

## Keith Tippett – A Personal Memoir

There are many brilliant musicians in our world – but there are few who are so complete in their talent that they cover every aspect of musicianship: performer, instrumental virtuoso, innovator, composer, improviser, arranger, bandleader, sideman, collaborator, teacher and mentor – and cover each to the highest possible standard.

Keith Tippett was one of these – a rare, magically complete musician. Or “mujician” as his infant daughter innocently but prophetically mispronounced his occupation.

Much has been written – and rightly so – about Keith’s youthful development as a Bristolian organ scholar and a trad jazz band leader with KT and the Trad Lads and then his incredible early professional career with his own bands, the phenomenal 50-piece Centipede, his association with many other notable artists including King Crimson, Elton Dean, Stan Tracey, the exiled South African musicians and of course his beloved Julie (nee Driscoll) Tippetts. By the time he was thirty Keith had already amassed a body of work and experience that would outstrip most other artists’ lifetime achievement.

My acquaintance and friendship with Keith began a little later when he and I were both in our mid-thirties, a couple of years after the release of his first solo album *The Unlonely Raindancer* in 1980. Listening to that album today is still as much a jaw-dropping experience as it ever was – the thunderous orchestral-sounding passages, the anthemic melody of *Tortworth Oak*, the sparkling musical box pattern of *The Pool* – it’s a perfect reminiscence of Keith’s genius as a soloist and an indication of all the other ways in which his artistry was expressed. And I remember, too, that he played a version of *The Pool* in my first ever programme for the Bath International Music Festival in 1986.

I worked with Keith – and very often with Julie and the other exceptional members of *Mujician* – Paul Dunmall, Paul Rogers and Tony Levin - for much of the 1980s and 90s.

The late 1970s and early 80s was a period that hadn’t started well for Keith. He’d turned down the blandishments of a music industry that wanted to package him and Julie as mainstream rock artists to follow his dedicated but far less lucrative personal path of discovery and personal expression. The effects of Thatcherism and the publicly perceived state of the jazz scene (from near eclipse to the superficial hype of the so-called Jazz Revival) had dampened many of the opportunities for radical improvisers to work in the UK. Keith was already celebrated as one of the leading

innovators in European jazz, so bookings in Europe, especially tours in Italy organised by his old friend Riccardo Bergerone, brought some, but never really enough, work.

In the ensuing years I was never Keith's agent or manager or anything so well defined. He used to jokingly call me his "representative" which we both knew was much too pompous and formal. But in a way I was often a kind of improvised ambassador, looking for opportunities and connections that I could bring back to him.

What I actually did was to support and help organise Keith's projects, raise funding if required, help fix some gigs through my British and European contacts and, occasionally, find a new opportunity myself and one that I knew he'd be perfect to lead.

There was such a profusion of Tippett projects that it's hard, maybe in fact unnecessary, to put in any kind of chronological order. These are just a few, at random, starting with the new commissioned music and new Septet that resulted in the epic *A Loose Kite*....., recorded by the BBC in Exeter.

There was a resurgence of interest from French jazz festivals; the regular liaison with Riccardo and touring in Italy, with his own music and as a collaborator with others; and a trip to Riga, Latvia, on which he had the idea for what would become, many years later, another major composition. There were tours and an album with fellow Bristolian Andy Sheppard; and, then as ever, more gigs - and the aptly titled album *Couple In Spirit* - with Julie, his beloved partner in music and in life.

There were commissions, including from the Kokoro contemporary music ensemble and the piano quintet Linuckea commissioned by and performed with the Kreutzer String Quartet. And the inauguration of Keith's idea for a Rare Music Club, first in Bristol and then on tour, which featured Mujician alongside an incredible weekly programme of leading folk and contemporary classical musicians, mostly friends and admirers. Everyone played, and did so happily, for the same (rock bottom but completely egalitarian) fee. The programme was different every time and always fascinating, featuring many shades of today's music with the exception, as Keith put it in one of his well-honed phrases, of "No Baroque, no Jazz-Rock and no Fred Wedlock".

Large-scale and long-term projects always seemed possible with Keith and so did adventurous circumstances. The British Council (god bless them) supported a lot of Keith's overseas work. The British Council funded visit to Tblisi, Georgia, just as that nation broke free from the Soviet Union and Britain struggled to break free from Margaret Thatcher, was the start of a collaboration between Mujician plus Julie and musicians from the Georgian State Radio & TV Orchestra.

After hair raising Aeroflot flights and a VIP concert in Tblisi – amusingly billed in translation as ‘Julie Tippetts, jazz singer, under the direction of her husband and three musicians’ – Mujician started rehearsing Keith’s scores with singers and instrumentalists from the orchestra. Initially bewildered and unsure – and with only a clever but non-musical Georgian interpreter to communicate between them and Keith – the Georgians ended up utterly convinced and committed and playing their hearts out in a musical environment that until then was completely new to them. The resulting Mujician and the Georgian Ensemble (released on CD as The Bristol Concert) not only played in London and Bristol but on the bill, with folk groups, orchestras and comedians, in state-sponsored gala concerts in Tblisi to celebrate the first anniversary of and independent Georgia and election of its first President.

The other big project for Mujician around that time was another British Council supported exchange, this time with South Africa and the young saxophonist Zim Ngwana and his band Ingoma. Over three years these two bands – touring under the banner title New Notes (the name a conscious nod to the path-finding Blue Notes) spent time in residencies in Bath and Johannesburg, and toured extensively in both the UK and South Africa. One of my abiding memories of the project was seeing and hearing them play to a crowd of thousands in Pretoria in an outdoor festival celebrating the first anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s election as President.

In part, the inspiration and motivation for the New Notes project was the bittersweet juxtaposition of two separated generations and their experience. Keith Tippett had been a close associate of the exiled South Africans in the UK (Louis Moholo, Mongezi Fesa, Dudu Pukwana, Johnny Dyani, Harry Miller, Chris McGregor et al) and was also a member of the Dedication Orchestra in Britain. Zim Ngwana and his colleagues, the rightful heirs of the Blue Notes, had nevertheless been denied access to their role models because they had gone into exile (and sadly most had passed away) long before the end of apartheid and before Zim’s generation had the chance to hear or play with them. So it was Keith who provided the essential connection between the two South African generations, spending time telling Zim and the others stories of the exiled musicians and the European jazz life and spending long and happy sessions listening to Blue Notes albums.

In South Africa, Keith with Mujician ran several workshop sessions for young musicians around the country. In a run down high school complex in Pelmama township, Soweto, I watched and listened as Keith held a group of teenagers enthralled, describing and explaining all kinds of musical ideas to them without even the use of a piano to demonstrate on, but with a clarity that conveyed even complex ideas in a way that was immediately embedded in their understanding.

Keith's reputation as an educator or mentor is well known at Dartington, for instance, or the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and so many more workshops and projects. He never liked referring to himself as a teacher because he didn't see himself in that formal role but the role he did take was personal and inspirational. The South African workshops provide one example and another, that I also witnessed first-hand, was a project, shared with Julie, with primary school children in an obscure little town in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire.

Whether working with eight year olds in class or teenagers in youth groups or the most seasoned professional musicians, Keith always gave them his full energy and attention. Everyone in the group he was dealing with were treated as his equals. He was always disciplined and straightforward; he never patronised or talked down or simplistically to anyone he was teaching; he always encouraged people to take risks, create and express themselves bravely through improvisation and celebrated them when they did; and he never dismissed or disrespected any of his students for their musical efforts, however modest.

After several sessions in the Gloucestershire primary school project, Keith and Julie led the children in a concert for their friends and families. The children, transfixed with the magic of the music, sang and made improvised soundscapes with as much conviction as the finest choral society. In a classroom project at the end of the period with Keith and Julie, the class teacher asked children to draw and write their impressions of their new grown up friends and the music they had experienced. In the middle of a host of lovely crayon drawings of Keith and Julie, plus lots of happy comments, one paper among all those pinned up in the classroom stood out particularly for me. In answer to the question 'What did you learn in this music project?' one little boy wrote, simply 'From Keith and Julie I learnt that there is no such thing as a wrong note'.

In the classroom Keith had not only explained that was no such thing as a wrong note but also pointed out that as they played and sung more and more they would find that some notes seem to go better with one another so they could always keep exploring and choosing which notes were right for them. It seemed to me to be a sentiment that was right at the heart of everything that Keith did in music.

I had to leave off working regularly with Keith when I moved to live and work in Scotland at the end of the 1990s. But I had one last and hugely satisfying opportunity to work with a KT project when he asked me to help organise his new, ambitious (and second biggest) band, the Tapestry Orchestra. Bringing Keith's hand-picked favourite band members from Italy and Germany and from all across the UK, fundraising, commissioning, liaising with tour promoters and the BBC and finding

time, money and space for rehearsals and accommodation – it was a lot of work for an organiser but much more for the band's composer, arranger, conductor, leader and pianist.

Tapestry premiered in 1997 at Bath International Music Festival's European Jazz Weekend. Before the applause had died down, Armand Meignan, Directeur of Europa Jazz du Mans, one of France's leading festivals, ran up to the stage and booked the band there and then for his festival the following year. Tapestry was so full of brilliant musicians and long-time comrades that Armand made use of several small groups from the band, making his weekend programme an indisputable TippetFest. The Tapestry gig was recorded by French radio and, much later, released on CD as Live at Le Mans.

My regular work with Keith and Julie and Tapestry came to an end immediately after Le Mans as I got off our returning Eurostar and headed up to my new job in Scotland. While I worked in Edinburgh I saw far less of them, but even so there were occasional gigs over the border, including a well-remembered mentoring role with the Distil project for traditional musicians, and the splendid new work You Never Know commissioned by Tommy Smith for his Scottish National Jazz Orchestra.

From a distance and with only occasional meet-ups I watched and listened as Keith's career and creativity bounded along year after year. There was the inspired combination of the BBC Singers and his chosen saxophonists in The Monk Watches The Eagle, the Granite to Wind Octet, works for the Apollo Saxophone Quartet, Finland's UMO national jazz orchestra and The Nine Dances of Patrick O'Gonogon for octet and dancer. There were British Council projects, residencies, workshops and tours, taking him either as soloist or with bands as far afield as Japan, Australia, India, Canada, Russia, and throughout Europe and the UK. Keith's reputation as one of the leading voices of contemporary music, jazz and improvisation just continued to grow.

Back in recent years in the West Country – a homeland that Keith himself never left – I saw Keith and Julie occasionally and helped to fix the odd gig. I came to realise how much I'd missed being in the middle of a KT project – the buzz, the friendship, the brilliant musicians, the camaraderie, the laughs - and everyone's total absorption in making music.

I last heard Keith play, in a two-piano duo with Matt Bourne, at the Royal Northern College of Music in the 2019 Manchester Jazz Festival. Keith was frail by then, having already had a serious run of health problems but his playing, although maybe a little sparser of late, still captured his unending spirit of reflection and exploration. Matt loved those duos – he was a lifetime fan and felt privileged to be able to have such an inspiring mutual, musical conversation.

Since that gig Keith and I talked on the phone a few times - about possible gigs that I could help with – about what to do during the Covid lockdown (I suggested that he should imagine that he'd been commissioned by me and start to write a new piece) – and about octet rehearsals and a benefit gig, not for himself, but for Louis Moholo who was also in poor health back in South Africa.

That was all to happen when he was well enough. I knew he was in pretty bad shape right through the last year but maybe in denial, maybe in simple disbelief or optimism, I couldn't believe that he wasn't going to be around to play again. But then, on the Sunday night, Riccardo called me with a sorrowful voice and I guessed the news.

We've all got our own memories of Keith. Mine are long and varied and, as warm or funny or uplifting as they are, they now are tinged with sadness and a sense of loss. Hearing him play solo in the ancient stone-built, high-ceiling'd chapel in the Abbaye l'Epau in Le Mans, sending notes like shafts of light up into the chapel's perfect acoustic, playing the room as much as playing the piano, with equal virtuosity. Standing in the main street of Tblisi at midnight, with our coats off, arguing about some chance remark with the foolishness and force of several glasses of Georgian wine, when he challenged me to a fight, which of course we never had, with "Scrapper Tippetts from Southmead". Sitting next to him in Riga at an exquisitely aethereal concert by the Latvian State Radio Choir, when he turned and whispered to me "I've got an idea for something with choir and saxophones" – which around two decades later became *The Monk Watches the Eagle*.

Amongst his signature philosophical phrases Keith often used to repeat "Our job as musicians when we play a gig is to remove our listeners from chronological time". He did that for me every time – and will still do it on record and in memory for as long as I can imagine. Keith Tippett was funny (oh those classic jokes), sociable (another cider please), passionate in his views and opinions and, sometimes just a wee bit intransigent ("Can a diva", someone fondly asked, "have a Bristol accent?") – and I swear that I enjoyed every single moment of the chronological and musical time I spent in his company. Along with thousands of others - musicians, students and audiences - I'll miss him terribly.

**Nod Knowles**

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