

Henry Jacobs: An interview

by Meredith Holmgren, in conversation with Henry Jacobs

He's been called a legend, a visionary genius, and a "wizard of oddsville [who] confronts the challenges of satire and sound."¹²³ [Henry Jacobs'](#) pioneering work in sound collage, humor, and ethnomusicological radio broadcasting has influenced eminent artists and paved the way for innovations in sound performance.⁴ He has worked closely with artists such as [John Cage](#), Jordan Belson, Ken Nordine, Ali Akbar Khan, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, and philosopher Alan Watts, among others. His radio satire work with Woody Leafer, notably the fake interviews with Sholem Stein and Shorty Petterstein, have inspired comedians such as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin.⁵

Jacobs' seminal, early work can be found on three Folkways albums, including (1) [Radio Programme No. 1: Henry Jacobs' "Music and Folklore,"](#) (2) [Highlights of Vortex: Electronic Experiments and Music,](#) and (3) [Sounds of New Music.](#) In January of 2013, I was able to speak with Jacobs about his work. I found that, at 88 years-old, Henry Jacobs is still full of surprises. The following represents an abbreviated, edited version of our conversation.

Meredith Holmgren (MH): How did your interest in ethnomusicology develop and how did you initially connect with Folkways founder Moses Asch?

Henry Jacobs (HJ): Most of my musical background as a child came out of the Chicago area via the radio... I was fascinated with jazz and later with African music and ethnomusicology... Two of the primary sources of African material were coming through the auspices of Melville Herskovits, a professor of anthropology at Northwestern University, and one of his graduate students, Richard Waterman, also of Northwestern. Becoming aware of their interests motivated me to pursue ethnomusicology. This was really before ethnomusicology had graduated into advanced standing with the advent of magnetic tape... except for Herskovits' work, [at that time] there really weren't that many ethnomusicologists...

[In the early 1950s] I was working at a radio station called WILL FM, in Urbana, Illinois... I was doing programs and taping them and mailing the tapes to KPFA — the Pacifica radio station in Berkeley, California — where I later relocated to continue my radio program. The show was first called "Music and Folklore," and later it was called "Ethnic Music." That program ran on KPFA in Berkeley probably for six or seven, or maybe even eight years... I was so interested in the Folkways catalog, because it was a major source of ethnomusicological recording, that at one point I made a trip back east to New York and I met Moe and told him what I was doing. He asked me to send him some examples of my program and various things that I was

experimenting with, and low and behold he wanted to release an LP of my material! He called it Radio Programme No. 1. It was originally a 12 inch LP... And after that, Moe and I became good enough friends so that he would ship me Folkways recordings, which provided a huge amount of material for many, many, many, many radio broadcasts.

MH: Tell me a little about what appears on *Radio Programme No. 1*.

HJ: When I was first doing the “Music and Folklore” series, at the University of Illinois, I was basing it very much on the record collections of various foreign students who happened to be at the University of Illinois at that time. I included a few bits and pieces of those broadcasts [on the release], and then I included some satirical takeoffs on ethnomusicological interviews... One of them, one that became kind of a classic, was the interview with Sholem Stein, who discussed the origins of calypso as if it were somehow related to various Hebraic texts... It was making fun of musicology, it was making fun of ancient religious texts... so that was a part of the *Radio Programme No. 1*.

Another satirical interview was with a character called Shorty Petterstein. He was a super hip, spaced out, jazz musician, who happened to walk into this radio station and get involved in being interviewed by a very, very conventional, straight, clear thinking, disc jockey. And the person that played the disc jockey on the Shorty Petterstein recording [Woody Leafer] was the person who played Sholem Stein on the other recording, where I was the disc jockey.

...Also [on Radio Programme No.1], I included some experiments that I'd been playing with, where I would take a piece of magnetic tape - say a small piece, physically 10 or 12 or 14 inches long - and just splice it at the end, so that it's no longer a piece of tape, it's a loop of tape. And if you put the loop in the recorder, and say, "I am recording what I'm talking about right now," then it would come out, “right now, right now, right now, right now, right...” It was a way of creating a synthetic rhythm. And then from that point I became interested in combining synthetic rhythms to create new, what I called "asymtodic rhythms" - rhythms that bend the mind a bit because of the regularity of their irregularity. And, so, these experiments were also part of this Radio Program No. 1... All in all, the entire production was sort of like an audio collage... Of all kinds of ingredients, all mixed up.

MH: What can you tell me about *Vortex*?

HJ: *Vortex* was originally a sound experiment that was done with the sponsorship of Pacifica radio in Berkeley, in cooperation with the California Academy of Sciences. The California Academy had a fairly highly technically-developed planetarium known as Morrison Planetarium. And one of my friends attended an astronomical show at that planetarium and came back to me raving about the unusual sound system — because there were a dozen sound speakers surrounding the periphery of the planetarium space.

...When I discovered the planetarium, and its round theater, and the distribution of a dozen speakers around the periphery of the planetarium... I approached them and asked them if they would be interested in a sound experiment where we would develop a control devise, so that the sound could spiral around your head in a giant sweep... like, picture a railroad train on a track,

swirling around the planetarium, and you could make the train go "RRRRRRROOOOOAAA" - you know, whirl around, acoustically. So the planetarium found that an exciting experiment and they produced a device, we called it a 'motorman control,' like a control on a streetcar or something, but it was a hand operated thing where you could rotate a lever... You could turn it in any direction and it would rotate the audio. So, a friend of mine at that time was experimenting with unusual animation and pictorial experiments in 16 mm film, and so it struck me since the planetarium was all set up with all its astronomical projectors, that perhaps we could come up with some new projection ideas and do some sort of visual thing that would accompany the audio experiment.

And my friend, Jordan Belson, came aboard and we put together five different shows that were presented over a two-year period. They were offered at the planetarium on its normal dark nights - which would be Monday and Tuesday nights... And often we had so many people attend the Vortex performance that we would have to do two separate shows in the same day.

I was a young guy who was just getting into my 20s and 30s, and all excited about this... Sound was always something that was very interesting to me. I was much more of an aural person than a visual person. Both Jordan and I were very excited about the Vortex performances at the time - getting the California Academy of Sciences, including their technical department to build machines for us, whatever we would dream up.... So, to grow up in this climate of technological change, and all of the ramifications, was very exciting...

But I think that both of us didn't particularly like repeating the material over and over again... Which is what happens when you're dealing with tape! I mean, you know, we could make it louder on the second performance... We could affect both the volume of the sound and also the movement of the sound. So, I guess that part of the performance was a concert. But the source material was a fixed thing that was on magnetic tape. And, I think that having been raised at a very early age on American jazz, there was something that just didn't feel right about doing something *that* mechanical. You know, because, I mean, we scorn so-called "elevator music," but that's what it was in a way. It was canned music. And so, I'd say that the rest of my life has been devoted to living that part of my life down.

MH: What are some of the major projects that you were involved with after *Vortex*?

HJ: I went through a whole period of being a professional sound person and creating radio commercials and soundtracks for movies and honored dancers... and all of that type of thing.⁶ I also got involved in creating a family and three children and all that...⁷

I'd say a major event was in the late-60s, when the local PBS television station invited me to collaborate with one of their art department people who had some skills in animation. We did a series of three half-hour shows that were animated... The series was called "The Fine Art of Goofing Off." It was like Sesame Street for adults. The subject of the show was leisure, play, that kind of thing. The animator, a gentleman named Robert McClay, and I took great liberties with exploring the outer limits of audiovisual agreement or disagreement or contrast. We really explored how far you could go with combining various visual elements with very different kinds of sound elements. That's what that program was all about.

Jacobs currently manages a record label⁸ and curates Alan Watts Seminars⁹ — an archival collection of Alan Watts' lectures. His main project, however, is playing ping-pong with a group of friends on Monday nights.

“We don't play the usual kind of ping-pong, where I play you, and if I beat you then I move up the ladder. And it's all about who's winning... The salt and pepper of the thing — what makes it really interesting — is that maybe every fourth or fifth game, someone will say the words, 'let's play a left-handed game.' That means that everybody who's playing with their normal hand - whatever that is - they'll switch and play with their other hand. Now, that may not sound like a big deal, but when you multiply that by 12 years, and once-a-week, every Monday night, even if Monday night is New Year's Eve... It gets to the point where it makes hardly any difference to you at all as to whether you're playing with your right or left hand. It's been one of the most interesting experiments of my life to partake with a group of people, and go through that shift in behavior.”

After leaving behind tape experiments, Jacobs' musical inspiration has come from live and improvised performance. He states, emphatically, that he is more than ever fascinated with improvised music.

“I regained my faith in humanity when I left *Vortex* and canned music and got back into live music... That's where I am today, into live music as much as possible. In live music, you still have an element of surprise. And surprise, I feel - from the 88-year old vantage point — is one of the sweetest parts of life.”

Meredith Holmgren is an anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, and cultural heritage researcher. She serves as Web Production and Education Specialist for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Endnotes:

¹Rose, Joel. (2005) [Henry Jacobs' 'Weird Wide World,' National Public Radio \(NPR\).](#)

Rose, Joel. (2007) [One Man Goofing: A visit with legendary zen humorist Henry Jacobs, Author Magazine.](#)

²Cinefamily (2010) [Henry Jacobs' "The Fine Art Of Goofing Off" And Other Wide Weirdness.](#)

³(January 1960), *Henry Jacobs: Blow is like an instrument*, “On the Scene,” Playboy Magazine.

⁴ *Vortex* is widely cited as one of the first performances to employ surround sound. (Walter Murch et al.)

⁵ Public Broadcasting Service (PBS): [My Comedian Hero: George Carlin](#)
“Two Interviews” by Henry Jacobs and Woody Leafer was licensed from Folkways Records to Fantasy Records for the release, *Lenny Bruce Originals, Vol. 1*.

⁶ His work included a collaboration with the American Cancer Society to co-produce (with John Kory) one of the first anti-smoking documentaries, called “Breaking the Habit.” It was nominated for an Oscar Academy Award in 1964.

⁷ He was introduced to Sumire Hasegawa, daughter of Japanese artist Saburo Hasegawa, by philosopher Alan Watts. They married and had three children, one of whom grew up to marry Alan Watts’ son. “And now there is a new Alan Watts,” said Jacobs, referring to one of his grandchildren.

⁸ Founded by Bill Loughborough (co-composer of *Vortex*), the label was originally called Musical Engineering Associates (MEA), but later became Master Enlightenment Arts (MEA) when ownership passed to Jacobs.

⁹ [Alan Watts Seminars, http://www.alanwattsseminars.com](http://www.alanwattsseminars.com)