

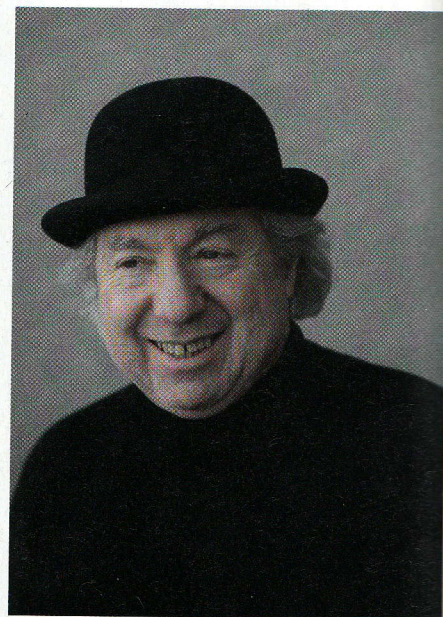
Cross Platform

Sound in other media

From decoding the language of fish to conceiving harbour symphonies and public events involving thousands of players, chemist turned musician and sound artist

Charlie Morrow

is creating a holistic Earth catalogue aimed at redressing the damage mankind has done to the planet. By Julian Cowley



“Imagining that you are more important than you actually are in Nature seems to be a very big part of the human condition,” observes Charlie Morrow. “We have developed within the holocene period, the past 12,000 years, and are acclimatised to it. But that’s at tipping point and we’re in danger of destroying the balance. That’s not an issue for the Earth. That’s an issue for the human race and other adapted species.” Morrow, who initially trained as a chemist as well as a musician, addresses this crisis in *Land Sea Air*, an audiovisual installation using his own sophisticated system for 3D sound playback, developed in collaboration with professional acousticians. It was presented in New York City at the start of October as part of Little Charlie Fest, a five day celebration of Morrow’s multifaceted life and work.

Designed to stimulate local planning for climate change, *Land Sea Air* scans across 400 million years. “That’s the time when life crawled out of the sea onto land, and vocal cords and ears formed,” he explains. “I’ve worked with scientists, and through the fiction of science we came up with sounds appropriate to the time – thunder, fire, reptiles hissing.” Two other soundscapes within the installation home in on New York’s Central Park. Morrow drew material from the huge archive of recordings at Cornell University’s Ornithological Institute to make short montages featuring bird species living in the park when it was built in the mid-19th century and now.

Morrow takes the long view, not only because it’s ecologically responsible but also in recognition that traces of the archaic reverberate everywhere into our present. From 1973–1989, with Jerome Rothenberg, poet and compiler of the landmark ethno-poetic anthology *Technicians Of The Sacred*, he ran the New Wilderness Foundation, promoting cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary art and performance, while exploring correspondences between current developments and the distant past. “My work is informed by research into shamanism,” says Morrow. “It leads to recognition that any ritual you are doing

in the present is a re-enactment of the first time it took place. When you blow a conch shell you connect back to the paleolithic, back to antiquity.”

Ritual has been a key element in Morrow’s unusually varied work, an organising principle for his heterodox creative imagination. At present he is writing a concerto grosso for the four french horn players of Helsinki’s Radio Symphony Orchestra, but despite formal training in composition and trumpet, Morrow’s creative life has been idiosyncratic and unbounded. After *An Evening With The Two Charlies*, a lively anti-war music programme of Ives and Morrow presented in 1973, he chose to operate beyond the confines of the concert hall, working extensively in public spaces, parks and harbours and city streets.

“I became more interested in working with environmental acoustics rather than the blank canvas of the concert hall where you remove all other sound in order to create your own sound”, he reflects. A wind player since he took up bugle as a boy, Morrow feels that the action of his breath corresponds to the wind blowing through the world. That sense of spatial as well as temporal connectedness resonated through his earliest recordings of himself chanting, not in imitation of any other culture, but projecting a personal vocal music from within. Such a strand of intimate performance may seem remote from the large-scale public events for which he has become better known, but both are rituals of connectedness.

During the 1960s Morrow played trumpet with *Tone Roads*, the chamber ensemble formed by Philip Corner, James Tenney and Malcolm Goldstein. It was a crucial experience in his development as a musician. “That and the opening up of the Fluxus scene all made sense to me,” he says. “It had humour. The university music scene in America then was so doctrinaire. The attitude was, if you’re one of us you can become a professor, and if you’re not you can get a job with the post office. Philip Corner’s thinking is really seminal to the 20th century. He was the first to do a lot of things, and the *Sound Out Of*

Silent Spaces music-ritual project he ran during the 1970s was a real gathering place for a lot of good people. The idea of having a social gathering as an aesthetic group was important to me. So was his use of graphics as a source of music, and his conception of a piece as a framework within which other people’s work could be heard.”

The social dimension of creativity remains important to Morrow. His Ocarina Orchestra was formed on the simple and practical basis that “the ocarina makes a good sound for anyone who plays it. So it was a way to bring people together to improvise and make structures – a social instrument.” This emphasis has resulted in a series of spectacular public events, starting in 1973 with a celebration of the summer solstice in New York. The event was repeated annually until 1989. Morrow’s *Citywave*, staged on the streets of Copenhagen in 1985, involved more than 2000 performers – folk musicians, singers, brass bands, bell-ringers, rock groups, boats, helicopters, clowns on bicycles. The following year he designed a dramatic event called *Universitas* for the University of Louvain. “In a humorous way, I’d included the two Belgian national anthems as adversarial elements and I also had the US anthem in there,” Morrow recalls. “But the week before it was presented the US shot missiles into North Africa in an ugly response to a bombing in a Berlin disco where American servicemen were killed. I was upset and didn’t know what to do, so I called John Cage. He said, ‘It’s your piece and your decision... but if I were in your shoes I’d put in more national anthems, put them all in.’ And that’s what we did. As a public event-maker you have to keep in mind that things have the potential to go really wrong.”

The retrospective Little Charlie Fest revived *Toot ‘N Blink*, a nocturnal maritime action involving fleets of boats tooting their horns and blinking lights in response to verbal cues delivered by prompters. On this occasion the venue was New York Harbour, and one of the prompters was Joan LaBarbara, a member during the 1970s of Morrow’s New Wilderness



Citywave, Copenhagen, 1985

Preservation Band. A recording of *Toot 'N Blink's* 1982 Lake Michigan debut will appear on a forthcoming XI triple CD set of Morrow's sound work. It conveys the spirit of the event, but John Cage, who witnessed it in Chicago, wryly commented that he preferred the blinks to the toots. Much of Morrow's art doesn't lend itself readily to conventional documentation, but this release communicates well the radically self-defining yet deeply connected nature of his music.

It includes a dramatically slowed down version of a piece by the Renaissance composer Gabrieli, conceived by Morrow while still at high school in 1957, and a collage sound portrait of Marilyn Monroe assembled a decade later. It also features two examples of his *Wave Music*, written initially for the solstice events and scored for groupings of identical instruments. "I'd been gathering sounds of radio astronomy as well as all sorts of recordings from on Earth", Morrow explains. "One of the discoveries I made was that fish make sounds that seemed to move beyond signal and into language. There were rhythms and they were dialogical. I then made a piece involving conversation with frogs, which have a very simple language like fish. From that came the idea of composing for herds of instruments. Where but in New York could I have found 30 harps to play at once? Those pieces also go back to my training as a chemist. They are modelled on the motion of fluids, where there's a natural connectedness between everything that's in the flow. I also drew on the clarity of European musical counterpoint. The late Middle Ages and Renaissance have been hugely important to me because of the way sounds were put together, and it worked beautifully for these herds of instruments."

A bowler has long been Morrow's trademark headgear but he has worn many different hats. Casting an eye across his CV is like looking into a kaleidoscope. You find him running his own home studio; contributing music for the space documentary *Moonwalk One*, Ken Russell's *Altered States* and the first feature film made in the Sami language; issuing recordings by Lakota medicine man Leonard Crow Dog; arranging for The Rascals; creating radiophonic works about the Arctic for Westdeutscher Rundfunk/WDR in Cologne; participating in Derek Bailey's Company Week at London's ICA in 1981; running healing workshops; organising the 12th International Sound Poetry Festival in New York; advising Paul Simon on arrangements for *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary And Thyme*; designing sonic sculptures; involving Sun Ra and Don Cherry in one of his solstice events; writing advertising jingles; working on projects with Norman Foster's architectural company; doing stitchworks on pillow cases and calligraphy on glasses, vases and windows; or composing and performing an underwater concert especially for fish.

Talking with Morrow, you soon grasp that within that flux there is indeed connectedness. Still the variety remains dazzling and the practical navigational skills he has employed over the years – dodging orthodoxies, engaging supportive collaborators and negotiating with bureaucracy – are by no means the least of his accomplishments. His vision as an artist knows no bounds. But his practice is here and now and hands on. "At heart I'm a craftsman," he acknowledges. "I have a craft mentality." □ Charlie Morrow's triple CD retrospective, *Toot!*, is out this month on XI