

Interview carried out by Ben-Ewart Dean, Saturday 27th February 2010 in the DCA, Dundee, Scotland

Who the fk are you, and what the hell are you doing?**

I'm Michael Gallagher, and I make experimental music in a band with Neil Simpson, called Buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo. Buffalo. There's five of them. Hahahaha.

Oh, this is going to take a while.

It could take a while.

Next! So, do you want to talk a little bit about the music that you make?

I suppose my role in the band with Neil is that I'm more on the engineering side of things. I suppose both of us come up with ideas, usually based on very repetitive, arguably boring processes, involving doing the same thing again and again, or lots of the same thing but very slightly different. So we both come up with these ideas, and I suppose my role is really, once we've decided which ones are any good, my role in a way is to say how are we actually going to realise them, and if they're even feasible. So I'm kind of more an engineer and a producer, and Neil does a bit more of the performance stuff. I do a bit of the performance stuff too, but I don't massively enjoy live performance. I'm happier plugging things into each other and making sure things sound good and work properly and so on.

And what is it about repetition that interests you?

It's a good question. I think that my life in general, including my life outside of making music, is characterised by a big mess of stuff, and things, often having my attention divided between several different things, and having only a few minutes to spend on doing each thing. Like the job that I do, I work at a university, and it's a lot of tight deadlines and getting things done and sending off emails and all of this kind of thing. And it's difficult to find time within that to actually pay close attention to one particular thing. And I think what I like about repetition is it enables me to pay close attention to one particular thing, so if it's one certain type of sound, once you start repeating it, and get locked into the...what that does to your attention, I think, it draws it, really. And then you can hold, you can just focus on that thing. It's nice to get rid of all this clutter of other things and just make things simple, for once.

Why is it that you deal with repetition in terms of sound?

I've just always been drawn to sound. I don't know what that is, but I always have been. I remember playing with, my parents had an old record player at home, and I remember being very small and playing around with it. And wanting to interact with it, not just being happy sitting and listening to it, but wanting to mess around

with the sound. So I remember we had an uncle who was a, he was really into trains, steam trains and stuff. So he bought us this record, I think trying to get us into trains as well. Bought us this record of recordings of steam trains on a twelve inch. I must have been about four, five years old, maybe, and I remember I used to love this thing. The trains would move across the stereo space, and you could hear them coming and going. And I used to like, as they were coming past, fiddling around with the tone controls, making it more bassy or less bassy, or more trebly. So that, I don't know where I got that from, because that's from a very early age, just enjoying listening to sound and messing around with it.

Have you got any sound-based memories that are earlier than that?

That sticks in my memory quite strongly as an early one, because it was kind of the earliest instance, memory that I have because it's roughly what I do now. And that really is, I like going out with microphones, making recordings with things and I like afterwards fiddling about with them and changing the sound, using bits of equipment, I suppose. Bits of musical, bits of audio equipment.

What would you do if you couldn't make sound?

Oh, just listen, that's okay. I think I'm not very good at just leaving things alone. I suppose it's a character flaw, really, of wanting to meddle with things. But if I couldn't, then I just wouldn't and I'd just listen to sounds. And I think that the next question is, what would I do if I went deaf, well I'd still be experiencing sounds. I like paying attention to sound.

And how do you go about recording and distributing and making other people aware of the music you make?

I'm quite bad at it. I mean thinking about how long I've been making music and the number of things that are available in the public domain is a bit of a shocker. Because there's not very much out there of what I've done. I think I enjoy the process a lot, and then the kind of distribution side of things just isn't very interesting. So even just sending things off to record labels I find a chore. But we've done a bit of that. The stuff that I've been doing in this band Buffalo...we've had a couple of small labels release CDs, we've done a couple of self-released stuff as well, we've made CDs ourselves, handmade packaging and stuff like that, but yeah, I'm kind of, I'm of two minds about distribution. On the one hand I'm not that fussed about it because it's not the bit that I like, but also, and I think this is maybe as you get slightly older, like in my twenties I didn't care so much, but now I'm in my thirties, there's a bit of me that, I don't know quite where this comes from, but there's a bit of me that thinks "I'm not leaving anything behind of this, other than a hard disc full of half-finished, half-baked projects." And that somehow doesn't feel good. And it doesn't feel very healthy as well, not to have the possibility of other people being able to listen to something and give you critical feedback. So I'm kind of trying to do a bit more of that. Because I should say as well, I mean I make music in this band with Neil, but I also do stuff on my

own as well, and we're trying to do a bit more in the band, but I'm trying to do a bit more on my own as well, sending out demos and stuff like that.

Whereabouts do you perform?

Well, I don't perform all that often. I mean my thing about performance is I do get very nervous. I used to think, I remember telling people that I was never nervous with performances, and then one day I realised that it was a complete fabrication. I'd decided that it would be a good idea not to be, so I just pretended that I wasn't. But I get really nervy, which is funny because in my job I often have to do public presentations and stuff, but it usually doesn't bother me that much. But somehow with music it can really get to me. And I think it's a thing that if you don't do that many, as well, you don't learn how to cope with that stuff. But I find that not very enjoyable. So if I'm going to do a gig, I want it to be in a nice place, basically. And I think that that really mitigates against playing lots of gigs because usually, when you're a small band and it's a minority appeal thing, which is the sort of thing that we're doing, you end up playing gigs in shitty venues, but having done that, having had a number of different bands over the years and played gigs in shitty venues that stink, and stink of beer and the toilets are disgusting and you have to sit around through a sound-check it just, again, it's just one of those things that I could cope with in my twenties, but being in my thirties, it just does my head in. So the way that we work in the band, for example, I tend to say to Neil if we get offered any old gig anywhere, he's welcome to do it without me, and if we get offered a good gig, I'll come along.

One of the nicest things that we did, in 2007, we performed on four small islands in the Firth of Forth, which is the body of water just to the north of Edinburgh. And there are these little islands, some of them quite difficult to access. So we did performances on four of those during 2007. And that was really enjoyable because they were interesting spaces, they were spaces that we'd chosen. And also the kind of, you couldn't take much equipment, so there wasn't all that much to go wrong. You weren't depending on people for a PA system or anything like that. And there wasn't that thing you get of, just the kind of infrastructure of a venue not working in your favour, and being a really dingy, dark space or the people who were there have come there to have a drink, they didn't want to listen to music and what you're doing is something that they don't like, so it was nice to just go into some kind of other locations. We played in Huddersfield contemporary music festival 2008, and that was a really nice venue as well, and we've got a gig this year in InSpace, which is at the University of Edinburgh, which is in association with Dialogues, which is a festival of experimental music that happens in Edinburgh and again that's one that I'm curating. Somebody else is going to deal with the whole setting a PA up and all that sort of thing and it should be quite a nice gig, quite an easy gig.

How do people respond to your music?

It really varies, because the stuff that we do, it's really not going to be everyone's

cup of tea. And even people who are into certain kinds of experimental music may not like what we do, because it doesn't fit into categories like improvised music, it's not really that. Because it tends to be quite formal. And it doesn't really fit into things like the whole DIY noise scene, it doesn't really fit into, because often it sounds, on the surface of it, quite nice. It's often sounds that are quite easily approachable, like the sound of a guitar, but the way that it's structured is the more experimental bit because the guitar plays the same chord for twenty minutes, repeatedly. But some people really like it, some people really hate it, some people find it confrontational, but some people find it very meditative and soothing.

I think one of the things about making experimental music is you have to find something that you think is good and you think is worthwhile and then work on developing that and getting better at it. And that's not to say that you don't take other people's feedback into account, but you can't hinge what you do on it, because it is something, by its very nature, it's not going to appeal to the majority of people. So I think if you find people that are into the kind of things that you want to do and they don't like it, then you can take that a bit more seriously. And it's useful to have I guess what you'd call informed feedback. But it's also useful to have feedback from people who don't know anything about experimental music, and see what they have to make of it.

How did people respond to the events that you did on the islands?

The gigs that we did on the islands, we got pretty good responses to that. I think partly that was because when you're doing experimental music, you're often presenting people with something that is a bit unexpected to them, and may be a bit difficult to digest, so putting it in these unusual and quite stimulating spaces, so like for example on one island, we were in a partially ruined medieval abbey, on another island we were in an old military building, on another island we were next to a lighthouse. So they were quite unusual and inspiring spaces to be in and the way that we set the music up was to kind of work with those spaces. And I think that worked in our favour. I think that helped people engage with the music, because at least they were in this interesting and unusual space that they'd never been to before, and hearing this slightly unusual music and it kind of fitted together quite well.

One of the things is we've, that we've had gigs that we've done actually, is people who you wouldn't expect to come to that kind of gig. So for experimental music, the classic thing is that you get guys in their twenties who are generally university educated, generally glasses wearing, maybe slightly beardy kind of crowd. You know, there's a definite core market of people who are into that kind of thing. Slightly geeky, twenty something blokes, art students, that kind of thing. Which is absolutely fine, but it's been quite nice when we've played in slightly unusual locations, like on the islands, that we've had a much wider range of people come, particularly we've had people bringing children to the gig that we did on Cramond Island, and they seemed to be really into it. Which was great. Even very young children were bobbing along as we were doing this repetitive stuff. And also we've

had gigs where some older people have come, which has been unexpected but really nice. And again I think that's what doesn't attract me, or what I'm not so attracted to about doing gigs in these spaces like, the classic ones are places like Henry's Cellar Bar in Edinburgh or the 13th Note in Glasgow. They really attract a certain kind of crowd. People who know about experimental music and who go to those kind of things and who are happy going to a little, kind of slightly divey bar and having a few pints in the evening and that's absolutely fine, there's nothing wrong with that at all, but it doesn't excite me to play music in those spaces to those people. It feels kind of, it just feels quite narrow, I suppose.

Do you consider what you do to be art?

I've been sometimes describing what I do to people as sound art. I think since we, we did a piece in 2009 that was an installation. It was in an observatory up in Stirling, with an old telescope in this little Victorian observatory, we put a piece in there that was using sounds that were synthesised from star observation data. And then they were being processed by playing them into the space and then recording them, so they had this kind of, they were shaped by the acoustics of the space and we weren't present, we didn't perform it, it just got played in this space all across the course of a weekend and people went up in groups and visited it. And so I think at that point, that started to feel like it was more reasonable described as sound art than experimental music and I'm quite interested in sound art as well. Again, I think, coming at this from a musician point of view, it's just a different way to do what I'm doing, it's a different set of spaces. You can do stuff in galleries, it's a different audience. Again it's an audience that comes to contemporary art galleries, but they're not necessarily the same as the audiences that go to experimental music gigs, and again I think they can be a bit more diverse. We've done a few things in galleries as well, so we kind of sit on the edges of that. But I describe myself as an experimental musician and sound artist, rather than an 'artist' per se, because I think it is quite a different thing. Definitions are always problematic, inevitably. But they do have some sort of common sense value, and it's best to try and tell people something that is going to be broadly intelligible, rather than labelling yourself in a way that is going to be deliberately misleading.

What's your favourite noise?

What's my favourite noise or favourite sound? Is it noise? Favourite noise. See, I've recently revised my perspective on noise, and I've maybe...because of course experimental music is all about exploring the differences between music and sound and noise and implicitly questioning the way that those boundaries are set and saying "any sound can be music, any sound can be noise, any noise can be music" and so on. But I've recently had an experience with noise that I think is quite different. I've maybe become more entrenched in my position on noise because I've had a neighbour noise issue going on, and I think I've realised that noise is an experience, it's an experience of unwanted sound, and that's what I think. So the whole idea of noise music, which I think at one time I would have

subscribed to, I now think is kind of nonsense. Noise music is music, it's not noise. Even if it sounds very noisy to some people and even if some people would think it is extremely objectionable, it is not in itself noise, until it's experienced as unwanted sound. And usually it's being presented in the context of a gig or on a CD and the people who are buying it and listening to it want it. So I think at that point, reasonably it becomes music. So noise, I don't really have a favourite noise because it is, by definition something that is unwanted, and therefore not liked.

Okay, so what's your favourite sound?

What's my favourite sound? I really like continuous sounds in the environment. And these are normally things like hums and drones. Often quite quiet, and you don't notice them until you pay attention. So in this room you've got, there's fridges over there and they're classic ones that make this sort of sound, they give like a whirring sound, sometimes it's quite high-pitched. There's a low rumbling, and a little higher rattling coming in and a slightly more wide spectrum kind of noise that's just pulsing. You can't hear it so well, because there's the sound of people outside there, but if you close the door, you get that. So sounds like that. Things like extractor fans and stuff like that. Yeah, sounds accidentally occurring in the wider environment and often in the urban environment. And I like things like, on a bus you sometimes get a very strong concentration of sub-bass, particularly at the back where the engine is, and it's resonating the whole body of the bus, and you get this massive kind of whole body bass experience. I can really enjoy that as well.

And does any of that relate to the music that you make?

Yeah, I mean I go out and record this stuff. And one of the things that's interesting is that it often doesn't sound as interesting when you've recorded it and you listen back to it. I think part of being in the space and getting the kind of, and even with a stereo microphone, you don't quite get the same spatial sensation. I really like how sound works within spaces and how it is so strongly related to a sense of space. That's something that I'm interested in. But I do go round and record these sounds and then do things with them later in the studio. I do quite a bit of that, using contact microphones as well on things. We've done a piece of music based on contact microphone recordings of a wind turbine. And that again is a continuous droning type sounds, and that's something that I'm intending to do more of. But also I'm a sucker for musicality, because I tend to go for sounds that have pitch and rhythm, rather than just the sound of cars moving by or something like that. I tend to go for sounds that have some kind of distinctive musical characteristics. So I do go for things like blackbirds singing, I'm a big fan of. And the repetitiousness of it as well, because they sing in little strophes. If you listen to one for long enough, you can hear it singing similar patterns again and again, each time slightly different, so I can get quite enchanted by that.

What do you think the mainstream perception of experimental music is?

The impression that I sometimes get of a mainstream perspective on experimental music is that people who don't know much about experimental music don't understand what it is. So you sometimes will get people referring to what they do as experimental music and when you listen to it...I mean this raises the question of what the hell is experimental music and we're back to definitions and of course there's nothing much to be said that hasn't already been said, but you sometimes hear music that people have said is very experimental and actually it's essentially pop music with some slightly unusual production techniques. And so I think if there's anything I know about the perception of experimental music from the mainstream culture, there's maybe not a fully developed awareness of what experimental might mean. Of how far it actually might go.

When did you start making abstract or experimental music?

I think that's hard to answer because it's been quite a gradual process for me. I started out making music, well I did music GCSE at school, and was in bands playing very bog-standard, you know, whatever Smashing Pumpkins covers bands or whatever we were doing back then. And I always had this interest in music technology, but coming from a dance music point of view, I was really into rave music growing up in my teens, that was where all the energy was, and I grew up in a shitty town in the North West of England, so the energy around that was all the scene that was kicking off in Manchester and the warehouse parties and the acid house stuff and the Hacienda and all that business. And I was a bit too young to participate, but the energy of it was very strong.

So I grew up with this, and it was always this thing that I wanted to do was to get synthesizers and connect them to my computer and make that kind of music, and I dabbled around with that in my late teens and early twenties, and was doing very sort of very run-of-the-mill dance musicky-type stuff and then got more interested in the slightly further reaches of dance music, getting into bands like Autechre and that then starts to take you into the direction of more abstract sound, more abstract music, and it starts getting you then into the whole kind of, I guess classical experimental music, if you like, which is Cage, Feldman, Stockhausen, Boulez and people like that, and the Viennese people, Webern and things I got quite into, again in my twenties. So then this kind of, I guess dance music that I was making started to get more abstracted, and that's how I got into it. And I think doing very extreme repetitive music is in a way a very far-removed progression from that because dance music is essentially all about repetition and that, that ties together everything I've done, but the move to experimental music was quite gradual.

But I think it's a kind of a, it's a sort of a seeker mentality, if you like. It's a mentality of someone who, if they're in a place, for a while, and they've seen all of the places that they know in that town, or whatever, they start going to the edges and looking round at the other bits that no-one normally goes to. And you're either that kind of a person or you're not. Some people are just quite happy being in the centre. If you go and live in a new city, you go and live in the centre, but

there are some people that just want to go to the edges and go past the edges and go into the pockets that aren't very well explored. And I think that if you have that mentality, then no matter what your entry point is into music, you'll end up going to the edges of it.

Does that in any way relate to how you've ended up in Scotland?

No, you see, I could turn that on its head, really, and say that I'm actually really conservative when it comes to geographics. The reason why I ended up in Scotland is just because I came here for university. I wanted somewhere that was, I guess somewhere that was quite different to where I'd grown up, because it wasn't the most positive experience, growing up in a post industrial northern declining town. It was a place really to get out of if you possibly could. And so, yeah, I did. And then being in Edinburgh, it's just more convenience than anything else that I've stayed, I've developed a network of friends and also work stuff. It's easy for me to be there. But I definitely have that kind of, within the place that I'm in, that kind of explorer mentality if you like, I very quickly got bored of the centre of Edinburgh. It's so classic and iconic and it's beautiful and it's great, but it's missing...and I think that's something probably that there was a lot of, actually, where I grew up. There was a lot of old industrial sites, abandoned derelict places that people didn't normally go, and again that whole rave thing that was about reclaiming those spaces and using warehouses and all that sort of thing. So I'm very much drawn to those kind of things, I really like the docks down in Leith in Edinburgh, which is not a place where people tend to go, out by the sewage works which is, you know, a really kind of abject environment, some of those bits of town. But yeah, I like exploring them.

To what extent do you think there's a supportive community for the music that you make?

I don't know, I don't feel strongly part of a community, musically in Scotland. But I think you might find that everybody who does this kind of music feels similarly, because everyone's doing kind of their own sort of thing. And I say that I don't feel part of a community, but then there's small labels in Scotland who have been really supportive of our work, there's festivals in Scotland that have really supportive of what we do. So there's definitely people who will support you and who will help you out and who will kind of be on your side, I suppose. But ultimately when you're doing this kind of thing it feels quite individualised. Not necessarily individualised, because people are collaborating, I mean I collaborate, but there isn't this sense of a great big group where everyone's doing the same thing because I don't think that's what all this is about.