

Jack Straw Turns 40

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Twenty years ago, when Joan Rabinowitz began volunteering at KRAB-FM, Seattle's first non-commercial radio station, she had little inclination she would one day be the executive director of the Northwest's only non-profit multidisciplinary audio arts center. Nor did she think that KRAB-FM's parent, the Jack Straw Foundation, would become the arts organization's namesake, and the scrappy, upstart KRAB-FM would no longer exist. Many things have changed at this arts organization over the years: this month Jack Straw Productions marks its 40th anniversary of fostering the communication of arts, ideas, and information to diverse audiences through audio media.

Visiting the Jack Straw studios, the spirit of KRAB-FM is still alive. The radio station's collection of vinyl records lines an entire wall of one of the recording studios. In an adjacent studio, an engineer works with an artist on an audio documentary about her mother's battle with brain cancer. The production is independent . . . the spirit is community radio . . . and the feeling one gets while touring the Jack Straw offices is one of marginalized arts being promoted through community-based broadcasting.

"You have to remember," recalls Rabinowitz, commenting on KRAB-FM's early days and pointing to the radio station's collection of records, "FM radio was the new technology. People were giving FM radios away for free." Indeed, much of KRAB-FM's content was politically charged, and came out of the tumultuous climate of the 1960s. In 1962, Lorenzo Milam and a group of educators, artists, and journalists started The Jack Straw Foundation (named after a leader of the English Peasant Revolt of 1381; Straw and his fellow insurgent peasants traveled throughout southern England, gathering followers, opening prisons, killing lawyers and telling stories) and its notable broadcasting arm: KRAB-FM. The station filled the airwaves with everything from Early Music to bebop to Appalachian folk to children's stories to big band classics to audio documentaries about professional wrestling and greasy-spoon diners. The studios of the station were just as varied as its programming: an old donut shop and an abandoned fire station served as home to KRAB-FM.

Milam became a community-radio pioneer, and helped establish dozens of other

small radio stations in cities such as San Francisco, St. Louis, Miami, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Austin and Washington D.C. "The primary purpose of these stations was to give voice to those members of the respective communities who had no place else to be heard," recalls Milam. "It was our thought that freedom to express opinions, even when unpopular, could help to ameliorate the cultural, social, and financial divides that were threatening to tear this country apart."

KRAB-FM's frequency was sold (that frequency – 107.7 FM – now belongs to the commercial radio station KNDD) in 1984: a move that drew criticism among independent-radio purists.

"I remember its latter years," comments writer and music critic Clark Humphrey, author of *Losers: The Real Seattle Music Story*. "It had essentially dropped its original pretenses of diversity – except in foreign-language programs – and had become radio for middle-aged stoners. During the jazz hours that meant little or no outré modern stuff, but instead [lots of] pseudo-hypnotic noodling."

Indeed, KRAB-FM's evolution, transformation, and ultimate demise led to a falling-out between Jack Straw and Milam. In a letter addressed to Jack Straw's Board of Directors, Milam effectively ended his relationship with the organization last fall. It's a sad chapter in the organization's history, particularly for Rabinowitz. "I was so crushed when we received that letter," she recalls. "I feel like we are a community resource. We bring artists together through community radio. That is *totally* in the spirit of KRAB-FM."

The Jack Straw Productions namesake moved to the forefront, and continued to produce and present innovative and neglected sonic arts. Today it is the Northwest's only non-profit multidisciplinary audio arts center that provides a production facility unlike any other in the region. Jack Straw focuses on annual artist residencies through several key programs:

- The Artist Support Program was started in 1994 to support Northwest artists working creatively with sound. Artists of



Jovino Santos Neto conducts third-grade students in a found-object batteria with Musician's Accord percussionist Bill Trigg looking on. As part of his artists' residency at Jack Straw, Jovino produced a new composition for the new-music chamber group Musician's Accord as well as leading the "Orchestra of Everyday Objects" and accompanying them on piano. The students, from the Bertschi School, brought items such as plastic bottles, boxes of rice, tubes, and pans to the workshop.

Radio Remnant: Sonarchy Hour

Arguably, the most commercially notable Jack Straw production today is the weekly radio show *Sonarchy*—a program heard live every Saturday night on 90.3 KEXP-FM, and produced by Doug Haire. Haire started at Jack Straw in 1988, and recorded a series of jazz artists for a national radio show entitled *Jazz Journal*. The show provided Haire the opportunity to continue his appreciation of jazz music. “I was a jazz program director in New Orleans for three years before coming out [to Seattle.],” recalls Haire. “I was dedicated to improvised music, and picked jazz artists who either wrote original material or were pure improvisers.”

Sonarchy was launched in 1996 and focuses on the periphery of the music genre, particularly avant-garde jazz. Artists such as Crack Sabbath, David Haney, Adam Diller, Quasi Nada, Stan Keen, Wally Shoup, Gregg Keplinger, and Reuben Radding have performed in *Sonarchy's* studio over the years. This month, *Sonarchy* will showcase music from the Pulp Ensemble, producer/keyboardist Steve Fisk, and legendary trombonist Julian Priester.

“There is just a lot of talent here,” Haire comments, referring to the Pacific Northwest music scene. “I thought that when I first came to town. I never get the impression that there is too much new music being made. What I discovered in Seattle was just a large number of musicians and artists. One of the beauties of Seattle is that it reconfigures itself. You have new players playing all the time. That makes for good radio. I don’t have any trouble finding people [for the show]. The trouble is turning people away.”

Haire’s criteria for selecting musicians is simple.

“I just listen for work that sounds good,” he says. “Even if I don’t like it personally, if they sound good, it works for me.”

every genre and style have been represented, including writers, choreographers, multidisciplinary artists, theatre sound designers, radio producers, filmmakers, visual artists, and musicians and composers of all types. Every year, up to eight artists are awarded twenty hours of studio recording and production time with a Jack Straw engineer. An additional eight to ten artists receive matching awards for studio time as part of the Artist Assistance Program.

The Writers Program began in 1997 to provide local writers with a new venue for the presentation of their work and to encourage the creation of new literary works. Up to 14 authors are selected to participate annually. The program features a series of three public readings, half-hour radio programs developed from

recordings made of these readings, a chapbook, and content for the Jack Straw Web site.

The Jack Straw New Media Gallery offers established and emerging artists of all disciplines the opportunity to create and present experimental work involving sound and technology, with the option of integrating any combination of other disciplines including visual and/or performance art. During the residency, artists work with a staff audio engineer to produce their work.

It is through these programs that Jack Straw Productions has developed a relationship of sorts with jazz musicians. Jazz artists such as Craig Flory, Eyvind Kang, Jovino Santos Neto, The Young Composers

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Essential Rutherford Recordings

Challenge (1966-7) [Emanem, 2001]: CD re-issue of original Eyemark LP featuring the original release from the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. Much of the material has a strong Ornette Coleman flavor with only a hint of the non-idiomatic free improvisation that would characterize later work.

Chapter One (1970-1972) [Emanem, 2000]: Early material from the original lineup of Iskra, with Derek Bailey on guitar, Barry Guy on bass, and Rutherford on Trombone as well as some surprising piano work. This three-CD set compiles a pair of Incus LPs and an additional 100 minutes of previously unreleased material.

The Gentle Harm of the Bourgeoisie (1974) [Emanem, 1997]: The definitive record of solo trombone improvisation. As Derek Bailey famously stated, "the best solo free improvising you are likely to find."

Waterloo (1985) [Emanem, 1999]: An Evan Parker date with Rutherford, Hans Schneider (covering for an unavailable Barry Guy) on bass, and Paul Lytton on drums. The recording is an hour-long improvisation. At around 45 minutes, Rutherford displays jaw-dropping technique while matching Parker's fireworks note for note.

Iskra 1903 [Maya, 1995]: Recorded at the Western Front in Vancouver on October 5, 1992, this date features the second incarnation of Iskra with violinist Philipp Wachsmann joining Barry Guy and Rutherford.

Trio (London) 1993 [Leo, 1994]: An Anthony Braxton date featuring Evan Parker and Rutherford. A set of five improvisations matching the trombonist against a pair of saxophone phenomenon's.

4,4,4, [Konnex, 1994]: A 1979 performance with Stevens, Rutherford, Guy, and Evan Parker.

The First Full Turn [Emanem, 1998]: The first quartet performance of Rutherford's current working group RoTTor, with Keith Tippett (piano), Julie Tippett (voice), and Paul Rogers (bass).

Jack Straw, from page 5

Collective, William O. Smith, Steve Griggs, and Jim Knodle have received Artist Support Program awards. Moreover, Jack Straw producer Doug Haire has worked on jazz projects such as *Jazz Journal* and the weekly radio show *Sonarchy* (see sidebar article).

"This organization has had a long commitment to jazz over the years," adds Rabinowitz. "Jazz has been a very big part of Jack Straw Productions."

Rabinowitz's start at KRAB-FM was in a volunteer capacity. As an ethnomusicology major at the University of Washington, Rabinowitz enjoyed teaching and performing world music. When she later hosted a world music radio show, she was amazed by the number of people she could touch through broadcasting. "I realized that I could reach all these people who would never step foot in a world music classroom," Rabinowitz recalls. "People pulled over on the side of the road and called into the radio station, asking me, 'What is that? It's gorgeous.'"

After the frequency of the radio station was sold, she became the Jack Straw Productions executive producer. It was in that capacity that Rabinowitz earned five artistic-in-excellence awards by the National Federation for Community Broadcasters (NFCB).

In 1995, she launched a series of art and technology educational programs for youth. These classes helped students gain a better understanding of the dynamics of sound through hands-on experience with professional audio equipment.

In 1996, she won a silver reel award for radio dramas from the NFCB for the production of a two-part radio drama, *The Turf Fire*, based on traditional Halloween stories. She was appointed executive director that same year.

Many arts organizations have come and gone over the past forty years. How has Jack Straw managed to survive? Perhaps its evolution from an upstart radio station to a community-based audio arts center is part of the answer. Jack Straw's anniversary is an awkward one because the organization has morphed from one thing (community-based radio station) into another (arts production center) over the course of four decades. "Half of our life, we were something else," Rabinowitz concedes.

Perhaps being able to evolve into a non-profit business serving the arts community has contributed to its longevity. Jack Straw offers professional studio and engineering

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Sonarchy, from page 3

January 4 — Julian Priester leads his band through a set of new music. **Dawn Clement** (piano), **Geoff Harper** (bass), **Byron Vannoy** (drums). Expect an hour of great jazz listening.

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services. It has also partnered with other organizations to showcase artists. Financial support through members has also contributed greatly to keep the organization going. "Vision and programming are important to me," says Rabinowitz. "We work to define and create new programs. It's very creative for me because I am helping to make art happen. We work really hard to make it work. It's been a fight every step of the way. I can't imagine Jack Straw not being around. It's clearly worth it."

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