SPONSOR

Support American Mavericks with your Amazon.com purchases

Search Amazon.com:

All Products

Keywords:

GO!

Search New and Used amazon.com.

An interview with Chris Mann

By Preston Wright, American Public Media, with Philip Blackburn, American Composers Forum, July 2002

Deconstructionalist sound poet Chris Mann trying to look as serious as possible (Photo: Preston Wright)

Explore further
About Chris Mann

MPR: So, Chris Mann. Who are you, and why do you do what you do?

CHRIS MANN: Testing, testing, [to tape machine] is anybody in there?

Say your name for the record please.

This is the House Un-American Activities Committee, 1952.

Welcome to this un-*American Life* on public radio. Three desert island disks. What would you take and why?

"One of the three things that I have in common with Philip Glass." That's the title for the disk. I don't know what the other two are, but our parents sell records, which is his explanation as to why he finds it very easy to confuse money with music. There's a record which we used to sell which had six minutes of recorded sound on one side which was a Mercedes SEL 350 or something doing the standing quartem, going through the S-bends at Sebring [Raceway] or something like that. All of the car enthusiasts used to come in and buy it, and drag their high-fi out to the garage, and tune their engines to this car. I was really impressed.

So that's one.

That's one. And the other side was blank. It had six minutes of recorded sound on one side, where every other record in the store was I think 5.95. This was 6.95. I think it was put out by Audio Fidelity, but I wouldn't swear to it.

There was a record which I wanted to make—which was stolen from a Monty Python skit—which has a series of alternative track endings. This then became a model for a record which was produced in Queensland where the first five minutes was universal, and after the five minute mark, there were a series of braces and Amtrack Y-junctions, where the bias of the needle would determine which resolution. They made a horse race and five different horses won, depending on what sort of equipment you played it on. People used to bet on the record, particularly when the racetrack was wet up in Queensland. That would probably be the other one. I always wanted to take that as a model and make a bigger version in a less sort of narrative form, but also one you could bet on.

The third one, I don't know yet. Maybe Tammy Wynette or something.

Why?

The irony that the texts of Ludwig Wittgenstein's that stayed in press for his lifetime was the text he produced as a primary school teacher, which was this word book. Tammy Wynette was a primary school teacher. I always understood that Wittgenstein got the job at Cambridge because he was a failed primary school teacher.

What are your current fixations?

There are two avenues. I just discovered the Greeks, which for me is late. I've studiously avoided them for years, so I'm very excited about Plato at the moment. It's interesting to do Plato as a mediocre playwright. The dialogs are—it's a form of conversation theory. I'm doing Plato as a subset of Levinas, which is for me quite interesting. It's the obvious thing that had never struck me before, that it's all structured as dialogs.

I've been working with Holland Hobson for the last year making this software which is doing phoning recognition in real time. So it's the idea of modeling the performance space as though it was a vocal track. So "E's" always appear front right, and "O" always appears back left. We have various little schemes going. One doing predominate vowel recognition, one doing predominate consonant, one doing pitch, one doing speaker manipulations and phasers. We designed this lovely little patch the other day which has the side effect of making you quite nauseous. It's playing with middle ear stuff, which I'm very happy with.

That has it's own peculiar rationals because I can't do that as vindictively as I'd like because of the travel time. English is whatever it is, it's like 72 phonemes a second. Chris Mann is probably slightly in access of that. This means you have to make these resolutions in very short millisecond frames, so the travel time from a speaker which is then 50 feet away, you are either in the only ideal seat which is like DVD audio, or you are peculiarly disadvantaged. Phonemes start arriving out of order. That's not in itself uninteresting, but I haven't figured out what kind of texts to conjugate around that.

What's the most mind altering work of art you've experienced. Visual art, poetry, dance, theater, something other than your own.

It's probably *4'33*. I mean it's a touchstone for me. In it's form as an anecdote. In it's concept form or as score, it's neither here nor there for me. As Christian Wolff said the other day—he was at Quaker school—"What the hell was the fuss about?" But as an anecdote that you tell in the pub, that I've found really nice and dangerous. It's like "what is red and invisible? No tomatoes." I understand that as the definition of Duchamp.

Do you think it describes your own work as well?

Oh, I'd like to think it did. If I was that ambitious. My work is better understood as "What's brown and sticky."

Chris Mann?

A stick. Excuse me, I spent a long time in sixth grade. I had to repeat it several times.

Just into Greeks, now. Your most memorable or inspirational performance, or event of some kind.

I remember being incredibly impressed by Marlene Dietrich. I don't know how much of it was the performance, and how much was being told that what she does, that before she goes onstage, her greenroom time is spent with Ajax cleaning the toilets backstage. I found that a really incredibly impressive definition of an industrial attitude. That I liked.

Documents of Cage—I think of him as a sort of Buster Keaton. He has that same timing.

Cage performances, the way he reads them?

The reading particularly. He's the most gifted stand-up comic I've ever come across.

Does that relate to your own readings and performances?

In terms of the sit-down comic? Yeah.

What have been your career highs and lows? Excluding this one.

There was this beautiful moment at the Paris Autumn Festival in 1980 something where we were doing something... I was in the middle of the piece, it was 10:00 or 11:00, so the techs knock off. The techs were from Radio France and so they knocked off. They just pulled the plug and walked off. I was again really impressed. I thought, "I want to be on their side." That was a bit startling. I'm down on Europeans today.

At LRF, I was working with machines making sense, and the Austrian radio techs wouldn't take our word for anything. We'd set ourselves up a couple of hundred of times, and we obviously didn't know what the hell we were doing so they wanted to take over. Under the worst of circumstances it would take two hours. They took ten. Which meant we had to be there for lunchtime, which was very nice. We got a voucher and went to the canteen and there was a special on mushrooms. I spent the balance of the day being incredibly ill and then there was the performance at 9:00 which was then for the art radio section of the European Broadcasting Union. Everybody tottled in their ties and hairdo's. I walked on with a bucket. Throwing up on-stage, that was nice.

Career highs and low's seem to be similar in your mind. What trait do you like and dislike most about yourself?

My tendency to ramble on.

What is your vital daily ritual?

I'd be lying, because for a bunch of domestic reasons I've been celebrating summer by retiring from the ritual. But, for the last 15 years, I have to do my Tai Chi in the morning.

How do you spoil yourself?

Chocolate.

If I wasn't making music I would be...

Well, I was for years a chainsaw operator and a tractor driver. This is how I discovered environmental recordings. It was when... Oh what's his name?... I have the earliest known onset of Alzheimer's. I'm just a noun-free zone, it's nothing personal. David Moss was at NPR 30 years ago and commissioned a whole bunch of environmental recordings. The environment for me in those days was a Czech tractor, which was a Zetor-5745. I set up the mic, turned on the tractor in the barn, laid down underneath the tractor and read this text. In the middle of which, the representatives of the local town council came by investigating why we didn't spray all of the ragweed that year. So they were standing in the door of the barn, looking at this idiot reading a text underneath a tractor.

I don't have any other skills I can retire to.

This leads directly into the next question. What is your greatest fear?

Being struck dumb, obviously. The pause in relationship to that was when I was six, I bit my tongue off. I had been sitting on a fence, fell off, and bit my tongue off, and came home with my tongue in my hand, and said, "Mom." She grabbed me by the other hand and marched off to the doctor. He sewed it back on.

Maybe being stuck dumb doesn't terrify me in the way that it may.

They could put it in backwards next time, maybe.

Upside down. I would only be able to speak Swedish.

How are you like your music?

Irrelevant. Someone asked me a question a while back, which was not unrelated. I explained it in terms of, "There is this moment in primary school where they explain the difference between language and music, and something gelled, you know you were seven or eight. I was away that day."

I'm really interested in the fact that sense making is an act of charity. Senses and intelligence, which is bestowed by the listener on someone who is trying to wrap their mouth around an idea. The issue of silence with Cage was the invention not of listening, but the invention of composition.

This is what humans do, this making sense. We do very graciously and we do it very generously, and we are so practiced at it that we do it unconsciously. The grace of it is that we do it stupidly. I find that incredibly attractive. It's that humility of things I would like to have said.

Who do you think is the most significant unrecognized composer—apart from yourself—and why?

There is a beautiful piece of David Dunn's, which I'm incredibly impressed with which is a listening exercise which has to do with listening at a proximity and listening at a distance. It's an incredibly detailed, orchestrated listening piece. I think it's fantastic. I don't even know if it has a name. It's a score. Listen for 30 seconds to something here. For 5 minutes to something in the mid-distance. It's monstrously difficult in a way. It celebrates difficulty in the way that the neo-complexisists celebrate difficulty. It's one of those bloodsport things.

All of my heroes are people in Australia who's wives haven't even heard of them. I love that thing about—I think it was in Ulysses—they threw this big party, and Nora and Jim are tucking themselves into bed that night, and Nora says to Jim, "Have you got a copy of that I think I'd like to read it. Everyone thought it was quite good."

Present your list of the official mavericks. React as you please.

I love the politics of Nancarrow. Lou Harrison will be a patron saint of everybody because of what he said about Northwest Asia.

Which was?

He used that as a definition of Europe. It's incredibly useful to use this in Europe because it upsets them to no end.

Why Nancarrow's politics?

He was fighting in the Lincoln brigade, and he decided that Mexico was an altogether more attractive place.

Frida Kahlo and the relationship to Leon Trotsky. The connection between Leon Trotsky and Marcel Duchamp. I like to think of Nancarrow as sort of working that out a little.

If there are individuals like John Cage, or people you know lots about.

It's not that I know lots about them, but I recently was introduced to the fact that Morton Feldman and John Cage in the early 50's were not paid-up members by any stretch of the imagination, but were really interested in Scientology. Which was something which I hadn't tweaked to at all. I found that really intriguing. In the clear notion. When I have nothing else to do I'm craftily knitting together a little conspiracy with Ron L. Hubbard and John Cage. I thought that would be sort of quite fun.

Speaking of Cage and conspiracy, can you tell us anything about Hy Cage?

Not much. There is this moment... So 4'33 is 1952, 1932 is... there's this cartoonist for Etude magazine, which is his piano teacher's rag. He does this piece where little Johnny, I think it is Johnny... Mom comes in and says, "Johnny you haven't been practicing.", and Johnny says, "But Mom I have! I've been playing my composition." Then in the last frame is his composition which is this series of rests and whatever it is. So it's clearly a silent piece.

In 1847 Karl Marx has the line, "Silence is therefore the only possible means of communication." Which is what I think it was that Hy Cage was referring to. I'm not sure this is what John was referring to. Marx also speculated a bit later, I think it was in the 1870's, it was somewhere in Volume III, I think, of Das Capital, he has this little moment where he talks about the distance from the silverware to the table as being this strange cultural space. This goes along way to explaining Duchamp for me—but anyway.

That's all I know about Hy Cage. I don't know him to be a reader of that, but it's quite possible. One of the pieces that I'm doing is the Schoenberg/Marx brother's tennis match. Who was the person who always wanted to be Schoenberg's student? I can never remember.

Adolf Weiss?

No. No. No. The populist. Gershwin! Gershwin, Harpo, Oscar Levant, and

Schoenberg used to play tennis every Wednesday. If not Harpo, then Groucho and sometimes Chaplin...blah blah blah. That was the standard foursome. I always understood that John Cage was the ball boy. Is it possible that it's him. Yes, but then I suspect Schoenberg's finger is in the pie there somewhere.

Schoenberg used to apparently carry around, I didn't know this either, he used to travel round with a violin case. People would actually query him, "Arnie, I didn't know you were a fiddler." He was not a fiddler. He had table tennis paddles and a net in the violin case. He was a maniac table tennis player.

What's American about mavericks as opposed to Australian mavericks? Where do you fit in?

There is an Australian tradition which I think is really strong which is about betraying, or being a traitor to a form. There is the idea of conceptual depth where you can actually choose to do something badly for whatever reason. This tradition goes back to, at least the 1840's. I don't know of that in the American sense. I don't know of any equivalent of that in the American sense. The next sort of mention of that, that I know of is something like the painting school in Berlin in the 70's and the 80's. It's much more vindictive for example than Portsmith's symphonia or fatty acid. It's much more vicious. So that's how I would distinguish the Australian from the American. Americans are just nicer people. There is an Australian "So what" quality which informs a lot of stuff. Which is why when you asked me for a list—a bunch of people that no ones ever heard—Sid Clayton, and Paul Pendergast, who I think... Sid Clayton did everything that Marcel did, and everything that Albert Ayler did, and he lived in Monthagy.

He was enormously generous, and the only time he ever left Australia, he left by boat and went to India. He was there for six hours and didn't cope, and went home. That was his sole adventure over the water. He got nervous when he saw a cab stand. He didn't understand traffic lights.

There's that "So what?" quality. There's also this strange perverse thing in Australia of, you do it because it's like betting on flies running up a wall or something. One of the governing notions is what we call "desert time." It's that thing of, "I'll see you at quarter past." We agree to meet sometime, and we agree to meet at quarter past, but we don't know is this quarter past 10, quarter past 2? Is this Wednesday, Thursday? Is this in August?

I'll go with this lovely story that Alan Marshall used to tell about when he lived in the bush and a bush fire was coming through, and he had to make this decision about what is it he's going to save. He took the books of Alan Marshall translated into Czech and Hungarian. He stuffed those into his wheelchair and wobbled on down the hill. He kicked himself afterwards. I mean of all the things...it's really stupid. In 1983 when there were the bush fires at the back of my place, I very thankfully wasn't there, people were standing down in the local football field having been evacuated because the fire is being clocked at 100 miles an hour and there is nothing you can do. They're standing there in the middle of the football field in their pajamas with their parent and their cooking books, and the kid's homework assignment, and the dog, and the fire is jumping from one hill over to the other which is five miles. It's jumping right over them. I don't know that experience. I don't observe that in the American mavericks.

Do you think there are other kind of influences that the American environment, urban East Coast/ West Coast, you've got Jerry Hunt down in Texas. How does geography in all that favor?

My relationship to Ron Robboy was this whole thing about that there is actually much more communication between the west coast of America and the east coast of Australia in the 1850's, 1860', 1870's, 1880's, then there is between the east coast and the west coast of America. To travel the Pacific was two weeks. To travel across the United States was six weeks. There is documentation that jazz happens in Sydney and in Melbourne before it's known all of in New York.

Ron was very excited about the Jewish cowboy. The model for the Jewish cowboy is the background to a Yiddischer Cowboy in the 1890's, which is the definition of New York. Which was Rosa Luxembourg, Carl Kautski, and all these people depend on the advent of the Jewish cowboy. The Jewish cowboy is based on the Jewish bush ranger in Australia in 1842 or 1838. It's Teddy, the Jew boy.

Jerry Hunt rigging up chess computers to synthesizers is something which I understand in Australia. It's sort of not needing to prove that it works, but needing to find out what happens, and being perverse enough or having a rainy Sunday afternoon when there is nothing on TV, so you might as well invent something. That I understand. I feel myself much closer to Jerry Hunt than to some of these other people here that shall remain nameless.

Why do composers still write for the symphony orchestra?

So they can be interviewed by Peter Drucker. It's management science. It's to do with management science. It's so that the forward assembly line, so that they can run something like just in time. This is the historic role of the symphony orchestra. So that they can model systems. It's exactly why the people who are most interested in computer composition in the 1960's and 1970's worked at the defense department. You would go to the American Society of Cybernetics and the people with the best questions were from the defense department. The computer composition was being modeled on the guts of a warhead for an intercontinental ballistic missile. It's to do with, what can you get this thing to do. In a systems sense. What's it capable of. It's what Casio did to the American electronic organ. They just bought all the chips. Whatever electronic organ company went bust, Casio bought all the chips and then reverse engineered them. Casio was used by all of these boys at home with their drills, drilling through the back of the Casio

keyboard and then pushing the screwdriver in and finding out that, "Oh, if you connect that to that, then you get a whole new set of voices." Their R and D department was actually done all off-site. They didn't pay anything for it. The best you might hope for might be 20 dollars off your next Casio.

What does that mean for audiences for new music or symphony music or the economics behind it?

It's only doomed if the questions are uninteresting questions. The only mention I'd seen of the conductor, the only analysis that I'd seen of the conductor in the last 20 years has been in management science. It's not in the music press. What is it that we use music to do? Most of what we use music for is sort of extraneous stuff. It's as a memory adjunct. Most listening to music is not the listening to music, it's listening to the last time I listened to this piece of music. In that sense, it's a subset of Kodak. I think it has possibilities of being much more volatile and much more dangerous and much more useful than that. I think the people who are asking those questions tend to be, not the note composers, but the people who are designing the Volvo essembly line. What is it that you get five people to do? So, Spike Lee doesn't talk about jazz, Spike Lee talks about basketball. The analysis of basketball is as though it was some bebop quintet from 1952. It's systems engineering in small groups. I think the research for that then is probably the Israeli military. The Israeli military as I understand it is modeled on the Russian Communist Party of 1905. It's in a cell structure, and it's all about parallel systems. It's non-hierarchical. The value of the American military system of course is that it insists on maintaining some sort of hierarchy. So it's doing something other than winning battle. It's a legislated system for keeping your population... it's a system of surveillance, it's not actual military in the strict definition of military that is.

So the Israel information flow in their military systems is much more somewhere between how you think of a really good string quartet. A bunch of people who have just been playing together for a long time. Which is the beginning of the answer to the question. It's not the answer.

Finally, why are our ears so far behind. In the visual arts, theater, dance, film, you want to be confronted by new thinking. Why not in music?

Some Austrian, 1930 something or other... Can't remember his name, sorry, who says, "Due to inclement weather, the German revolution was in music." It's again what we use music for. Music education in primary schools is about making ears Peter Drucker. It's the symphony orchestra thing, it's about organizing a bunch of people to do things on the down beat, which is what it is. It's just nothing more than what it is. The thing which is most disappointing about it is that it's not something else.

There was that moment—in post *4'33* of course—if music is everything you do, then it is everything you do. So we don't need Britney Spears to tell us that. We are doing much more sophisticated things with sound now than organizing it's sequencing I think. We use sound to brush our teeth. We use sound for surveillance. We use sound microwaves, we use it to cook with, there are analog computers which are based on sound. I think this is all seriously rich musical material in a seriously rich musical environment. There are things which we suspect and which we haven't sort of dealt with in any sort of disciplined way. If you take the difference between 110 and 220...circuits...the difference between background variation between 50 hertz and 60 hertz, how you function in that, how living in the battery like that—all the background radiation. It's all audible. We tune ourselves to that all the time.

One of my favorite definitions of the mouth is that basically what the mouth is that the mouth acts as a tourniquet. What it does is control blood flow to the brain. But there are interesting things that go on in the mouth. If you went to the dentist, if you're of a certain age and you had a bunch of fillings put in and they are amalgam fillings, and if you dutifully go and get all of your amalgam fillings taken out and replaced with ceramics or gold, whatever it is, you get acutely depressed, which is not the pain of the operation but the chemical reaction in the mouth. The saliva has this little charge in it. So you have this little battery running in your head, which is then tuned to either the 50 hertz or the 60 hertz, your background radiation, so you have this little electro-magnetic universe that you're toddling around in. I think that's an aesthetically musical environment.

# # #

American Mavericks | Archive | About | Contact | Stations | Features | Press | Listening Room | Discussion | Purchase

©2015 American Public Media Careers Podcasts Newsletters RSS Audio Help Terms and Conditions Privacy Policy