



ANNA PALMER

The *WRITE CLUB* Remix

This interview was conducted by Birmingham-based music PR, consultant and journalist Lyle Bignon for this *Riffs* Vol. 2 Issue 1.

Discussing the topic of music criticism and Anna Palmer's experience and opinions of being critiqued, this interview was undertaken during the cover shoot and was envisaged as being more of a conversation with disruptions and interventions, inviting contributions from both Anna and Ian Davies, the photographer. This disruption and reversal of the roles of photographer, interviewer, and interviewee facilitated the frank nature of the discussion. The relationships between the three – Anna and Ian had not met before, Lyle

'There's already a bit of... pre-emptive – a preconception there, a little pressure on the writer; where-as somebody who's absolutely their own person, who's got, you know, a Tumblr with three readers or three subscribers on it, but they can write honestly, they can write ambitiously if they wish...' Write honestly. About music? Honestly? In my head, Bangs bangs his honesty drums. A demonic smile stretched across his face; he cannot believe that we are still enthralled by this errant foolishness – this junk food for the ears; scoff it down, belch it out, rinse and repeat. Then

and Anna had met briefly a number of times and bonded over a shared love of dogs – contributed to the dynamic of the interview.

At another level of translation, the transcript of this interview was then interpreted by seven members of Write Club, an experimental writing group run at Birmingham City University.

The interview below is communicated through seven different fronts, identifying the individual voices of these writers-as-translators.

In negotiating the transcript, processes of critique and of evaluation were made in the omission, emphasis and ornamentation of elements, yet each contributes to a fluid and distinctive recreation of the interview.

there's the weight; the infernal weight of expectation, criticism, ridicule and the rest. Wait for the weight to clog your arteries – merciful release.

And the prying eyes. Before, naivety could be buried; the stylistic tics borrowed and stolen lay undiscovered. Now, it's shared, shared, shared. It's out there, before you've finished your next coffee or cigarette. Ambition is limited to survival; a desire to not get torn apart by the jackals. Or, in moments of selfish reflection, to not be ignored. Honesty and ambition; unlikely bedfellows. The first a pretence adopted

to mask the second by many a charlatan. Write honestly. Ignore the fact that everybody now writes, honestly or otherwise. A sour milk sea of words. 'Did you say you've written a review?'

The café was noisy when I arrived. Looked around, but no tables either. I should have thought about this place, never good for talking, especially on a weekend. Then I spotted her over by corner. Headphones are on, she's writing something, coffee cup in her hand, and looking like just don't distract me. Oh well, she'd said yes over the phone, and I was here, and she was there, so here goes...

"How did you get involved in writing about these groups?" Laughs. Uh oh. "I went to a local show of a band that had played for Supersonic before, so it was kind of agreement," pausing to look at her phone. "I'd come and review the show and it would go up on the Supersonic website and it's helping us with our content, giving us stuff that keeps things going while we're working towards the festival."

Maybe I got this wrong? Maybe she really didn't want to talk to me. Pause again, sending a message. Where were we? "Did you bring a conscious effort to it? I asked. "I quite enjoyed the writing side, and being creative – cause I do like writing and you know I like playing with words, so I found that enjoyable. But there was

an element of detachment in it I think." Hmm, too much noise. I can't hear what she's saying now. Coffee machine is blasting, speakers are on full bore, and the people next to us are breaking up.

Okay, pause again, glancing at a group of people having a really good time at another table. "Yeah!" "Yeah?" "Okay." "Okay" "And yeah" "Again..." Things are calmer now, and it's easier to talk, to say things that matter. Confession. "But the thing is it... wasn't too far from what I experienced... I'm not saying that I thought it was all shit and I said it was all great. I still enjoyed all the bands I watched..." Laughs. Laughs. "...It's good cause it makes you opinionated and if we didn't have that, everyone would just be..." I couldn't think of what to say. Time to go I guess.

"Yeah. But it is important, I think to try and switch off from that inner monologue sometimes and just actually be there in the moment, whether its listening to an album or – I think it's different actually. Being at a live performance – it's more important to kind of look around and see the impact it's having on the –" there is a moment of reflection, then "audience as the whole not just you."

I reflect on the reason we review, our motivations and drives for this work, and AP says that this changes as we

age. We become more cynical. Maybe energy levels are not the same, I add, and we laugh. Trying to get myself back on track, I ask about the validity of criticism, and if this changes over different media. Is a Facebook post the same as a newspaper review?

It is a tricky question to answer. "... depends, I think. It can be, taken on board, but if you're a working artist, and you're gonna quote a critic of your work, it's more likely that you'll take a review from an actual trusted source as opposed to someone Face-[chuckle]-book status," AP says and follows up with an anecdote about quoting a respected musicians Facebook comment, making it clear that it is not that simple. In the end, it comes down to trust. Trusted sources and trusted voices.

I ask what the worst piece of criticism AP has received was. "For someone to say that, it was predictable and boring, cause that's something that I strive to stray away from. Its formula and following trends. Uh... yeah, so if, but I guess that's quite – not to blow my own trumpet – but that's quite easier for me to say because it's not often that people would look at our music and see what we do and say it was the same thing that they've seen before – which is a good thing. So maybe I need to be more – go a bit deeper and say... on the other side, I don't want people to think... a – a bad critique would be if someone was, saying the work was pretentious maybe?"

Yeah. So, it's the two ends of the spectrum, I think. Saying, that it was boring or predictable... or basically just giving a kind of, mundane review. If - if somebody critiqued, but they weren't either that bored or, annoyed! I want to provoke a strong reaction from somebody critiquing [laughs], that's the main thing. I don't want somebody to give a middle of the road critique. And particularly at this point in the real formative years of a career... Maybe bad publicity to some could be felt as - as - as, you know, not good and not constructive, but I think it is. I think, it's important to re-evaluate or, if you don't wanna take on board what that person has said, at least people are talking about you and, care enough to write something in response to what you've put out there.

I don't think I've spoken to a lot of the music journalists. I guess probably the perception, is of, there's a kind of "schmooziness" [laughs] everybody rubbing shoulders with one another, but that's - that's probably quite an old-fashioned opinion. That's - that's probably more of a general thing with the press. Of journalists in general being very good at networking and very good at publicity, and, but the thing is I'm generalising a bit because I know that there's a kind of different way of critiquing now. Of being dry and self-deprecating. But the thing is, I've not met those people, I've only read what they've written, but then it

gives this impression that this person is gonna be like that in person maybe, and be like less of the kind of schmoozy, networky, stereotype you might have of a music journalist.

Criticism of the criticism: that's what writing about music is like, always. Because music itself contains (the hardest of) criticism, even when it does not intend to: a criticism to the tangible, the one-dimensional, the trivial. Even when it says nothing new, seemingly, music makes a point out of its own depthlessness. And we get it, on some level, beyond the limit of translation. Sound is an abstract space. The songs of the everyday are sites of interpretation: individuality, collective, resistance, celebrations living alike.

The criticism, both in music and in writing, can never be complete: like an overheard conversation, full of omissions and subjectivities. In the pauses and full stops - the recurring absence of detail - we find chances for the imagined, the nuance, the hopeful ambiguity. And in this sense, music and writing, writing music, music writing are together in their claim to timelessness. Yeah, I guess that answers your question by raising some more.

It seemed fitting that we were sat in a quiet corner at the back of the café, as I was somewhat apprehensive about asking her the next question. Considering she had had a Conservatoire education, which in my mind always comes out as 'posh' or 'privileged' the question could go either way. It could open up a whole new avenue of discussion or completely close down the conversation.

"So what's your favourite swear word" I blurt out. "You fucking shit-hole!" she exclaimed immediately and loudly, without a moment's pause or consideration. It led me to wonder if that was her favourite swear word, or a response

aimed at me directly for asking the question. Either way, I took that as a sign that she was cut from a different cloth to other classically trained musicians I had previously interviewed. That moment opened up a revealing conversation into a dimension faced by all musicians, as to how one's ego deals with criticism from without, and the painful task of self-criticism and reflexivity from within.

'That's what I try and do in my music really', Anna muses, shifting slightly in her seat, ' - to combine elements of technical ability with the more intuitive and - perhaps popular culture side of music. That's something we have within our band - we've got, you know, those of us who've studied, and those of us who've just come from the gig culture'.

For Anna, contemporary music writing is ill equipped to capture and express such meetings between pop culture and conservatoire; between the bland mediocrity of light entertainment and the polysyllabic jargon of academia. The key to refreshing music writing, she argues, is in bridging the stylistic gulf between these two poles.

'What I'd like to see is a change in the way things are reviewed', she challenges, 'because if there was more, critique, like academic critiquing of that world, then, you know, the two worlds wouldn't be so separate. Having the informed, muso side of academia, paired with the entertainment - the emotive, intuitive response.

'Now that would be a really interesting critique'.

With thanks to Rhiannon Davies, Jasmine Morrison and Hafsa Naveed for their help in transcribing this interview.

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SIMON FOX

'Context is Everything' plays with the notion of taking quotes out of context; a constant and fundamental issue for journalism, reporting and academic research. Using an audio recording of the Riffs interview with musician and composer Anna Palmer, individual comments and asides that had the potential to be provocative, thought-provoking or amusing were picked out. Placing them out of their original context, the meaning of each quote subtly changed. In the original recording, there were qualifying statements, retractions, interaction with the interviewer - all of which have been removed.

By manipulating the recording of the voice, three distinct characters appear; none of whom are recognisably Anna. As the piece progresses, a conversation between the voices emerges, with the 'personality' of each becoming apparent.

Though the meaning and context of each comment remains somewhat ambiguous, the overarching piece drifts further and further from the original interview context and Anna's original intentions.

Each voice also triggers a series of modulators and reverberations, forming the background ambience. The result is a slightly disorienting, meditative sound piece that also retains an element of humour.

Simon Fox is an acoustic meddler, with work ranging from solo songwriting and composition, to more challenging sonic experiments and collaborative performances. Former leader of Birmingham post-rock pioneers, Grover, his current activity includes (but is not limited to) Some Some Unicorn, a 50-strong free jazz/drone/electronic cooperative; trombone/drums noise trio Kendo Nagasaki; and Independent Country, a country band.

In his composition work, Simon is particularly interested in drones, reverberation and textures, using a wide variety of unorthodox instrumentation, often in non-idiomatic ways.

Simon completed his MA in Media & Communication at Birmingham City University in 2008.



Links to work
www.worldoffox.com
www.somesomeunicorn.co.uk
www.kendonagasaki.bandcamp.com
www.independentcountry.org

