

Finn Peters: Music of the Mind



Lab coats, brain-scanning headsets, a laptop and a tuba sound like the perfect quasi-futuristic ingredients for some dodgy cyborg band jamming behind Jabba the Hutt, yet they're exactly what flautist/saxophonist Finn Peters has combined for his 'Music of the Mind' album and tour. Mixing a spooky Kubrick-style soundtrack via Ornette Coleman and funky Sun Ra-ish grooves, Peters has made a successful leap from the lab to the stage with spellbinding results. The future possibilities of turning brainwaves into sound are

almost endless as chief Goldsmiths boffin Mick Grierson states, 'It's going to get simultaneously very scary and very interesting and beautiful.' So while nanobot-enhanced symphonies may be 50 years away, this is a chance to hear what your brain actually sounds like.

Mike Flynn

Café Oto
Fri Oct 29
 Further listening:
www.tinyurl.com/TOFpmotm

Finn Peters thinks beautiful thoughts



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Evening Standard
 standard.co.uk

Mind over matter: Finn Peters



By Jack Massarik ★★★★★ Jack Massarik's rating
 01.11.10

Saxophonist Finn Peters recently had a brainwave but of course we all have them. What makes his so interesting is the ability to convert them into notes and tones, and thence into jazz.

Thanks to the brain-mapping experiments of Dr Mick Grierson at Goldsmiths University and the "bespoke software" of electronics geek Matthew Yee King — who uses virtual theremins, algorithms and an EEG machine, since you ask — Peters makes music this way on a new album, *Music of the Mind*. "The notes are most unexpected but not random," he observes.

This is catnip for the silent millions out there who yearn for new music that really sounds good, and a large audience crammed into the Oto Café on Friday to see him attempt this live. An unusually high proportion were female, evidence that Finn is also a good-looking chap and not above using a little scientific hokum. His quintet wore white lab-coats and bulky headphones and surrounded themselves with thick cables and black boxes.

The results were sometimes weird and wonderful but most times charming and swinging, due to the practised jazz artistry of drummer Tom Skinner, vibraphonist Lewis Wright, sawing his tonebars with a bow, tuba maestro Oren Marshall, whose squelchy quacking effects were delightful, and Peters himself, whose alto and flute solos were infused with neo-boppish conviction.

The audience loved it all but fortunately for musicians who can still play instruments, it'll take a while longer before people can simply come onstage and think beautiful thoughts.



Lester Bowie, late, great trumpet-player of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, wore a white coat on stage. He was, he explained, doing research. Finn Peters' new work takes the idea to the next level. His latest project uses laptops and computer hook-ups in performance, and features compositions whose melodic contours derive from his own brainwaves.

Both ingredients stem from collaboration on human-computer interfaces at London's Goldsmiths College. Peters, a versatile alto sax and flute player who is also at home with studio technology, was introduced to Mick Grierson at Goldsmith's by a mutual friend — Matthew Yee-King. "He said he knew this guy that had a computer that could tell what note you were thinking of." That set up needed an electro-encephalograph cap with multiple electrodes, but the team has now developed a simple headset which can turn brainwaves into sound in real time.

The other main strand of the work was refining several varieties of computer software. Some produce improvisations which intertwine with live players — an area Peters has explored with Yee-King in the past. "I've worked really closely with him," says Peters, "for him, everything is an experiment." It produces a different kind of interaction from playing with other musicians. "It's very different, interesting, and sometimes weird playing with the computer," adds Peters.

Then there is software which can translate recordings of brain waves into audible frequencies as a basis for further musical inspiration. Peters found himself reviewing his own brain activity, and spending "months" transcribing the sound patterns, and pondering the results. He was originally excited by the futuristic notion that a composer might be able to think a symphony on to a computer screen. This less ambitious, but feasible, process, does not probe deep into the brain. The electrical signals are taken from the scalp, so at best it is like recording "ripples on the surface of a pond", says Peters. Still, as he worked through the traces, "every now and again, I found myself saying: Oh, that's really interesting."

Why? The patterns of sound derived from the EEG got him "thinking in a different way. There were unusual contours that I wouldn't have thought of myself". If one test is whether the process can refresh the music, then the experiment was a success. The album which resulted, recorded with Yee-King, Tom Skinner on drums, Dave Price on percussion and tuba virtuoso

Oren Marshall, is densely written: "a lot of the core material for the record is basically my brainwaves mapped, and large parts are through composed, even the bits that sound like free-improvisation". Peters seems genuinely uncertain how the results, released as *Music Of The Mind*, will be received. "I'm still not really sure what people are going to make of it". Maybe that is because the brain readouts induced him to take more risks. He found himself relishing a new kind of uncertainty. "Normally, I try things and think, 'that sounds good!' Now, I was thinking: does that sound good? But I decided to try it anyway!"

The project has had great publicity — with "these people can read your mind" items on GMTV and the *Today* programme. What about the music, though?

The recorded results, released on 1 November on his own Mantella label, sound rather fine. The tracks are varied, and consistently interesting, with a mix of beats, some ambient elements, a touch of radiophysics, and complex writing which explores compositional areas reminiscent of Steve Coleman or Henry Threadgill, as well as others harder to pin down. Just what you might hope for from a would-be pathbreaking project.

Then comes performance, with a short tour continuing this month, and a new set of possibilities. All the musicians will use the headset, now a commercial product, together or separately, as well as their regular instruments. There will also be visuals, including the "Finnphonium", an advanced sequencing sampler devised by Yee-King which can display the patterns that Peters' is making as he generates sounds through the computer interface.

Peters, whose career already takes in wide experience in soul, funk, hip hop and house, as well as winning a BBC Jazz Award in 2007, is full of enthusiasm for the new horizons opened up by brain science and computer-generated sound. There will be more to come from neuromusic, or perhaps 'psychozonics', a term he found in a booklet packaged with an ESP game by the 1960s 'mentalist' Kreskin. "Really, this is just a start. My whole thing is getting more people interested in this way of making music." It will be fascinating to see whether *Music Of The Mind* is a one-off performance or develops with the technology over the next few years. Does the future of jazz lie in teaching computers to improvise, or at least training them to assist? Who knows, but it is certainly one path to explore. And yes, Peters and the band will be wearing white coats.

Finn Peters

Music of the Mind

Mantella Records 0045 | ★★★★★

Peters, (as, fl), Tom Skinner (d), Dave Price (p), Oren Marshall (tba), and Matthew Yee King plus band (elec).
 Rec. date not stated. Rec. May 2010



Finn Peters' last release, *Butterflies*, incorporated gamelan chimes and birdsong on some pieces. Now,

he and long-time collaborator King turn to brainwaves as a sound source. They are used directly to generate tones, and also recorded as a basis for composition. 'Agitation' has long complex unison lines reminiscent of Zappa, 'MTA' offers an extended synth solo which is noodly but nourishing, 'Oxygen' is electro-dominated and dreamy, 'Virus' insidiously jaunty. The nine tracks oscillate between hefty beats and more peaceful interludes, almost orchestral textures from the electronics and starker settings for acoustic instruments, with plenty of Peters' agile sax and flute, and Marshall's punchy tuba making light of taxing scoring. You wouldn't know

about the brainwaves, but there is variety and interest here aplenty, and an avoidance of cliché which suggests that, whatever the inspiration, it is working well for the leader. **Jon Turney**

JAZZ

Finn Peters plays Music of the Mind

The dream of turning brainwaves into sounds has at last been realised. Saxophonist and composer Finn Peters and his band will be using software invented by scientists at Goldsmiths College to think music into being. But thank goodness they won't just accept what their brainwaves offer; they'll be playing their instruments, too.

Phoenix Arts Centre, Exeter
 (01 392 667080), Wed. Dates:
www.riotsquadpublicity.com