

JAAP SPEAK & BLONK JAZZ

PHOTO: (2000) TELEMACH WIEZINGER

BY PAUL DUTTON

We'll never know whether Louis Armstrong dropped his lyric sheet or suffered a memory lapse after singing the first verse of "Heebie-Jeebies" during his Hot Five's recording of that number in Chicago, U.S.A., 1925; but whichever it was (or neither), something inspired him to break into apparently spontaneous nonverbal lyric flight — "Eh! Eez! Gaw! Ew! Geep op, geep lop bah, loo boop de doo dee doo ..." — thereby giving birth to the continuing heritage of scat singing in jazz, which remains as only one facet of his monumental contribution to the music. Nine years earlier, when Armstrong was still a barefoot boy hauling coal in New Orleans, Hugo Ball, an expatriate German pacifist opting out of the First World War in neutral Switzerland, stood on stage in a hall in Zurich and intoned, with calculated intent, "gadji beri bimba glandridi laula lonni cadori ...," thereby introducing his "verse ohne worte" (poetry without words), and making a seminal contribution to a strain of sonic orality — sound poetry — that has snaked its way subversively through the Western art world through the ensuing decades.

Both of these watershed moments had their several separate prototypical antecedents, both sprang immediately from very different contexts and motivations, and both were precipitated by individuals oblivious of each other, and of each other's world. Still, it's hard not to feel that something was in the air back in the early twentieth century, and that both Armstrong and Ball were acting out of some like impulse. They each stood, however, at the head of different streams, and jazz vocals and sound poetry developed along different lines through the ensuing decades. Something began to shift, though, in the 1980s and '90s — marginally, it's true, but there were trickles on the fringes of both streams that began to flow together. On the jazz side, such movement as there was came not so much from scat singers (hardly a class, in any

case) as from free jazz and free improvisational singers and players. Within the field of sound poetry, which is better thought of as a poetic approach to sound than as a sonic approach to poetry, any number of individuals had developed techniques similar to those being used in free improvisational singing and the more venture-some strains of jazz vocalization. A few instances of the confluence of jazz, or jazz-related musics, and sound poetry within the last twenty years: American jazz and art singer Lauren Newton's work with the late German sound poet Ernst Jandl; the collaborations between London saxophonist Lol Coxhill and London sound poet Bob Cobbing; the intermittent alliance of the Toronto sound poetry ensemble The Four Horsemen with the Toronto free improv band CCMC, as well as the work of individual Horsemen with the Bill Smith Ensemble; the present writer's periodic playing with Phil Minton and other London improvisers, and as a member of the CCMC trio; and the sundry projects undertaken with improvising and chart-playing ensembles by sound poet and musician Jaap (pronounced "Yahp") Blonk, the subject of this profile.

"Blonk," wrote Sean Scott in the *Sacramento News and Review* a few years ago, "is Pablo Picasso to McFerrin's Walt Disney." The image is apt. Consider Bobby McFerrin linking his thumbs and flapping his symmetrically arranged hands in bird-wing simulation, telegraphing the representational intent of the breathily fluttering sequence of "t"s he emits; then imagine Blonk cubistically reducing a phrase like "The minister regrets such statements" ("senator" when performed in the States) through various stages, to a cluster of incoherent roars, or abstracting language itself in lines like "Obbele boep 'm pam bè'm boem / lebbele bop 'm pèè dla dla tepatepat." McFerrin's technical inventiveness, for all its originality and audacity, seems always prettified and palatable (no pun intended), vocally airbrushed and melodically inflected; while Blonk, in his straining at the limits of human oral sounding, is all grit and grain and texture, with multiphonic bellowing and vowel-generated overtones sharing pride of place with splutters and lip-smacks, squawks, shrieks, and ratcheting inhaled vocables.

Blonk applies his impressive array of sonic effects in a variety of contexts, composed and improvised, original and interpretive, solo and ensemble, at jazz and new music festivals, literary festivals, sound poetry festivals, clubs, concert-halls, galleries, and bars. He leads two ensembles, the thirteen-piece Splinks orchestra and the BRAAXTAAL trio, and plays in sundry ad hoc constellations with improvisers from both sides of the Atlantic, including

such luminaries as John Tchicai, Joëlle Léandre, Mats Gustafsson, Michael Zerang, and Fred Lonberg-Holm. His busy performance schedule has him crisscrossing Europe and touring frequently to North America, with occasional sorties into South America and Indonesia. In between and along the way, he conducts workshops, sharing the secrets of his unorthodox art with musicians, poets, and actors. On the recording front, his output currently stands at thirteen CDs, one vinyl LP, and one cassette.

It has been, then, a busy fifteen years or so, featuring exceptionally diverse activity. There's also the book of sound poetry texts and scores produced in conjunction with one of those thirteen CDs, plus a multi-media collaboration with visual artist Melle Hammer, and some exploratory beginnings in the area of electroacoustically treated voice, the direction Blonk is headed in next. No poetry as it's usually thought of, though: Blonk belongs to that breed of sound poet sprung from an artistic matrix other than the literary.

A self-taught musician, Blonk studied sax on his own during his twenties, and also took formal studies in musicology for a few years, until, he reports, "the musicology curriculum got much too historical-descriptive and theoretical in a non-productive way, so I quit." By then — around 1983, at the age of thirty — he was already seriously exploring jazz, and finding his way into sound poetry. He had saturated himself with the '60s free jazz of Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and the rest, and was working on the vocabulary of bebop, playing both standard repertoire and his own compositions. A taste of his writing from that period can be heard in the opening tune, "Vreemd Lied" ("Strange Song"), on the 1992 disc *Splinks*, by the septet of that name (*Splinks* grew from an initial quartet to its current thirteen-piece size). The piece not only reveals a firm grasp of bebop, but also pushes into the cool realm, and treads onto the territory of contemporary art song, as well.

In tandem with his musical pursuits, Blonk had been working up his own versions of classic sound poetry texts by Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters, in both of which cases improvisational elements were per force entailed: Ball left us only

his phonetic texts, which he'd performed but not recorded; and Schwitters' score for his *Ursonate* (a forty-minute nonsemantic exploration of phonetic soundings in the sonata form) leaves much of the interpretive details to the discretion of the performer — or indiscretion, which is how some viewed the liberties that Blonk subsequently took in staging the piece. Sound poetry purists, and many who'd never heard of sound poetry, took exception to the costume and prop he employed, a provocative mix of politically charged — and politically ambiguous — signals to the European psyche, featuring a militaristic red jacket and black armband, and a red flag on a black pole. This fascist-socialist mélange, coupled with a histrionic performance of the non-significative text, fre-

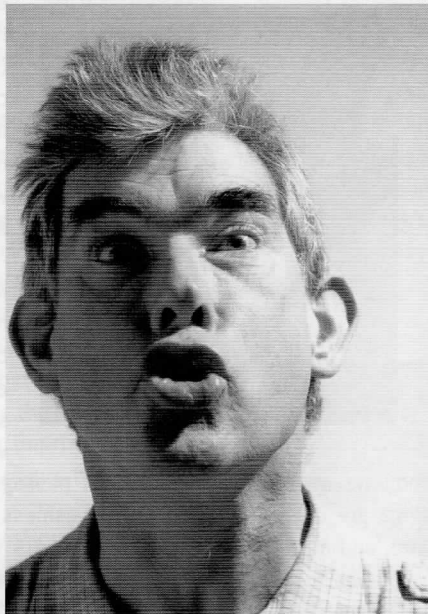


PHOTO: ARTHUR NIEUWENHUIS (1998)

quently led to precipitate departures by some audience members, plus howls, cat-calls, and projectiles from others.

Blonk has since dispensed with the costume and staging, but still interprets texts by Schwitters, Ball, and others. It was back in 1989 that he did a concert at Amsterdam's Bimhuis in a trio comprising himself, bassist Pieter Meurs, and saxophonist Bart van der Putten, working exclusively with Ball's texts (and taking its ad hoc name, *Baba-Oemf*, from a phrase in a Ball sound poem). A CD of the concert (*Hugo Ball: Six Sound Poems*), released in 1998, documents the trio's settings of and improvisations on the Ball material, which

serves as a rhythmic and motivic base for some accomplished free playing, featuring finely attuned interaction and collective invention, along with evidently pre-arranged passages of rhythmic unison and points of transition.

The version of "Karawane" on the *Hugo Ball* CD contains no trace of the "style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches" (i.e., Gregorian chant) that Ball recounts lapsing into in his own reading of the poem. Blonk's omission of this effect, whether consciously intended or not, just might have personal relevance. As remote as Gregorian chant may be from Calvinist hymns, it could possibly still have been enough of an associative turn-off for Blonk, whose hatred of the vocal rituals that pervaded his strict Calvinist upbringing extended to singing in general. "I always tried to get away with not singing along with the psalms and hymns in the church, and the house meetings around the harmonium, and subsequently with all the singing there was in high school and on whatever social occasions."

So potent was the negative religious conditioning, that it even figured in Blonk's choice of instrument: "I started to play saxophone in 1973 because I wanted an instrument that was not in the least associated with the church music at our home." How much more so the style he attempted some years later, under the influence of free jazz, and more so still the kind of vocal expression that free jazz eventually led him to. For it was while Blonk was listening to what he calls "a savage Archie Shepp-Roswell Rudd duet" on his record-player in 1984 that he succumbed to an impulse to join in vocally, getting so caught up in his improvising that he failed to notice when the record was over. The effect of this experience on him was galvanic and transformative. Gone was the frustration he'd been experiencing in aspiring to free jazz proficiency. "I never managed to play this music convincingly on the horn," says Blonk. "It was always like there was a wall, a barrier between what I wanted to come out of the horn and what really came out. It was not until I started voice improv that this wall fell down and I felt I was onto something real, something that mattered, something that gave sense to my life."

Sense through nonsense (in the best sense). Once the wall was down, Blonk's new-found improvisatory freedom soon led to his composing his own sound poems. He still kept up his work on bebop, but, as he relates, "it turned out not to be quite my language, although I still like to use elements of it in my writing." A good example of such use is his "Obbele Bop 'm Pam," which he has twice recorded, once with sax-player Bart van der Putten (on Blonk's *Liederen uit de Hemel* CD), and again with the Splinks septet (on *Splinks*). A phonetic sound text, somewhat suggestive of a Dada-influenced Dizzy Gillespie, is set to a fittingly boppish accompaniment, the charted portion preceded by an opening passage of freely improvised voice and instrumental play with the rhythmic and sonic elements of the "head" (or, in this case perhaps, "tail").

Blonk's use of the term "language" in reference to matters musical is telling, for it is the pervasive sense of language, of speech, that is the one overriding attribute of his sonic orality — however much he might employ his voice as an instrument, which is the second most striking feature (the third is, perhaps, an irrepressible sense of humour, which ranges from the arch to the broad).

Blonk's obsession with speech crops up in his free improvisation (where it crops up less frequently) primarily as nonsemantic, linguistically inflected episodes of spontaneous mock-talk; though God knows, he may be spouting any number of languages without my realizing it: the guy's a polyglot, fluent in English, German, French, and Spanish, in addition to his native Dutch. (And I mean *seriously* fluent: from only an English-language perspective, I note on his bookshelves Joyce's *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*, the latter of which he tells me he has not read through, but keeps dipping into, reading a few pages out loud now and again.)

Blonk has so far released three CDs of fully free improvised material, two on his own label, Kontrans, both entitled simply *Improvisors*, and one on Buzz records, called *First Meetings*. All three recordings are of trios, each trio different both in personnel and character, and all three revealing Blonk to be a versatile collaborator, technically proficient and venturesome, with well-honed instincts, a fine sense of *le son juste*, and a strong compositional approach (he strives, he once told me, for improvisational creations that "make musical sense"). In company with bassist Jan Nijdam and saxophonist van der Putten, he draws deeply on his Dada roots, frequently articulating speech-inflected, non-significative vocables — not that there's any dearth of the more extreme sonic utterances that I like to refer to as soundsinging: non-syllabic vocables and nonvocables, multiphonics, honks, mouth percussion, and the like. His trio recording with Mats Gustafsson and Michael Zerang tends towards a jittery, spacey character, and is notable for its low dynamics and subtly worked effects, Gustafsson confining his sax to inchoate honks, understated burlings, tiny peeps, clicks, and the like, Zerang scraping and tinkling and pattering away at his percussion instruments, and Blonk keeping mainly to lip and breath effects, hardly bringing his larynx into play at all, and mostly putting very little wind behind it when he does. Much the same subtle character distinguishes *First Meetings*, with Zerang again,

and Fred Lonberg-Holm on cello, but there's a good deal more cutting loose and much more laryngeal sound from Blonk.

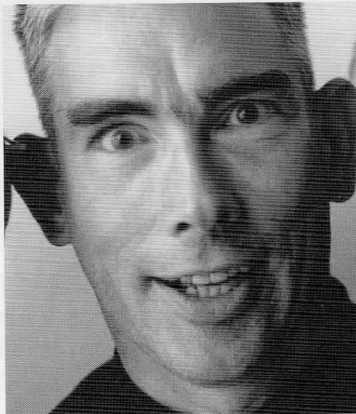
Speech and language play a more prominent role in Blonk's voice work with his two bands, BRAAXTAAL and Splinks, for both of which he writes semantic and nonsemantic lyrics — in addition, that is, to writing music for them, sharing the compositional duties in BRAAXTAAL with bandmates Theo Bodewes (percussion) and Rob Daenen (synthesizer). Lest this sound as though the bands merely provide backings for Blonk's vocals, let it be clear that much of Blonk's band work is instrumental, and until he quit the saxophone in 1995 to focus on voice, he played alto and/or tenor in both ensembles, in addition to his text work and soundsinging. The two Splinks CDs, in fact, reveal Blonk to be as versatile compositionally as he is vocally and linguistically, some pieces imparting a distinct Ellingtonian flavour through their chords, phrasing, and scoring, others bearing traces of Gil Evans, Ornette Coleman, Willem Breuker, and fusion, as well as cabaret and art song, and what might fit the category of, for lack of a more satisfactory term, new music (or what I think of as "pedigree composition").

"Cyril's Nightmare," on the double CD *Consensus*, employs, Blonk discloses, a twelve-tone row in the classic serial style; and "Hotel Vergetelheid" ("Oblivion Hotel"), on the same release, is pure chamber music with jazz inflection. BRAAXTAAL moves more into the territory of house, noise-rock, and heavy metal, though always tinged with the improv and jazz elements that remain at the core of Blonk's musical persona.

But I was speaking of the role of speech and language in Blonk's work in these groups, so let me get back to that. A few notable instances will bear out the point. The first BRAAXTAAL CD, eponymously titled, opens with a work of social satire, "Blo-blaing on No Nonsense." Blonk's voice part begins with an imperious and gruffly

incoherent passage of bluster that gradually crystallizes into a string of business buzzword clichés, until the phrase "No nonsense!" triggers a closing sequence of semantic nonsense declaimed with steadily mounting desperation. Two other tracks on BRAAXTAAL, "Deutsche Lyrik" and "Ailatilolitalia," are respectively an arrangement of German phrases and an exercise in mock Italian, while a third, "All Day Belly Rumble," is straightforward light verse. The trio's second CD, *Speechlos* (Speech Loss), is, despite its title, one of Blonk's most verbal, eight of its eleven pieces containing extensive or limited semantic content, mostly in English, but also in German, Dutch, and French. Two of my favourites are "As I Was Saying" and "Katalog der Schwersen Metalle" ("Heavy Metal Catalogue"). The first satirizes the inarticulate "well" speaker, as in "Well, I says to him, I says, I says, 'Well!' I mean, well, that's what I'm tryin' to say, I mean, well, I says, well . . ." etc.; the second progresses through a list of heavy metals, spoken calmly over soothing long tones on a synthesized organ sample, eventually interrupted by a sequence of throat-ripping nonverbal bellows, accompanied by jarring, jagged, electronic pile-driver pounding, with an abrupt return to the quiet measured tones of the original reading. Finally, one worthy example (of many) from the Splinks repertoire: the title track on the *Consensus*

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CD. This piece blends a polylinguistic chorus of terms of assent, the accord of which is belied not just by the increasing chaos of the assenting voices (“Yes!”, “Ja Wohl!”, “D’accord!”, “All right!”, etc.), but also by the musical accompaniment, which features different instruments insisting their own keys, and two rhythm sections playing in different meters. The effect is hilarious.

Hilarity is something Blonk is happy to promote, and he readily resorts to the occasional bit of mugging or hamming to inspire it. While he might on occasion carry this a bit too far (he will sometimes conclude his “Electroshock Boogie,” an exercise in inter-buccal squawks, with comic staggering that makes light of the plight of victims of psychiatric abuse), he’s proficient as well in more sophisticated modes of humour, as in his satirical swipes at business people (“Blo-blaing on No Nonsense,”), scientists (“Rational,” on *Speechlos*, and “Katalog der Schweren Metalle”), politicians (“Der Minister”), and empty-headed motor-mouths (“As I Was Saying”). Then, too, there is both the comic effect and the sheer high-spirited sense of fun in some of his nonsemantic work. One of Blonk’s Web pages, www.bajazzo.com/blonk, exploits this potential with the *Blonk Organ* (conceived by Web designer Arthur Nieuwenhuijs), a grid of fifteen facial photos of Blonk in performance, each photo responding to a pass by the cursor with a different Blonk-generated oral effect, permitting the user to create his or her own Blonk piece.

Also on the Web, at www.ubu.com, are RealAudio files of all the tracks on Blonk’s first solo CD, *Flux de Bouche*, which remains an excellent introduction to Blonk the solo artist. Both *Flux de Bouche* and *Vocalor* (the only two of his three acoustic solo CDs that are still available) offer a mix of Blonk originals and interpretations of historic works, from both the Dada and later periods. Blonk is one of the few sound poets to interpret the sound texts of others, to which enterprise he brings the same studious research, diligent discipline, and creative application that characterize all his artistic endeavours. His solo work contains the same ingredients found in his ensemble work: close scoring, improvisatory elements, exacting research, depth, wit, humour, tongue-twisting and lip-torquing acrobatics, and general sonic oral virtuosity. Also evident is his solid grounding in speech and linguistics, which is further bespoken by his use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in scoring his works (all his acoustic solo CDs include a selection of scores, several of which can also be found on his Web site www.jaapblonk.com). The IPA serves well for such pieces as “Rhotic” (on *Vocalor*), a thoroughly researched exploration of “r” sounds, but is utterly inadequate for imparting any sense of the delicate mouth-located overtones that characterize works such as “Labiore” (also on *Vocalor*) or “Mnemosyne” (on *Flux de Bouche*). In his solo work as much as in any other area of his oeuvre, Blonk maintains a secure base in speech and language while conducting expeditions to distant realms in the universe of oral utterance.

This last observation is both borne out and contradicted by Blonk’s two most recent releases, the BRAAXTAAL CD, *Dwoor Buun*, and the solo treated-voice CD, *Avershuw*. The booklet accompanying *Dwoor Buun* is basically a lyric sheet, offering the texts employed on seven of the ten selections, along with a nudge-nudge, wink-wink note to the effect that “These poems are written in Onderlands. This is the language of Onderland (Underland), a possible synonym of Nederland (Netherlands). Although

Onderlands sounds like Dutch, even native speakers of that language cannot understand it.” *Avershuw*, on the other hand, contains no discernible speech or linguistic content, real or invented. Blonk, digitally doctoring his voice, which serves as exclusive sound source for the material on the CD, proves to be, at least in this early stage of his electroacoustic experimentation, largely fascinated with the production of repetitive staccato rhythmic patternings, more reminiscent of Italian Futurist sound poetry than of the Dada strain that can be perceived in so much of his overall output. It will be interesting to track the artistic itinerary Blonk pursues in his development of computer-assisted utterance.

His geographic itinerary is more foreseeably defined, with ongoing band and solo tours in Europe and North America. During my correspondence with him in researching this essay, Blonk mentioned plans for a January 2002 trip to perform and record some of his compositions with seven Chicago musicians in an octet dubbed the Yaptette. In 1994 I was pleased to share with him his first appearance in that city, when we performed on a bill together at the Randolph Street Gallery. Since then, he’s returned regularly to Chicago, to play solo, with BRAAXTAAL, and in various improvisatory constellations, at festivals and in single billings, and, on one occasion, in an event dubbed a “Blonkfest.” Now, no one would make a case for Blonk being a jazz singer, much less a scat singer (or any kind of a singer, for that matter, except perhaps a soundsinger). And there’s not a thread of connection between Louis Armstrong’s Chicago-based precipitation of scat (or his unaffectedly multiphonic voice) and Blonk’s sonic orality. But personally, I find Blonk’s gravitation towards that city somehow appropriate, and just maybe, in some strange way, significant.

Discography

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