# THE VISIONARY AND THE VIRTUOSO: A PROFILE OF JOHN SURMAN

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> “In jazz, the key people are the virtuoso instrumentalists who improvise their compositions and the visionary leaders and organisers who create stimulating musical conditions and contexts. John Surman is unusual in combining the roles of visionary and virtuoso, and it is this dual function that has made him such an important figure on the British scene: not only has he made wonderful music himself, but he has also inspired and encouraged many other musicians.” (Ian Carr, 2008).

Perhaps it was because of its historically privileged relationship with its former colonies, economically as well as politically, or because of a shared language—a decisive factor in connections, stimuli and cultural cross-fertilisation in general—but the fact remains that Great Britain has always been a step ahead of continental Europe in developing and reinterpreting musical currents coming from the United States. Without wishing to detract from the various French, Italian, German, Dutch or Swedish scenes, the sheer number and exceptionally high average quality of British jazz place it indisputably hors catégorie, to borrow a cycling term dear to the French. And as if the constant, fruitful contacts with American jazz were not enough, British jazz musicians also benefited from the strong imprint left by the small legion of South African exiles in London in the 1960s, who further stimulated Britain’s jazz heritage in new and unprecedented directions. If we also add the disruptive effect that the explosion of rock, beginning with the Beatles, had on the entire cultural landscape—a scene with which jazz nevertheless shared streets, shops, venues and festivals, in short a geographical proximity that often translated into musical relationships and collaborations, as well as mutual influences—it becomes clear that British jazz truly laid the foundations for a strong identity of its own, almost as a counterweight to African American dominance.

## A biography intertwined with the history of British jazz

Among the many exponents of British jazz, John Surman is one of the best known, not only in terms of popularity but also artistically, thanks to a distinctive personality forged over the years through prolific live and recording activity and countless collaborations. Born in Devon on 30 August 1944, Surman studied at the London College of Music, quickly moving from clarinet to baritone saxophone and bass clarinet, as well as soprano saxophone. His musical path could well serve as a concise account of the stages and characteristics of British jazz: from his blues encounters with Alexis Korner to orchestral collaborations with Mike Westbrook; from neo-bop languages alongside Ronnie Scott and Stan Tracey to the jazz-rock excursions of Extrapolation, the historic album by guitarist John McLaughlin; from the free territories of The Trio with Barre Phillips and Stu Martin and Chris McGregor’s Brotherhood of Breath to experiments with the new sounds of the synthesiser in SOS with Mike Osborne and Alan Skidmore (and also with Jack DeJohnette); and finally to a certain ethno-folk world and the ECM aesthetic, of which he is one of the leading artists. Such a varied and intense career is, indeed, a kind of synthesis of the rapid evolution of British jazz, which moved in just a few years from the triumph of Trad Jazz to the free-jazz revolution. Among the distinctive features of the English improvisational world is the frequent use of orchestral ensembles, or at least

large groups, which substantially reinvent the big-band tradition.

> “A pianist such as Tracey’s interest in orchestral writing is significant of the presence and importance that big bands have always had in England (justified by a certain tradition, both classical—even early classical—and popular, in the use of wind ensembles), and that they continued to have even as the new European improvised music was developing between the 1960s and 1970s. Musicians such as pianist Mike Westbrook, bassist Graham Collier, trombonist Mike Gibbs (Rhodesian-born and white), the two Canadians who settled in the United Kingdom, John Warren (baritone saxophone) and Kenny Wheeler (trumpet), drummer John Stevens (with the Spontaneous Music Ensemble), double bassist Barry Guy (with the London Jazz Composers’ Orchestra), and South African-born pianist Chris McGregor were all involved in leading large ensembles…”
> (Onori, Brazzale, Franco, 2020).

It is precisely in this context that we can place Flashpoints and Undercurrents, a double album released by the never-sufficiently-praised Cuneiform label, featuring John Surman at the head of a ten-piece ensemble in a recording made in Hamburg at the studios of NDR, North German Radio, on 18 April 1969. The line-up is a veritable who’s who of British jazz: besides the leader on soprano and baritone saxophones and bass clarinet, there are Mike Osborne on alto, Ronnie Scott and Alan Skidmore on tenor (the latter also on flute), Kenny Wheeler on trumpet and soprano flugelhorn, Malcom Griffiths on trombone, Harry Miller on bass and Alan Jackson on drums. In addition, there are Erich Kleinschuster on trombone and Fritz Pauer on piano, both from Austria. It must be said straight away that the music on this double album is of the highest calibre: well recorded and with an exceptionally high standard of both composition and performance, a true gem to be listened to carefully and repeatedly. The brilliant, energetic arrangements, with their unique ability to change colours and sonorities, often using reed and brass timbres in call and response, interweaving themes and building backgrounds rich in tension, make this music immediately recognisable as belonging to the aesthetic of British jazz, particularly the orchestral groups briefly mentioned above.

John Surman during the studio session of 18 April 1969 (courtesy of Cuneiform Records).

Take, for example, Dallab, written by Kenny Wheeler: a ballad evoked by the trumpeter’s mellow sound and characterised by a restless, dense arrangement, with wind-instrument backgrounds vividly colouring the piece’s progression and Fritz Pauer’s lively piano solo. An unmistakable identity, a mastery of balancing instrumental voices, of highlighting particular moments in the piece, of providing counterpoint to the solos—in short, an elegance and sophistication that we can rightly call typical of British jazz. Which certainly does not lack energy or fury, as in the opening track of the second CD, Background, where a torrential, explosive Alan Skidmore on tenor saxophone sets things in motion in a context without a true theme but with a series of backgrounds of different kinds that enter into free spaces. Hallo Thursday and Mayflower, by contrast, play with Coltrane-like idioms, with modal openings and introductions followed by an interweaving of themes that foreground Surman’s bass clarinet and, in the second piece, an insistent motif played by the reeds and subsequently answered by the brass, from which emerges an energetic, spectacular Surman solo on soprano. In both pieces, the enveloping and creative role of the rhythm section deserves emphasis: Harry Miller, precise and tireless, circles around the rhythmic pulse, making the accompaniment constantly different and original, in perfect accord with Alan Jackson, a versatile drummer and frequent collaborator not only of Surman himself but also of Keith Tippett, Mike Westbrook and

Michael Garrick, among others. Puzzle, meanwhile, stands out for a furious, devastating post-bop big-band opening, with two remarkable trombone solos: the first, most probably by Malcom Griffiths, strings phrase after phrase together at a dizzying, relentless pace, while Erich Kleinschuster—whose sextet and fine records with guests such as Joe Henderson and Art Farmer certainly deserve to be remembered—works more with effects and unease, like inkblots on a rippling sheet. To close, Jackson's tempestuous drum solo, once again splendidly to the fore.

Surman and Alan Skidmore during the recording session (courtesy of Cuneiform Records).

Amid this wealth of sounds, rhythms and expressiveness, Mike Osborne's alto saxophone could not be missing: a genuine force of nature, with a sharp, penetrating, flowing sound. On the gentle Where Fortune Smiles, credited to Surman, he outlines a theme bordering on the heartbreaking, maintaining the same mood in his solo, heightening its more melancholy moments and often working in the instrument's upper register. He is followed by Wheeler's elaborate, rich and finely phrased trumpet, and Ronnie Scott's mellow, distinctly bop-influenced tenor saxophone. Particularly noteworthy, for different reasons, are Beyond Hill and Aqua Regis, both by Surman: the first moves with a funky feel and a brief but irresistible beat-flavoured electric-organ riff, with an exceptional Skidmore in the altissimo register and in close dialogue with Osborne. The second is a free-jazz cauldron, with gushing horns and a rhythm section working beneath the surface, alternating timekeeping with free episodes in tune with the horns. A final mention must go to Gratuliere, written by Fritz Pauer, with its relaxed, measured atmosphere that brings even greater prominence to Harry Miller's essential, dynamic double-bass work, including a solo characterised by long notes, pauses and rapid phrases, and to Surman's poetic virtuosity on soprano.

Surman, again photographed during the recordings of 18 April 1969 (courtesy of Cuneiform Records).

Flashpoints and Undercurrents is a work that faithfully reflects the magical moment Surman was experiencing, along with much of the British scene: a period rich in collaborations, record releases and concerts, but also in valuable international recognition, foremost among them Miles Davis's recruitment of Dave Holland and John McLaughlin. The year before these recordings, Surman had received the award for best soloist at the Montreux Jazz Festival and recorded the first album under his own name, the eponymous John Surman, subsequently released in 1969 by Deram, together with longstanding collaborators also present on this new release, such as Harry Miller, Malcom Griffith and Mike Osborne. The year 1969 was fundamental to the career of the Devon saxophonist because, in addition to recording a large number of albums, he eventually decided to leave the United Kingdom and form a free-jazz trio with drummer Stu Martin and double bassist Barre Phillips: The Trio, briefly mentioned above, with which he would help elaborate and define a European jazz aesthetic. From that moment onward, Surman's career was one of steady ascent towards the recognition and consolidation of a musician of exceptional stature, original and possessing a fully recognisable sound on baritone, bass clarinet and soprano.

## An original voice emerging among giants

It is greatly to his credit that he managed to build a style of his own on three instruments that are, in part, secondary in jazz history, but which for that very reason had been marked by the stylistic dominance of powerful personalities: Gerry Mulligan on baritone, Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, and Sidney Bechet—with the necessary additions of Steve Lacy and John Coltrane—on soprano. They had

been almost completely dominant in exploring the sonorities and developing the styles of these particular instruments, and it had been very difficult to move beyond them. John Surman was one of the very few, if not the only one, to free himself from this dominance, certainly taking his predecessors as a starting point but developing his own recognisable stylistic signature. To complete the picture of the magical moment Surman was experiencing at that time, it remains to add that in March 1969 (though released by Deram in 1970) the saxophonist recorded his second album under his own name, How Many Clouds Can You See, featuring, among others, Barre Phillips, pianist John Taylor, saxophonist John Warren and Barbados-born trumpeter Harry Beckett, alongside, of course, his longstanding collaborators. On 17 April of that same year, exactly one day before Flashpoints and Undercurrents, again at NDR's Hamburg studios and with the same line-up, Surman had already recorded part of the material heard here, later released by Cuneiform in 2011 on CD and DVD, with video of the entire concert, under the title Flashpoint – NDR Workshop – April 1969. Naturally, it is of the same extraordinary and admirable standard, demonstrating the exceptional skill and expressiveness achieved by that ensemble of genuine masters. Two days to treasure and listen to with passion.

## LISTENING

— Chris McGregor's Brotherhood Of Breath, Chris McGregor's Brotherhood Of Breath, Soundvision, 2013.

— John McLaughlin, Extrapolation, Polydor, 2017.

— S.O.S., S.O.S., Ogun, 2006.

— John Surman, John Surman, Deram, 2008.

— John Surman, How Many Clouds Can You See? Deram, 2008.

— John Surman, The Amazing Adventures Of Simon Simon, ECM, 2019.

— The Trio, The Trio, Belle Antique, 2017.

## READING

— Ian Carr, Music Outside, Northway Publications, London, 2008.

— Duncan Heining, Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers, Equinox Publishing, Sheffield, 2012.

— Luigi Onori, Riccardo Brazzale, Maurizio Franco, La storia del jazz, Hoepli Editore, Milan, 2020.

— Mike Pearson, Conversations in British Jazz, Soundworld Publishers, Chelmsford, 2004.

— John Wickes, Innovations in British Jazz, Soundworld Publishers, Chelmsford, 1999.