

SONIC SHAPESHIFTER

Saxophonist and flautist **Finn Peters** is set to release his debut as a leader, *Su Ling*. A poised sense of contemplative Javanese calm alternates on the album with an eruptive percussion driven Brötzmann-like spurt of new music courtesy of the Devon-born player and his group, the Finntet. **INTERVIEW :: KEVIN LE GENDRE**

Age is relative. Definitions of things junior and senior vary from one society, one culture, one industry to the next. In pop, old age can start around the third decade of a human life. In jazz, youth can run all the way into the eighth. Sam Rivers reminds us of that.

One person who can vouch for the zestful vitality of the aforementioned is Finn Peters, Rivers' junior by a good half century. The 31-year-old UK saxophonist was part of the American legend's UK big band a few years ago. "He was pretty incredible," Peters says.

"There he was, 81 and sounding wicked. He was an inspiration to me because he was just still totally in the music, writing every day and playing all these different instruments.

"He didn't show any signs of ageing and I suppose that's part of the culture of the music really; it's not like being a ballet dancer." Yet if there's less potential for a physical burn out in jazz, then the development of a musician may not be necessarily without its challenges. Different players find their individuality, their voice, at different stages of their evolution. Some take longer than others."

After many years as both a sideman and leader, Peters makes his debut with *Su Ling*, as assured an opening salvo as anyone might hope to expect given a versatility that has taken him from the Rivers gig to work for renowned deep house labels such as Guidance. As far as he's concerned the baby hasn't arrived prematurely.

"As a composer, I definitely needed to give myself a longer time to form concepts, to get ideas together and also to work out my own harmonic language, my rhythmic thing," says Devon-born Peters who studied music at Durham university before moving to London in 1996 where his first year was spent at the Guildhall.

Peters' evolutionary journey has led him to many diverse shores over the years. Scan the work of the more adventurous exponents of contemporary dance and classical music and his name will crop up with a steady frequency.

Currently on the road with composer Matthew Herbert, Peters has collaborated with anyone from Jhelisa Anderson, arguably the most apposite heiress to the throne of Nina Simone to Sa-Ra, the hip-hop ensemble who are the loveable jesters in the court of King George Clinton.

As for the coterie of producers that congregate loosely around the People label, they have also called upon Peters' services in recent years, ensuring that his incisive saxophone and flute are heard in a wide variety of contexts.

We're talking the elegiac waltzes of Two Banks Of Four, the racy Afro-Latin funk of Bembe Segue or the staccato snap and crackle of I.G. Culture, purveyor of "broken beats", the idiosyncratic rhythm that jerks reggae into techno without losing balance on the good foot.

Peters has already released music under the

monikers of Dr Seus and Bansuri. These projects betray his interest in state of the art production techniques as well as improvisation and like several of his peers on the contemporary British jazz scene, he appears happy embracing eclecticism.

However, it takes little prompting for Peters to point out that the definition of a coherent musical identity is not always well served, necessarily, by constant chop and change. Every musician will have his own take on exactly how best to find one's way. Peters is happy to reflect on the pros and cons of his trajectory to date.

"I love all kinds of music and willingly embrace all these different things but it's been difficult for me to find my direction sometimes.

"A long time ago I played with some incredible salsa musicians and we were doing all the Afro-Cuban stuff and I was really lucky in that I got to play with some of the big guys like Giovanni Hildalgo. At a certain point about five or six years



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– Finn Peters

ago, I was just doing that sort of stuff.

"Then suddenly one day I just thought what am I doing? This isn't me! Do I really want to do this? Er, no, So I left all the bands that I was doing and started playing jazz again. It's taken me 10 years to get a jazz album together because I was doing all that different stuff and now it feels like I'm coming home."

Su Ling features an ensemble, the Finntet that comprises players who have accompanied the saxophonist intermittently on his long and winding road for many years. There's drummer Tom Skinner, who Peters first heard at the ripe old age of 13, bassist Tom Herbert, keyboardist Nick Ramm and guitarist David Okumu, all F-IRE collective members.

Blooded by a variety of gigs such as the Tomorrow's Warriors jam sessions in London's Jazz Café – where Peters and Skinner played with pianist Andrew McCormack among others – the

Finntet has been over 10 years in the making, operating under various names such as Thieves Without Loot and Lunch Money.

"It's been a steadily evolving thing rather than something that's just happened overnight," says Peters. "It's about finding a sound that's really individual that will hopefully move people."

The extended timeframe may also account for the impressive poise of both leader and ensemble. An admirer of both "standard" icons such as Coltrane and Dolphy, as well as the somewhat unheralded contemporary Greg Osby, Peters is an agile musician. His compositions can veer from aquiline serenity to outright agitation. He can play in a characterful way in minimalist settings or confrontationally amid expanding, heated noise.

Although Peters has worked frequently with vocalists – his Bansuri project features the celestial tones of Eska Mtungwazi – *Su Ling* is an all-instrumental affair. While the title track, a ballad set to a slow, sparse Javanese mode reflects Peters' love of pared-down open-ended settings, 'Machine Gun' is a bold exploration of aggressive percussive playing. Its beat evokes the sound of bullets.

Originally written for the contemporary classical ensemble Nosferatu, the piece started life as a score for piccolo, snare drums and tape that cut up the crackle of AK-47s and Kalashnikovs.

"I was interested in the rhythmic patterns of machine gun fire but also just the sound, that dead, dry, sick sound and what it represents," Peters says.

When he played 'Machine Gun' at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall with the F-IRE Collective big band during a UK tour last winter, audience reaction was interesting. Although the track is a protest piece, Peters didn't introduce it as such but many seemed to be moved by Skinner's drums and Peters' flute whose combined trilling graphically evoked the rat-tat-tat of mid-combat weaponry.

The violence of the music, standing in a long lineage of politically charged fanfares such as Peter Brötzmann's *Machine Gun*, Louis Moholo's *Woza* and more recently Billy Bang's *Vietnam: The Aftermath*, possibly said more than words could have.

"Well, it is probably harder to make a statement with an instrumental piece of music," Peters notes.

"The words are more tangible but sound is obviously a really strong entity. Doing the machine gun rhythm surely helps in that respect; it's somewhere along the symbolic lines of the piece. It makes it more obvious what it's about.

"Different people feel different things from instrumental music. I think that even if you don't have a technical understanding of music, there's so much you can get from instrumental music if you open your mind, you can feel what the composer is trying to say.

"A lot of the time the guys write about stuff in



the liner notes to explain but I haven't got any, it's part of my love of a certain amount of simplicity, I suppose. What I like about instrumental music is the fact that it is less didactic, it remains open to interpretation and different people will get different things from it. I love songs, you know I love songs with words but I also listen to a lot of instrumental stuff because I can appreciate the openness, the mystery, I suppose.

"I like the fact that it can be more subtle; it's not just what you see is what you get. I also like that thing of not telling people on the record 'what this piece is supposed to mean'. Everybody can make up their own mind.

"I feel that it's my prerogative, possibly my duty to say things through my music, though. 'Machine Gun' is specifically about the war in Iraq but also Afghanistan and the whole Project For The New American Century.

"It's about Bush and also Blair and things going very wrong. You know I went on the Stop The War marches and was blown away by what I saw and was gutted that we made no difference. I really find the wars shocking and upsetting and that's why I wrote the piece."

Jazz musicians have been experimenting with sound effects through tape and machines for decades, as Peters did on his original version of 'Machine Gun'. In many ways the manoeuvre extends research of tone and timbre through instruments. The epitome of the soloist-sound designer may be Rahsaan Roland Kirk, the blind virtuoso who was blessed with amazing artistic vision. Albums such as *Rip, Rip And Panic*, *Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata* and *The Case Of The 3-Sided Audio Dream In Colour* show how ingeniously Kirk created a continuity between his daring multiphonics on reeds and the crafty, jokey heterophony of anything from sirens and hose pipes to recordings of table tennis games and wild horses. All this prescient work reaches back to the mid-70s. It foreshadows uncannily Prince Paul's comic-cinematic breakbeats of the late-80s.

All manner of noise and spoken word interludes was also integrated into a jazz context with great verve on Freddie Hubbard's profoundly moving *Sing Me A Song Of Songmy* and in many

ways this work is directly relevant to Peters' 'Machine Gun'.

That said, the man who has arguably gone further than any of the aforementioned in the melding of sound treatment and composition is the great Brazilian composer and multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal.

It was the excellent British producer Hefner who pointed out that if Pascoal were to use squealing pigs in one of his scores then the squeals would all be in exactly the same key as the rhythm section and horns. Peters has drawn inspiration from this invention and discipline.

"Hermeto is possibly my favourite living musician," Peters says. "If you think of all that stuff that he does with vocals and effects of all sorts; that idea of just finding odd noises and phrases from other non-musical places to make them musical, wondering how they'd work together in an arrangement for a group fascinates me.

"I suppose a lot of other people do that now but possibly not as well as Hermeto. That whole interest in sound, both organic and fabricated, is becoming more and more widespread among my peers."

The evidence can be seen in a wide variety of contexts. In Europe anyone from Audun Kleive to Steve Argüelles has been seamlessly weaving electronic elements into the fabric of their live playing while in America the likes of David Binney and Craig Taborn have also brought sampling into composition and improvisation with fascinating results. You can identify a continuum of player-producers that runs from Kirk to Pascoal via Steve Beresford and the fact of the matter is that today's loop machine and music-making programmes like Reason and Logic have become part of the paraphernalia of many jazz musicians.

"I think it's really exciting for the music," Peters enthuses. "It's funny, you go out on tour and everybody's got their laptop and they're all working on tracks in Logic or whatever. It's really due to the birth of the home studio and it's possibly a generational thing as well.

"My generation grew up listening to electronic music, hip-hop, drum 'n' bass – really all about sonics – as well as listening to Eric Dolphy... it's

great to see how these elements might come together in the music. "There isn't a lot of that on *Su Ling*, there are no computers but I think there's a sensitivity to sound that I'm getting more and more into; questions of how particular things are recorded, what format I wanna record in.

"I'm getting much more into that side of things, now there's a type of musician who can just talk about studio gear and about the way that you can get the best possible sound. Even the best jazz players I know can be like that and I think it's a really exciting development."

In other words analogue and digital worlds might collide creatively rather than steering clear of one another. Sound research from the pre-programming age has its place alongside that of the programming age. Messiaen's flighty orchestrations inspire just as much to Peters as I.G Culture's root-down extrapolations.

Peters' aim is to find a balance between acoustic and electric textures in his music but as far as he's concerned this isn't just a way of creating the most complete sonic palette. The range of tonalities offered by both instrument and machine parallels the distance between city and country, urban and rural environments. Both backdrops carry equal weight in Finn Peters' mindset and aesthetic.

"I've put out some real banging club tracks in the past and I was finally thinking that there's another part of me that wants to get out of the city and go into the woods," says Peters who long ago used to practise in a studio that his father built in a barn. "I think that all of the acoustic sounds on *Su Ling*, the bass, drums, piano, reflect that.

"It goes back to my roots, I grew up surrounded by fields, I love wide open spaces and as a musician that definitely comes through. I sometimes take big pauses between my phrases, there's something in that nature sensibility that's important to me.

"Nature inspires me not just as a musician but as a person. Walking along a beach you really feel that you're part of the planet. It's very different to walking on a pavement and going into the tube and that feeling of being at one with your environment is something really powerful." ■