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# **The Bredgar Band-**

an intervention into a social system -

**'Who would, in a burning building, calmly write esthetic treatises on the colour sense of crickets' W. Reich, preface to 2nd Edition.**

**In the present situation this seems an apt way of introducing my project which was developed in collaboration with the Polytechnic of North London Behavioural Sciences Division.**

## **Introduction**

*What is it for?* The main purpose seems to have been to find out about learning, particularly linking theories with people in situations. The task has enabled me to bring into conscious thought perceptions which have become understandings about a situation I had been part of before doing this project. In other words what was going on between people in the band began to make sense, and explained what happened to the band as a group during its life (1972-1974).

*Presentation:* I will present the material as follows. After looking at the background to the music and the people involved I will look at specific areas and relate them to learning theory existing in the subject. I will also try to compare the structure experienced here with alternatives, some of which have happened and some of which may one day occur. This will be incomplete in this work and is to be taken up in a later project.

*What can we do with it?* It raises many questions for me about the existing culture bands find themselves in, and how they can change their environment. It also makes pointers to anybody who overlooks at a live concert of musicians, to observe what is happening to them and between them. This I believe can help understanding of musicians and their culture by people who are not normally involved with them.

## **And now for some background**

Jazz music started in New Orleans and was a popular social activity which sprang out of communal music-making in the days of slavery. These collective activities spread through the efforts of bands and individuals such as King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong until jazz had influenced popular music with the heyday of the big bands in the thirties and forties. This is a very cursory history of a huge social event but it does explain the terrific popularity of jazz and later blues as we know it today.

So from a country blues to an urban popular music, jazz found its way to Britain by records and later radio and visits of star performers.

The influence was soon felt on the local musicians and the result was our own home grown British jazz. This then was what the content of the Bredgar band was about.

They all at one time or another, had taken up the study of learning to play a musical instrument, but more than that they had attempted to learn how to play improvised hot music - jazz. But external commercial forces dictated that playing jazz for a living

was impossible except for a very few popular figures. This is why the subjects of this study, the Bredgar Band, came to be playing for £2 each on a Monday night at Bredgar in Kent, miles away from the popular venues.

The time of this study extends from November 1972, when I joined the band on drums, until October 1974 when the band as we knew it split up to be replaced by a New Orleans style group.

The musicians in 1972, seven of them, tended to play roughly the same style, which was an older type of jazz, which we know as New Orleans style. (see record list). The composition of the band was usually trumpet, trombone, clarinet, banjo, double-bass and drums. At this time the musical standard was average and the music not very adventurous. There was however a highly positive social situation i.e. people were very friendly in the band.

By 1973 the band had become more musically adventurous. The banjo was discarded eventually. The effect of this was two-fold. It made some people in the band very pleased and others less so. This sowed the seeds of the final split of the band as described later. Although we did not realize it then, the action of change without complete commitment by the group to that decision, meant that in the end the group would split up, and be replaced by a band. With a banjo playing the sort of music we played at the start i.e. New Orleans, people came to listen to music they could easily relate to and when we tried to play more technical material the public stopped coming. This had its effect in turn of making us even more determined to persevere. We felt even more isolated and therefore more inward looking and cohesive, whilst the threat of breaking existed. But we could not bring ourselves to take the one decision which would have ensured our survival - to play music which would sell.

This is to do with why they played and I will expand on this under the heading *Motivation*.

### **Motivations of the Group**

The motivations of the group I define as the reasons the individuals came along and played together. These I looked at from the individual approach and the following information emerges.

The main motivation was different for different people. In two cases it was for social reasons that they turned up each week to play. For the others in the band it was to practise their skill and extend it. There were also some other motivations I felt were around but of which I could not specifically quote examples. The feeling people got and transmitted when the music was going well, was difficult to measure, but was very powerful to experience.

The enjoyment of the music and people's mutual appreciation more than compensated for the lack of financial reward it seemed. This was so pronounced that even though the management kept the money collected for the band from the audience there was never one objection from the musicians to this practice. This clearly underlines the economic vulnerability of musicians who enjoy their work but cannot play union jobs because of local economic conditions. The situation is compounded by the acceptance of this state of affairs, and it will take a lot of changing. Perhaps it is better to recognise the music as a non-commercial activity and to set up sessions on that basis.

You can pay the piper and call the tune but don't be surprised if he chokes on it sometimes. (see 'Bird Lives', reading List).

### **A Monday Session at Bredgar**

The following is an account of events from a typical evening session at the Sun Inn, Bredgar, describing some of my reactions and feelings and how I imagined others felt.

During the day I had telephoned the trombonist, Pete, to check everything was OK for the session. Sometimes we had to ring around at the last moment to fix up musicians to do the gig; nor every player was up to playing this kind of free style music, so sometimes we had to do without a particular instrument.

We would leave London at 7.00 p.m. to drive down to Kent, with the gear in the back of the car. Traffic getting easier as we get out of town. During the drive we talk, mainly about the music, and the characters we know and what they are up to at the moment. The preliminaries to a session, like these kinds of chats, determine to a certain extent my own state of mind, and help me to gain access to my store of energy and ideas after a day at work. This is an important process to me. It seems almost like a ritual now and topics have included 'how we started to learn to play'. This is an interesting way of including new members to the group and to also find out sometimes of their competence and previous experience.

We arrive at the Sun Inn, Bredgar, Kent, at 8.00 p.m. Now I have to set up the drums and tune them, which takes usually a quarter of an hour, and because of this I do not get a chance to chat with the rest of the band. This has consequences which I will go into under the *Socio-Technology* heading elsewhere.

This particular evening we have guest musicians in, who have already been absorbed to an extent because of the social interactions that have already happened (see above). By talking together, before the session we have already gone some way to understanding each other and whether we are going to work well together.

The first collective decision of the evening is 'What shall we kick off with'. Again the socio-technological aspects come in here, because the choice of material (tunes we can play) is largely decided by the horn players and the piano. The power lies mainly between these two points at this stage of the evening. But it will shift later, as I shall explain.

Once a tune is sorted out as being acceptable both in key signature and pitch the band begins, on a signal, the tapping of the trumpet player's boot. This is called 'counting in'. The tune flourishes and fades, each player doing his bit in the 'ensemble' that is collectively and in his solo. As the night wears on the players begin 'to get their lip in' - that is, to reach their best playing level, gaining more and more confidence as they progress. By the time we take the interval, power has shifted to who is playing the most original music and although people are still going through the process of consulting before calling a tune, it is now mostly he who has played best who has most influence. This is where I feel I am sometimes leading from behind the band, in terms of musical dynamics. The drums can often do this, bringing 'light and shade' into the music by different levels of volume, and also be the use of 'cues' into solos or ensemble passages.

The interval itself is interesting as a process. People, it seems to me, haven't week after week gone over to chat with the same subgroup out of the band. They tend to congregate with those people they've already had some social contact with during the playing activities, or with friends out in the crowd. I think this reflects the way the band is held together and has implications on how the band split up. The second session starts about half an hour later. Now, on a good night, the band rolls along with a powerful momentum, going from a 'fast' to a slow blues, to a medium tempo swinger.

The last number is finally played, usually a rabble rouser, like the 'Saints' or 'Tiger Rag'. Everybody piles in like there was no tomorrow. Mistakes are tolerated and the thing is often played for laughs. This contradiction of playing for laughs, after an evening of good thoughtful music has its effect on some musicians who can get confused in handling their conflicting feelings in this situation. This is very common amongst musicians who play to live and is one of the pressures which can lead to the occupational diseases; alcoholism, drugs, etc.

At the end of the playing we congregate for the post mortem. Interestingly, in this band the after session talk is usually superlative if we discuss the session at all. Usually topics range well away from the playing that evening. The process of contact through talking after collective activity in music seems pretty important to me and reminds me of the catholic process in counselling/praxis. It reminds me of a natural unconscious process which is similar and which I've seen in families. That is, the parent and the child coming in from school. The parent usually Mum, will say 'How did you get on at school today?' This gives the child the opportunity to express the memories and aftermaths of all the feelings he has stored up during the day, and to discharge them. I believe there is a similarity in the two processes.

Finally the time comes to pack up the gear and get paid. This is done by the bass player, who has a regular standing joke. He always says 'God bless me' as he gives out the money. No-one knows why he says this, and no-one ever challenges him to find out. But at this time decisions are taken as to who is coming to play next week. Because we don't rehearse or see each other between Monday's, business has to be done now. And when people are tired, after a long session, they can sometimes forget what has been decided. This sometimes happened which meant that the band was without a particular instrument the following week. I think communications were sometimes crossed or cut between us.

Perhaps I should state here that one dynamic, between the manager of the public house and the band, has been affected by our times of arrival at the beginning of the evening. This I think contributed to the breakdown of the band and its dispersal. We never took the opportunity to discuss this through, not like the Choir did at Melstock, in 'Under the Greenwood Tree'. There under threat of extinction as church orchestra in the face of the dreaded 'organ', they treated for terms with the Vicar and got a six month stay of execution. I wonder whether we would have got better terms.

### **Use of the video tapes**

Each of the video tapes are of an evening's performance by the band at Bredgar.

The dynamics apparent to me in the tape spell out what was going on between people in the group. For example look at the double bass player with the beard in the corner.

To me he seems isolated, stuck in that corner. Look at the problems he has trying to communicate with other people.

The drummer too is apparently stuck against the wall, with the drums between him and other people. This puts a distance between him and the decision-making centre - the 'front-line' musicians. This means that sometimes the band begins playing without the drums.

The two tapes have a different pattern. In the first tape the band seems taut and tense, with some feelings of isolation around.

In the second tape people seem looser and are able to get into the music more easily. This may have been because they were accustomed to being filmed on video the second time.

I don't propose to list dozens of interactions as I saw them, but just to give this as a guide line to how I looked at the tapes to draw information from them. Who talked to who? for example Who came in late? How did that affect the others?

### **Socio-Systems and Socio-Technical Systems**

This means to me the way people are affected by the tools of their trade in interactions or contact with each other. A band is composed basically of blowers, pluckers and strikers. In the kind of music we played at Bredgar, you have a front-line and a rhythm section. The two make the whole sound, but they have different functions. The *front-line* play together in the ensembles at the beginning and end of each tune. In the middle they can each take turns to play a solo, of a chorus or two each. They don't follow each other in a particular order necessarily but rarely do individuals miss the chance to solo. This means they can chat with each other while they are not actually blowing.

The *rhythm section* however have to pluck and strike all the way through the tune. The sounds they make are the foundation on which the front-line ensembles and solos rest. They keep time (tempo) and play the chordal structure of the tune. They are under pressure to keep an even tempo and play correct musical chords. Therefore they find it difficult if not impossible to chat, during playing. What effect does this have? Well first it means that some people are having close contact, to making decisions, to changes of mood, to information about what's happening, and aren't. In turn this has an effect on the two groups, particularly the 'out' group. They tend to get more and more solitary as the evening wears on. There's also the effect of the equipment of the players. The drums took a quarter of an hour to set up or fold down. This means the drummer is always first there and last away. Lester Young, the 'President' of Jazz, who was one of the great innovators on tenor saxophone, gave up drums for tenor because he couldn't talk to the girls after playing a session. He got fed up with hanging around packing up all those drums, and then having to carry them home. There are examples of players having to give up, because for example, in the case of brass players their teeth gave out.

### **Alternative Systems to Bredgar**

Can we change the system? From what has been observed at Bredgar I think we can.

\*The seeds of the bands dispersal were there to see right from the beginning. Peoples commitment to come to the session, on time and to play what was required depended on their involvement in decisions and the chance to use their influence and feel it work. To put it simply we lost the job because people didn't arrive on time, didn't always play what the customers wanted and were unwilling and unable to change. We can ensure that the pressures about what we play are removed by choosing either to play for nothing; (and even then the public may not enjoy it) or choose very carefully where we play and who we play for (apart from ourselves).

We can also change the way decisions are taken. Instead of the power lying with the front line, or even one instrument (often the trumpet) we can try to take decisions collectively. This means that communications have to be improved from the existing situation where people are often in the dark about what's going on. The 'circle' grouping can solve both these problems. If we sit or stand in a circle we have eye contact. We are immediately aware if somebody has not attended what is going on. Also we can share power by going around the circle individual by individual to choose what we will play next for example. The very kind of choices people make could give insight into where they are in terms of commitment to what the group is doing, and where they want the going to be musically.

I should add here that the system used at Bredgar was more free and open to allow individual's space to play than most commercial bands are wanted to, with the exception of one or two of the more recent jazz/avant garde/rock fusions.

*\* See also the film 'Help' by Richard Lester and the Beatles.*

#### *People in the Bredgar Band*

*Humph. double bass player, fire alarm fitter by day*

*Rosie pianist, teacher by day*

*Jake trumpet, car salesman by day*

*Pete trombonist, plumber by day*

*Bert drums, civil employee by day*

*Ray tenor sax, salesman by day*

*Alan clarinet, piano, Railway employee.*

#### *Reading List*

*Interpersonal Dynamics*

*Hear me Talking to You*

*Bird Lives - Ross Russell*

*The Tavistock Institute Coal Mining Studies (Eric Frist)*

*The Sexual Revolution: Wilhelm Reich*

*Organisational Psychology: Schein*

*Under the Greenwood Tree: Edmund Wilson*

*Organisational Behavior and Administration, Lawrence and Seiler.*

## *Films*

*Newport Jazz Festival - 1956*  
*Jammin the Blues - CBC*  
*Help - Richard Lester.*

## *Records*

*For a good example of New Orleans style listen to any Jell Roll Morton or early Louis Armstrong.*  
*For examples of good modern mainstream any Ellington or Basie record will demonstrate how far the music developed technically and in other ways.*

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## **Voluntary Community Action and Television - Conference Feb. 26-27 1976.**

The potential of television on community development could be far reaching and the conference was very exciting and stimulating. It seemed to me particularly appropriate at it seems to indicate a way in which voluntary action can be expanded without any or very much extra need for cash.

We saw four actual programmes (TV tapes) from Granada, Yorkshire, Thames and Border TV. They are all very different, from Thames' 3-minute appeal to Yorkshire's magazine-type 25 minute documentary. But they all had one thing in common: far too little exploratory work, that is discussions with the community and voluntary organisations involved either before or after. This was agreed by everyone at the conference. More work needs to go into planning and likely programme response and what to do with it.

In Holland where a similar scheme has been operating for some years, some six months are allowed for planning and making sure the organisation is able to cope with the results. Where no such organisation may exist in a particular locality, it may have to be created, and this is where community development may be undertaken by the pressure from the programmes.

In Ealing the BBC programme on literacy seems to have produced some 400 new volunteers to help teach reading and writing but only some 150 people wanting to be taught. There are some plans afoot of what to do with the other 250 but so far they have not been involved to any extent and volunteers won't wait for weeks or months.

And that is really the heart of the matter, matching supply and demand. On several occasions speakers singled out voluntary organisations as not coming up to scratch and making proper use of the volunteers offered to them. But there is no use blaming such organisations when they have not been involved from the beginning of the planning stage of such programmes.