



What Was Now

On the video documentation of Jane Bunnett's residency

by Dawn Matheson

This email showed up in my inbox on Feb. 16 of last year.

From: Ajay Heble

Date: Wed, Feb 16, 2011 at 8:28 PM

Subject: job with ICASP?

To: Dawn Matheson

Dear Dawn,

I hope this note finds you well. I'm writing to see whether you might be interested in considering taking on some short term work with ICASP. We're looking to hire someone to do some creative (video and other) documentation of our Improviser in Residence initiative (this year, as you may know, our Improviser in Residence is Jane Bunnett). If you're interested and available, perhaps we can arrange a time to meet to discuss.

All the best, Ajay

I wasn't. That's not to say that the improviser project didn't intrigue me, or that I didn't want to work with Ajay Heble. I'd been a fan of Ajay's many projects over the years. A floor once separated us in Guelph's Trafalgar Building: he upstairs with the Guelph Jazz Festival, me down with the Guelph International Film Festival (now the Festival of Moving Media). He let me project a giant eyeball on the side of a heritage building downtown for one of his festivals. In its pupil, I'd inserted archival film footage of mainstreet action shot over the past century. I once installed a shower in St. George's fountain from which I broadcast songs submitted from the private showers of anonymous Guelphites. And, for Nuit Blanche—a nocturnal community carnival initiated by Ajay which takes the successful annual nighttime outdoor art experiences in Paris, Montréal, Toronto, and other cities and applies that model to Guelph—I invited four jazz musicians to engage in silent staring sessions

with strangers, their gaze captured in close-ups then projected in a storefront window.

See, I knew Ajay was fantastic to partner with—an open-minded, endlessly enthusiastic type. It's just that with this latest invitation, I thought he was off. I don't do music. I appreciate it from afar, but I don't know the language, especially that of improv jazz. Who was I to provide insight into something I felt I didn't get? How could I do justice to the work of Jane Bunnett—she of the multiple Junos and the worldwide reputation as one of the finest artists working in contemporary jazz?

But Ajay has a keen sense of knowing: he sees things in people when they don't see them themselves. That's what I discovered when I met with him at the Second Cup across from the University of Guelph. He told me that Jane would be collaborating with local community groups—mostly non-musicians, many with special needs. This would be new for her. Jane would be in a role

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where, she, too, feared she might be ill suited. Ajay had seen possibility.

For my part, Ajay wanted someone to help tell a few stories of these collaborations from the community side through a series of videos. This interested me, so long as I could find a way to share in the storytelling with the participants.

I'd start with one video.



Video One: *Interruptions*

I first met Jane by spying on her, digitally. As the residency had already begun, I had hours of footage to screen, shot by Ajay's team of student videographers. Jane looked cool and excitable. She was playful but serious with her talents, a master of a casual intensity. I liked her.

The ICASP team had decided the best way to introduce the Improviser-in-Residence to Guelph was to simply have Jane blast her horn in public places, flit her flute in libraries, bookstores, and coffee shops, unannounced and uninvited. This was met with an extreme set of reactions: people who were into it and people who weren't, which, I would soon learn, set the tone for the whole residency.

I was most drawn to the footage shot at the University of Guelph's McLaughlin Library by Nicholas Loess, a PhD

candidate in the department. He had a particularly keen eye for finding hidden paths of narrative, his camera following an invisible trail of sound, wandering through the air, resting on faces and objects.

Here at the library, Jane faced the most competition for the attentions of her unsuspecting audience. These students were all under the spell of the modern malaise: digital distraction. It was as though Jane was sparring sonically with text messages, smashing status updates with her saxophone.

I decided to meddle with this interplay of sound and digital waves by superimposing text from actual electronic messages, but where to find them? It was impossible for me to collect digital data from a room full of strangers after the event, so I posted an open call for messages on my Facebook page. Hundreds of random emails, anonymous personal texts, and entire histories from cellphone chats landed in my inbox. Just as these



digital dispatches interrupt us in our daily lives with oft-times non-germane trivialities yanking us from the present moment, so, too, would the captions inserted overtop of the McLaughlin Library footage.

Am I the only one who finds it totally bizarre that Tony Clement is a Clash fan? Are you out there still babe? I love you lots, banana!!!! Mom loses her belly with one weird tip www.flatbelly.com.

Such digital fripperies battled onscreen with Jane's musical interruptions.

Video Two: Jane Bunnett and the Vertical Squirrels

The next time I met Jane was as an audience member. She was performing with Ajay's band, Vertical Squirrels, for a noon-hour concert in a classroom at the university. Nicholas and I would both shoot. I'd select one song where the magic really happened, then cut a short highlight reel. Problem was the whole concert was one big hour-long song. Being that they'd never played together before and had decided to forgo a rehearsal, it was all stupendously magical to me. Here's where my artistic predilection for collaboration comes in handy: bandmember Lewis Melville and I would screen the footage together, him yelping at the good bits. I cut between Nick's close-ups and my long shots and sixty minutes of energetic music-making was distilled down to ten.

Jane passed instruments around to the dozen-or-so participants. Sound happened. It started out soft and tentative, then swelled

**The Video That Never Happened:
Homewood Health Centre**

The first time I followed Jane on one of her forays into the community was to the Homewood Health Centre. I was to videotape a session with Jane and a group of patients being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. Here, I got to see Jane in action with mostly non-musical strangers, many emotionally vulnerable. The footage would be used for research purposes, not for the general public, as consent was never granted. It is understandable—privacy is important, and mental health comes with such a stigma. Still, I wish we could have shared in the thrill.

I'd come to know Jane as the chatty type, but here she hardly spoke. *I'm sure a lot of them get sick of being asked a million times a day: "How do you feel?" ... "Now, how do you feel?" And it's like, "I feel shitty! You asked me*

ten minutes ago. I still feel like shit!" Well, I didn't want to do that.

Jane started by making sounds, then tapping out a rhythm. She passed instruments around to the dozen-or-so participants. Sound happened. It started out soft and tentative, then swelled. The group, who ten minutes prior were subdued and reticent, were expressive and engaged. I was dying to see what Jane thought of the session. She invited me back to her room at the Best Western to share a bottle of Valpolicella. Here I got to know Jane by interviewing her.

Jane: I'm not, you know, a music therapist. It's not my training. I go all over the world and often I may not have my band, so I quickly have to use my judgment and intuition, instinctually suss out the scene and try to encourage music to happen ... Really, I try to make people feel

good. (Pause) On the weird side, in some ways, I think I am good for this.

Dawn: Because you can make people feel good.

Jane: Yeah! Being able to bring the best out in somebody, playing music with them. 'Cause you know, everybody is capable of rhythm and music.

Dawn: Everyone has a heartbeat. But when Ajay brought you on, did you think you would be working strictly with musicians?

Jane: Ok, I'll tell the story fast. I got the call ... I can't remember when I got the call, but it was after I had a really bad hand injury which took me out of commission for months and months and I cancelled a tour. So financially

I took a bit of a beating and things were tough. "It's an Improviser-in-Residence gig," [Ajay said]. "I'll do it!"

Then, we had the first meeting and I was totally like: "Oh my, oh my god—this is really overwhelming. And nobody else has done it, and there is not a template about how to do this." But, you know, now I think it's in my personality. I think that's probably what Ajay recognized in me, that I've always been highly collaborative ...

The first get-togethers with people were really tough. I just had so many nights where I was up thinking, "What am I going to do?" I'm a very goal-oriented person. I'm not into just process. I like process, but I like process that has a goal at the end of it. Since I was a kid, you know it was all "Let's do a show!" ... And this wasn't that.

But, I feel that music is something that really should be a part of everybody's life, that it shouldn't be elitist. In this society, we haven't put the importance of music into people's lives—playing music together. In other cultures,

The healing powers of music are incredible. Already in my short time at Homewood, having just met these folks who never even picked up an instrument, something happened

music is totally integral as the social fabric which connects people. Like out on the east coast—their kitchen parties where everybody is dancing and playing an instrument. In Aboriginal culture, people are drumming and chanting together.

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Already in my short time at Homewood, having just met these folks who never even picked up an instrument, something happened. Here, we're on the same playing field. It's not like: "Who's the better musician?" We all begin at the same starting point. We have a totally natural ability for music and yet somehow it is instilled in us that we can't [make music]. And then we do. It's just as natural as walking. It really blows my mind to see it happen ... To get kind of new-agey on you: the vibrations of music alone affect people. It's a true phenomenon.

Dawn: You said, "We're all at the same starting point." When you come into a group, like at the Homewood, what is that starting point?

Jane: You sit down and you try to be honest. We're all human beings, we all feel, we all have certain hurdles, you know, that we have to get over ... and music is a way to connect. It's part of the cycle of life. We hear it all the time. We hear it in bird sounds. Some of the sounds are beautiful and some of them aren't so beautiful, but they all register certain emotions in us. And, I guess for a lot of people, when depression or certain things happen, those things shut down. You shut down that ability to feel. I think music can open you up to be able to receive things—to receive good things from people. It just allows you to put out energy and to take in other people's energy. To have an exchange. It's another form of dialogue if you don't want to talk.

Some people don't engage because it feels very foreign and weird to them to have to play music. But gradually, maybe, they start to feel comfortable with it

I look at Homewood and go "Homewood is life." I take my hat off to those people, because they are there trying to improve themselves and take care of something that is not working for them, right? They're there for a very positive reason. But everyday we go out and there is hard stuff in the world that we have to deal with. We can't always just get together and say, "Let's have a drum circle and work it out." It's sort of a Utopian dream that we're all on equal footing. This is where the interesting experiment happens. Some people don't engage because it feels very foreign and weird to them to have to play music. But gradually, maybe, they start to feel comfortable with it. Even if they're just slightly tapping a tambourine, that's a start.

Dawn: We are a very self-conscious society and music is always associated with being free.

Jane: Yeah. It's terrible, actually, you know. My experience with Cuba is that at social activities, everybody is dancing, and it's unseen that somebody is sitting down not dancing. It's the total opposite here. People are like, "Ohh. Look at that guy dancing. He looks like an idiot."

Dawn: Why? I don't know if you can answer that, but you are right. I'm one of those people you are describing. I don't dance; I don't do music.

Jane: We have to get you up then!

Dawn: Yes, but why not you? You are part of this culture, why did music work for you?

Jane: Because I got emotionally moved by it at a very young age. I connected. From my early experiences playing along with records ... And later, I fell in love with the

communication between musicians. You go to levels that you don't go to in your normal activities. Music can be very enlightening, and it just makes you feel good. And the fact that you're making music that makes you feel good—that makes other people feel good. It's a win-win situation.

Video Three: Give Yourself Credit

(In order to protect the privacy of participants, this video is not included on the DVD.)

Before this project, I had no idea that there was a high school downtown for street-involved kids and youth-at-risk. It's one big classroom next to the Speed River with around 18 teens finding innovative ways to complete their credits. Teachers and social workers share in the instruction and support. Some students choose to be there; others are pressured to be there. From my short stint, I noticed that most kids, for whatever reason, didn't see themselves as very capable.

Jane had already attempted a couple of sessions with ten or so students. She wasn't getting much of a response. Jane is the determined type, and eventually, in spite of a limited time to gain trust, she managed to get a few off the couches and up to the keyboard to plunk out

a melody. By the time I arrived to film, she had a guy on flute, a few girls doing background doowap, and several tracks recorded. A song was in the works. Rob Jackson, an undergrad with ICASP, was the real activator in initiating participation. He was a regular around Give Yourself Credit, leading a running club. By the fourth session, he had encouraged some pretty decent lyrics.

My way in would be to get the students to help in the documentation. As I was a complete outsider, I didn't feel right sticking a camera in their faces, so I asked one of their peers to do it. One guy was keen to learn camera as he wanted to make a music video for his friend's punk band. I showed him the ropes and he started messing around with the ICASP equipment.

For additional media, the students were already well equipped: the cellphone is a part of most teens' anatomy. They would take snaps of day-to-day life in the classroom, downtown, and on field trips.

My way in would be to get the students to help in the documentation. As I was a complete outsider, I didn't feel right sticking a camera in their faces

I would just need to find a student to edit with. To my surprise, the most disengaged youth during Jane's sessions—the one who up and left as soon as the music-making began—came forward to edit. This girl was sharp and street-smart; but she was hard to reach, as she was living in a tent in St. George's Square for the Occupy Guelph protest. When she did show, she was keen and decisive and felt at ease with the editing program remarkably quickly. Some of the improvisation footage she balked at; other bits she was into. You can so trust youth for honesty.



Video Four: *Katy's Song*

It quickly became obvious to me that the most authentic relationship forged was the one Jane made with the little musicians at KidsAbility, a local organization for children living with special needs. These kids all instantaneously accepted Jane, responding to her spontaneous, unassuming, and oft-times goofy behaviour. Several lived with severe physical and mental challenges, yet each jammed without inhibition on the keyboard and drums, on the umbrellas, the bags of potato chips, and other such instruments.

Indeed, there was a real cacophony in the activity room at the West End Recreational Centre one Tuesday each month, but the thing that kept pulling my attention didn't make any sound at all. It was the parents on the other side of the glass. I'm not sure if they could hear any noisemaking—no matter, they were all ears.

Being a mother myself, I know something of the pride and pleasure in watching your kid “do their thing.” Here were theirs, free and expressive and so very joyful in their bodies. From the looks on the parents' faces, this engagement seemed so desperately vital, I decided this was the story I wanted to pursue.

As Jane said, each one of these awesome kids should have a video made about them, yet I would have time to pursue only one. I hoped that this story might hint at the kind of experiences the other kids and their parents seemed to be having.

Katy is a 16-year-old girl who is developmentally delayed and living with autism. Although her receptive language is very high, her verbal output is severely limited; yet Jane and Katy shared a remarkable dialogue. This exchange, *Katy's Song*, was improvised live at the Guelph Jazz Festival in front of thousands of audience members.

I met with Barbara, Katy's mom, to talk about what happened. Then I asked Jane to give me her side of it.

Barbara: Early on we noticed Katy was auditorily motivated. She picks up an object and the first thing she does is try to find out what kind of sounds she can make with it. She has done this since she was little.

Dawn: How did you come to this workshop?

Barbara: We signed up with Jane so that Katy could be with musicians who are interested in dialogue that is non-verbal.

Dawn: Tell me about the connection with Jane.

Barbara: There seemed to be a special relationship that developed right away. Jane had the children bring in an

object or a picture and focus on the emotion that came with it. Then she brought the children together to play music around that feeling. For Katy, it was bypassing language that I think helped her to engage with Jane. She gets to express herself without words ... Katy is selective about remembering people's names. If you ask her who she plays jazz with, she says "Jane." That tells me how powerful Jane's personality is for Katy. She only names people who she connects with. Katy sees Jane and she beams.

Dawn: How did *Katy's Song* come about?

Barbara: During the sessions when Katy's turn came on the keyboard—I watched it happen through the glass—it was so obvious it was *Katy's Song*. It was about her chance, she had the focus. She knew the time was for her.

It is always such a roller coaster ride with Katy. The Jazz Festival under the tent was beautiful, but getting to the tent was touch and go

When Katy was in kindergarten, a music teacher noticed that she picked out harmonic intervals on the keyboard. Sometimes she does it to play along, but other times, it is a way to calm herself. It was beautiful to witness Katy communicate with Jane on her flute and her saxophone ... a beautiful interchange, going back and forth with the tones and the mood.

Dawn: You were crying watching her at the Jazz Festival.

Barbara: It is always such a roller coaster ride with Katy. The Jazz Festival under the tent was beautiful, but getting to the tent was touch and go. She was so disregulated in the park. She was upset about what was now, what was next. We almost didn't make it. But as soon as she got there, and she saw Jane, she settled herself right down. On stage—for that moment, for that one moment—I could see Katy's joy. And I need to see

that—it's not about me—but to see Katy's joy, that's what I live for. I bring her to these places and spaces to try for that. To try for that peak experience for her so that she has happy things to remember. Memories are so powerful for Katy. When she is unhappy, she can go to these happy places and times in her memory. We were building a positive memory. The sense of community that we felt in that tent—everyone, I mean everyone pulling for our kids, for their success—it was beyond words. A moment beyond words! I was grateful. I had tears. Tears of joy. To be able to say, "Here's my little one, my little one doing her thing." I just love seeing her do her thing. And she was doing it so beautifully. It soared. Jane made it soar.

Then I asked Jane about playing music with Katy.

Jane: When it came to the time to do Katy's piece [we developed a piece for each kid], hers became very hymn-



like, almost anthem-like. Very deep, very dense ... There was this electricity. It was unusual. I just felt that she was deeply listening to what I was playing. Sometimes I would follow her. Sometimes she would follow me. There was an exchange of musical lines ... She's funny, she'll just all of a sudden switch a timbre and the sounds will totally shift. I don't think it's arbitrary. A very interesting dialogue was happening between us on our instruments. It was fascinating. It was inspiring. She'll play for a really long time. She's just like me. She doesn't want the song to end. I don't want the song to end.

Video Five: *Sound Painting*

The final video I made on Jane's residency was an about-face in terms of subject positioning and process. I first saw Joe Sorbara direct the Contemporary Music Ensemble at an evening rehearsal of undergrad music students. Jane sat in as a band member. I was entranced by Joe's warm-up routine, made up of dancing gestures that commanded different sounds from the musicians. I loved how he moved, how he was so noisily silent. He told me it was a method of live sign language composing called Sound Painting. It was not an improvisation technique, but a vernacular whereby each movement indicated a very specific performance. I had never heard of it. Neither had Jane. I thought it would be interesting to shoot a teaching video with Jane attempting to learn it live for the first time. I'm not sure whether or not Jane found it "interesting," being put on the spot learning

something entirely new in front of a camera. She is a sport, all right.

For this video, I shot the footage and Nicholas edited it, the reverse of the first video, *Interruptions*. I knew I wanted to use split screen so that the audience could see Joe's silent expression and hear Jane's audio interpretation. I asked Nick for his creative input on how he might structure the piece based on the raw footage I shot, consisting of two separate but identically framed shots of Joe and Jane facing their respective cameras. A few weeks later, I was cc'd on an email Nick sent to Joe explaining his editing direction:

From: Nicholas Loess

To: joe sorbara

Sent: Wednesday, 23 November 2011, 14:14

Subject: Sound Painting Vid

Hi Joe,

So I'm working away on the sound painting piece and I wanted to run what I've got so far by you. I've visually structured it around your particular gestures to begin with.

I've tried to create a kind of visual painting with looping panels unveiling your gestures with different colour effects attached to them. I have an audio track of you explaining the process of sound painting as the gestures unfold on your portion of the screen.

I have Jane on the other side of the screen, and will have her gestures unveil as she plays them. This sequence is four minutes long and will fade into a long dissolve of your and Jane's exchange.

I've attached a screen shot showing what I mean for the first part.
Cheers,
Nick

Nick's intensive fragmentation of the footage resulted in four minutes of visually entrancing video where, as Nick explained, "the gestural performativity that Joe displayed in teaching Jane the language of *Sound Painting* became the visual emphasis of *Sound Painting*."

Such is the nature of things: so many stories, we have to choose which few to tell

In all, I made just six videos, missing many stories. Even one I did make, I didn't have the space to cover here in this chapter: Jane improvising with students and actors at a community-university conference, CU Expo in Waterloo. This video is available on the ICASP website. Such is the nature of things: so many stories, we have to choose which few to tell. We have to decide on which now to be in. As someone who popped in and out of the Improviser-In-Residence's numerous collaborations with some ten organizations in the community, I hoped to have captured a little of those exchanges, both the ones that worked and the few that didn't—just to keep it real. Throughout, I was so often reminded how important it is to say "yes," not just for the participants and for Jane, but for me as well.