

# Musicology

by Silvia Bombardini



Gabber Eleganza

To those who do it well it may be natural, but it should be noted, to the benefit of whoever might wish to follow in their steps, that the job of the music archivist is by no means the easiest. The endeavour to collect and protect against the passing of time, the sounds, styles or paper trails of a scene disappearing or disappeared, or else mutating through the years as all music genres do, requires both the patience of the collector and the unyielding passion of the fan – talents often very much at odds, whatever the genre in question may be. Over the pages that follow, we'll meet with Sam Lee, whose dedication to keep folk music alive spans from his own albums to the organisation of campfire concerts and festivals with his own folk club The Nest collective, whose keenness to preserve the traditional songs of the British gypsies leads him to travel the country, recorder in hand. We'll meet punk historian Toby Mott, whose great collection of punk ephemera is four decades old, and who, although he concedes that the best of punk music has long fallen silent, still runs a travelling art fair where the DIY attitude of punk reigns supreme. We'll meet, at last, Berlin-based Alberto Guerrini, who DJs under the alias Gabber Eleganza, which is also the name of his online archive of mid-90s images and clips from the European hardcore scene. What all of them have in common, patience and passion aside, is how much of their daily life is shaped by

the music they love and look after, as well as a defiance of the music industry's obsession with the new, and the generosity it takes to share their collections with the rest of us – to keep them safe for the listening and viewing pleasure of future generations too.

## Sam Lee

Before being the director of The Nest Collective, a live events producer, song collector and a radio host, Sam Lee worked as a forager and wilderness expert, and a symbiotic relationship with nature has inspired much of his career in folk music. A Mercury Prize nominee for his 2012 debut album, 'Ground Of Its Own', Lee organises with the Nest the sorts of concerts across London and the United Kingdom's festival stages, centered not around the stardom of the few, but the community of the many, the environment which belongs to us all. An acoustic folk club dedicated to the promotion of traditional folk songs, history and lore, The Nest Collective hosts a multitude of show types throughout the year and seasons, by emerging and established artists alike, whenever possible in the woods. Lee is all about the rewilding of our ways and ears: in a time of climate emergency all the more his work and music is crucial.

**S.B.: In the digital age, music recorded anywhere in the world can be listened to in real time at its opposite end – there's a lot to be grateful for, for the accessibility that technology has allowed. Yet there's also a lot we've given up for it, and in time forgot we did. At The Nest Collective you organise outdoor concerts around the fire, performances in the forest accompanied by nightingales, and the *Unamplifire* festival where microphones are forgone and music is intimate once more. You're keeping alive ways to experience music that used to be common and no longer are: how did the idea for it come about, and how did The Nest begin, 13 years ago now?**

S.L.: You're right, I guess I sort of am eschewing modern technology in many ways, taking things back to simpler times. I don't think I went out intentionally to do that. I've grown up as a kid sitting and singing around the campfire, and they were the happiest times of my life – I guess I've always had a great appreciation for the simplicity of being out in nature and doing things in the old-fashioned way. But when I started putting together The Nest Collective, I didn't set out trying to do that. When it began it was called The Magpie Nest, and we were just organising gigs in pubs, with microphones and things like that. Then suddenly I found myself in a situation where whenever the opportunity presented itself, I wanted to do music outside, around the campfire. And it seems obvious now, but then it was challenging – you know, finding the spaces, the quiet, finding audiences that would come and dare into those places as well. But bit by bit I found that there actually was an audience for that, and musicians were really loving it. But I really did have to convince people at first. Not only convince them to go into those spaces but also to try out a different way of listening. A richer experience, a more intimate

engagement and less of a separation between the artist and the listener. So The Nest evolved, and as I brought more people into it it has expanded, it's grown into a way of challenging people into a new relationship with music. But it must be said that The Nest Collective is also a response to the issues we're having in London and elsewhere, where we're losing music venues and spaces are being taken over by corporate organisations that aren't interested in atmosphere, but rather in the most streamlined ways to get people in and sell them beers, that sort of thing. It's a protest against that too.

**S.B.: The medium of all songs is time, and all of them are destined to begin and end. Yet none of them is intended to never be listened to again – with The Song Collector Collective, you work to ensure ancient and rare folk songs are recorded, preserved, and protected. How does the process to go out and find them work, and who are the people who've kept them safe for so long?**

S.L.: The work of the song collectors and myself is about the desperate race for time in this age of extinction that we're in, to document and conserve the incredible oral material that is still extant amongst mostly the English gypsies, Irish travellers and Scottish travellers who are native indigenous people here in the United Kingdom. These are unique communities who have been nomadic throughout their existence, have had a very different relationship to the land and society compared to ours, and who by nature of an itinerant way of living and travelling, which is now illegal and banned, were able to keep going an incredible oral culture – and their songs have been central to that. These are English-language, British traditional songs, sung with such elegance and vibrancy and passion, that I've had to go to try and rescue them before the last elders of those community pass away. We really will see them be dead and gone within the next 6 to 8 years I reckon. And that will be the end of thousands of years of oral culture, literally thousands of years – although the songs aren't always that old, some of them are. Only the elders know them. There are a few songs that are being learned by the young, but just one or two, often sung with an American accent. So hearing them in their old styles and through the relationship the elders have with these songs, that tell the stories of their families and people around them, through the depth of their heartfelt sorrow and belief in them, is astounding. By losing the people not only do we lose the songs, but we lose a relationship with music that is being replaced so fast by a sort of commercial understanding of what songs are about, popularity and style and grandeur, advancing one's own social media following. What I hear in these singers instead is a relationship to the songs that is so much about the community and places where the songs have come from, and the stories of the ancestors. For me being a song collector is a way to cling on, and try to absorb as much as I can from these wise characters, full of richness, whom the music inhabits as much as they inhabit the music in a way that you very rarely get to see anywhere else. And for me that's true singing – it has truth in it and it's utterly captivating.

**S.B.: Folk music has undergone something of a renaissance on the cultural stage in recent years, more widely heard and appreciated now than it had been in a long time. Its popularity has grown, it seems, hand in hand with climate change awareness and a newfound concern for the loss of nature. How do both these things tie together for you, and what is the social role of folk music now, to champion a more responsible behaviour – in tune with the planet?**

S.L.: You're right to draw that parallel. Folk music, back in its heyday in the 1950s and 60s was definitely protest music, taken up as a weapon in the campaign for social change and the protection of the planet. I wish this was a stronger theme within folk music today. I feel that a lot of folk music today is about prettiness, and has been rather divorced from campaigning. Marches and campaigns today are very devoid of the folk song and the folk singing, and I'm working very hard as part of a movement to try and bring folk music back to initiatives such as Extinction Rebellion. I also run The Fire Choir, which is a protest choir. So the role of folk music now is fractured, it means many different things to many different people. To some it's just nostalgia and re-enactment, just a community thing which is still really important, but I feel that there's a brightness in the fire that really needs looking after – to make sure that folk music is there as a representation of heritage, but also of independence from the corporations and the powers that want us to give them their money. The wonderful thing about folk music is that everybody owns it, it belongs to the commons. And I think that's a really powerful thing we mustn't ever forget. We've got to always remember its origins and heart.

**S.B.: I've read that you've got a new album coming up soon, your fourth, a couple of years in the making. What can we expect?**

S.L.: Yes, I do have an album coming up – at the end of January, 2020. It's a very personal album for me, that delves deep into the connection we have with nature. It speaks of the heart, the hearth, and the Earth, those three qualities sharing the same lettering in English. It's about our relationship to a diminishing planet and our responsibility to tune into ourselves and our purpose. And it's an album that I've very much written of from folk songs, reappropriating and reappraising them for this day and age, and exploring the sacredness within them that I also think needs to be acknowledged. The British folk songs are our devotional songs, and we need to embrace the spiritual element in them, because I think that losing our spiritual connection to the land and the world around us is part of the reason why we're losing our responsibility toward it, and our trust and our love of it. So this is an album about restoring that love at the heart of those songs back into us as human beings.

**Alberto Guerrini**

**A subgenre of hardcore techno, louder, harder, and more aggressive than most, it hasn't been long since gabber spread from the twin hubs of Rotterdam and Milan across Europe on shrieking sound waves. But still long enough for Gabber Eleganza, the archive project of Berlin-based artist and DJ Alberto Guerrini, to tug at the heartstrings of those who've lived through the scene, in the early to mid-90s. An online-based collection of rave flyers, grainy clips and photos of kids dancing in tracksuits with their heads shaved, the project, which started in 2011, could serve as a moodboard for what many fashion designers are doing with menswear today. In the spring, Guerrini started a sister platform, Never Sleep, with which he will curate records, publications and apparel. His first book, *Hardcore Soul*, is already sold out.**

**S.B.: The European hardcore and gabber scenes have always been stylish, brand-conscious music subcultures. Yet browsing from your archive through to some most recent fashion shows, it's clear that that the interest is now reciprocated. They seem almost like a tribute – but I wonder if you ever feel like the culture has been appropriated instead, when wealthy kids in Vetements now look just like the working-class ravers of yore?**

A.G.: The discussion around cultural appropriation is tricky most of the time in the fashion industry, because if someone uses it to criticize a fashion label they will reply with the excuse that 'it's a tribute' or 'it's ironic'. But this system is a beast, usually uncaring for ethic values and respect for the culture or work of others. Of course there is subcultural appropriation, this is not a new thing at all. Sometime it's stupid and cheesy, other times I'm pretty sure that there are a few designers out there who pay due respect to the scene from which they draw.

**S.B.: It's also true that over the years since you started the Gabber Eleganza archive project in 2011, a renewed interest not only in the looks but the in the sounds of hardcore too has kept growing. How does hardcore music today differ from the hardcore music of its early years?**

A.G.: I like it best when a producer or a music artist can merge nostalgia with a future scope. We've had to sacrifice the naive attitude of original hardcore in exchange for more rules, but now there's more concept and storytelling within the music too. New technological equipment also helps the producers to create a new spectre of sounds.

**S.B.: The gabber scene, not unlike other subcultures, did not enjoy the best of reputations at first. What's a wrong idea that some might still have about the gabber subculture, that you would like to set straight?**

A.G.: All the suburban working-class subcultures are always targeted by the media system. They take the black sheep and use it to generalize an entire scene. The stigmas related to gabber were the classic ones: drugs, bad behaviour, hooliganism. But all European subcultures mostly share the same stigmas and clichés. I've always

hated the prejudice according to which gabbers were with far-right movements and fascism – it ruined the reputation of a very friendly scene just because of few individuals.

**S.B.: The first release of the Never Sleep label you've started this summer is the *Hardcore Soul* book you'd been working on together with photographer Ewen Spencer, on two seemingly disparate music genres and styles. What sorts of similarities have you found, between the hardcore scene and that of the British weekenders, young fans of the Northern Soul?**

A.G.: *Hardcore Soul* explores the analogies between two worlds, appearing as they do entirely at odds with one another – yet similar in their devotion to the scene, their rhythmic frenzy and euphoria and sweaty escapism.

### **Toby Mott**

Some 40 years ago in Pimlico, London, a teenage Toby Mott grows up together with punk. That's when his archive begins – of flyers, posters and zines, ephemera picked up at gigs and record shops before the time when the historical importance of punk became clear to the rest of the nation and the world at large as well. The Mott Collection is now among the finest of its kind, routinely exhibited around the globe. And although Mott himself no longer looks like a punk now, the spirit of the music still imbues what he does today. In particular, his Cultural Traffic art fair, which is free to enter, cheap to exhibit at, and sells affordable art to its many visitors in London, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Detroit.

**S.B.: As a music genre, the heyday of punk it's gone – and you've said you're not interested in the kind of nostalgia that claims otherwise, or calls now for a punk revival. As an ethos and an attitude though, punk survives and inspires your work to date. In which ways is the Cultural Traffic art fair punk, and how can anything else still be today?**

T.M.: At the Cultural Traffic Arts Fair we embrace the DIY, do-it-yourself ethics of punk, meaning that we approach all projects with total commitment and the determination to see them through regardless of our skill – this is the true legacy and philosophy of punk, and the reason why it still resonates today even after the music falls silent. At our fairs you will find a broad selection of new publications and other art forms, all reflecting the spirit of punk but not necessarily the same aesthetic.

**S.B.: Punk has grown from being distrusted and discouraged by authorities into a matter of national pride, whose historical relevance can't be ignored. Back in the 70s, when you were going to your first concerts and started collecting posters and flyers, how aware were you of being part of something momentous, even if the adults around you didn't realise it? Could you ever have imagined back then, that the Mott collection would one day be exposed in museums?**

T.M.: In the late 1970s and early 80s we in the UK were still living in a post war period. The class system and the arts establishment were very much in control of all platforms of engagement. This was a system we were rebelling against and that prompted our stance – and punk was the perfect vehicle to do that, which is to say to engage with and antagonise through punk art. To us our self-made, DIY culture was of the utmost importance. With our punk clothing, our haircuts and our self-published zines we had our own world and identity. Even movements like Dada and artists like Kurt Schwitters making art out of debris, or Jean Tinguely's exploding sculptures, all shared a punk attitude. I never reflected back then that my punk culture would be recognised for its importance not too many years later, or that I would be invited to exhibit my collection in museums across the world. I value this opportunity: where some are critical about it, I see it as the chance to elevate this dynamic punk culture.

**S.B.: You're now referred to as a punk historian, and your archive includes over 1000 items from bands like the Clash, the Damned, X-Ray Spex, Sex Pistols and the Jam. What are you the proudest of, in your collection, and what are other people usually the most impressed by?**

T.M.: My collection of punk ephemera is purely paper material, from the UK. What I find most inspiring are the hundreds of flyers, fanzines, poster made by anonymous hands as punk was a great cultural liberator, freeing creativity from the hands of the few and gifting it to the many regardless of their ability, which was replaced with passion: all you needed was glue, scissors, and an attitude!

There are a few recognised artists from the era such as Jamie Reid who created work for Sex Pistols, and Linda Sterling who worked with the Buzzcocks in Manchester. I have many examples of their work in my archive and other collectors are usually fascinated with this material the most.

**S.B.: Radical music genres with the power to disrupt the status quo will be born again, and it is safe to assume that once again we will distrust them at first. But it's difficult to imagine an archive like yours for the music of the future, when all the promotion for it now lives and dies online. Has the internet killed the music collector, or are you more optimistic?**

T.M.: I'm interested in paper and its history as a medium of communication, to circulate ideas, news, propaganda – paper was instrumental in how the punk message was circulated in those pre-internet days of the 1970s. Nowadays there are people interested in data, and already it's being archived and mined for information and its cultural relevance. I find it difficult to get excited about pdfs as I appreciate the physicality of the paper artefact. But then this electronic data is free of value such as that which commercial art generates, so in a way that is punk itself.