

ECHO CITY - a history

Echo City's roots go back to 1983 when four musicians, **David Sawyer, Giles Perring, Giles Leaman** and **Guy Evans** were commissioned by the arts charity **Interlink** to build the UK's first sonic playground on an adventure playground in Bethnal Green. Built to withstand the onslaught of disaffected youth from one of London's most deprived inner city boroughs, the finished structure sported giant tubular bells fashioned from scrap streetlamps, drums made from polyethylene storage barrels and the first [and since much imitated] **Batphone**- a bass percussion instrument resembling a giant pan-pipe made from yellow polyethylene gas main.

The project was huge hit with play and recreation professionals as well as the children who used it. Within three months, the same team had been commissioned to build a second playground for disabled children at The Hayward Playground in Islington and, with funding from The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the musicians were able to experiment with new materials - principally aluminium and fibreglass.

The design approach was essentially the same. A workshop was set up on site and ideas were developed in situ with the children and playleaders. The instruments they finally installed represented those designs which had survived and proved most popular. Today, fifteen years on, the original bell tower and batphones are still in daily use. This experience was the starting point for Echo City's track record of innovative projects with disabled people and the commitment to equality of access which has informed its work ever since.

This project in particular generated a wholly unanticipated level of interest from the media and from promoters. The sonic playground team suddenly found itself in demand to perform

and run projects. There was one problem - the only instruments it had built were bolted into two playgrounds and belonged to other people. For the following year, Echo City as it had now dubbed itself, and now supplemented by **Paul Shearsmith** staged events at such prestigious locations as the South Bank using instruments discreetly borrowed from their permanent sites.

In June 1985, the solution came in the form of a grant and technical assistance from **The London Innovation Network**. Using a fully equipped workshop and assisted by skilled professionals, Echo City was able to refine its original designs and build them into the mobile unit, the **Sonic Playground** or **Pod** which made its debut at the 1985 Pendley Jazz Festival followed a week later by WOMAD. This highly adaptable structure has now been at the heart of Echo City's project and performance work for over a decade. By now Sawyer had returned to his own work in Exeter, Devon, and Giles Leaman had taken up full time work as a playleader. **Rob Mills**, an improvising saxophonist and then treasurer of the London Musician's Collective joined the group as did **Susie Honeyman** [violinist and researcher for the original sonic playground projects] as a performer and project worker.

Left-field curiosity and an in built distaste for out-and-out commercial exploitation have since brought Echo City a unique and indefinable career path which has embraced commissioned art, equipment manufacture, community project work, music composition and performance.

Whilst working on the mobile playground, Echo City attracted the attention of the first of several film-makers to commission music for a soundtrack, Channel Four's 'Welcome To The Spiv Economy' which was to provide the foundation for a number of the Batphone tracks on 'Gramophone'. At the same time its first art commission produced 'The Shimmer' an installation of tuned aluminium bars spanning a valley at an arts centre in Cumbria.

In 1987, the German music label Line gave Echo City its first record deal which resulted in the CD 'Gramophone'. Two years later, the follow up record 'The Sound Of Music' was released by the innovative British label Some Bizarre.

In 1988, The Singapore Festival of Arts flew all 900 kilos of Echo City to Singapore for a series of workshops and performances. In the same year, Echo City won a design prize which led to a commission for four structures along one bank of the Clyde for the Glasgow Garden Festival. Also in the same year, Echo City secured the annual performance commission for The Covent Garden Music Festival with a piece for improvising orchestra featuring seventy members of the public playing tuned drainpipes on five stages in The Piazza, under the baton of guest conductor Peter Hammill. A recording of that piece, '*Doddy No Diddy*' was subsequently released on the 'Sonic Sport 83-88' album along with the original 'Gramophone' tracks, and an adventure playground *musique concrète* assemblage '*Weaver's Field Band*'.

In September 1989, Echo City continued to explore its potential for grand set-pieces with '20 Big Tuns' a performance piece commissioned by The South Bank Centre involving forty drummers aboard two formation dancing tugboats synchronised to a waterborne firework display by Le Maitre.

In 1990 Echo City secured its first European funding from EUCREA (a newly created Brussels - based fund for community arts projects involving at least three member countries). The project involved performances in Leuven with a Belgian group of blind and partially-sighted musicians with learning disabilities, a performance with Dutch disabled percussion ensemble **Quasili**, and site specific multi-media events with disadvantaged groups from Loftus, Teeside and Dublin. For these projects Echo City was joined by flautist **Julia Farrington** who has since become a permanent member of the ensemble.

Around this time, interest which had been brewing in Canada and the USA culminated in a deal with the Montreal-based agency Latitude 45. Funded by the Arts Council of Canada, Echo City's first Canadian tour in 1991 included participatory installation events at The Museum of Modern Art in Ottawa, The Museum of Civilisation in Quebec City, four days at The Winnipeg Folk Festival plus community projects in Montreal and Mont Laurier.

These led directly to two building commissions completed the following Spring for installations at The Manitoba Museum of Childhood and the 1992 Ameriflora Festival in Columbus Ohio.

In Autumn of the same year, Echo City returned to Canada for a residency at the Museum of Civilisation in Ottawa followed by its most intensive community project to date - a week in Jamestown, New York involving street performances, a live TV show, daily performance/workshops with groups of local school children and a performance in a theatre devised over a week of workshops with a group of thirty local people. Subsequent US/Canadian projects included residencies at The World Student Games in Buffalo (1994), The Mayfest in Allentown, Pennsylvania (1995), and The Seattle, Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg Children's Festivals (1996).

For its transatlantic projects Echo City has built a second mobile sonic playground which is currently based in Montreal.

Echo City's most recent US assignment is for a permanent installation for a sheltered playground designed to be accessible to disabled children currently being built on Staten Island, NYC.

Since 1995, Echo City has worked on a number of collaborations with the Bremen - based group **Blaumeier**. This is an arts community of over two hundred people established in 1985 in the wake of the closure of a psychiatric hospital in

Oldenburg. It has an art studio which stages major exhibitions and runs a 70-strong touring theatre company. In the last two years, Echo City has run music workshops for the company and performed in joint street shows with The Blue Caravan - Blaumeier's travelling show which began in Leipzig, travelling by river to Bremen via Torgau and Wittenberg. Blaumeier has twice organised independent performances for Echo City in major venues in Bremen and, in 1995, Echo City was instrumental in setting up Blaumeier's production of 'Fast Faust' at The Union Chapel. In 1998, Echo City worked with Blaumeier to perform a score for the acclaimed 'Kanale Grande' show which was staged in an old water pumping station in Bremen.

Echo City has also appeared in other contexts in Germany. Notably for **EUCREA** at the **Reha** events in Dusseldorf in 1994 and 1995, and with the Siren Project at Gießen in 1999. In 1997 Echo City made acclaimed appearances at the Pipeline Festival at Podewil in Berlin and at the Lebenshilfe Festival in Mainz.

Closer to home, Echo City has maintained its close connections with The London Borough Of Islington. In 1989, London Borough Of Islington provided free premises in the form of a disused Borough Engineers Depot in Highbury - an ideal space for building instruments, rehearsing and running projects. Echo City was allowed to occupy this space until 1995 when it was re-developed for housing.

During this time Echo City ran a long-term project with **The Siren Project**, a local group of adults with learning disabilities based at The Elfrida Rathbone Centre. They produced several highly acclaimed performances including two at The Lilian Baylis Theatre and, in 1996, a ground - breaking multi-media event at The Union Chapel commissioned for the Oris Jazz Festival, followed by, in 1997, an album 'Loss Of The Church'. The two projects collaborate periodically in the 'Wild Bunch' club, a clubnight showcasing learning disabled performers

and artists from North London. In June 1999, Echo City and The Siren Project performed a music and theatre piece with Oldenburg mask theatre group **Blauschimmel** at the Lebenshilfe Festival in Gießen, Germany.

As a band in its own right, Echo City has never stood still. It tours regularly and has recently debuted in Rimini in Italy, as a headline act in the '*Percuatare La Mente*' Festival. Its most recent release is the untitled single - distinguishable by the cover photo of the face of the **Sonic Warrior**, Echo City's spiritual guide, whose face is seen to emerge from the Earth in the wake of an Echo City event. Less lyrically, the cover image is also a picture of the imprint left in the grass after a week long installation of the Sonic Playground in Winnipeg in 1996. A new album is ready for release, recorded and produced binaurally by **Tchad Blake** - better known for his high profile productions for among others, Realworld Studios and Cheryl Crow.