



**Caroline Kraabel:**  
**On Improvisation**  
**23 Nov – 14 Dec 2021**

**Tuesdays**  
**6.30–9pm**

Musarc Practice Programme  
Impulse Sessions 2021–22  
London Metropolitan University  
Old Castle Street  
London E1 7NT | [Map](#) | [Info](#)

Tuesdays, 6.30–9pm

Workshop Fee: £35

To join the workshop, please email Joseph Kohlmaier on [j.kohlmaier@musarc.org](mailto:j.kohlmaier@musarc.org). Fee payable by BACS before 23 November. Concessions available. Musarc Choir Ltd 77–25–16 | 04461560

# On Improvisation

## 23 Nov – 14 Dec 2021

*On Improvisation* is a four-week workshop programme with London-based improviser, saxophonist and composer Caroline Kraabel. It is part of Musarc's new programme of impulse sessions with visiting artists, composers and performers who join the choir to extend the ensemble's skills, knowledge and practice.

The workshop looks at improvisation in the context of music and performance, as an idea with distinct cultural and material histories, and as an art that animates not just the domain of music but all aspects of (probably not just) human life: from the everyday to major aesthetic, cultural and political events.

Accompanied by an extensive bibliography and set of resources for singers to explore, the impulse workshop first introduces the ensemble to the tradition of improvisation through a number of pieces, practice exercises and seminal scores, and culminates in the development and performance of a new work developed by the artist and the singers.

Caroline is joined by artist, composer and ensemble member [Steve Potter](#) with a complementary programme of songs and endorphine-inducing practice exercises from Medieval motets to South African choral singing.

Caroline Kraabel is a London-based improviser, saxophonist and composer. She conducts and plays with the London Improvisers Orchestra (LIO). Sometimes she improvises solo while walking in London and elsewhere (broadcast over several years on Resonance 104.4 FM as *Taking a Life for a Walk* and *Going Outside*). She works with many other excellent improvisers, including Robert Wyatt, Maggie Nicols, John Edwards, Louis Moholo, Cleveland Watkiss, Hyelim Kim, Susan Alcorn, Sarah Washington, and Charlotte Hug.

During 2020–21 Kraabel has performed live (off- and on-line) and while walking through London; made and shared many recordings of duo and solo live improvisation; made a number of socially distanced large-group pieces for the LIO; was artist-in-residence at UNCOOL in Poschiavo, Switzerland; and worked on her 40-minute music/film piece about lockdown London (*London 26 and 28 March 2020: imitation: inversion*), which received its avant-première at London's Café Oto on 25 February 2021, is available on the Jazzed app, and is a nominee for a 2021 Ivor Award for Sound Art Composer.

Click here for [online bibliography](#) and links to works, projects and websites.

### Coming up 2021–22

Jan–Feb 2022, Choral workshops with **Cathy Heller Jones** on ensemble building, vocal and music skills — Feb 2022, **Jack Sheen**, *Croon Harvest*, workshop and recording — Mar/Jul 2022, **Melanie Pappenheim**, workshops and project with stroke patients, on aphasia, inclusive choralities — Mar to May 2022, *The End of the World Service*, Musarc residency in Taranto, Italy, with **Aga Beaupre**, **Neil Luck**, **Marie Hamilton**, **Sara Rodriguez**: ensemble trip, VR opera, broadcast, performance, local histories, documentary scores, choral politics

# Bibliography

## Listen – Caroline Kraabel interviews artists

*Why is Improvising Important?*, ResonanceFM, 2018. The London Improvisers Orchestra member and conductor Caroline Kraabel speaks to people who improvise in music, visual art, dance, politics and religion, as well as in life. Visit [mixcloud.com/Resonance](https://mixcloud.com/Resonance) and use the search function 'Why is Improvising Important' to show all the episodes

## Explore and Listen

Val Wilmer

[Maggie Nicols](#)

[Shelley Hirsh](#)

Jeanne Lee [Link 1](#) | [Link 2](#)

Yoko Ono

[Charlotte Hug](#)

[Sainkho Namtchylak](#)

[Cleveland Watkiss/Filomena Campus](#)

[Phil Minton](#)

[Jaap Blonk](#)

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[Spotlights: Female Improvisers in London](#), British Music Collection, various dates. Interviews with Caroline Kraabel, Maggie Nichols, Alison Blunt, Hannah Marshall and many more

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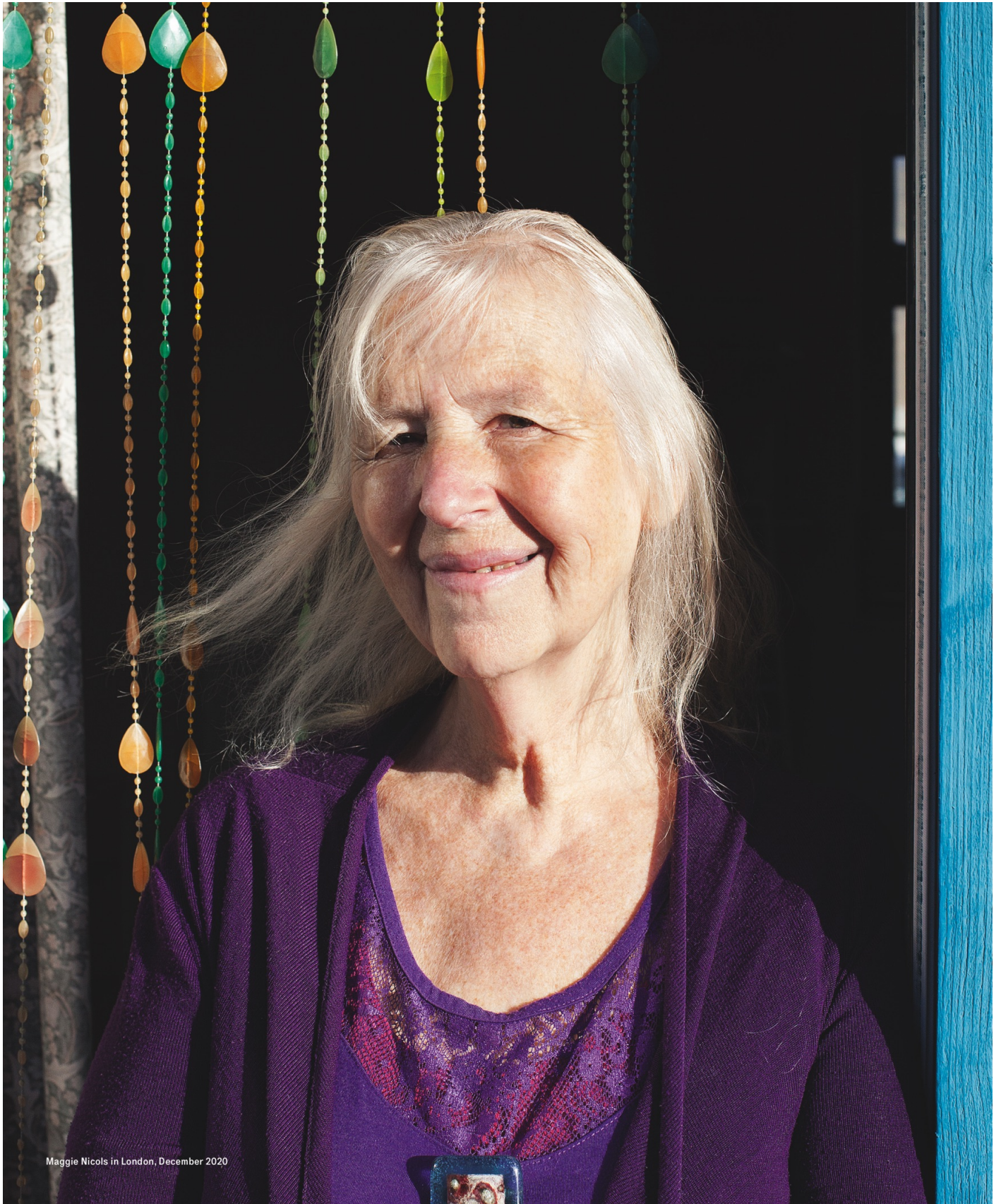
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Maggie Nicols in London, December 2020



# Lift

From singing jazz in strip clubs to improvising inside radical arts organisations and building community music initiatives, singer

## Maggie Nicols

has spent half a century empowering and liberating the human potential within. She tells **Louise Gray** about her groundbreaking work with Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Feminist Improvising Group and making her very first solo album. Photography by **Clare Shilland**

Towards the end of "Hecate's Household", an improvisation, a poem, a plea, a statement of being and of learning, of gathering, situated bang in the middle of her latest recording, Maggie Nicols sings, in a rich, resonating a cappella: "*To gather our resources/To summon up the forces of freedom and change*". There is a pause and now she speaks the next phrase, her Edinburgh accent still detectable after many years away from her birthplace: "*To make a nuisance of ourselves/To make a new sense of ourselves*".

Creatively, musically, politically, this homophonic slippage – the winding, dialectical path that leads from nuisance into new sense – runs through Nicols's vast body of work. As a singer and composer, mentor and musical activist, she occupies a unique place in music. People will know aspects of her work – with well-known collaborators or groups, for example – but one of her most significant achievements is surely about returning music to its roots. She has, with no frills or show, taken music-making off any pedestal and situated it in the community, using its force to empower the powerless. This continual working over symbolises the search for new sense. It's also what imbues it with immense power.

Astoundingly, *Creative Contradiction: Poetry, Story, Song & Sound* is Nicols's first solo album. As a singer and co-composer, she has been a fixture on the British, then European, improvisation scenes since the late 1960s when she joined Spontaneous Music Ensemble. She has appeared on countless other recordings in various combinations: duos with Julie Tippetts and Peter Nu; trios such as Transitions (with Caroline Kraabel and Charlotte Hug), Les Diaboliques (with double bassist Joëlle Léandre and pianist Irène Schweizer), Trio Blurb (with violinist Mia Zabelka and the late guitarist John Russell), and, most recently, Trio Generations (with pianist Lisa Ullén and percussionist Matilda Rolfsson); and in larger ensembles like Centipede, Contradictions, Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra and The Gathering.

Nicols's work in Feminist Improvising Group (FIG), the truly iconoclastic all-female band that she and Lindsay Cooper founded in 1977, is barely documented in audio. Many of these outfits are long running: The Gathering, a huge improvising group born in 1991 out of tensions and factions in the London Musicians Collective, celebrated its 30th

anniversary in January (it currently meets fortnightly on Zoom); Contradictions, the open women's workshop performance group, which she started with FIG colleague Koryne (formerly Corine) Liensol, are now in their 41st year and still going strong between London, where Nicols lives, and Carmarthenshire, where she is part of a creative community project.

There is, as Nicols senses, a need for open access groups which promote and value a creativity that is both individual and communal. If sonic nuisance could be heard as sounds that defy compositional norms, as noise out of place, then the new sense that Nicols speaks of is to be found in the power of being together, doing "whatever arises" and in "community excellence". Working over material of all kinds – musical, creative, relational – precedes the awareness that characterises new senses. It is this that we hear in *Creative Contradiction*.

The album is the 100th release on Takuroku, London venue Cafe Oto's lockdown download label. "My debut album!" she says, with palpable excitement. "I left school at 15 and [soon after] my first singing job was in a strip club in Manchester" – Nicols sang jazz standards and other songs – "but yes, it's my first album, especially since I became more of an 'artist' rather than a sort of cabaret or pub singer."

That *Creative Contradiction* was made with rudimentary studio technology does not hamper its impact. Instead, the close contact with the process of Nicols's work and thought processes – the new sense making – is accentuated. "I had used GarageBand once before with somebody else, or a couple of other people showing me things and setting up other mics," she says. "I didn't have a clue what I was going to put on it, it just evolved. I realised I wanted to put some of my songs on it as well as the free improvisation... I would come across something in a poem that I've written and, ooh, I'd sit down at the piano with this poem, see what comes out. I improvised something to the poem, and then another poem, and it gradually evolved, or got a shape to it. It flowed so easily. Everything just flowed so easily."

The results are very much Nicols's own lockdown album. In addition to vocals, she plays piano, keyboards and bangs a ceremonial drum: Katerina Kobizek and Ludek Salac, both members of The Gathering's Welsh contingent, weigh in with some

# Every Voice

Maggie Nicols | The Wire | 37

vocals, guitar and olitar – that is, a guitar made from an empty Palestinian oil can. The cat Kyna wanders through “Hecate’s Household” – one of the names that Nicols gives the former Welsh woollen mill, now a community centre – and is acknowledged accordingly with some spontaneous lines inserted into the poem.

Nicols takes an intuitive approach to recording: overdubs were mostly done without using headphones to listen to the recordings – “I cannae believe I did something as obvious as that! How many times have I been in recording studios?” – but the results are clear, strong and startlingly intimate. The 13 tracks have a visceral, supple strength as they move between ballads, recitations, extended vocalisations and the glossolalia of the made-up language that she at times employs. The vocal transitions – between tones, or different aspects of her voices – flow seamlessly on the album. This is highlighted while speaking with her over Skype. Nicols often acts out the dialogues of the stories she’s telling: there are small and earnest voices, big, powerful ones, and all the while a constant attention to contextualising what she’s speaking about. She will spin off, momentarily, to improvise on the rhythm of the sound of a word. At points, she’ll end a section of conversation with a flurry of scat singing. This is a form of conversation that she developed early in her life with her late mother Zouïna Benhalla, who was half Algerian Berber, half French. “She was extraordinary,” says Nicols. “She was the first one I improvised with: we used to talk in a made-up language.”

Nicols’s parents met in the closing stages of the Second World War: her father, originally from the Isle of Skye, was in the Royal Air Force and part of the Allied liberation of France; he met Benhalla at a dance in Marseilles, where she had run away from home to become a singer. Maggie’s surname is actually Nicolson (the lack of an h is significant), but she uses the shortened version to put some distance to some adolescent misdemeanours. “Oh, but I’d love to go back to Nicolson,” Nicols riffs. “It’s rhythmically so much nicer. Nicolson, *Mag-gie* Nicols, Maggie Nicolson, daa-daa-da-da-da, is a much nicer rhythm. But there you go.”

She’s proud of the radical heritage that comes with being a Nicolson. “When I realised that the Nicolson women fought off the bailiffs during the Highland clearances, and then some of the other Nicolsons were so embarrassed, they went down south and they put in an h” – so becoming Nicholsons – “to distinguish themselves from the rebellious Nicolsons. I thought, oh, my goodness, I’ve got to take that, I’ve got to insist that the h is not in Nicols.”

Born in Edinburgh in 1948, and moving to Central London in time for her adolescence, Nicols speaks about her teenage years in this way: “My mum and dad split up and I lived with my dad above offices in Golden Square [in Soho]. I’d wait till he went to sleep and then I’d sneak out the house. I’d sneak down through all the offices and then just go to all the clubs. Dad would wake me up for school, I’d be exhausted as I’d had about an hour’s or two hours’ sleep.”

The Soho clubs of that time gave her a window to the world. “There were Greek, Maltese, Afro-Caribbean, Turkish people, gays and lesbians, people from all over Britain, runaways... and it was extraordinary, we

were all going to the same clubs. There was something incredibly special about it to this day.

“I’ll never forget the first time I walked down The Limbo,” she continues, recalling her reaction to one club. “It was at the bottom of Wardour Mews. It was 2/6 [12.5 pence] to get in. And as I walked down the stairs, what should be playing, but The Folkes Brothers – you know, ‘*Oh Carolina, da-da-da, oh Carolina, da-da-da*’ – and it just hit me. It was the most wonderful music and that was it. But then one day, Dad did find out that I was sneaking out and then, of course, he grounded me. I would get my friends to pretend to be their mothers – that classic trick – and phone Dad up.” She slips into the voice of a fictitious school mum. ““This is Mrs So-and-So: can Margaret come and stay?””

But 1960s Soho also had its dangers. She knew, in her word, “villains”, including at least one connected to The Kray Twins. She left school at 15 and lied about her age to become a showgirl dancer at The Windmill Theatre, a revue bar in Archer Street. “I literally just walked in. I mean, when you’re young, you’re so bold. The Lord Chamberlain still censored theatre shows, so we weren’t allowed to show ourselves completely naked. We had to have nipple caps on and various other things. We did fan dancing, and we had to stand like tableaux, or if we were naked, we had to have a special UV lighting, so we looked like shadows. [The owner] Sheila van Damm auditioned me: I said I was 16... but thinking back, they probably didn’t mind that I was so young. Um, it was amazing training... I loved The ‘Mill.”

One of the themes that comes up in Nicols’s recollections is safety. Soho’s villains, she says, were by and large less sexually predatory and often friendlier than the male musicians. Of the women around at the time, she remembers *The Wire* writer and photographer Val Wilmer as a reliable and comforting presence. One of the few safe men in her early career was her bebop mentor Denis Rose, with whom she sang in pubs and clubs. “Soho was the red light district, and I did find that the women, the working women that did business, they were very protective. I remember being in the street and there were men who’d ask ‘Business? Business?’. And [the women] they’d say” – Nicols segues into a fierce voice – “‘She don’t do business! She don’t do business!’”

She never saw women musicians on stage until the alto sax player Vi Redd at Ronnie Scott’s. “I had got this impression that women were biologically not suited to playing instruments,” she says of that time. “People don’t realise for my generation of women, just how different it was before and after feminism, the *huge* impact the Women’s Liberation movement had on me. It was all about male approval – you wanted male approval. If I’d seen a woman playing an instrument, maybe I’d have thought of playing an instrument earlier, instead of later taking up piano. I would have maybe been an instrumentalist. That’s probably why I use my voice the way I do.”

From posing in tableaux vivants, singing in strip clubs, becoming aware of the sexualised gaze – and the need to navigate safe pathways around it – the new sense that Nicols was becoming aware of had as much to do with the performance of femininity as it did about the performance and creation of music. This would be played out most radically in the theatricality of Feminist Improvising Group between

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At Lady Mitchell Hall with Barre Phillips, Mongezi Feza and Trevor Watts, Cambridge, 1969



1977 and the early 1980s when the band dissolved, but also in subsequent groups. Contradictions have reflected several intersecting areas in their work, motherhood, mental health, economic power; and The Gathering are touched by the issues of sonic and musical relationships and the importance of letting voices be heard.

Fundamental to the idea of letting voices be heard is Nicols's exposure, in the mid-1960s, to the improv work of drummer John Stevens and saxophonist Trevor Watts at the Little Theatre Club off St Martin's Lane in central London. Nicols had been going to the Old Place in Gerrard Street, the venue vacated by Ronnie Scott's for new premises in Frith Street. "Mike Westbrook and John Surman would play, the free jazz was coming through. I remember saying that I could hear a voice in their music. Someone said, 'Well, John Stevens works with voices.'" Opening after the theatres closed and five floors up, the Little Theatre Club was, Nicols says, "a laboratory for free jazz". Founded by Amorel Weston and Stevens, it became a testing ground for improvising musicians: Derek Bailey, Evan Parker and Paul Rutherford regularly met there. After Stevens and Watts separately invited her, she overcame her shyness and went.

"John set up his *Sustained Piece*, where you just take a breath and you sing or play the first note that

comes to you, and you just keep repeating it over and over again," says Nicols, recalling her first experience singing there. "Trevor was playing a note on the alto sax. The rest of the musicians had gone. It was just John and Trevor, very intimate, very exposing, terrifying. John was playing a gong. I remember he said it doesn't matter if your voice wobbles, wavers, or croaks, and my voice was doing all three. I was *ahhhhhh*," she wobbles, "but I kept singing the note and Trevor played a note, different note. After a while, I don't know how long, our notes started just subtly bending. The next thing I knew, I was improvising. I didn't know I was going to improvise: as far as I was concerned, my brief was to repeat one note over and over and over again. It was just this note, but in combination with the gong, Trevor's note, and the harmonics, the frequency between them, we were pulled into this mesmeric improvisation. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I've never experienced this. I'll never forget: it was raining, and I was singing in a strip club in The Venus Rooms. I remember running, running, through the streets, singing in the rain... then I went up to the club to do my standards" – she sings, "*The sky was blue, but the moon was new*" – "but I was blown away. I realised that that experience just opened me out to a whole new world. Even singing songs took on a whole new life. It was an amazing initiation

into free jazz. I could have gone somewhere where there was loads of people screaming and screeching and I would have been completely alienated and felt completely abandoned and not felt included. But John was so inclusive, he introduced so many people to improvisation, he was so generous with music... He was a community musician. That was the essence of John."

The move into Spontaneous Music Ensemble, founded in 1966 by Stevens, Rutherford and Watts, happened naturally in 1968, and Nicols sang with the band for approximately two years. Her invented language appears on "Oliv II", a stately, wandering piece with Stevens, Watts and Johnny Dyani, on SME's third album, *John Stevens Spontaneous Music Ensemble* (1969). In November 1968, she travelled with the band to West Berlin for the first Total Music Meeting. It was a watershed moment in terms of being recognised as a musician and as a person, rather than a sex object. "[The Meeting] was extraordinary. Apart from Denis [Rose], I had never felt so safe with all these musicians. Nobody was predatory. Nobody was trying to, you know... I was treated as a musician. It was wonderful.

"We were staying in this sort of youth hostel with no hot water. My friend Annette came with me, and she got a chance through one of the musicians playing at the festival to stay in a hotel, all paid, and she asked





Feminist Improvising Group's debut gig at Music For Socialism festival, London 1977

if I wanted to come with her. I said, No, no! I chose this spartan [life]. I was so blown away by this, I'm actually treated like a proper musician! Oh, wow! So there we were with camp beds on stone cold floors and cold water, but it was amazing... actually, John flew, and me and Annette carried all his percussion on the train." She laughs. "We were right in the beginning of something like an explosion. In The Little Theatre Club, we were only playing to about five people, and to go from that to the Total Music Meeting in Berlin, where there was an audience! It was amazing that the German musicians had created something whereby there was an actual audience for this music."

The following year, after singing on the bill with John Lennon and Yoko Ono at the famous Cambridge gig featuring members of SME, Nicols started running vocal workshops at The Oval House, a space in Vauxhall, South London. Under the stewardship of Peter and Joan Oliver it had transitioned from being a Church of England youth club to a site for radical fringe theatre. "I didn't have a clue what to do. The first workshop was for instrumentalists and I was in a room full of men with saxophones and trumpets. I tried to do John's *Sustained Piece*, but I wasn't John and I didn't have John's authority. I think that he would have very quietly explained the piece. Anyway, they held their sustained notes for about two seconds, and then there was all this massive honking and screeching. It

just went completely apeshit. I stood there, stunned, and let it happen. After what was probably about half an hour, they ran out of steam. I said, 'Oh, that was lovely! Do you think we could do it again? And this time do you think you could hold your notes a bit longer?'"

The classes turned into vocal workshops which were informed by Steven's exercises. There were musicians – bassoonist/oboe player Lindsay Cooper was one of them – as well as actors who wanted to learn vocal techniques. Nicols bought "one of those black and yellow books, *Teach Yourself* books" and took her workshops through a mix of meditational and improvised pieces.

It was a period of change. Nicols was now a mother – her daughter was born in 1970 – and she was about to get involved with radical politics in the form of the Trotskyite-leaning Workers' Revolutionary Party. The party was, she says, one of the places where she first got an education. Its founder Gerry Healy was keen that the membership learn political theory and philosophy; he was also unusually open to the kind of music that Nicols was performing, post-SME, with Keith Tippett, Phil Minton and Robert Wyatt in Centipede. "Gerry got it!" she says. "I brought John Stevens to meet him. We had all these ideas of different sounds we're going to do, and I remember Gerry saying, 'Go for it, comrade, go for it!' Yeah! I've met anarchists that are more conservative musically than Gerry."

The party was, she says, a strange mixture of liberatory politics, but gender was not on the agenda. After a chance encounter with Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), she was beginning to articulate her experiences through a feminist lens. There were certainly powerful women in the party: one, the actor Vanessa Redgrave, was a member and a good friend to Nicols. They would go out to speak on building sites – "People's jaws would drop when they saw her." But feminism was, Nicols remembers, identified as "a deviation from class politics", a bourgeois distraction, a contradiction. "Contradiction was a big thing in the party," she observes: the word, signifying the recognition and synthesis of polarities, has played a part in her thinking since her early exposure to Marxist dialectics. The break came when she wanted to go to Holland with Phil Minton to do some gigs with experimental theatre group The Independent Outlaw University. "I was instructed by the party that I couldn't go because I had too important work organising in the nightclubs. I was thinking, *I want to go, I want to go*" – she adopts a whispery, determined tone here – "so I disobeyed orders. It was a very contradictory thing. I loved the party. I learned so much from it, but it was quite repressive as well."

Nicols had left long before Healy was expelled from his own party in 1985 for "non-communist relations" – described at the time as abusive and coercive sexual relations with party women. She was now forging new

Val Wilmer



musical relationships that drew on relationships that came out of SME, including Voice, an improv quartet of Nicols, Julie Tippetts, Phil Minton and Brian Eley.

"The first woman I really had a close relationship with was Julie," she explains. "We had both worked with John [Stevens] and we did one of John's pieces in the dressing room and just went *whoosh!* Our voices just wove together... before this, all my intimate musical experiences were with men."

Voice's self-titled album came out in 1977, a year that had multiple significance for Nicols. A request for her to do workshops at the radical theatre space Drill Hall had led to an introduction to the Gay Sweatshop company. "Gay Sweatshop were putting on a play there, *Care And Control*. It was about the fight lesbian mothers have to keep custody of their children: they often lost. Tash [Natasha] Fairbanks was in that particular production. I remember thinking, Oh, my god, she's beautiful, she's lovely, and I got this huge crush on Tash.... we got involved, and the next thing I knew, I was in a [lesbian] separatist squat in Vauxhall. It was like, what's going on? I'm just thinking I may be bisexual and now I'm in a separatist squat."

Nicols was not a separatist for any great length of time, but her relationships with women – emotionally, and also in terms of both political and creative spaces – remain hugely important. The women-only spaces of the period gave her the clarity to think through what she has identified elsewhere as her "male-approval disorder" – what the feminist theologian Mary Daly referred to as MAD. It was a space, too, to refigure her earlier notions about why there was a lack of female instrumentalists on stages. These days, she favours more diverse spaces, and she is heartened by social

changes which have led younger men, in particular, to examine their own roles within patriarchal structures.

"I do see a real change, but there's also a lot of men, unfortunately, who are still tied into a patriarchal mindset. I think I needed to break my dependence on men and that's what the women's liberation movement was for me: to recognise that I was capable of loving women. I mean, I probably would now call myself bisexual. What's that other word? Pansexual, because if I fall in love, maybe I could fall in love with a transwoman, a transman, who knows?"

"I tended to fall deeply in love with women," she continues. "Some of the most important relationships in my life were with women and I identified as a lesbian for 15 years, and that to me was really important, really, really important."

This is a powerful testimony to hear: from the distance of some 40 years, it is easy to forget how slow social change has been for women, for the beginnings of gender and LGBTQ liberation. For Nicols, Feminist Improvising Group's formation in 1977 and the few years that followed were, she says simply, "huge". And she is right. It had no commercial success and left precious few recordings. There is no film or video of them and their legacy remains to be truly historicised. Feminist Improvising Group – the band was actually named by a printsetter putting together publicity literature for the Music For Socialism festival at the Almost Free Theatre in London – were built around a core of Nicols, Lindsay Cooper, cellist/bassist Georgina (then Georgie) Born (both from Henry Cow), trumpeter Koryne Liensol (from feminist jazz funk band Jam Today) and Rag Doll's pianist Cathy Williams.

Pianist Irène Schweizer and saxophonist/vocalist Sally Potter joined a few months later, followed by vocalist Frankie Armstrong, flautist/saxophonist Angèle Valmeyer and trombonist Annemarie Roelofs. On stage, the personnel fluctuated according to who was available.

FIG were created after Nicols tackled the organisers of Music For Socialism over the lack of women on its platform, and it was suggested that she form a women's band. FIG worked at the intersections between improv, jazz and theatrical performance, drawing power from radical politics and what Born, in her post-FIG incarnation as an anthropologist and, more recently, as professor of music and anthropology at Oxford University, refers to as the "microsocialities ... of feminist politics" that reflected upon shared experiences as gendered women and the gender dynamics they experienced in larger, more diverse musical arrangements.

Listening to the recordings available, you notice a huge amount of laughter. The band members parodied various women's roles – Nicols often appeared as the frazzled mother, dealing with her whiny child; Liensol, who is Black and has a disability, was often made to "feel like a child" and the two women responded to that dynamic. Williams was the "hip, rock chick" and Born and Cooper, the two musicians responsible for the more conventionally virtuosic sections of FIG's music, came on in classical music drag. The roles were developed in workshops with each performer working to subvert accepted norms of female roles.

On FIG's self-published cassette – a live record of performances in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Reykjavik – we hear Nicols improvising lyrics about



Women-only gig with guitarist Sally Batista, 1981

Val Wilmer

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Aachen Festival of Improvised Music with (from left) Lari Fishking, Elmar Kraling, Jochen Kussman, Penguin Moschner and Georgie Born, 1979



snowscapes, “*all those colours*”, lava. There is the sound of pots and pans being banged, of squeaky toys and egg-slicers being strummed. On *Another Evening At Logos*, FIG’s 25 minute track starts with flourishes on woodwind and, by the end, has moved into a honkytonk song in which Nicols sings “*I like being part of womankind/I don’t want to be defined by no man*” before waving goodbye to all the diminutive “*silly names*” – the sugars, the honeys, the babies. In the absence of any film footage, the closest we can get to the humour, the come-ons, the humour these days is by glimpsing video of the trio Les Diaboliques: one 2008 gig shows Nicols on stage in a “*Make Capitalism History*” T-shirt singing, “*Where’s the chocolate? Who’s gonna dip me in chocolate and throw me to the lesbians? I wanna know!*”.

“We were completely irreverent,” she recalls. “It was because we were giving birth to ourselves in a strange sort of way. We were synchronistic, with a women’s liberation movement giving birth to itself; we were part of it. You cannot separate the political movement from what FIG was... and the absolute joy of discovering that women were important.”

Nicols remembers the debut gig well. “You could feel the men thinking, ‘what’s this, then?’ We were a bit slapstick, a bit punk. I also remember, to my shame and bless him, Paul Burwell: he [and David Toop] had been onstage before we came on. Paul used to do lots of

things with fire and water, and he left this real mess on stage. He was about to clear it up. I said, ‘No, don’t.’ Then I went on stage with a broom, saying, ‘Oh, these men that don’t clear up, bloody hell isn’t that awful?’ All the women started laughing, so we started. Corinne was playing her trumpet. Lindsay was running around, chopping onions like she’s preparing dinner and frantically trying to cover up the smell with perfume. Paul was so pissed off. Years later, I apologised for setting him up. Och, that was shameful.

“That first gig shocked people,” she continues. “There were people who were liberated and thrilled. Other people were hostile, and some of the men were really hostile. One of them, I can’t remember which musician, said, ‘My friend, and she’s a woman, thinks you were really self-conscious [and fake].’ But that was it. We felt liberated. We felt it was such a joyous occasion.” I tell Nicols about hearing Joëlle Léandre’s experience of FIG when I interviewed the French bassist in *The Wire* 429. But not everyone was appreciative. In his review of Nicols’s *Creative Contradictions* in issue 444, Stewart Smith reminds us of Peter Brötzmann’s denigration of Nicols and her comrades as “little English chickens”. Other comments at the time concerned the level of musicality and slapstick – these jibes, snide and to the side, were constant.

“Oh, we certainly went for it, wild, irreverent,” Nicols

declares. “We were really militant. We were naughty: we did a gig in a gents’ toilet once and wouldn’t let the men in. We were part of the women’s movement. It was in that time when women were really just refusing to apologise, and a movement is discovering itself, it’s really unapologetic, it’s bold, it’s provocative, we were part of that.”

Was she surprised or shocked at some of the reactions that FIG provoked? “Yes and no. For me, the women’s movement was a revolutionary separatist movement and so I stopped worrying about male approval. There was a wonderful, blissful period, where I didn’t care what men thought. I’d spent most of my life wanting male approval, thinking that if a man approved me, it must mean I was worthy of something. So suddenly, to be plunged into a movement where I didn’t care what men thought was really liberating... I think what the women’s liberation movement has done for me is really allowed me to appreciate decent men.”

It’s difficult to maintain such intensity. FIG dissolved after a few years: there were differences, but no explosions. In 1980, Nicols started *Contradictions* with Liensol; Schweizer, with Cooper and Roelofs, formed The European Women’s Improvising Group with Léandre joining them. Nicols continues to regroup with Schweizer and Léandre in Les Diaboliques.

With her grounding in John Stevens’s work, what was implicit in FIG and in Nicols’s workshops was

Gérard Rouy



the idea of community and one's place in it. She references a line from the Scottish bass player Lindsay L Cooper: "He wrote a wonderful prose-poem manifesto and in it was this line: '*Your voice is the sound of your being*'. It's a beautiful way of putting it."

Community, and giving people, especially those marginalised by gender or in other ways, a voice, was to the fore of the early work of Contradictions and The Gathering. In 1985 Contradictions hosted *Madness*, a five day combination of performance, music and theatre at Oval House. It marked Nicols's further involvement in mental health and what has become *Mad Pride*. The Gathering, too, fits into this communal vision in which voices – and by extension, social and political action – can be heard in turn, where parts can be negotiated, and each person can hold their neighbour's right to making sound and being heard. That the Gathering came out of a time of conflict – arguments and groupings within London Musicians Collective – makes this especially important. The Gatherings are, Nicols states, influenced also by Peter and Joan Oliver's ideas of community participation, and the openended events have a life of their own. "You never know how they're going to go. People can come halfway through and they walk in, but you are never, never interrupting The Gathering. It can get quite chaotic and wild and extreme. And it can also be very delicate. You never know where it's gonna go." In 2016, Nicols was invited to Houston, Texas, to run workshops and stage a Gathering. "This young man came up to me and said, 'This is butoh.' I asked this young man what he meant. He said, simply, 'Whatever arises.' That's when I thought, yes, whatever arises, that's what The Gathering is."

Nicols speaks often about virtuosity. It is a difficult word to wield: at its worst, it signals a separation between an elite talent and less skilled operations: between, she suggests, Léandre and Schweizer as examples of virtuosos by virtue of their rigorous training, as against people who play instruments in a more rudimentary way. Nicols is inclined to give a Marxist gloss on valuation and devaluation in terms of commodification. "Making some things scarce means they can be expensive. Look at [Carl Andre's] pile of bricks in the Tate" – *Equivalent VIII*, whose acquisition caused fierce debate in the UK press about the value of art in public collections – "If there wasn't a price attached to it, would you say, look at those lovely bricks? I would, but because the context is capitalism, people think [Andre's] taking the piss, whereas he's not... I think that's the thing, because everything gets twisted and distorted under capitalism, because these things are amazing. It is wonderful to be shown to be able to look at something in a new way and to see the beauty in a pile of bricks. ... it's an amazing revelation."

For Nicols, the distinction means that some are consequently undervalued. "I think that it's really important to recognise that we are so brainwashed by hierarchy, even if we see it politically, even if we recognise politics' hierarchy. I came up with this expression – 'Save me from aesthetic supremacists' – during a discussion at the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra festival [GIOfest XIII in November 2020]. George Lewis and [music sociologist] Tia DeNora were having a really good discussion and then we

were doing comments. The phrase came from my heart and I realised that that's something I've felt all my life, that if I'm doing something with other musicians who audiences recognise as 'really good', like Irene or Joëlle, then that's legitimate, but if I'm going to come with something [rooted in the] community, they probably think, 'Oh God, this isn't going to be as good.' There is that sense that even people who recognise hierarchy politically don't recognise it creatively, they don't recognise that they have value judgments that if you've studied and you've trained, then that makes you more legitimate than if you haven't. Improvisation has challenged that, and a lot of improvisors have studied ... there are still areas where people don't see the power."

The realisation in Nicols's long career is that identity contains difference. Even when she was feeling liberated, she was, she says, "also learning to surrender. What I noticed with FIG was we could sit in the shower together because there was a sort of familiarity or sensuality, an emotionality, an ability to just accept. I think, unfortunately, a lot of women can internalise the patriarchy, so those differences

did come up. It's contradictory, and the women's movement found this: the solidarity of sisterhood does not mean that you brush the differences of race, class, disability, under the carpet."

The key is to be open to the fact that sometimes those who weren't so experienced, so trained, so 'valued', may be the most refreshing voice. "I've always felt that that, you know, community isn't some sort of patronising thing where you say, 'Oh, let's do something nice for the community'. It's excellence. I learned that from John Stevens, I learned that from Peter Oliver and Joan Oliver, that variability is powerful. John could have a room full of people, some people who had played instruments for 60 years, others who might have just bought that instrument, and yet the pieces he created were absolutely stunning. To be able to hear the beauty of every voice was radical for me, it was so important because it meant that it stopped me from [being isolated]. How blessed am I to realise that every voice is beautiful... it's massive." □ With thanks to David Toop. Maggie Nicols's *Creative Contradiction: Poetry, Story, Song & Sound* is released by Takuroku



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