



AMBASSADOR FROM THE FOURTH WORLD

JON HASSELL REVEALS THE FASCINATING MUSICAL HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY BEHIND HIS LATEST RELEASE.

By Geary Yelton

The first time I heard trumpeter Jon Hassell's music, I thought, "That isn't a trumpet. I don't know what it is, but I know what a trumpet sounds like and that's not even close." The year was 1980, and the album was *Fourth World, Volume 1: Possible Musics* (EG Records), a groundbreaking record that marked the beginning of Hassell's long association with producer Brian Eno. *Possible Musics* changed the future direction of progressive pop music, influencing everything from Peter Gabriel's *Security* to David Byrne and Eno's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which, in turn, influenced everyone from Paul Simon to Hank Shocklee, Public Enemy's producer. Years later, *TV Guide* named Hassell's sample-laden theme for the television series *The Practice* one of the "50 All-Time Favorite TV Themes."

Like fellow trumpeter Miles Davis, Hassell is a unique talent, a visionary innovator in the first degree. His ever-evolving musical style consistently defies categorization, which has no doubt made the road to widespread recognition virtually impossible, especially in the United States. Yet his reputation with adventurous musicians is immense, as is the debt of gratitude many feel toward his contributions to modern music.

After receiving a master's degree in orchestral trumpet from Eastman School of Music in New York, Hassell got a grant to study electronic music in Germany with Karlheinz Stockhausen. When he returned to the U.S., he attended State University of New York at Buffalo, where he played on Terry Riley's seminal recording of *In C* (1968) for Columbia Records' *Music in Our Time* series. He studied raga with visiting Indian vocal master Pandit Pran Nath, who had a tremendous and lasting influence on Hassell's phrasing, his playing technique and his "diagonal, shape-making" approach to melody, harmony and rhythm.

Though perennially popular on the European stage, Memphis-born Hassell recently completed his first U.S. tour in nearly 20 years. I caught up with him in Knoxville, Tenn., where he performed at Big Ears 2009, a three-day music festival also featuring Philip Glass and many other extraordinary musicians. His concert was absolutely mesmerizing, with the audience silently transfixed for the duration of the performance. During our conversation the next morning, Hassell was accompanied by Peter Freeman, who has not only been his bassist, occasional co-producer and technical right-hand man for nearly 20 years, but has

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also written for *EM* on numerous occasions.

You're known for creating new musical forms, but everyone has a hard time categorizing your music. How would you describe your new album for the ECM label, *Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street* (2009)?

Hassell: I can't describe it. It's not classical, it's not jazz. The word "avant garde" signals thorny, difficult, something you have to take like a bitter medicine of some kind. I could answer your question, and say, "Well, it's Fourth World." Then you'd have to ask, "What's Fourth World?"

That's a good question.

Hassell: It came from knowing that you've got to have some little knife, a quick logo that cuts through, to give journalists something that they can say about [my music].

And you've been using that description for decades now.

Hassell: Yes, and it means a combination of

third-world, traditional, spiritual and first-world technology—hopefully, a blend that's respectful of the third-world sources it came from.

What can you tell us about your use of live sampling onstage?

Hassell: It goes back to *Possible Musics*, the record I did in 1980. If anyone happens to be doing their doctoral thesis on the origin of live sampling, I'd like to know whether anything ever predated what we did there. Michael Brook was playing guitar then, but he was also mixing live, and we had the Lexicon Prime Time.

That was what you were using to sample?

Hassell: Yeah. He would snag some trumpet phrases and things like that.

Freeman: [We now have] probably the two premier live sampling guys in the world, [Jan Bang and Dino J.A. Deane]. Dino is a bit older; he was a pioneer of that. He was on some of Jon's earlier recordings from the '80s.

What do they use for onstage sampling now?

Freeman: Jan's got a completely hardware-based system with some older gear. He knows Ableton [Live], but he doesn't like that whole laptop-onstage thing. He has an Akai Remix 16, an old '90s DJ sampler and a sample player. He likes interacting with the buttons, and he plays the thing. There's some hard-disk capability so he can play back existing tracks, as well as effects. I think he uses a [Korg] KAOS Pad KP2, too.

What about Dino's sampler?

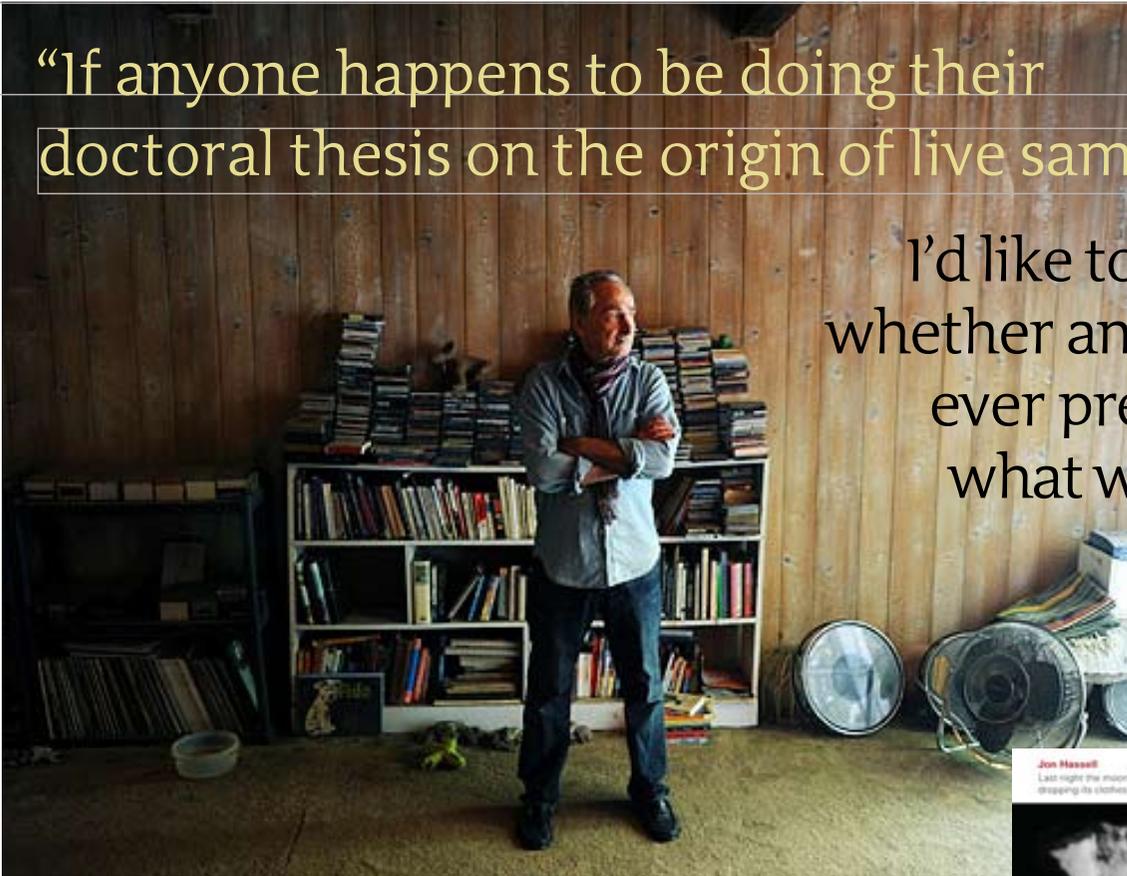
Freeman: Dino's running [STEIM] LiSa and Ableton together on a super-elaborate setup with an [M-Audio Evolution] UC-33. He's using every knob on the UC-33 to control LiSa and Ableton in an amazingly efficient way. He's the king of efficiency when it comes to equipment. He will squeeze every last ounce of functionality out of a piece of software or hardware and have the smallest, most compact, most easily transportable rig of any of us. He's really made that a priority. He takes

“Usually we speak about harmony as vertical and melody as horizontal, and in those terms I think about what I do as diagonal.”



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great pains to set things up in advance to allow himself great flexibility between playing pre-existing material for the pieces of music that we’re doing [and] integrating live sampling at the same time. He chooses to do that on a computer and he gets great results, where Jan does not use a computer onstage. There’s a lot of conceptual similarity between them, but the way they do things is very different.

Hassell: In the title track of the new album, we used a lot of samples and harmonic ambience from the title track of the previous record, *Maarifa Street* (Nyen, 2005). When we went into the studio, we said, “Let’s just make this into a super-weird, slowed-down remix of *Maarifa Street*.” So that’s the way that began. [Guitarist] Rick Cox, who works with [film composer] Thomas Newman a lot, had this string phrase that might have been something recorded at a full-string session. He and Tom still don’t know exactly where it came from.

Freeman: He had a handheld recorder, and he went out in the room with the orchestra. He just grabbed these two beautiful chords, and it had this magic thing about it. That became crucial to the fabric of the other

elements that Jon introduced [to the track “Last Night the Moon Came”].

It’s a very lovely atmosphere.

Hassell: If you look back to *Possible Musics*, the track called “Charm” is built the same way: a repeating string motif (it’s synth, but it’s strings) in the background that’s built over that. Instead of thinking like in traditional jazz, for example, in terms where it’s this chord and the next chord, it’s more like creating a kind of harmonic atmosphere, harkening to my Indian raga study, where the foreground is the musical calligraphy of the voice or the instrument, and then the rhythmic background of the tambura. Instead of the tambura, it’s a kind of harmonic atmosphere that came from the previous record, *Earthquake Island* (Tomato, 1978). And that also came from the title track. There’s this long coda, with this loop of a sustained chord, and I was playing chords on top of it. That was what we built “Charm” on.

How did *Possible Musics* come about?

Hassell: I’d done two records before that. *Vernal Equinox* (Lovely Music, 1977) was what

Brian Eno heard when he was in New York. He was living there for a couple of years, so he heard that and he came to hear a live concert that I did at The Kitchen. It was actually just me and a background, which I think was made from 10CC, like a big chord. I played what later became “Charm” over that. After the concert, [Brian] said it would be nice to do something together. And, of course, he was working with David Byrne at the time; they were doing [Talking Heads’] *Remain in Light*.

[For the *Possible Musics* sessions,] we had Naná Vasconcelos, the Brazilian percussionist, and Aiyb Deng, one of Naná’s friends he turned me on to. Brian was brilliant at the console. He brought that whole art-school sensibility to mixing, asking the question, “What would it sound like if you did this instead of that?” He just turned the whole process inside out.

Jon Hassell

Did that have much influence on the way you produce music yourself?

Hassell: Well, certainly I learned from it. Anyone who went through that art training knew what questions to ask. Now there's a lot less questioning and more just, "What's the first thought that comes into your head? Why not follow that?" Why do you have to automatically censor the first thing that comes to mind? You'll never know how effective that strategy is unless you actually practice it and wind up with some duds, wind up with some winners. There's more winners than duds by following this intuitive process rather than trying to prethink it too much.

Didn't you have some involvement with *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*?

Hassell: After *Possible Musics*, Brian came to me, and said, "David and I have been talking, and we'd like to get some basic recording equipment and go to someplace in California or in the desert and make this kind of quasi-ethnic record." What was that group that made that fake arctic thing?

The Residents' *Eskimo*?

Hassell: That was the original idea. The three of us were supposed to go and hole up and do this record together, the one that later became *Bush of Ghosts*, which later caused a great deal of friction because I was left out of the picture. They were the reigning stars at that point. Who was I? Just some unknown avant-gardist. I think we're close enough now to allow it to be put in the frame of a family squabble.

When we did *Possible Musics*, Byrne's friend [was] the editor of this French magazine called *Actuel*, which was a big, big magazine at that time in Europe, and in France in particular. It was like a combination of *Life* and *Rolling Stone* all rolled into one, very music-heavy and art-heavy. Annie Liebovitz did this picture of Brian and David and I for this big fold-out cover. (I happened to be on the inner flap of the cover.) The cover story was called "Coup de Foudre," which means "clap of lightning," as in something catching fire all of a sudden. It was about this infusion of ethnic influences into pop music, with me as a kind of *eminence gris* behind the scenes.

That's something you're well known for.

Hassell: I wouldn't mind being in front of the scene sometime. That seems to be the unpaid version of fame. That opened up a lot of doors in Europe and a lot of interest, so we started playing there a lot. I have a European booking agent, and that's pretty much where everything has been happening. They have a broader view: If we play a so-called jazz festival over there, it can have anything in it from Philip Glass to us. In a sense, it's like the Big Ears Festival here. It could very well be that little Knoxville, Tennessee, becomes a kind of a seed bed for rare plants.

Do you have a personal studio?

Hassell: No, not really. I just got conversant with [Digidesign] Pro Tools in the last year when I was working on this piece for a choral group in Norwich, England, in this beautiful cathedral. Peter will tell you the number of phone calls to him—what do I do here, what do I do there? That's my first multitrack capability.

Everything else before, it started out with two Revoxes, kind of mirroring Terry Riley's early setup. It was all about just putting sound on sound to make a sketch of something, and then getting into a studio and using that. When you say, "I'm going to make a sketch of this and I'll do the real thing later," often the sketch is the thing that has the vibe and is very difficult to achieve in another way.

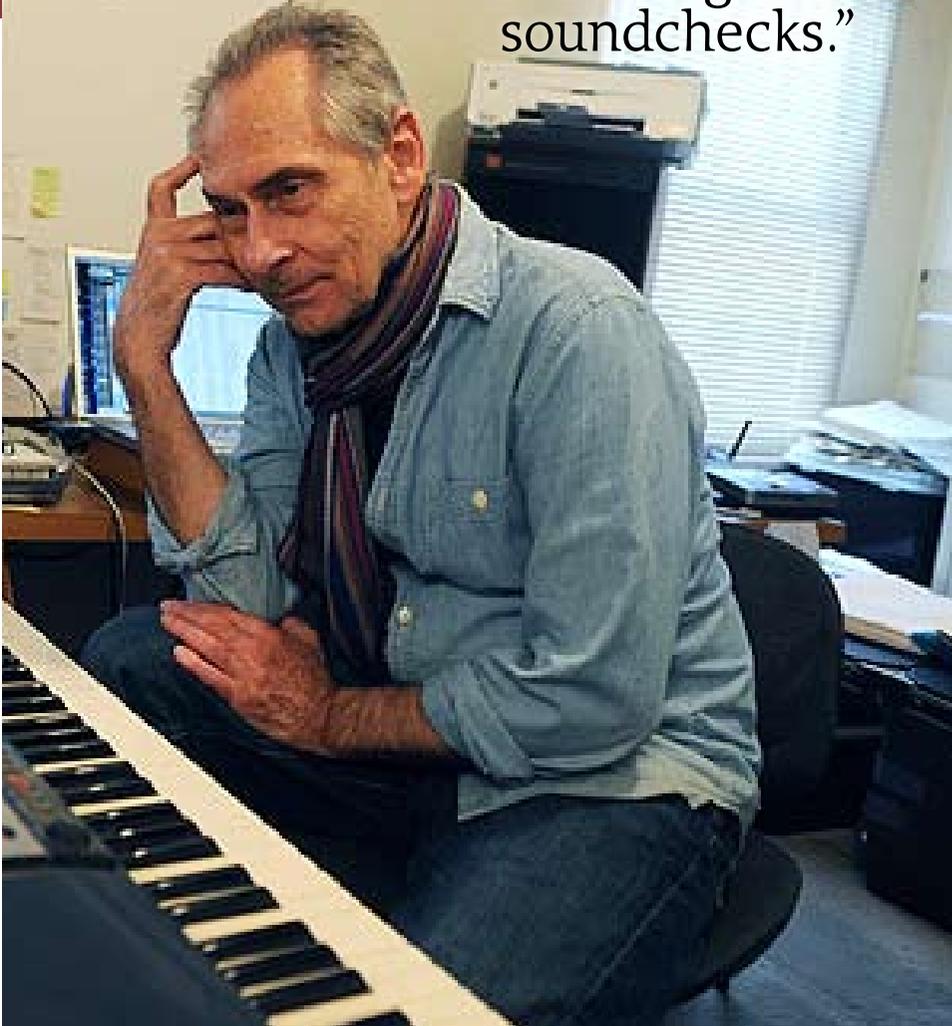
We're always running into accidental things. Yesterday we had a soundcheck where there's no pressure, and I said, "I've got this little cut beginning on my lip. I'm just going to hold back now." But we did this great little three- or four-minute version of "Abu Gil," a big track on the new record. Given the immediacy of superhigh-fidelity stuff, we've become more smart about grabbing things as they happen, so Arnaud Mercier, the technical director and genius who does everything [with us live], is always recording multitrack, even when we're doing soundchecks.

Do you record those sketches directly into Pro Tools?

Freeman: It depends on what we're doing. In France, we pre-arranged the entire session. Not a lot from that session got used in the

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final product, but there are elements. I work on a massive TDM system. Sometimes I’m using Pro Tools as the front end for it, sometimes I’m using [Apple] Logic, and occasionally I also like to use Ableton [Live] with the native audio drivers for certain things. In the context of this [album], it’s almost always in Pro Tools.

In France, the studio had a basic HD3 system, but it only had one or two interfaces, and we had a large group so we ordered a couple more interfaces. A lot of us had ADAT Lightpipe outputs, so we coordinated everyone to have complete digital connections into Pro Tools live at the same time. [We also had] a certain amount of analog because Rick [had

some analog sources], and of course, Jon [was] coming in through his mic preamp. We had tons and tons of inputs all set up, so we could just go into record and everything [was] all broken out, all coming in on its own channel, all at once, all the time.

Did you decide going into the album that you were going to take that approach or did it just evolve that way?

Freeman: It’s just about what Jon wanted to accomplish musically and how we could do that. He’ll say he’d like a certain kind of flavor and someone’s contribution, and we can find something that musician did and usually make it work. *Maarifa Street* was an extreme case; the entire record was constructed from

Jon Hassell

live performances of the same few pieces of music in different cities. You take a keyboard part [from] the Montreal performance and then use the underlying track from a different city. You have these constant cut-and-paste hybridizations of different performances from different nights, as well as individual tracks from totally different pieces of music getting added into different contexts because they worked really well.

But we didn't really do that [on the latest album]. The basic foundations were there, whereas on the other record, sometimes the foundation of something was a programmed element, and combining that with one of two musicians' performance from a certain concert in Europe would be the basis. In this case, we had the France recordings, we had the London recordings and I would add things. So it was a little more straightforward this time.

Peter, you're credited as engineer and co-producer for *Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street*. What was the division of labor between you and producer Manfred Eicher?

Freeman: Manfred organized us coming over to France and recording in the studio [La Buissonne]. He was very involved in shepherding the process and making comments about things that he liked. When something happened that he really liked, he would jump up and get very involved. He was always listening closely, but when he got really deep into something, he would conduct people and take over the proceedings in a very positive way. He's a really genuinely involved artist. He has amazing ears and really pays attention to what's going on in the studio.

He's also really great at balances during the mix. The first track on the record was actually one of his mixes, even though I was credited as mixer. "Aurora" was the only mix that was done at La Buissonne, and he really balanced that in a way that we liked. If we're working on something and something's not quite right, he can pick out the one element that if you just made [it] softer, everything would fall into place. Seeing him change things for the better just by balancing, without doing any EQ or anything, was really instructive for me. The idea was, before we

start playing around with effects, can this be done with just balancing?

So you did the rest of the mixing on the album?

Freeman: Yeah, I mixed the whole thing other than that. I was the only one who had his hands directly on it other than the guys who recorded the basic tracks at La Buissonne. It's important to note that there were three main sources of elements that got used in what you hear on the final record: the La Buissonne recordings (a group effort with everyone playing in the studio live into Pro Tools), concert footage from a number of places (mostly from London with individual elements taken from elsewhere) and things that we did at my house. I tried to respect the ECM tradition of mixing and sound. Jon absolutely has the last word on all the key musical decisions. He's quite conscious of what he wants in terms of relative balances.

Everything is potentially an element. There are no restrictions on where something came from. Very often there are layers, these two elements from a soundcheck and those things that were done very offhand in the studio without even being "in record," just messing around. Like Jon was saying, sometimes the best stuff happens that way, and even if it has imperfections, you have to work within that because you won't get it again the same way. It's the result of a particular moment and the way everybody was feeling and the circumstance. [For more, see the bonus material, "Jon Hassell's Post-Production," at emusician.com/bonus_material.]

Hassell: I still dream of a concert situation where, instead of having everything go through a mixer, what would happen if there were enough power onstage? It would be like having super-monitors [that] mix in the air. If it were a big hall, you would have one of these super-stereo mics, as if you were recording a string quartet, and that would be the house sound. When I achieve my trumpet-shaped swimming pool [laughter] in the Hollywood Hills, we'll give it a try. 

EM senior editor Geary Yelton gave up trumpet several years before he first picked up an electric guitar at the age of 15. He lives in Charlotte, N.C.