

## The Music Folder #4 Gavin Bryars

Interview by Veniero Rizzardi, 28 December 2021. Realized on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Gavin Bryars' composition *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* and its [re-edition by Edizioni Notae](#).

Link: <https://www.mixcloud.com/archivioricordi/the-music-folder-4-gavin-bryars/>

**VENIERO RIZZARDI:** Maybe... I would like to start with a couple of suggestions which come also from the idea of the piece *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, but also to the moment in which this started, because it was a moment where your name was associated with experimental music...

GAVIN BRYARS: Yep

**VR:** ..and this phase, I would say, retained somehow an echo of your involvement in the jazz, or free jazz scene... that's what... because I remember when the [record](#) came out in this Brian Eno series, and it was sort of a sensation, because it was something that was really unclassifiable, it was... it fell between minimal and whatever... I mean for us, when we were very young, it was like something of a fresh air coming from every side of the musical interests we had, and I read something about it... and maybe I wanted to ask you about how... not specifically about this piece (we will come later to this) but how was ... did you feel your position as a musician in the scene at that time?

GB: It's quite a delicate balance. I'd given up playing jazz and free improvised music in 1966, and that's when I started thinking... I'd probably already start to think about being maybe a composer, and had met Cage in 1966 and I worked with him in America in 1968, and it was when I came back from America in the summer of 1968 that I got to know people like [Cornelius] Cardew and that whole circle of composers living in London, and the whole collective of those which developed in the following year when he started the Scratch Orchestra – I was never a member of the Scratch Orchestra but I did a lot of work with them, and I played in many of their concerts... it was just something I couldn't really... I could never devote myself to a regular membership of anything really – so I was really unable to join the club, but nevertheless I could enjoy their company and work with them... so that was the environment which I found myself. It was a kind of post-Cage, post-Fluxus environment where we were working on all kinds of pieces... all sorts of music, much of which involve working with people who are not strictly musicians, or people who are maybe amateur, or even visual artists who would like to try different experimental things: events, happenings, installations, all kinds of things... and that was the world in which we were. And one of the things that a number of composers did at that time was... we were working with... we liked found objects, just re-processing, making loops, or whatever out of things we found, and making fragments and so on... and that's where *Jesus' Blood* and *The Sinking of the Titanic* fit into that, because they both process an existing musical image and extend it by repetition. That was part of the whole climate of that experimental music world. There's also a certain kind of enjoyably crazy logic to a lot of the things we did, which involved often things which are on the surface fairly absurd... but it was an environment in which quite a large number of people were involved who... many of whom probably wouldn't have actually been involved in music without this sort of collective sense of being a collective. They were supported strongly by Cardew and others like John White, Chris Hobbs... those composers and those... In a sense we were all working for each other because none of us were in a sense accepted by musical institutions, the establishment. For example, between 1969 and 1987 I had nothing at all played on the BBC, and so we were outside that context, none of us would be getting support from the Arts' Council in terms of financial support, or get commissions

from orchestras or string quartets or choirs, all... Nor were we allowed to work in conservatories or music departments in universities. We were seen as being perhaps too radical, too extreme... we were doing... maybe even questioning what could count as music for that follows... for our work with Cage. Cage did raise up a fundamental problem: eventually anything can be music, provided your attitude and your philosophical approach is the right one, and so in that sense we were sort of dangerous; but our strength was in our being supporting each other, which we did through concerts... we would hire halls, and put on performances. Chris Hobbs started the [Experimental Music Catalogue](#), which is a way of distributing at that time things which were in manuscript, and I took that over in 1972, so that was a kind of publishing activity; there was an organisation called [Music Now](#) run by Victor Schonfield, which put on concerts regularly at the [Southbank](#), at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room, which we would hire; and nobody would get paid for concerts, but we'd cover the costs by the sale of tickets and so on... So there's this kind of collective action and that... with something... it kind of gave us strength, and the one place which was supportive were the visual art schools, the fine art colleges who were interested in having people like me, Cardew, another's John Tilbury... we'd work alongside with painters, sculptors, printmakers on projects, and they could see similarities or relationships between what we were doing and the kind of art that was going on outside galleries from the late 50s through the 60s. And so that we found us up in that environment, which was a friendly one. It is also one where people would discuss ideas, so they would be interested in how we make art, just as we were interested how they make art; so, it was a kind of conceptual conversation rather than a technical one. If you had been in a music college, you'd be talking about how did you make this piece, *but* you will not talk about the ideas to the piece: you were talking about the craft and making it. And now's a fundamental difference: that in one sense the craft came later, the ideas came first, and sometimes, I would say, early on, there is a certain kind of absence of craft, or the craft is weak, so for example I would say that the first recording of *Jesus' Blood* in 1975 – I did the piece in 71, the first recording was 75 – I would say that that writing is less sophisticated than when I did the version in 1993, when I knew more about orchestration, and so I could work with other things. The one in 75 – which is the 1971 version – was essentially simple, and very kind of straightforward, and it became more complex, but at the same time I never wanted anything of my... technical ability to overshadow the central image, which was this being a support of this recorded human voice, and everything that happened was in relationship, not to make me look clever or doing beautiful things, but to enhance that voice and so that was, in a way... I would say that's how we developed... and gradually, I would say, the craft moved, developed, especially later, by 1981, when I was asked to do my first opera with Bob Wilson, [Medea](#). Then I had to develop a traditional craft, and that's when things changed quite fundamentally; though I still say that my roots are in experimental music. And so, someone asked me: « well, what kind of music do you write? ». Well, I find it hard to say, but I would say my roots are in the music of John Cage and historical experimental music, and those attitudes... Even if music doesn't sound anything like that, and one of the points, of course, working with Cage, as you find us, anyone who works with Cage – none of them ever write music which sounds like Cage, which is a sign of his greatness as a teacher. Whereas if you were to go to Boulez, Maderna, to Stockhausen, you would be expected to write music within that idiom, and in that sense the teaching of Cage is much more open and lead, so I think, to more interesting results. And that's where we came from.

**VR: Yeah, but talking about Cage I mean... how... what was the first impulse to get to know Cage, I mean, you moved to New York, right?**

GB: No, I first knew of Cage's music when I was a schoolboy, when I was about 16 or 17. My music teacher told me about the work of Cage, which is very unusual for a music teacher in a small town in England, and

when I was at university I bought Cage's book [Silence](#), and there was a book by Calvin Tompkins called [The Bride and the Bachelors](#) which is an account of Cage, and I became interested in that. All the time that I was playing, especially as I was moving towards free improvisation from within jazz, I was interested a lot in Cage. When I stopped playing improvised music, I met Cage... besides some students of mine, to a performance of Merce Cunningham in London, 1966, and I met Cage there and spoke with him, and he asked me about what I did; so, I showed him something and he took two manuscripts back with him; and we corresponded a little while. And then I had the opportunity to move to New York in the beginning of 1969, end of... no, at the beginning of '68, sorry, end of '67, to work with some dancers at the University of Illinois, and on the way, I stopped in New York for two weeks. I bumped into Cage at a concert, and it turned out... and he remembered me, and we talked, but it turned out he was also living in the same place in Illinois,<sup>1</sup> so we're in each other's company, for many months. And eventually he employed me as an assistant because he knew under my tourist visa, I was not allowed to work. So, in order for me to complete my project, he paid me out of his own pocket, to work for him, so I could complete my project – which was fantastically generous. And so Cage was a huge influence on me, and I performed a lot of Cage from that time onwards, especially during his 60th birthday year: in 1972 there was a lot of things on in England and I was involved in those and I've played a lot of Cage ever since ; and now of course after Cage's death I was the first composer commissioned for a new work for Merce Cunningham, with *Biped* in 1999, so I found myself working with Merce in the same way that John had done, and that was a huge, huge privilege, because seeing Merce and John that night in November 1966, I would say it opened my eyes and my mind to what is possible and I realised « this is what I want to do » when I saw that performance.

**VR: Were you involved in actual performances of music by Cage at that time?**

GB: Well, yeah, I have actually performed the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano. In fact, it's probably the first performance in England, nobody probably knows that, [in 1966].

So yeah, it was from when I met him in in New York, more than, and in Illinois, that I was involved in performances along with other musicians in Illinois, people like Jim Fulkerson, they were students at that time, so we're all the same kind of age, so from then on, I was involved in performances with Cage.

**VR: Since Cage was famously against improvisation, probably it was no chance – no pun intended – that you met Cage precisely when you gave up improvisation...**

GB: No, it's kind of coincidence, I've been interested in Cage and Cage's ideas and his approach to music even when I was improvising, and in a way I would say that studying Cage and becoming aware of that kind of area of music was one thing which drew me away from improvisation, but I could see the limits of improvisation compared with the open possibilities within Cage's world and that was one of the things which led me away... It doesn't mean I can't improvise, I mean I still can play jazz like, still can improvise and have done, but it drove me away from that as a kind of a lifestyle, but it certainly happened that I stopped playing jazz, stopped... the last free improvised things in November, actually was in November 1966, when I played three times with Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley in the same day, lunchtime in Sheffield, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cage was appointed Visiting Research Professor (Associate) by the Center for Advanced Study, Graduate College, in the School of Music, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, between 16 September 1967 and 15 June 1968. Among the projects proposed there was the work that was to become *HPSCHD*. Cage and Lejaren Hiller (1924-1994), with whom he collaborated, spent two years to realize *HPSCHD*. See [https://cagecomp.home.xs4all.nl/chronology\\_1912-1971.html](https://cagecomp.home.xs4all.nl/chronology_1912-1971.html)

afternoon in Northampton, in the evening in London, then I stopped playing altogether; and I went to the Cage performance shortly after that; so the two things are very close together but I don't think one is the cause of the other.

**VR: Yeah, sure. Well, correct me if I'm wrong but I remember reading somewhere that during the existence of the [Joseph Holbrooke trio](#) with Derek and Tony there were some kind of experiments in chance operations...**

GB: Yes, there was also some things where... I, we tried all sorts of ways... before we became completely free, we tried all sorts of devices to stimulate improvisation or stimulate structured thought, and some of this involved me doing some, like, coloured charts where we should give us all of sequences of things or possibilities or even to do things even within say existing charts, to do things where would we break the structure completely, so for example I remember one thing we did once... this crazy idea was to... if you were playing a song like *Stella by Starlight*, instead of improvising on the chord changes as they are, you'd shift the chord changes in your mind to one back, so you were always in a different harmony from the one you're playing or everyone else is playing, and it's very strange. And another was... at some points we'd be playing, suddenly to stop and just freeze on the same chord, the rhythm can carry on but the harmony just stays for maybe one or two minutes and then we'd move on again to some agreements, and so they were ways just for breaking up routines... some of it was by chance, some of it by sort of decision-making or signals or whatever we tried; and then eventually of course we realized that we didn't need any of that, we'd improvise freely anyway. So, we had broken the ice, as it were, but that was one of the devices we did use.

**VR: There was an episode that happened in Chicago, I don't remember exactly when, when some members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago asked Cage to have some sort of collaboration because they were very attracted to his aesthetics; but Cage was very much disappointed because he felt that they were continuing... improvising while listening to each other, and that was terrible for him. It was a failed experiment.<sup>2</sup>**

GB: Yeah, there were various things which I remember Cage said that he had difficulty with, I think it was Beethoven, the vibraphone...

**VR: Yes, Cage hated the vibraphone! And the electric guitar.**

GB: ... and the electric guitar, yeah... but little by little he realized that his dislike of them showed in a sense a judgement of taste, and he wanted to avoid taste... so little by little he found ways of avoiding that, changing it, and he said in one case, one of the ways of... assimilating something into your existence is as, like cannibals: you simply eat it, and if you don't like someone you eat them, and then eventually they are part of you [chuckles].

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<sup>2</sup> With the title *Imperfections in a Given Space* the piece was performed by the Joseph Jarman Quartet (Ellis Bishop, trumpet, alto sax; Joseph Jarman, alto sax; Bob Hodge, bass; Doug Mitchell, piano, percussion) in Chicago, at the Harper Theater, for the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, November 1965. The title *Imperfections in a Given Space* is a resemantization of a segment extracted from a text by Cage, *45' for a Speaker*, in *Silence*, p. 159.

**VR: But there's one thing that I read, repeated, that there was a precise... you remember precisely when you stopped improvising, or making improvised music, and that was... it's quoted... an episode that you witnessed that made you decide to stop improvisation and it seems that there was some specific reason for doing so...**

GB: Yeah, it was that day when I did those three concerts, three performances, and the last one, which was at this place, the [Little Theatre Club](#) in Saint Martin's Lane, which is a venue for free improvisation and all kinds of experimental things... I've been playing there on my bass and, as quite often happens, if there's another bass player they'll ask about your instrument, it's a common thing, you know «what is your instrument», and eventually «can I try it?», and this happened; and this bass player was playing and I could see that he didn't really know what he's doing at all, it's just guesswork, and I just thought, well, it's a waste of time... I have a good technique and know exactly... I was probably an extremely good bass player at that time, and I just thought « this man is a clown », so I thought: if you can fool people like that, it's a waste of time, so I stopped. I think it's now acknowledged; someone actually put on my [Wikipedia](#) page that it was Johnny Dyani, and it was. Later I got to know, because in fact, ironically, he lived in the same house as me for a time...

**VR: it was a very tight community anyway...**

GB: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

**VR: You have remembered the fact that the world of visual arts and especially educational institutions in visual arts were supporting the scene; and it's interesting because many rock acts at the time were promoted by the same circuit... is that right?**

GB: Yeah, and also quite a lot of rock musicians came through visual arts, I mean, I think John Lennon, Pete Townshend they were all at art school...

**VR: I think it's very unique of the British scene...**

GB: Well, the art schools had a very free, not regimented approach; they were open-minded and allowed experiment... there was also... there's always division, because... within an art school you'd have traditional painters, traditional sculptors who couldn't understand why this was going on, but there were others who were more open, but also people who were painters who accepted, this was interesting, even though it wasn't their work, so there was a kind of a free exchange of ideas in art schools which you wouldn't find, I would say, in a music department.

**VR: This reminds me also the fact that mostly all the experimental, especially minimal, music in the United States was very much supported by art galleries for example...**

GB: ...and I'll pick an artist: Sol LeWitt paid for a lot of things for Steve Reich, you know, and Donald Judd... those artists actually would put on concerts of Steve, Philip in their galleries when their shows were on, absolutely... and in fact that's why probably, you know, Michael Nyman used that word "minimal music", that comes from minimal art, that's where historically...

**VR: ...absolutely. And you were also involved in that scene for a moment, right?**

GB: Yes, yes...

**VR: ...as a performer too.**

GB: Yeah, I mean, I played in Steve Reich's group, I toured with Steve Reich in 1972 playing *Drumming*. There were four English musicians. When he came over with *Drumming*, which is a piece which had more musicians in it than he would normally have, so he took on four English musicians to save costs basically, so Michael Nyman, Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons and Chris Hobbs, we all played *Drumming*.

**VR: Well, let's spend a word for Cornelius Cardew too, because, I mean, he's a pivotal figure in British new music, in new music in general, I think... when and where did you meet him?**

GB: Well I first was in touch with him when I was... actually we didn't meet, I was living in Sheffield at the time I was playing with Joseph Holbrooke, and I was interested in experimental music and experimental music ideas; and I wrote to Cardew, I'm not sure where I got his address from... anyway I wrote to him asking if he knew of any other people who were interested in this kind of work in my area – he was in London and I was in Sheffield, which is 150 miles north of London – if anybody else knew; and he gave me two people's addresses. But it's a sign of his lack of knowledge of geography outside London that they were miles away in other directions... but there was... Howard Skempton was one, and Laurie Scott Baker; those two... Laurie was in Newcastle, Howard was in Cheshire... and so I wrote to them as well. So, I wrote to Cardew first, and then when I started trying to write different things within the sort of what I saw as an experimental world... what I was writing at that time was probably more close to Morton Feldman and some Cage, it was still using notations, but in a very free way. It was just before I went to America. I sent some of this music to Cardew, something to look at, to find out what he thought; and he wrote back saying « you're on the right track, well done! », and that was it. So, when I came back from America, I had to collect the music I sent him, so we met. This would have been the summer of 1968 when I came back from America, I picked the music up from his flat and after that we knew each other quite well.

**VR: You mentioned Morton Feldman. I mean, did you meet him in person?**

GB: Yes, I met Feldman several times. And Feldman was, again, like Cage, incredibly helpful to me, in a very specific way. When I went to first in New York I contacted Feldman and went round to his house, his apartment in Lexington Avenue, on the top of a Chinese laundry... I went and spent some afternoon with him; we had coffee and talked about his work. He showed me what he was doing, it showed me the music on his piano, in his writing. It was called *In Search of an Orchestration*, and in this room, there were painting by, you know, Rothko and all those kind of things... his friends! And that was before I went to Illinois, and then when I came back from Illinois, I was in New York again for a short time before coming back to England. I went to see him again and in fact he was interested in what Cage was doing, because they were not that close by then. And I told him that I've worked with Cage on the harpsichord piece, *HPSCHD*, and he was sort of puzzled because this was like... Cage was working with Mozart and all kinds of existing composers, and he thought, it is very strange... But the other thing that Feldman did was very helpful, was that when I had flown to America my aunt gave me the money for the airfare, so I've got a ticket for it in January and then I came back in the summer; it was an open ticket, but the problem was, when I came back in the summer the prices were higher, because it's the tourist season, and I didn't know that; so I was short of \$100 to cover the return costs but I didn't have \$100. Feldman offered to give me the \$100. I didn't ask

him, but he did. Eventually my brother wired it over but Feldman out his own generosity offered to pay, and I've always been very grateful to both Feldman, and Cage, for those little gestures, which were personal, and I've always liked Feldman's music anyway, I like it very much, and I mean, when he came to England I would see him sometimes when he came over here, or we'd meet at festivals when other composers were there... I think in Berlin in 1972, and I was there with Steve Reich with *Drumming* at a festival there; Cage was there too. So, I would see him from time to time; I wouldn't say we were close at all, but we got on well, and I'm not sure that he had a lot of close friends – he was a very strange guy – actually I liked him, but he was he was someone who was always looking for a debate or an argument... he just loved to talk...

We were talking about... he wanted to know what I was doing, and I showed him some of my pieces and he could see these were like... similar in terms of this kind of vertical aggregations and so on... isolated harmonies which were not sequential in any way; and he could see, so he showed me what he was doing and he played some... he put his hands on his piano, he moved his hands, and played something... and then he would write it down once he got the sound he wanted... so what he was doing was entirely by choice, by his hands; it was not.... there's no system; it wasn't abstract or any kind of... using any formula at all... he was entirely for his ear. And he would sit –because he was very short sighted, you know – he would sit face very close to the keyboard and play these notes and squint, and then he's writing down.... so I saw him do that; and he talked about that as being his way of working.

Curiously, in fact, in Italy I played... I wrote a piece for myself, and Derek Bailey after I saw – actually I was still working with Derek – for guitar and piano, which is a kind of Feldman-type piece and Derek had played it, John Tilbury also played it with Derek, but the manuscript is lost. Quite recently it was found, this was 1965; and I played it with an Italian guitarist in Vercelli and Bologna, Sergio Sorrentino... and we did it we did a couple of concerts together also with him as well with the percussionist Antonio [Caggiano], [we did concerts together](#). This piece is called *Catalogue*; we played it and it was very strange because I had no memory of this piece ... it was from 1965 and I'm playing it some maybe 53 years later, and it was very odd, I mean, I could tell that I had written it, but I had no memory at all, and I found it very strange and I played it also with my own guitarist, since... I should publish this, and I say, well, it's not anything like me anymore, but at least it is recorded, I mean – there have been performances that there are not on record yet, but it does exist... That's a piece from 1965, at the time when I started to feel my way in this sort of Feldman sort of world but while I was still at same time playing free improvisation, so in a way this is something like... the kind of thing I would probably have shown to Feldman, I imagine.

**VR: I see. Your, I mean, your knowledge of the music of Feldman was mainly through records - or performances?**

GB: There were some broadcasts I think in the early 60s, I remember one particular piece, very beautiful piece, for violin tuba and piano, it's one of those kind of *Durations* pieces,<sup>3</sup> wonderful; so it's mostly from broadcast... but what I did when I was working as a professional bass player, I used all the money, mostly when I owned, I used to buy scores of Feldman, Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, some Stockhausen, some Messiaen, and every week I would go to the music shop in Sheffield, and there was a big pile of music they assumed they came in and... « oh, it's his music », I was the only one... I would order it and the stuff would arrive...

**VR: ...you were supporting the shop, because they were expensive...**

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<sup>3</sup> *Durations 3* (1961).



GB: They were... and very badly produced! The Peters editions... Cage's was just kind of – prints of his manuscripts, you know, and you paid a lot of money... anyway I bought all that and studied... that's how I spent time with that music; and then of course I did get the [George Avakian recording of the Cage 25 Year Retrospective Concert](#). I got that box set of vinyl records as well, when that came out; so I, you know, I found everywhere I could, to get information.

**VR: Let's go back to the record production of *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. You say that you produced the recording in 1971 and the actual record came out four years later. So, what was the impulse for the first production... I mean because... how come the record was made four years later?**

GB: I started making the piece in 1971, when I first heard the recording of the voice, which was going to be thrown away. It was just a piece of tape which was given to me: I helped out a friend<sup>4</sup> who's working on a film and all the tapes – it was about homeless people – everything, all the sound tapes they didn't use for the production, he gave to me; so, I would have a big reel of tape which is very useful, I couldn't afford it. So – this was by accident – just on one occasion I listened to this tape all the way through, which is why I heard the old man's voice: but that's how I made a decision to make a piece out of it.

**VR: So, this was within a collection of discarded tapes...**

GB: It was a number of discarded tapes. This is one, it's a long tape, maybe about 30 minutes of things where people... old men... people living on the street were interviewed; most of them were drunk, sometimes they would sing, or talk about their lives, it was just very random. But in the middle of all this, it was this one moment, 26 seconds where this man sang this song and it was... suddenly, it was like a jewel, something else, unlike anything else in the whole thing. As it turned out, this old man was the only one out of them all who didn't drink at all; he was not alcoholic. I mean, he almost certainly died not long afterwards. We knew nothing about him at all, you know. I did try. But I started, I made up the piece in 71 and then in 72 we did the first live performance of it. I made a simple recording just with a few friends in 71, which was just with people like Cardew on cello and so on, just about... maybe ten of us. And then in 72 we had the first live performance, I started to give live performances: I did some in Belgium, and elsewhere; I did one with John Adams directed with me in San Francisco in 74, and eventually, and each time that I would do the piece, some other instruments would be there which I hadn't used before, so I had to do another instrumental group and little by little these ended up. So, in 1975 when Brian Eno started Obscure Records, I made a kind of a score which was all the different groups we had, and some which we didn't have already, like for example four French horns, to make an orchestral version, and that was the recording. The piece had existed for four years but in various ways and different kind of live performances. In fact, there had been discussion about possibly making these recordings in 73, but at that time there was... 73 there was the Arab Israeli war, when the big petrol shortage and all vinyl production stopped for a long time, and that didn't happen. 75 Brian came back to it, and then he proposed his plan of a series of records, and the first one he wanted to do was these two pieces: *The Sinking of the Titanic*, which was the main side, *Jesus' blood* was the B-side. That would be the first one, Obscure One, and then there were three others in the first series which were released, so therefore altogether... initially. And the idea was... you would try to get out maybe ... maybe 10 a year, but in the end we made a total of 10 over 3 years, because by then he started to do things... he'd be away working with David Bowie in Berlin so and so... he

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Power.



had to give attention to it also, but I acted as a kind of advisor, and so did Michael Nyman on the kind of repertoire as something he found himself too. So, it was a mixed thing... but so it was a project where we were all involved. And I've known Brian when he was a painting student, before he became involved in music, also. And he'd gone to love the concerts we organised with this experimental music stuff in the late 60s, and he felt that a lot of that music he heard that, although it was contemporary, it was not kind of alienating, like some avantgarde music was, for a popular audience, and he said they felt there were things that ... which were potentially very attractive, which non-musical specialists could enjoy, and find some sort of relationship too. So that's what that was the idea for *Obscure*; later he then moved into ambient with a similar concept, or specifically *ambience*, but it was his way of sort of paying a debt to the music he'd heard before he became a musician – which it was a very, very incredible thing to do... We were friends, we do, each other, for years...

**VR: I gathered that the piece existed for a number of years without specific notation – or what? I mean, you said that you felt the necessity to notate the piece when it was the moment to make a record production or...**

GB: I made a full score notation... I would make notations for each group, and each group, like this string quintet, some woodwind... I'd give them notation and then there was a time plan, when they would play, so there wasn't a full score; there were individual [parts].

**VR: ...because it was in principle... it was not coordinated of course...**

GB: ... the only coordination was the old man's voice... yes

**VR: ...and so the orchestration was not fixed of course... you weren't interested in specific orchestration except for the group that you happened to work with...**

GB: Whatever group, I mean, I would play... maybe with a group somewhere, and there would be a harp player, which we didn't have, so that when eventually I put that into the score; so when I did the recording in 1975 it was almost a way of saying, « look: this has all the different things I've done so far and it's a way of doing it, like almost a definitive score ». And in my mind, I thought that was a way, so now I need no longer to play live because that's it. That didn't work out like that, but that was my plan: that was the end, but it wasn't supposed [to be so].

**VR: I read that, as you said it before, the 1993 version was out of quite a different intention, right?**

GB: Well, that was because of Philip Glass. I met Philip and Steve [Reich] in 1971 when they both came to England for the first time, and we became friends, and they played in each other's group in those days of course; and, you know, I remember Philip having a concert at the Royal College of Art and... there were six people in the audience and six people in his group, you know, that was crazy.<sup>5</sup> But when Philip started his record label Point, he asked me, he liked to put something of mine on there, and I sent him various pieces of music and recording... which I would thought quite nice to get out, but he wanted to do *Jesus' Blood*, and so I said, ok, fine; and then he was concerned: « But what else would you put on the recording? » and I said

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<sup>5</sup> On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1971, The Philip Glass Ensemble (Jon Gibson, Barbara Benary, Arthur Murphy, Richard Landry, Steve Chambers) performed *Music with Changing Parts* and *Music in Similar Motion* at the R.C.A.

« Nothing », because the only reason the piece has been whatever length it was, was because of the physical constraints; the vinyl was 24 minutes, because after that you run out of quality; the live performances were 30 minutes [because of] the length of the reel of tape on which you played back the recording, and so on. So, with the CD I could go to maybe 75 minutes or so, and he was sort of a little bit worried because he thought « Wouldn't it become sort of rather boring and repetitious? » I thought, well that's a very funny thing for you to say... [chuckles], but in fact because what he would have done would have been to take that 1975 version and repeat each repetition three times, so that would then make it three times this long. But what I said I would do: I keep *exactly* the structure of the 1975 version for the first 25 minutes of the new version, and then it would move... the voice would carry on, but the musical territory they complement, the background support would change; so he got some kind of orchestrations which I wouldn't have thought of in 1975, you know, sort of things with an ensemble with two trombones, two French horns and the contrabassoon, something with untuned percussion, a choir and so on... various other things like that, and then so it went on another journey – but in my mind, if people really wanted, only wanted the original version, the first track, 25 minutes, they could just play the first track and they would have exactly that, but with better players, because all these players in New York were from the New York Philharmonic and so on, and there was a fundamental difference, you know, when I did the 1975 recording, some of the instruments, we didn't have: for example four French horns, so I had to hire musicians from orchestras, and every one of those musicians of orchestras, I paid them, but they said « we don't want our names to be on the record, it would damage our careers », so if you look at the listing of musicians on that first recording, it's very strange: a lot of instruments are not identified at all.<sup>6</sup> But when I did [the 1993 version](#) everyone wanted to be named... In fact, those guitarists, that guitarist there, who would phone me up just to make sure I got the spelling of his name correctly... and so I would have someone who had been the concertmaster of New York Philharmonic, even the violins you know... it was incredible. So there everything changed. And then of course the other thing that could change was... well, Philip Glass's managers, a guy called Rory Johnston, was in charge of these projects. I was speaking to him on the phone, and he wanted to know how the piece would evolve over the time and so on... and I found myself saying I hadn't given any thought, and I said, « then about round about 55 minutes or so, Tom Waits will join the old man singing »... and he was very shocked... and surprised, but he also could see this would give it commercial possibilities at all which I hadn't called up at all. I thought of that because I would have been in touch with Tom before that, about other things. Tom and I had been in touch, because in fact in the 80s – 1986 I think it was – he got in touch I think through my manager's office, late 80s, he was touring, coming to tour UK and he lost his final copy of *Jesus' Blood* and he said it was his favourite recording, and did we have a copy? So it happened we did, and so we sent this to his management; so he got this vinyl and then in fact he gave me two tickets for his concert, which, as it happened, I couldn't go; so in this concert, it was sold out, there were two empty tickets as I couldn't, I wasn't there... and then after that he started working with Robert Wilson, and because I've worked with Bob Wilson in 1981, '82, '84 and I saw the performance of *The Black Rider* in Paris,<sup>7</sup> then we were in touch. I was developing an idea for my second opera which is *Dr. Ox's Experiment*, and two of the characters are people from a different world altogether I was interested in Tom performing in this opera, and he was interested. But all this was by faxes, telephone conversations in those days, but we were in touch about ideas. And so, when this *Jesus' blood* recording came up, he and I were in contact, so maybe he was in my mind, that's why it came up. And I also decided, with this I wouldn't have... he wouldn't repeat like the accompaniment does, or like the old man does: he

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<sup>6</sup> They are indeed collectively identified as *The Cockpit Ensemble*.

<sup>7</sup> *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*, is a collaborative “musical fable” between Bob Wilson, Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs, which was premiered in Hamburg (Thalia Theater) on March 31, 1990 and performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on October 9<sup>th</sup> of the same year.

will sing along with the old man but in real time and so it became as if the old man had found a companion now; this is not just things going along with him, this was someone of a similar wavelength... And he agreed to do it, so that's where that came from, and then I mean the story of how we did it that was good quite complicated and very close to disaster, but anyway it worked.

**VR: That's a fascinating story because this is... I always loved this idea of this piece, of the journey of this piece from the world of a niche of experimental music, up to the mainstream pop – it's amazing – always being the same thing...**

GB: Yeah, and also there was no intentions, no plan... in fact when we were doing the piece, I recorded I think in 1992, end of 1992, in November, we recorded all the music in New York, Philip Glass's studio, but without Tom, because Tom was working in Europe with Bob Wilson, and so he was going to go home for Christmas, and so on, and I said, well, we get in touch in the new year. And then in January he didn't answer his phone, no faxes got through, nobody could find him, nobody reached him at all; and little by little the release date was going to be something like May, and getting closer and closer, and eventually I would leave messages on his voicemail and so on, and I never get anything back. And then eventually one day I just left a voice message, and I just said « Tom, I'm sorry this isn't going to work out... it would have been great, but no mind, no hard feeling, we just go ahead and do it... but if you can do it, it would have been great ». So, I went to the pub for a drink, and I came back, and I checked my voicemail: no answer. But then I called him again: his outgoing message had changed; so, it was not the same, so I knew he was there. And then I left a message again and this time he called me back and then he just said, he apologised, [imitating Waits' raspy voice] « Hey Gavin, I'm so sorry, man », but eventually he said yes, we will do it. But the way it was done was... he would only do it just me and him, and his engineer, in California, not in New York. So, nobody from the production would go to California, only me. So, I went to New York, I got a large reel, a multitrack tape, 2-inch tape; flew to California to San Francisco; drove to Northern California, to the studio; met Tom, his wife, and kids, and we spent the day together recording, and it was fantastic. And as it happens, we had to use fairly not very long takes because the reel size on the studio tape machines was too small for the big tapes: we had to cut the tape in half, so instead of having 30 meters we had 15. So, Tom would be in the next booth just singing with the old man. We did like 15 minutes like that; then we had the second reel, so there was a whole pre-mix, a rough mix of the thing, and several blank tracks so Tom could sing. And then Tom suggested, and his engineer suggested that the room which is called the waiting room at this studio – it's called Prairie Sun Studios – and it's a series of... like old chicken shacks, chicken huts, it's a farm, but they converted it; and on one of these there were all Tom's instruments were, where he recorded. So, the idea was we'd record now, in his room, just me and him there, and the engineer in the other room. And so, we did that, and sometimes I would play one of his harmoniums, on his keyboards while he sang, and sometimes he would sing through a voice gun, and all kinds of things... and eventually it was done. And then I went back to New York with this tape and then I put it all together, because what I then had to do is to find, out of all these different sequences, to find where you... which makes sense, because he was singing generally like four or five repetitions before it stopped; and then try a new idea. So, I tried to keep these ideas in sequence, so I spent a long time annotating these. But one of the things that happened was that when we were making the recording, with the recordings planned, I worked with the Frankfurt ballet, William Forsythe, and they were interested in the possibility of having rights to use this for a dance performance. So, when I was back in New York doing this, Bill Forsythe came to see me because he was in America. I showed him what I was doing, but the Frankfurt ballet were not sure whether they wanted Tom or not, so we had to do... we did one mix which doesn't have Tom, so somewhere there is a mix of the whole thing without Tom at all. But then the Frankfurt ballet eventually did do this piece, it's

called *Quintet* which is a piece... it still plays, performed by different companies. He decided to orchestrate it from the old Obscure vinyl, and of course the Frankfurt ballet were horrified... they spent I don't know how many thousand... \$50,000 dollars or whatever, and it was going with the recording which cost him like \$0.10! But so, as a compromise, what I did... I got the version edited so that it was exactly the same but with the new sounds, so he could use that, and that was done, so that became part of this ballet... but I do still have all the other recordings of Tom singing, with the voice, which we didn't use. I have another 20 minutes more... I could issue those, but I have to get an agreement with Tom.

The project was full of tension and difficulty, but in the end, it was a very good project... and Tom and I... I haven't seen, we haven't met since, but we stay in touch sometimes. He edited a magazine and he wanted to include *Jesus' Blood* as well, as an album.<sup>8</sup> And we stayed in touch... and I was sending birthday greetings...

**VR: I came across [a sermon](#) that a priest gave, quoting extensively and taking your piece, and it's quite a good sermon, and I think he really captured the spirit of the piece... and it's curious because this operation comes back to the church... the way it becomes functional to a sermon... and I read about that in your beginnings in the church... I mean I think the church music probably helped shaping your attitude toward composition ...**

GB: Certainly, as a child my mother and my father went to church, my uncle was a church organist, I went to church maybe twice on Sunday and I sang in the church choir, and eventually I sort of lost my faith... I studied philosophy, and became agnostic, later I became more interested in Zen Buddhism and so on... but I still respect Christianity. In a way... I all I have to say is that *Jesus' Blood* is not a religious piece, not a Christian piece, it is a kind of a human... and it can be used in a liturgical way... in fact now we have every year in London on the first Thursday in November there is a the service at Saint Martin in the Fields for all those who died homeless in London in the previous year, and we played *Jesus' Blood* at that service every year now, and there's... members from my own ensemble, but there are two choirs of homeless people who also sing with us, and it's an extraordinary, moving thing, especially having it sung by homeless and of course I did do this 12 hour through the night [performance at the Tate in 2019](#) which also included two orchestras, my ensemble, two homeless choirs... so it has come all the way round and it's become like a kind of a sort of hymn for the homeless as well.

**VR: There was a story connected to the preparation of the recording which I read...I'm trying to find out the exact words... by the way this is... the sermon I'm referring to was delivered by this reverend Dominic Barrington at St. James Cathedral in Chicago: « As Gavin Bryars, the composer who made famous this old man's song, as he was working on this recording one morning, he went to make a coffee, and he left the tape-loop of the old man playing in his office, adjacent to a staff common room in the university in which he worked, unaware that the song would be overheard. When he came back with his drink, he says, "I found the normally lively room subdued. People were moving about more slowly than usual, and a few were sitting alone, quietly, weeping". » Is that accurate?**

GB: It's true, but it wasn't the whole piece... what it was... at the weekend I'd heard the recording and I made a loop, and I replayed the loop on my tape recorder round and round again, and that's when I sketched out the harmony. But on the Monday, I then went to the university where I was teaching and I took this tape loop with me, because it was very fragile, and I wanted to copy it onto a reel-to-reel tape so

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<sup>8</sup> [Mojo, 201 \(August 2010\).](#)

it's safe. So, what I did... there was a kind of a little music studio which is just off the main art studios, where there were two Revox tape recorders, so I could copy, get the loop going and copied onto the other, so this was going to take about 30-35 minutes; so, I got it going after about 10 minutes and... [I said] well it's fine now; so, I went downstairs to get a coffee, which is exactly that, when I came back, what you describe was happening. So, it was just the old man's voice on its own. And that's when I realised at that time how powerful the old man's voice was, on its own, without anything, so that's why it made me even more serious to be very strict and not to fool about at all that. That had a kind of power of its own... True story.

**VR: Talking about the fact that this piece came to you in a moment where there was a work on found objects found things... is that right?**

GB: Yeah

**VR: I mean that was inside this I mean of course the power of the very information coming from this piece of tape was what i the impulse for from doing what we know – but, generally speaking, you were interested in that... I mean just... working with found objects....**

GB: *The Sinking of the Titanic* is the same thing... I didn't do a lot of it, but this was something which other composer were doing, John White for example: he did lots of pieces where he would process by deconstructing music by Elizabethan keyboard players and so on, or by Schumann, and reconstruct different things. And in a way when Cage made *HPSCHD* of course he was deconstructing Mozart and all the other things... so there was a sense to which that idea was in the air, but it's also something because when I was working in our College of course I have had a great interest and developed an even greater interest in the work of Marcel Duchamp where the readymade of course is at the centre of his work from certain period. So, it resonated with other artistic ideas, yeah.

**VR: ...definitely an archival attitude in the artistic creation...do you think this method is still viable to you?**

GB: Yes... it can be! It is not something I would seek, not something I would look for, but if the right thing occurred, I would do something like this...I mean I have... I have worked with existing material in some of the situations, but not quite as fully as that's where this becomes a whole piece, but I certainly have used some existing material in other pieces...

**VR: Okay, well, thank you so much!**

GB: Thank you very much! I've enjoyed talking to you and remembering things; and fortunately, my memory is so pretty good. And I hope it will stay that way... you know it doesn't happen with all old people, but I'm only old in body, my mind is still sharp...

**VR: I thank you so much for that.**