place to hide and flee from Covid in, and about how he eventually decided to put together albums of unreleased music, recorded in performance, not the studio, and release them on Bandcamp. Later, with some additional recordings integrated, all the audio mastered, writers' contributions, and the artist/composer's own written work all boxed together in a superbly designed package, it became this new release on the False Walls label.

The first CD 'is centred around the orchestra with a soloist', although at times that orchestra is electronic. It starts with a piece arising from recording an improvised piano solo over a track in progress for Poppy's ZTT album *Alphabed*. The solo was mixed in and out of the final track, but later Poppy realised it worked as an independent track; and here it is. As far as I can gather this piece is remixed around the complete piano solo, choosing when to use guitar, keyboards and programmed percussion. It's a very different work from 'Goodbye Mr G', the track it is related to.

The next two pieces are from a set of six called 'Horn Horn', all for two solo saxophones and orchestra. These feel quite traditionally 'classical' to my ears, although the second, 'Chewing the Corner', has some great chiming percussion in amongst the swelling chords. I much prefer the next track, 'Almost the Same Shame', which foregrounds Poppy's own piano playing over an orchestra. Poppy writes about it as though it's from a dodgy past in minimalist music making, and also mutters that 'The problem with minimalism is it isn't minimal. It spreads out into every corner of the room.' Which is exactly why I love this kind of thing, the slight variations, the relentless rhythm, the shifting forms and layers... Poppy says that this track is included because it seems 'to have arrived and started to talk to people other than myself.' Count me in, it's a gorgeous ten minutes of musical oscillation and variation.

The final track on CD1 was written 'for any number of instruments and playback percussion' but is played here by an unusual trio of accordion, bass clarinet, and piano along with drum machine percussion (presumably pre-recorded), all mixed live by Poppy at a concert on the Isle of Dogs. This is where Morley's comparison with AMM makes absolute sense: 'Weighing the Measure' is a spacious and lengthy track that allows the listener to focus on each and every sound. Time becomes fluid, piano chords and bass clarinet notes hang suspended as the accordion gently wheezes in and out of the mix, as does the mechanized percussion. It's fantastic stuff.

And then it's CD2, 'a collection of vocal pieces', which perversely starts with a track that the original vocal has been removed from! Here is part of '45 Is', an ending removed due to the constraints of vinyl when making *Alphabed*, but also a partial resurrection of a solo piano piece that existed before the track. And actually Poppy is lying, as there are several voices remaining in the reworked live mix as the piece progresses, again seemingly with a nod to minimalist progression and repetition.

The second and third tracks are at times reminiscent of Ligeti's vocals, although these are perhaps more rooted in song than abstraction, whilst 'Touch of Your Hand', track 4, uses a male voice choir set in contrast to female soloists and eerie electronics. The piece moves towards a powerful and somewhat ghostly conclusion, before we hear 'Joe the Miner Sings "Thank You My Sponsors"', from the same work, 'The Uranium Miners' Radio Orchestra Play Scenes From Salome's Revenge', which was commissioned by the Royal Opera House. I'm not very good at opera, and the strange outline of the whole opera – which involves a reincarnated John The Baptist as a radio presenter, Herod, Joe trapped by a landslide underground, and a host of others – doesn't help much. It does highlight how weird Poppy's thought patterns and inspirations can be though!

'Three Characters Chorale' concludes the second volume, a brief visit to the start of *Baby Doll*, a chamber opera partially worked from a Tennessee Williams screenplay. It's a satisfying conclusion to a curious cluster of music, and in stark contrast to the next CD, which offers up three compositions played by independent music ensembles. 'More Matter Less' is a sprightly and energetic

piece in which violin, saxophone, vibraphone, marimba and piano are foregrounded in turn; 'Playing the Pulse' sees the CoMA ensemble doing what the title says, constructing repetitive, slow changing, saturated piece of music, focusing on an ensemble sound; whilst 'Darwin's Sin Draw', for solo violin and ensemble, has a very different energy, with not only the violin foregrounded as the subtitle suggests. Instead Poppy tells us about Darwin's relationship to the concerto, Poppy's tangential inspiration for his work, and how the piece questions the nature of a soloist ('There is no gene without the pool. We splash about in the ocean of unknowing it seems.'). is also inspired by Bridget Riley's 'Composition with Circles' art work, and how we might be listening 'for the tune that isn't there'. We might but as Poppy knows perfectly well, music exists perfectly well without tunes.

I'm not sure that CD 4's 'Avalanche Thoughts No. 1', 'No. 3' and 'No. 6' have tunes either, but they are melodic and accessible piano solos with a wonderful sense of both space and dynamics apparent in Tania Chen's performances. The final track, 'Eleven Word Title' (it is actually, of course, a three word title) is played by the Roger Heaton group, again utilising an unusual cluster of instruments. Heaton himself plays clarinets, James Woodrow plays electric and bass guitar, and two other players work with vibraphone, marimba and percussion. As Poppy says it's 'a fragmentary and episodic piece', a work recorded back in 1995 but more recently the recipient of Poppy's keyboard overdubs and electronic processing, to help tie it altogether. At times it is reminiscent of Henry Cow and also early Mike Oldfield (especially some of the electric guitar moments and acoustic interludes), prompting me to ask 'Why is Paul Morley always right?', but that aside it is a terrific, meandering, complex composition, which feels related to that idea of Paul Klee's that drawing is taking a line for a walk. Here, Poppy has several instruments on a lead and they take the listener to various unexpected places. It's an intriguing end to this box set's music.

Elsewhere, the *Ark Hive of A Live* book concludes with a collection of photos, a full discography – both backwards and forwards – with one containing Poppy's comments, the other album covers plus tracklists, an index, the obligatory thank you (no, thank you Mister Poppy), and a final written piece by Poppy himself: 'Musical Cadences & Full Stops'. Here, he ruminates on creativity, 'self-sabotaging impulses', discusses further inspirations and the effects of lockdown. His uplifting conclusion reads thus:

Different forms speak to different senses, and we want to be alive to them all if we can. Although practical situations are always making frames that often seem like undesirable obstacles, there are an infinite number of ways of being alive within the boundaries of the Ark and an infinite number of moments to fly the Hive.

If, as the False Walls website says, '*Ark Hive* is an ironic meditation on the archive' which 'brings together elements of biography and materials from a lifetime of creative endeavour in sonic, language and visual forms', then I would like to suggest that it is much more a celebration of being alive, of being persistently, tenaciously and single-mindedly creative. Or, simply put, of being a

wonderful composer, performer and musician.

Rupert Loydell

Visit [www.andrewpoppy.co.uk](http://www.andrewpoppy.co.uk) and [www.falsewalls.co.uk](http://www.falsewalls.co.uk) for more information.

(2100 words)