



LUC HOUTKAMP

A PORTRAIT



Music Center
The Netherlands

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Its mission is to propagate and enhance the position of Dutch musical life, both nationally and internationally.

BIOGRAPHY



Luc Houtkamp (1953, Den Haag) is a composer who bridges the gap between different musical worlds. Having a background in jazz & improvised music as an alto and tenor saxophone player, his musical goal is to establish a continuum between improvisation and composition in which the difference between the two is dissolved. With the aid of computers and live electronics as well as various forms of music notation, his compositions are highly personal in both sound and concept. Here, stylistic freedom is not a post-modern cliché, but based on Houtkamp's firm belief that musical style is secondary in importance to and can serve the expressive quality of the music itself. His main interest as is evident in his pieces is the way in which the musicians play together, and how this can be directed by means of composition and the use of computers.

After a long-standing career as an improvising musician, Houtkamp established his own POW Ensemble in 2002. Being a flexible unit of musicians with musical backgrounds in jazz, rock, electronic and contemporary music, the ensemble soon became the ideal unit for the performance of his own compositions.

In 2004 Houtkamp received the VPRO/Boy Edgar award, a prestigious award for jazz and improvised music in the Netherlands.

Luc Houtkamp has been a teacher, lecturer and composer in residence in electronic music composition at numerous universities and music conservatories, in, amongst others, Johannesburg, Durban and Grahamstown (South Africa), Odense (Denmark), Lüneburg (Germany), Hilversum and Den Haag (The Netherlands). In 2010 – 2011 he will be an academic tutor in composition to USA Fulbright scholar Seth Rozanoff.

Houtkamp was a member of the jury at the 2009 Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition, The Netherlands. From 2000 – 2008 he was a member of the artistic board of Stichting Gaudeamus. Further, he has been an active board member of various musical foundations in The Netherlands such as the Conlon Foundation (to further the development and use of new and existing 'MIDified' acoustic musical instruments), the Association of Dutch composers (GeNeCo), the Union of Improvising Musicians (BIM) and the BUMA Social fund.

DIRTY HANDS, CLEAN AESTHETICS

Luc Houtkamp is a man who hates to get his hands dirty. Setting out in life with plans to become a visual artist, he soon abandoned paint and ink in preference for the cleaner art of music. And it seems he has a taste for order, too, his apartment containing nothing less functional than his much-loved cat Mingus. That said, it does contain a fair amount of stuff, another indication, perhaps, of the inspiration Houtkamp draws from a diverse range of sources, both at home and in his work. And certainly, the dexterity with which he manages to synthesize the most unlikely musical elements in his work seems to be a testament to a highly organized and deftly analytical mind, qualities he employs to create music that is generous, funny and surprising.

Starting life as an improvising jazz saxophonist in the early 1970s, Luc Houtkamp has gone on to make extensive explorations of both electronics and composed structures in his music, and has, along the way, had the pleasure of working with a huge range of musicians across all genres. But it is perhaps Houtkamp's work as a teacher that has been most formative, with a period in the late 90s at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban having a significant impact on his approach to making and sharing music. The fundamental political changes taking place in South Africa at the time confronted Houtkamp with some vital questions of context, as an almost exclusively Zulu first-year intake of Maskanda and Indian Bhangra musicians, jazz drummers and gospel producers had somehow to be accommodated within the academy. With Western art music clearly providing an insufficient framework for teaching such a group, Houtkamp found himself faced with some fundamental questions regarding musical style and performance practice. And for him, the answers lay in abandoning questions of style altogether, in preference for more flexible strategies of communication between musicians. After all, if the musical conventions that constitute a particular 'style' are only a means by which musicians can communicate with one another, the moment they cease to serve their purpose they must be re-assessed or abandoned. Luc Houtkamp's music is a constant and often playful negotiation of both these possibilities.

An exemplary demonstration of Houtkamp's aesthetic can be found in his extended *BoX of BriX* project of 2010; an assemblage of components compiled according to its own uncanny principles of construction, its own surreal rules of play. Despite the distinct character of the constituent modules that

make up *BoX of BriX*, however, Houtkamp's intention here is in fact to explore the possibilities of musical continua between these blocks, with specific lines of continuity, specific modes of transition, forming the constructive backbone of the piece. Houtkamp describes his approach to form here as an extension of Stockhausen's concept of compositional structure, where the overall form is perceived as a kind of 'timbre', driven by the relationships between, and coloured by the constituent components of, melody, harmony, meter, rhythm and amplitude. For Houtkamp, however, investigating lines of continuum between improvisation and composition, and the possibilities for morphing or splicing between musical styles (boldly declared only to be yet more boldly dissolved), is also an essential part of the composition process, along with an integrated use of electronic and acoustic instruments and live-processed acoustic sound.

What then of the relationship today between Houtkamp's work as performer, improviser and composer? In the light of his African experience it will come as no surprise to hear that Houtkamp prefers to have personal relationships with the musicians who perform his work, or to be directly involved in the performance process itself. But as he points out, historically, this has been always common practice: until, that is, the late-Romantic preference for having star conductors mediate the genius of a composer's mind through the vast medium of the orchestra. Duke Ellington, however, wrote music for the members of his band, working as composer, performer and improviser, much as Bach had done centuries before him. And in the 21st century, with electronics bringing improvisation back into the processes of both composing and performing, Houtkamp can make full use of what he describes as a more healthy creative situation. That said, Houtkamp has also begun to establish a catalogue of composed works, for the most part developed in close collaboration with musicians, but not by any limited to performance by them alone. *Uiterste Staat* (Utmost State, 2008/09 for electric guitar and two computers) for example, is a three-movement work defined by extremes, with meticulously notated virtuosity, guided improvisation, modulation-free tonality and crackling electronic sounds proceeding through rapid exchange and in quick succession. Like *BoX of BriX*, *Uiterste Staat* employs familiar objects, structures, timbres or styles as the frame through which we can experience something new and for this reason it is equally demonstrative of Houtkamp's core composition concerns.

It is, however, only since around 2002 that Houtkamp has begun to describe himself as a composer at all, his main musical activities having previously been specific to improvisation and the writing of interactive computer programs. And despite his early studies in the plastic arts, it is the relationship between music and dance, and specifically in jazz and African forms, that is most evident in much of Houtkamp's music. The fact that many African countries use only one word to describe both music and dance, clearly demonstrates how interrelated the two practices are on that continent, and for Houtkamp this is also true of jazz music and dance of the 1930s, and something he aspires to in his own work. This goes some way to explaining the unusual and highly versatile combination of performers Houtkamp brought together when he formed the POW ensemble back in 2001, in which computers, acoustic and electronic instruments, live electronic processing and turn tables can often be heard performing with an unusual addition to their rhythm section: tap dancer, no less.

In many of his projects, Houtkamp's main goal has been to create music that is essentially improvised but nonetheless gives an almost symphonic feel of being through-composed, with themes, counter-subjects, variations and other traditional formal constructs. And although he professes admiration for many jazz musicians, the traditional structure of jazz performances, with improvised variations sandwiched between opening and closing statements of the theme, is something Houtkamp has always strongly disliked. So, rather than putting improvised and composed structures side by side, it is the act of smelting them together that excites Houtkamp, who is more than happy to get his fingers metaphorically very dirty in the musical melding and formal moulding of his materials. This combination of rigour and flexibility has proven central to the formation of Houtkamp's creative personality and distinctive compositional voice. For Houtkamp, cultural and personal identity is fluid, finding power in change. But what is exciting about the music he makes is that this change does not take place without resistance; without jagged juxtapositions, musical anomalies and moments of surreal humour acting as counterweights to the unifying musical forces Houtkamp is constantly searching out.

Alwynne Pritchard, 2010

photo cover: Adri van den Berg

photo p. 3: Bert Niehuis

COMPOSITIONS

ENSEMBLE PLUS ELECTRONICS

BoX of Brix (2009-2010)

duration: 60'

lyrics: William Blake, Han Buhrs, Luc Houtkamp

2voice fl sax-a vla vc cemb ukulele 2synth

3comp live-electr soundtracks

Uiterste Staat (2008-2009)

duration: 16'

el.git 2comp

8 pieces for Homage to Hazard

(2007-2008)

duration: 45'

lyrics: Han Buhrs, Guy Harries

2ten fl sax-t trb vc 2synth 2comp live-electr

Masnavi Molavi (2005), together with Guy Harries

duration: 60'

lyrics: Kader Abdolah, Jalaluddin

Rumi, Guy Harries, Luc Houtkamp

2voice recit sax-t perc keyboard vl vla vc ud

saz 2comp dj-set

ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Exercise in Swing (2001)

duration: 47'

soundtracks

Ton Sur Ton (2002)

duration: 8'

soundtracks

SOLO-INSTRUMENT AND SOUND TRACKS

The Way Up (2000)

duration: 15'

sax-t soundtracks

The Way Down (1997)

duration: 15'

sax-t soundtracks

Odd & Even (1986), with Tony van Campen

duration: 16'

sax-t soundtracks

INTERACTIVE MUSIC

Duo for Man Alone (1997 – 2004)

duration: variable length

for single voiced solo instrument, computer and MIDI-controlled piano

Rebounds (1994 – 1997)

duration: variable length

for single voiced solo instrument, computer and MIDI-controlled piano

Vogeltrek (1992)

duration: variable length

for single voiced solo instrument, computer and MIDI-controlled piano

The Rule of Thumb (1991)

duration: variable length

for single voiced solo-instrument, computer and harmonisers

MUSIC THEATRE

Dulcinea, Dulcinea (1989), with Gilius van Bergeijk

duration: 60'

visuals and scenery: Adri Boon

actress sax-t soundtracks 2synth comp live-electr

COMPACT DISCS

POW ENSEMBLE

Continuum

Luc Houtkamp/ POW Ensemble
X-OR CD020, 2010

Homage to hazard live

Amsterdam 2008, POW Ensemble
X-OR The Field Recordings 14, FR 14, 2008

Birdsong from inside the egg.

POW Ensemble.
X-OR CD019, 2006

The thirteen bar blues

Houtkamp's pow3
X-OR CD017, 2003

LUC HOUTKAMP

Exercise in swing

X-OR CD 011, 2001

Luc Houtkamp in Chicago

Entropy Stereo 00, 1997

Live in Canada '97

The Field Recordings 6
X-OR FR 6, 1997

The duo recordings

The Field Recordings 7
X-OR FR 7, 1998

Live in Geneve & Luzern

The Field Recordings 1
X-OR FR 1, 1994

Metslawier

X-OR CD 05, 1994

The Rule of Thumb

X-OR CD 03, 1993

The Songlines

X-OR CD 01, 1992

OTHER ENSEMBLES

#40 Vienna & #41

Bernbeuren, 2003, FOURinONE
The Field Recordings 13
X-OR FR 13, 2003

Burnt sienna, 2nd Outlet

Nuscope Recordings 1015, 2003

Beyond the edge

O.B.A./Luc Houtkamp
EWM 51712, 2003

Stelen, FOURinONE

Random Acoustics RA026, 2000

Live at Free Music XXVII

Antwerp, 2000, f.i. quartet
The Field Recordings 11
X-OR FR 11, 2000

Binaurality

King Übu Orchestrù
FMP CD49, 1992

STEAM-Group + Sven-Åke Johansson at the Roundhouse

London 1972 SÅJ-CD 15, 1972 (re-leased in 2008)

PUBLICATIONS ON THE COMPOSER

“The reason why I want to use electronics, especially computers: one of the ideals in my music is to combine composition with improvisation in such a way that you can't say what is improvised and what is composed. Computers can help you with that. I write interactive programs that can respond to improvisers. In those programs, I write the rules for a composition, the possible combinations, etc., but not the composition. The computer starts composing on stage as a response to what happens there. To me, that gives a very interesting integration of compositional and improvisational elements. With electronic music, but also with music in general, I am more interested in processes than in the sound itself or in the medium or the technology. I will never use electronics just for the fun of it. But I am very interested in the possibilities that using electronics give.”

Interview with Fred Jung, *Jazz Weekly*, USA, 2001

“Aesthetics doesn't interest me at all!”

Interview with Koen Schouten, *Volkskrant*, The Netherlands, 2005

“We became musicians because we hate having office jobs,” Houtkamp said. “But the thing about computer music is it's exactly like sitting in an office. So one day I thought, ‘This isn't right. I am back in my office again.’ That's why we try to find different ways to make it more physical, even theatrical at times. That's the challenge with computer music: you have to deliver it just like other musicians do.”

Interview with Katrin Figge, *Jakarta Globe*, 2009

His oeuvre can be aptly described as eclectic merriment, improvisational multi-flexibility, or intense bric-a-brac because Houtkamp manages to hold merriment, improvisation, and eclecticism in a delicate and effective balance. Eclecticism implies the hazard of discontinuity, of attention-deficit carpet bagging while art is the strategy of stringing genres, sounds, prejudices, influen-

ces together in an adept configuration suspended between meaning and feeling. Houtkamp does this with flair and verve.

Bart Plantenga, liner notes *Birdsong from Inside the Egg*, 2008

A self-taught musician, Houtkamp has been breaking new ground both nationally and internationally for over 30 years. Through his explorations Luc Houtkamp has bridged the gap between the worlds of jazz, free improvisation and electronic music.

Jury Report VPRO/Boy Edgar Award, 2004

For Houtkamp, the use of interactive computers enables him to blur the line between composition and improvisation further, as well as delving deeper into the possibilities of electronics within the new music.

Jon Morgan, *Single to Noise*, 1999

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