

» Story and photos by Michael Jackson

# In For Life

## The 40-Year Coincidental Saga of the Instant Composers Pool

The Instant Composer's Pool, as a record label, musical collective and modus operandi, was established by Willem Breuker, Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink 40 years ago in Amsterdam. In 1967 there was no precedent for what two Dutchmen and a pianist born in Kiev had in mind. "Except," Mengelberg said, "maybe in America with those women around Paul Bley—Carla Bley and Annette Peacock—what they were up to with the Jazz Composers Guild."

Saxophonist Breuker, perhaps the ICP's primary catalyst, broke away to form his *Kollektief* in 1974. Since that time Mengelberg and Bennink have persevered as one of the most enduring tag-teams in creative music—the portly pianist playing a wryer Hardy to the gangly drummer's knowingly slapstick Laurel. Seeking comparatives to their inimitable act is tempting, but folly.

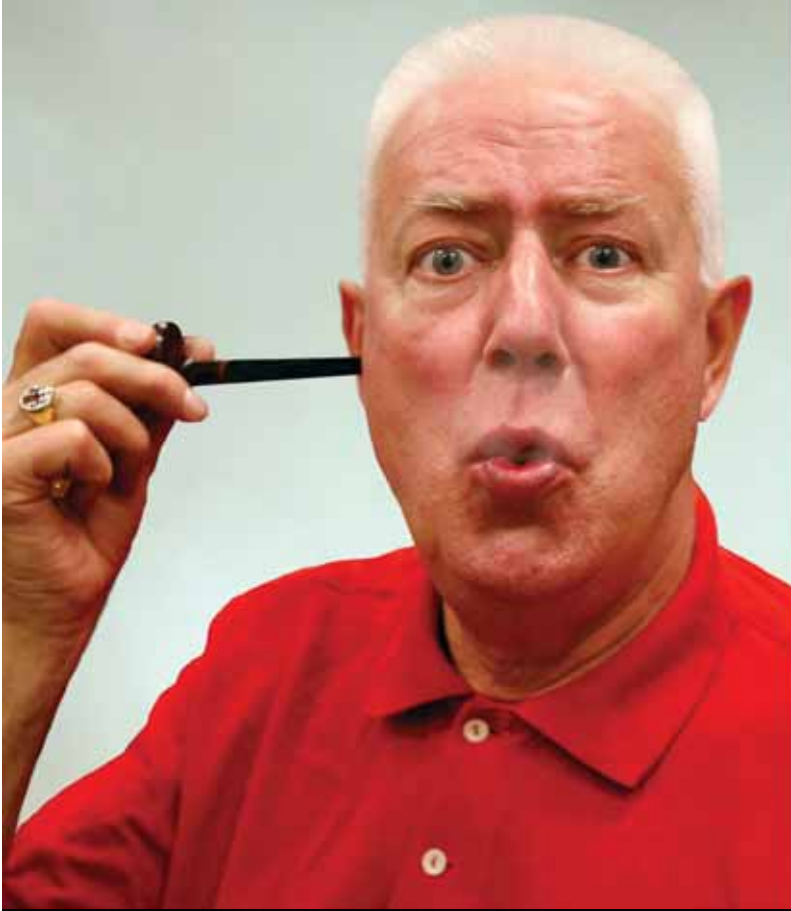
"When people sit in a concert hall they are used to this and that, and then suddenly the piano player is eating a cake, or the drummer is taking his cymbals off and winding them on the floor," Bennink said. "Then we talk a little bit, and people think it's Laurel and Hardy. I never have that intention."

When the two toured the Midwest with the ICP Orchestra last spring, their relationship resembled a matador and picador—Han the goader, and Misha the spiker. Bennink didn't buy the analogy. "When you go and look at a painting as a spectator, there always should be room to come into a painting, grow into it, find your place," Bennink said. "When I played with Misha there was always so much space that there was time to make up these thoughts."

Mengelberg was more sympathetic. "I'm not courageous enough to stab with a sword and go through to the kill," he said. "I stab with a pin. I like to hinder people."

Neither man lacks courage of conviction, even if Bennink is the more physically demonstrative of the two. During separate solo performances orbiting their concert with the orchestra, both flouted compromise. Bennink remains protean, his antics refusing to pall in the way aspects of the *Kollektief's* schtick have over the years, in large part due to his sheer athleticism (despite being almost 65) and his reliance on precipitous site specifics. At his performance at the Intuit art gallery in Chicago, he put 10-foot planks into service as ungainly drumsticks. In the meantime, he annihilated several loaner snares and used a cupped hand to spookily control reverberations from a surviving snare drumhead.

Some express *longueur* at Bennink's forays from the kit, at which he is a deep catalyst of swing feel and meister of brushwork amid the gamut of traditional skill. Yet his improv theatrics demand a more nerve-wracking sense of timing.



NAME: BENNINK HJ

PLACE OF BIRTH: ZAANDAM THE NETHERLANDS

LENGTH OF ICP SERVICE: 40 YEARS

INSTRUMENT(S) PLAYED: DRUM (+ VARIOUS)

FAVORITE IMPROVISATIONAL DEVICE: \_\_\_\_\_

LEAST FAVORITE IMPROVISATIONAL DEVICE: \_\_\_\_\_

YOUR MUSICAL PHILOSOPHY (TODAY, IN A NUTSHELL): NO

SHOE SIZE: 45



NAME: Mosha Muzelbey

PLACE OF BIRTH: Kiif [Ukraine]

LENGTH OF ICP SERVICE: all the way

INSTRUMENT(S) PLAYED: piano, voice

FAVORITE IMPROVISATIONAL DEVICE: hindermy people

LEAST FAVORITE IMPROVISATIONAL DEVICE: sparsely used is my slimy side

YOUR MUSICAL PHILOSOPHY (TODAY, IN A NUTSHELL): even one word would not fit in any nut shell

SHOE SIZE: 39-40

Mengelberg will start a performance with a blank slate in the same fearless manner, commencing with a scribble on the keys, a nursery rhyme—"a little nonsense" as he would term it—then coax it into something, or perhaps nothing. To him, either is acceptable. Beginning his solo set at Chicago's Claudia Cassidy Theater, he tossed his leather jacket on the apex of the open piano lid and let it hang as an affront to concert society. Riddled with sniffles, his rather disgusting deployment of tissues and throat coughs rendered literal the term of the music as phlegmatic.

Though Mengelberg's connection with the Fluxus movement from the 1960s has been overplayed, such unapologetic interpolation of chance conditions is part of his general manifesto, calculated to set bourgeois teeth on edge. To top off his set of miniaturized ruminations and underscore disregard for audience expectation, Mengelberg pranced across the stage like a sugarplum fairy.

The true wonder of the ICP Orchestra, however, is not the idiosyncrasies of these two giants of dada-jazz, but how they have magnetized a loyal league of uppercrust musicians—the "Lifers"—whose personalities also define the group.

"ICP changed quite a bit in 40 years," Bennink reminisced. "How the band sounds now, how they work for each other and they are all good improvisers, it reminds me of the Duke Ellington band. It's not a showoff band. It's a band that's interested in music. It can only work the way it works now with these people."

Alto saxophonist/clarinetist Michael Moore has been with the ICP 26 years, although he knew nothing of Bennink and Mengelberg when he hit Holland in 1978 with Available Jelly. "I came to Amsterdam from New York for the theater festival, the Festival of Fools," Moore said. "I went to the Kroeg to hear Han and Misha with guitarist Derek Bailey."

Moore was at first skeptical of the Dutch duo. "I wasn't sure who was who; there was a piano and drum set on stage, but the only thing heard during the 30 minutes I stayed was a string trio," he said. "Misha and Han were playing violins; one of them was metal. Perfect for Derek, of course, but it sounded horrible."

Trumpeter Thomas Heberer has been with the ICP for 15 years. "On our recent trip to Australia I heard someone play soprano sax next to my hotel room," he said. "I was irritated since no one in the band plays soprano. The person was playing the melody of 'Ask Me Now,' one of Thelonious Monk's masterpieces. It turned out the mystery player was Han."

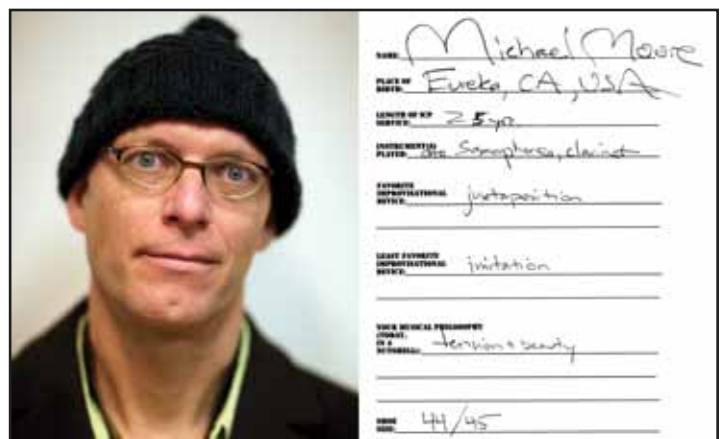
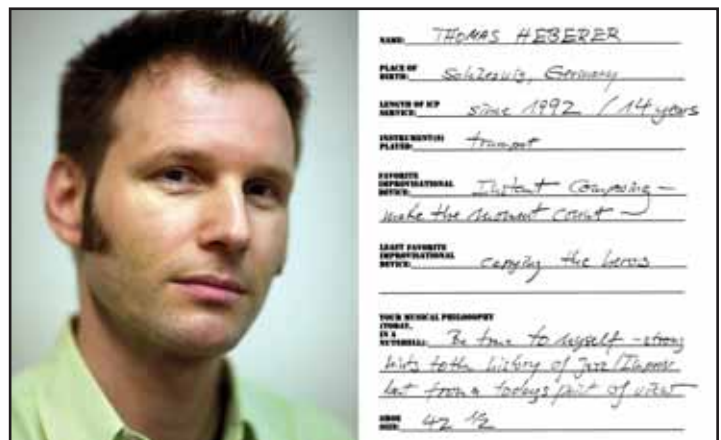
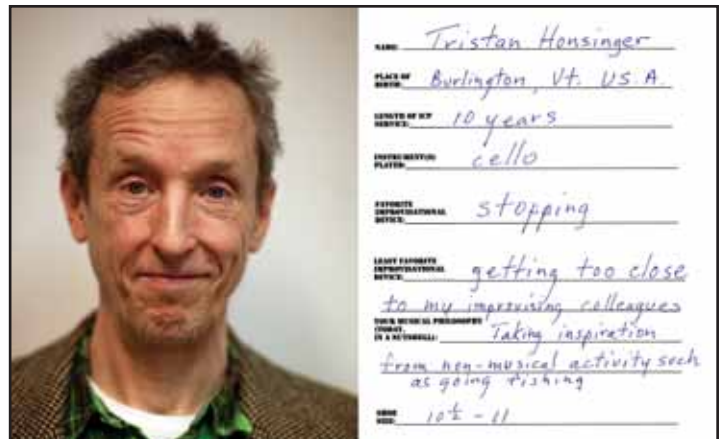
It was a throwback to earlier days when Bennink would add clarinet, banjo and assorted paraphernalia with saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. Point being, nothing is sacred here, despite a corporate reverence for such giants as Ellington, Herbie Nichols and Monk.

Yet Mengelberg maintains he raised the ire of American jazz musicians for plundering the latter's book. "Cecil Taylor says I am a thief, that I robbed Monk," he said. "But I robbed Monk in a period when nobody thought of robbing Monk, so I had free entrance there."

At a Chicago Jazz Festival in the '80s, Mengelberg recast "'Round Midnight" in the major key, an act that allegedly infuriated Muhal Richard Abrams, a man who Mengelberg considers something of a Stateside counterpart. "He thought that was sacrilege, when Monk had only been dead five years," he said. "'Round Midnight' makes a happy song when played in the major key, although it is an awful sound."

Mengelberg's inverted chutzpah has a child's brashness, a directness he holds dear. His sabotage baby-monkey vocals, glib whistling and sporadic kindergarten pianism on "De Sprong, O Romantiek Der Hazen" from the ICP's 2003 CD *Aan & Uit* is a vivid example. But Mengelberg's deep appreciation for Monk allows little shrift for his sidemen. Even John Coltrane was in the doghouse, "always playing the highest tone on his instrument, which was indiscreet and idiotic."

Mengelberg met Monk in the '60s, winning his trust with the delivery of his favorite cocktail ("a mixture of beer, cream, whiskey and crème de menthe") and then nagging him to play "Criss Cross" by making his own







ICP in Chicago in 2006

copycat rendition at the piano. (“Criss Cross” remains popular in the ICP repertoire, as featured on the group’s latest recording, *Weer Is Een Dag Voorbij*).

The ICP is populated with performers and writers predicated by magpie versatility. It’s no accident that tenor saxophonist Tobias Delius taps the bluster of Ben Webster, or that Ab Baars will write a chart on “Perdido” for *Weer Is Een Dag Voorbij*, drawing heavily from Clark Terry’s arrangements for Ellington.

Moore said that studying with Jaki Byard in Boston prepped him for Mengelberg’s performance technique. “Both had a deep knowledge of tra-

dition but didn’t let that get in the way of the music,” he said, adding that the lack of a partition between classical and jazz realms within the ICP is another attraction. “Stravinsky-meets-Sonny Rollins.”

The socialist politics, or communal organization, was also a relief after the American model. “We share money, space in the photo, responsibility during sound checks and composing set lists,” Moore said. “This comes so naturally now that I’ve been shocked when dealing with the American leader/sidemen system. I appreciate that Misha and Han are content putting their esthetic stamp on the group and treating the rest of us as equals.”

Dave Douglas, who has collaborated extensively with Mengelberg and Bennink, has an outside perspective on the workings of the band. He envisions it as a herd of elephants. “Each one doing its own thing, seemingly oblivious to the others,” the trumpeter said. “Without any cue [elephants] all start running in one direction. Without any signal again they stop. Scientists say there must be cues, but that we humans are just not aware of them. I feel the same way about the ICP. I’d like to know what those invisible signals are and how they work. I’ve invited the group to the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music in hopes of getting to the bottom of this. That should be a trip.”

“Initially, Misha was the bandleader,” Baars remembered, “composing, organizing, rehearsing written parts and the improvisations. Over and over explaining everything. During concerts he would hardly play piano. He just listened, directed—looking angry, furious, or laughing and enjoying what was going on. These days everybody in the orchestra is a ‘band-leader.’ In my 22 years [in the group], the orchestra has become a musical organism that develops itself, that changes by the musical input of the individual. Everybody takes responsibility. Some fine surgery is going on. It can be crowded, but everybody is aware of the balance. Sometimes a disturbance of the balance is important and opens up new possibilities.”



would rather have a new album out than put some old vinyl stuff on CD.”

Strings have always balanced horns in ICP, although the emphasis shifted with the arrival of Toby Delius in in 2002. “I was aware of the string players’ worries,” Delius said. “I wondered if the band needed another saxophone/clarinet. I never petitioned to become a member; it happened gradually. Han pushed for me to become full time. Just before the tour we got snowed in in Denver. After all the visa formalities I bumped into Misha and he said, ‘You’re coming to America with us, how nice!’ How nice, indeed, and I’ll gladly remain with ICP for as long as they’ll have me.”

Violinist Mary Oliver joined officially in 2000, though she’d worked with other members since moving to Amsterdam five years prior. She spliced together her own parts (as suggested by Mengelberg), borrowing bits from the trumpet and clarinets for “Alexander’s Marchbefel” just in time for her inaugural ICP concert at the Ulrichsberger Kaleidophon festival. “The first gig was daunting,” she said. “I was sharing the stage with all these great musicians, most of them playing horns. Then there’s that rhythm section. Being a woman and a string player automatically put me in the minority. But the guys are sensitive. I let them know if my arm is breaking (not to mention bow hairs) from playing fortissimo all night.”

Susanna von Canon has been managing the ICP for 16 years, and she’s learned well how to wrangle this cast of characters on the road.

“What’s so pleasant is that I can rely on everyone off-stage, but onstage they surprise me,” she said. “Even on a long tour, the band never comes up with the same set list, and if a tune is played two days in a row, it’s entirely turned around—different soloist, different tempo, different segue. I’ve always got an evening to look forward to on concert days.”

Mengelberg’s appetites and scant regard for social mores surface on these journeys. Bassist Ernst Glerum once shared his recordings with the Curtis Clark trio featuring Bennink and himself on a car journey with Mengelberg. “He asked, ‘Do you like this type of music?’” Glerum said. “He then started his exposé on the possible delights of consuming human flesh.”

No conventional role model, Mengelberg once offered Glerum’s 8-year-old son a cigarette before an ICP concert and asked him whether he liked the concept of school.

Heberer had a more alarming road experience with Mengelberg: “You get the impression he is not interested to reach his destination without an accident. Once I was with him and Tristan and Misha fell asleep at the wheel. We went off the road into the fields.”

As Mengelberg takes his conversations—as he does his music—on a peregrination of his divining, Bennink speaks fast in long, compact lines, which echo his stick work. When he

seems passionate or irascible, he’ll abruptly detour into a cheeky aside. He avoids being tied to commentary about past or future. It’s all about the now.

Bennink likens stoking the ICP to swimming—trying different strokes to get across, or upending a rucksack and handing out music-making materials. “You dive in a pool and you try to reach the sound—the sides—and don’t sink,” he explained. “Improvisation is like daily life, like a kitchen, like crossing the street. It’s nothing special. Everybody is

improvising everyday but nobody realizes it. I swim like a dog, with a bite in my bag, in the form of a drumstick.”

Pressed to praise colleagues in the ICP, Bennink sidestepped: “We know each other so well it is like dancing.”

He then whistled epiphanies with adjectives like “incredible” and “super-top”; even Mengelberg was awarded “fine old geezer.”

As for Mengelberg, regarding future schemes for ICP: “I don’t make plans. I’ll leave it all to coincidence.”

DB

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