

Eulogy for Roderick Poole

(1962-2007)

Invocation

We are here to celebrate the life of Roderick Poole, a musician, a teacher, a friend and an inspiration to so many people. Jim McAuley recalls initially being “mesmerized by his... crystalline tones”, then later coming to admire his “exquisite control of ... dynamics and phrasing”. Devin Sarno “never could quite figure out how one man with one guitar could generate such an all-enveloping aural space”. Jeremy Drake described Poole as an “intense and uncompromising” man who performed his music “with a focus that touched upon transcendence”. Nels Cline called him, “a true artist, probably a genius”

Early Days in England – From Cricket Mallet to Les Paul

Roderick Poole was born in Taplow in Shropshire, England on January 4, 1962 to Douglas and Ruth Poole. Rod’s parents owned and operated cafes and grocery shops in various towns such as Cumnor, Poole, and Scarborough, where they finally settled. Doug and Ruth liked to entertain guests, and Rod fondly recalled that he was often the only child amongst a group of quite talkative adults. Perhaps this environment was the genesis of Rod’s passion for discussion and debate. There are scores of people, who have described spending hours with Rod, talking not only about music, but also politics, film, and literature. Jim McAuley has noted that, “Rod had informed opinions on practically any subject”.

Rod was an only child, who came to Doug and Ruth later in life. His parents doted on him and Rod felt quite close to them. As a boy he was upset on his first day of school, feeling that it cheated him of time he would rather be spending at home. That first evening, he approached his father, and I’d wager he had that serious squint in his eyes. “I trust there’s not going to be anymore of this!” “Sorry son, but this will have to continue for some time”. Rod was not happy, and did not find much to inspire him at school. It’s ironic that he spent much of his adult life as a teacher. But, he was always restless and inquisitive and perhaps he was simply bored with the rigid structure of English schools. Nevertheless, he found ways to impress the other students, as Duncan Salkeld recalls, “He could run fast and excelled at sport, routinely knocking cricket balls into the field beyond the school fence (much to the annoyance of the teachers).”

Rod began playing guitar in 1972 at the age of ten. By age fourteen, he was playing a cherry-red Les Paul and had mastered blues and rock styles. Duncan Salkeld adds, “...as Rod progressed, it became clear that his interest, and forte, lay in technical mastery of the guitar. His style became efficient, precise, stunningly quick, and quite unusual.” He was especially drawn to the classic virtuosos of electric guitar: Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix. He retained an affection and admiration for their music throughout his life, amassing a tremendous collection of live recordings and bootlegs. Rick Grunauer has pointed out that “Rod knew (vinyl) matrix numbers, memorized dates, times, song orders and the unique characteristics of each show”.

Oxford to Hollywood – The Prepared Table-Top Guitar

As a young adult, Poole moved out of his parent's house and took on a series of jobs, the longest of which was at the legendary Garon Records in Oxford's covered market, where he became known to customers for his detailed knowledge of recorded music. As Rod's musical tastes were developing, he was drawn to the esoteric and experimental styles of artists from the U.S. such as John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and John Cage.

His discoveries led to changes in his own technique and approach to music. Thus, in 1983, Poole became a founding member of the Oxford Improvisors Collective. He was involved for several years, performing and hosting concerts by the cream of the English free improvisers. Rod later recalled that guitar legend Derek Bailey was the only visiting musician who would perform in settings along with members of the Oxford group. This marked the beginning of a long friendship with Derek Bailey, who regarded Poole quite highly. During this period, he also became a close friend of recording engineer Michael Gerzon. These two mentors were very important to Poole's development, providing inspiration in both the artistic and technical realms of music.

I first met Rod in 1989, shortly after he first came to Los Angeles, while he was sharing an apartment with Swiss sax player Hermann Buhler. They were the hot new talent from across the pond, toasted at parties at Mac programmer, juggler, and amateur Grateful Dead concert recorder Jim Lloyd's flat near Beverly Center. At one such party, drummer Dave Kerman invited them both out to a makeshift studio in Torrance for a day of improvising with the U Totem rhythm section. Rod was playing a prepared electric guitar on a table with a hard-edged, angular approach that was certainly informed by his contact with Derek Bailey. He sounded fantastic, was friendly, and seemed refreshingly earnest to a native Angelino, so I invited him to play on one of the tracks we were recording for the first album of our hybrid acoustic/electric group. In discussions at Jim's flat or later in a teepee with disc jockey Bruce Hollihan, I learned about Rod's first hand knowledge of the English avant-garde and how to sort out AMM from ICP from SME. After a while, Hermann Buhler returned to his home in Europe. But, Rod stayed on and made Los Angeles his new home.

Avenue 65 to Poop Alley – The 17-Step Acoustic Guitar

I lost touch with Rod in the early 90s, and the next time I heard him he sounded completely different. He was now playing acoustic guitar exclusively. He had snagged a nice 1972 Martin 00 18, during a visit to New York City. But now, listen to those harmonies, and wait, look at those frets! This was not some obscure open-tuning; this was the mathematically perfect ratios of Just Intonation. This could only mean one thing. Rod must have met Kraig Grady; Kraig has been carrying the torch for Pythagoras here in the southland since he met his mentor, Erv Wilson back in 1975. Wilson is a musical theorist and composer specializing in tuning systems. And, as Grady and other students before him, Poole had moved in to Wilson's house at Avenue 65 in Highland Park in a move that dramatically changed his art. There was even some talk among his friends that this might destine him to obscurity. This way really was the path less traveled, taken by off-beat composers Harry Partch, LaMonte Young, and a few others only known to the cognoscenti.

It's ironic that the practice of Just Intonation should be considered obscure. It is not esoteric or experimental at all; it is simply the use of the natural harmonics that occur in pipes or strings or the human voice. However, in Europe in the 18th Century, a Faustian deal was made that created the ability to modulate in twelve keys and eventually for violins and pianos and even saxophones to all play together. In exchange for this facility, the purity of the natural harmonic intervals was sacrificed. As a result of this decision, today all of our instruments use this twelve-note system. So, in order to realize the pure intervals of just intonation, Kraig Grady modified marimbas and pump organs. And now Poole had re-fretted his guitar, a vintage Martin at that! There were now seventeen notes, rather than the usual twelve. Moreover, his style of playing had changed. His playing was no longer disjointed; it now focused on the subtly changing articulation of arpeggiated figures.

What I didn't learn till later was that while still in England, Poole had already begun to move away from the angular, pointillism of Derek Bailey to an acoustic finger-picking style more akin to the folk hero Davey Graham. Poole had waited to spring this style on Los Angeles till he had found the right context. This approach, derived from folk music, would both ground his music and leave him free to concentrate on exploring the rich harmonic textures possible with just intonation.

People were starting to take notice of Poole's new direction and in 1994; he performed at a dinner concert at Tom Grimley's Poop Alley recording studio. This garage in East L.A. next to an auto shop, with all the attendant sounds and smells, would give birth to many post-modern sound pioneers, like that band with the unforgettable name, Waldo the Dog Faced Boy, which Grimley produced along with Devin Sarno. Their collaboration led to the founding of Win Records, the first label to publish Rod Poole's new music. A fourteen minute excerpt from the dinner concert was released on the infamous Poop Alley Tapes compilation; then in 1996, Win Records released "The Death Adder", Rod Poole's first solo album. That year also marked the recording of his second album "December 96" made on Poole's own equipment in his new home in Hollywood, the apartment known as Waring Manor.

Waring Manor – Love... and a Stray Cat

At a certain time in life, different for each one, a man's thoughts may turn toward home and hearth and a companion to share life's journey. I distinctly remember a conversation at the Cat and the Fiddle, when I advised Rod against dating musicians. Well, it's not an absolute rule. And I don't know if Rod was really taking my advice or not, but in any case, I think everyone around him was happy when Rod met Lisa, simply because Rod was so obviously happy. Lisa Ladaw was living in Costa Mesa when they first met in 1997, but it wasn't too long before she moved to Hollywood and they began to share their lives with each other. Lisa was not a stranger to moving around, having lived in many places with her family from the East Coast of this country to the coral island of Okinawa. All of Rod's friends accepted Lisa and he was welcomed into her family. It was just so obvious that they were devoted to each other, that you couldn't help wishing them well.

At some point after Lisa moved in to Waring Manor, Rod told her about an alley cat that he had noticed hanging around. Unlike most Angelinos, Rod actually walked around and got to know his neighbors, even the cats! This particular cat must have impressed Rod in some way, because he gave him the name of Bag and over time, Bag became an occasional guest in Rod's flat, showing up just like another musician in the constant flow of visitors. Later, when Bag became ill with feline AIDS, Rod and Lisa nursed Bag through to the end of a difficult downslide. The devotion that Rod demonstrated to this poor diseased creature was truly amazing. Rod would simply not give up. That's the way he was.

The Path – Teacher, Historian, Collaborator, and Soloist

Even the most dedicated artist must deal with the realities of rent from time to time. For Rod, giving guitar lessons provided primary income for a great portion of his life. Throughout all his years in L.A. he had a steady clientele of young guitar students. This was a side of Poole that many of his musician peers didn't know, but when he did speak of his students it was always with great concern and affection. He cared about each one's development as a musician, no matter what style or musical goal they chose to pursue. Rod often made friends with the entire family of one of his students. Rod was never two-faced in his personal interactions. Whether young or old, rich or poor, Rod always treated everyone equally.

From 1997 on, many of Poole's activities would take the form of collaborations, beginning with the long-form drone exploration of *Voice of the Bowed Guitar*, with Joseph Hammer and Douglas Williford. This project would give rise to the "Iasis" album, credited to the Rod Poole Trio, though in their concerts they were always known as *Voice of the Bowed Guitar*.

Poole was also honing his skills as a recording engineer. In addition to recording his own solo and group performances, he recorded an extensive series of sessions in El Segundo for woodwind ace Lynn Johnston in an assortment of free jazz duos, trios, and quartets. In 1998, when I resurrected the Motor Totemist Guild as 12-piece homage to Stan Kenton's big band, Rod volunteered to record all the rehearsals, at no charge. He was dedicated to the promotion of new music in L.A. and I really think he felt that all of us in the musical community here should be pulling together for the common cause. From 1999 to 2006 Rod provided the live recording documentation for the ongoing concert series curated by Cindy Bernard of the Society for the Activation of Social Space through Art and Sound. She remembers Poole as being, "precise about recording sound ... he really had that level of passion for playing, recording and listening. It's rare to know someone whose enthusiasm for music is so pure"

As the new millennium passed, Poole was planning a new solo album, this time to be released on 12" vinyl, which he always considered superior in sound to compact discs. The album was to be titled "Unfathomable Loneliness of the Lightyear Man" and Rod had found the perfect label to publish it: The Organ of Corti, named for the spiral in the inner ear that receives sound waves, and founded by Gary Todd. Tony Mostrom's review

in the L.A. Weekly said it all: “dizzily rapid, tumbling arpeggios rolling on smoothly without letup, but subtly varying and changing themes, timbres and dynamics organically, evoking a gull shifting its wings in flight.” But, after the review, there was no release. There were technical issues that did not get by Poole’s uncompromising ears, so the project was put on hold. Then, in a tragic accident, Gary Todd became paralyzed, unable to continue the label.

In spite of this setback, 2001 marked two important milestones for Rod Poole. First, the release of the Acoustic Guitar Trio album with Nels Cline and Jim McAuley, marking the first time, Poole’s guitar playing was published by a British label, and what’s more, it was Incus Records, the private label of Poole’s musical mentor, Derek Bailey. Though he was “over the moon” about this triumph, the second milestone was an even more personal and heartfelt one: his marriage to Lisa Ladaw.

Millennium Memories – Commitment and Renewal

It’s impossible to measure the effect that Lisa had on Rod for the ten years that they were together. They acted like a married couple, even when they were first dating. When they became legally married in 2001, the only people who were surprised were the ones who had thought they were married all along. Throughout all those years, Lisa unselfishly nurtured Rod’s dreams and helped make it possible for him to focus on his artistic vision. Who else would have driven two hours through rush hour to pick up what Rod would describe as his favorite birthday present: a machine to clean vinyl LPs? I think Lisa also brought out Rod’s sense of humor, and he really did have one, albeit a dry, British sense of humour. They traveled back to England several times after their marriage and most recently just last year. Rod spoke of the great time they’d had revisiting old friends and places together, and he seemed rejuvenated by the trip. As G.E. Stinson observed during a concert they both attended just three weeks ago, “several times during the show I looked over at Rod and Lisa sitting together and noticed that they were holding each other's hands. I remembered thinking how happy they looked.”

Chris Heenan relates a story familiar to many of us, “A trip to Rod's would ... turn into four hours of conversation, digging through his immense record collection.” Long telephone conversations about music were also commonplace for Rod. I can only imagine his phone bill. During our talks, Rod picked my brains about the post-Webern school from Earle Brown to Xenakis, and from Rod I learned to tell a Sun Ra release on Saturn Records from a re-release on Thoth Intergalactic. After his father passed away, Rod’s pre-Los Angeles record collection was mailed from Scarborough to be united with the records he had acquired here. After spending years studying modern jazz, Indian, and Persian music, Rod was rediscovering his old classic rock favorites. We exchanged memories, and Rod quizzed me about the concerts I had attended back in the early 70’s. We filled in gaps for each other, and it tickled me when he turned me on to a California band like Country Joe and the Fish, and when I played him albums he had missed by English artists, like Jack Bruce’s “Songs for a Taylor”, which he devoured with relish.

In 2005, Poole took another step towards musical independence, while showing a very different side of his artistry. This year marked the inaugural release on Rod's private label, JustGuitar Records. The surprise was that this would be an album documenting Poole long-standing collaboration with vocalist Sasha Bogdonowisch. The "Mind's Island" project demonstrates Rod's ability to function in a continuously interactive way with Sasha's evocative singing. It's the interaction that makes this music so fresh, and it also points to the profound influence of Indian and Persian musics.

Though he had become disillusioned with live performances over the past few years, his music continued to develop – Rod was the only musician I knew who would spend four hours a day practicing, and all that hard work was apparent in the solo recordings he made in the past few years, two of which form the A and B sides of a light blue splatter vinyl 12" disc that was almost released last year. Side A is "For Bag" and Side B "For Derek", two friends who had recently passed away. This music ably demonstrates just how much his solo playing had matured in the decade since his first album was released. Alas, several rounds of test pressings were made, but none had passed Rod's rigorous standards of quality, so the project was put on hold. There were many other "irons in the fire" as he used to say. Rod was planning to return to live performances and was interested in releases loads of new recordings. Still, I feel confident that there will be a continued and increasing interest in Rod Poole's work, and that his most important works may be those that have not yet been heard.

Coda

Music is ephemeral. You cannot see it or touch it, but you can feel it. Our bodies vibrate in sympathy with waves of sound and there is an understanding in our minds, which we call music. Now, Rod is just like music. I can no longer see him making a cup of tea or placing the needle on some vintage vinyl. I can no longer shake his hand, but I can still feel his presence... lingering like a familiar melody. His voice is still reverberating in my ears, challenging me to remain true to my vision, as Rod always was to his own unique artistic vision. And as more people hear his music, Rod will make new friends and he will challenge them in turn to do better, to never compromise, and to never take the easy path in life. Keith Rowe, founding member of AMM, posted these words that, for me, say it all: "the manner of your passing visits such great sadness, but even as I write this your brilliance, the power of your gaze, the purity of your sound, warms me, we will remember, dear friend, we will remember."