

Incontro con JOHN PIETARO
di Erika Dagnino



ED: John Pietaro is a New York activist musician. He plays vibraphone, xylophone, drumkit, frame drums, hand drums, percussion, voice. He has performed with artists including Alan Ginsberg, Karl Berger, Fred Ho, Arturo O’Farril, Salim Washington, John Zorn, Pete Seeger, Amina Baraka, Blaise Siwula, Ras Moshe, Cheryl Pyle, Elodie Lauten, Carsten Radke, Rudresh Mahanthapa, and many more. Pietaro directs the ensembles **RADIO NOIR** (<http://www.reverbnation.com/radionoir>), **THE DISSIDENT ARTS ORCHESTRA**, and **THE RED MICROPHONE**, a quartet of revolutionary musicians. He also performs with **KARL BERGERS IMPROVISERS ORCHESTRA** and free-lances in NYC. He is the founder of **THE DISSIDENT ARTS FESTIVAL** and has spoken on arts activism at Left Forum and other venues. Pietaro writes for *Z Magazine* and many other progressive journals and wrote a chapter for the Harvey Pekar/Paul Buhle book *SDS: A GRAPHIC HISTORY* (2007 Hill and Wang). He is currently writing an extensive history of protest arts and a book about the No Wave movement, and completed a volume of contemporary proletarian fiction.

Here we talk with Pietaro about what the Dissident Arts Festival represents in a collective situation. We look at this in the current struggle for freedom of the individual even within the goal of building a network of progressive forces. There is the need to value one’s individual sensibility and reality and dreams (that of course are part of reality) in a world that seems to be going downward – and wants to keep to the people in the lowest common denominator , where the individual seems to be nonexistent and sometimes the society seems to become a system to put each one at a standard level to make the characteristic of each person banal in the name of homologation.

JP: I first conceived of the idea for the Dissident Arts Festival in 2006, after enduring years of the Bush presidency and dealing with the fallout of his right-wing policies. By day I work as a labor organizer, so I saw the effects of this conservative, anti-worker administration close-up. The National Labor Relations Board had been decimated by this regime and he and other conservatives were doing their best to defame unions whenever possible. The wealthy were getting tax breaks as the middle- and working-class were being cast aside. Bush was an incompetent, a failed businessman who openly befriended the kings of corporate America—the very force that had been greedily built up by the right-wing and were especially supported in those Bush years. We were engaged in an unlawful war, citizens were being spied on, social service programs were being slashed, women’s rights were being threatened, the poor were vilified and there was a terrible divisiveness throughout the country. As an artist of conscience as well as a Leftist, I recognized the need to speak up through radical creativity. I reached out to a variety of musicians as well as poets and guest speakers to create that first Festival. At the time many topical singers were involved, invoking the great body of work of the folk-protest movement, but jazz musicians were also present as were rock balladeers. Over the years the scope of the Festival has gone increasingly avant garde and while there were still some sing-songwriters involved this year, most of the artists

were those who hold a presence in the free jazz and new music world. The 2012 Festival was truly the best one yet and it occurred in two venues, one in Greenwich Village and one in Brooklyn. Our reach grows further and the goal is to unify more and more artists—as well as audience members—under a collective umbrella of radical music.

ED: Here it can be interesting to connect and recall one of the latest interviews, in 1975, of the Italian intellectual, writer and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini who talked about his film taken from the Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, but set during the Republic of Salò in 1944-1945 (the readers can watch the documentary film 'Pasolini Prossimo Nostro' – Director : G. Bertolucci; Interviews: Gideon Bachmann – at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sGwcEThM00&feature=related> , with English subtitles). In some points of the interview the Italian filmmaker declared that “today's ideal is consumerism” – there he was talking about Italy in particular – “there is an enormous group extending from Milano to Bologna, it includes Rome and spreads to the South. It is an homologating civilization that make everything the same. So it is clear that the barriers fall that small group disband....a consumer ideology , you don't...instead of having a flag, the clothes they wear are their flag. Some of the means and some of the external phenomenal have changed but in practice, it is a depauperation of individuality which is disguised through its valorization. [...] ‘Permissive’ societies permit a few things, and only those things can be done.[..] Today 1975 it is a power that manipulates the bodies in a horrible way, it has nothing to envy to of Himmler's or Hitler's manipulation. It manipulates them , transforming their conscience, in the worst way, establishing new values which are alienating and false. The values of consumerism, which accomplish what Marx called genocide of the living, real, previous cultures.[..] ‘I lower my head in the name of God’ is already a great phrase. While now , the consumer does not even know he lowers his head, to the contrary he stupidly believes he has not lowered it and that he has won his rights.[..]”.

Can you tell us some thoughts about these themes ?

JP: Sadly, it is often the goal of any government to secure some kind of control over its citizenry. Sometimes this is done by brute, oppressive force as in fascism. Other times it is done via a bastardization of a unifying philosophy: Stalin manipulated Marxism for his own sense of glory and gain. In the USA we have seen a homogenization of the populace at various points and through various means. The dictates of the fashion industry are a seemingly benign arm of conformism but how the fashion mogul would love to have everyone in their clothing! Advertising pushes us, pulls us and can become a background drone that can be inescapable. Here in the very bowels of capitalism, it is easy to recognize the power of the wealthiest corporate leaders and their sway on the public. Sometimes we are unable to purchase products the industry machine has forcibly made unavailable, sometimes we are tricked into making the purchase the corporate powers guide us to. These factors can and do lead to a rather faceless population, one devoid of a real sense of self and a thorough course of development. But even here in a nation with an intact Bill of Rights we have seen points where the manipulation, the coercion of a power goes much further. Usually those times have been in the shadow of an outside threat that a government can opportunistically magnify in order to frighten people into a willing homogenization. The best example in the USA would have to be in the late 1940s – ‘50s Red Scare—which actually lasted into the 1970s and was actually reinvented by Ronald Reagan's Administration in the 1980s. But in those high years of the Cold War, American citizens were investigated by agents of the government, blacklisted, terrorized and humiliated. It was an age of fear and conformity and false patriotism (which begat nationalism and xenophobia) under the guise of national security. The House UnAmerican Activities Committee and the Senate Sub-Committee on UnAmerican Activities (where McCarthy became the rising star) as well as smaller, local governmental committees, tried artists, intellectuals, teachers , municipal employees and union leaders in public hearings in order to break their organizations and means of communication. This was the boldest example of in American history one could think of and the tactics of these bodies was dangerously close to the methods of the Nazis.

ED: To keep here, for these thoughts we are talking about, the line of his declarations, “[..]I think that no artist in any society is free. Being crushed by the normality and by the mediocrity of any society in which he lives, the artist is a living contestation. He always represents the contrary of that idea that every man in every society

has of himself. In my opinion, a minimum, perhaps immeasurable, margin of freedom is always there. I can't say to what point this is, or is not freedom. But certainly, something that escapes the mathematical logic of mass culture, for the time being. [...]"

JP: Well, Bertolt Brecht also said that the artist is the ultimate whore. We sell off pieces of ourselves in order to eat and we almost always compromise our values in doing so. And John Reed argued that without dissent, there can be no radical democratic movement. We as artists get to speak out in a manner that others cannot. Even musicians who dedicate their career to commercial music, poets who write greeting cards for a living, visual artists who spend their days painting still-lives to be hung in hotel rooms, we cannot lose the inner artist, the force within us that has allowed us to create in the first place. Like many, I have a day job but the music is in my head at all times and every night I can go home and play music, perform for the public, compose, go to jam sessions. This is something bigger than the individual yet it is purely of the individual as a means of expression. How does the rest of the world do it? How can they go home from their jobs and watch the ball game on TV, drink a beer and go to bed? The freedom is within us and we must constantly embrace it so that our art can be whole, so that we can produce an inspired kind of creativity that can enlighten others.

ED: Recently Pietaro has been working on a new project with local professional musicians in NYC and also from other countries. Can you talk us about the name 'Radical Arts Front' and what a collective like 'Radical Arts Front' wants to be?

JP : Just to clarify, a front in Left politics is not really with reference to a war zone: think of the United Front, the gathering of Left activists in the early 30s all in opposition to fascism. This collective allowed them to tear down the walls that separated communists, socialists, Trotskyists. Later it expanded to the Popular Front which included social democrats and liberals too. My idea for the collective is just that—a gathering of experimental, free jazz, new music, avant garde musicians who have strong convictions about a people's movement, about equality, peace, workers' rights, ecology and other progressive issues. Yes, many of us will be socialists in general, some Marxists, some engaged in a variety of Left parties and organizations—but others will be more general activists who have varying degrees of progressive thinking. This is why we are standing as a united front, albeit one united as much by our drive toward an advanced art as advanced socio-political philosophy. The October Jazz Revolution (October 20, 2012), a concert featuring some of the most revolutionary musicians in New York now, will be the first official event under the banner of the collective. And then one week later, there is a performance of the Dissident Arts Orchestra, playing a live improvised score for the German Expressionist film 'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari'.

I am not building a collective that will necessarily engage in meetings or require dues of any kind, it will serve as a resource for each musician involved. A collective such as this would enable us to seek opportunities, to have a list of musicians from which to draw from for gigs, quick access to referrals for gigs that may come up (especially if they are directly tied into social justice movements), and more than anything else, a banner under which we might be able to work, a brand which will help with public relations and outreach. My plan, if we have enough interest, is to seek out not-for-profit status and use it to seek out grants for concerts under this banner—because the goal for me has always been to be able to pay musicians for events I organize. This will not only inspire more participation but growth of the entire concept of an artist-driven organization which reaches into issues beyond art's sake. The big difference between what I am seeking to build and earlier protest music organizations is that those (such as People's Songs) were usually comprised of folksingers. This collective will focus only on experimental, free jazz, new music performers/improvisers/composers who hold Left philosophies and engage in activism of any degree. Some may seek only a more defined kind of revolutionary activism, others may not wish to be associated with any kind of radical organization and most will fit somewhere in between. Whichever path the collective's members choose, it would be great to be able to engage in this together and of course in concert with existing Left artists organizations such as Scientific Soul Sessions, Occupy Music and the like. As musicians of conscience, we all have a lot to consider.

Ultimately I would love to see this collective become a means to make funding available for a series of events that seek to bridge progressive and radical politics to forward-looking music. If you see yourself as an activist in any way, particularly as it applies to your music, do you also see the strength in a unified action? Events

such as my Dissident Arts Festival need to grow, but I would like this umbrella to expand and help to produce a wide variety of concerts. A familiar banner over many of our events can allow us to attract more attention and increase not only our audience as well as our radical message. The politics are not bound by a particular school or philosophy, but suffice to say that the outlook is Left: ranging from outright revolutionary to general progressive and in every case, an organization to celebrate individual expression as well as a collective sensibility. For more information please visit my website www.DissidentArts.com