

# SERIOUS

## John Surman Biography

Composer and multi-instrumentalist John Surman is a key figure in a generation of European jazz musicians who crucially expanded the international horizons of jazz during the last three decades of the twentieth century. A stalwart of the ECM record label, and long acknowledged as an improviser of world class, he is composer of a body of work that extends far beyond the perceived boundaries of the jazz repertoire and is currently at the height of his considerable powers.

Surman was first noticed in the late 1960s as a virtuoso and original voice on baritone saxophone, then on soprano saxophone and bass clarinet. In the 1970s he began to explore a new world of electronics and synthesisers, emerging as a composer of real substance with two landmark recordings, *Westering Home* and *Morning Glory*.

In recent years, Surman's extended compositions have caught many new ears. His solo work *Road to St. Ives*, inspired in part by the intriguing place names of Cornwall, has been re-arranged for orchestra and has been programmed by the BBC Concert Orchestra, Orchestra della Toscana and Bournemouth Sinfionetta among others. In the mid 1990s he was commissioned by the Salisbury Festival to write *Proverbs & Songs*, a work for saxophones, pipe organ and 80-strong Salisbury Festival Chorus. This piece premiered in Salisbury Cathedral, was recorded for BBC Radio 3 and the subsequent release by ECM was nominated for a Mercury Music Prize in 1996.

*Proverbs & Songs* signalled a direction in Surman's compositions that has gathered momentum and has resulted in a body of work that combines improvisation with the resources of European chamber, orchestral and choral music. In 2008 he wrote *Three Landscapes*, a commission from the City of Melbourne for recorder virtuoso Genevieve Lacey, saxophone and strings. This work premiered in Melbourne in April 2009 and has been performed around the UK in 2010 and 2011. Surman has written for the Balanescu Quartet and the Oslo Radio Symphony Orchestra and his piece *Coruscating* combines string quartet, with saxophones and double bass (the latter working both as part of the string group and as an independent improvising voice). A further work in this area was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 and enabled Surman to write for the acclaimed American percussionist/pianist Jack DeJohnette and the outstanding classical ensemble, London Brass. This work, originally called *That's Right*, was inspired by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and premiered in Norwich Cathedral as part of the Norfolk & Norwich Festival. This collaboration performed again for the Future Tense season, opening Robert Wyatt's *Meltdown* at London's Southbank Centre, where the music was recorded live and released as *Free & Equal* in 2003.

Surman composes music for all media. His evocative bass clarinet and electronics are striking features of the 2003 Italian film *Respiro* and his commissioned soundtracks include the highly praised French movies *The Shade* and *Apartment #5C*. He has an established interest in writing music for theatre and dance and had a long association with the American choreographer/performer Carolyn Carlsen in the 1970s and 1980s.

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He composed music for the landmark *Private City* for Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet – this was subsequently recorded as one of his acclaimed series of solo saxophones-with-electronics releases for ECM.

Recently, Surman has completed three new recordings for ECM. The first release was the glowingly reviewed *The Spaces in Between* which features new music for the same string quartet and double bass instrumentation as *Coruscating*; the second, entitled *Rain on the Window*, develops new repertoire for saxophones and pipe organ, with Howard Moody; and the third, *Brewster's Rooster*, sees Surman return to his jazz roots with a stunning quartet album featuring old friends Jack DeJohnette (drums) and John Abercrombie (guitar) and a new collaborator, the American bassist Drew Gress.

Surman is currently touring with Richard Galliano's La Strada Quintet in a tribute to film composer Nino Rota. The group's album is due for release in October 2011 on Deutsche Grammophon. In addition to this, Surman is currently composing two choral works. The first, *Songs for a Coastal Wind*, will be performed in spring/summer 2012 and was commissioned by Lighthouse, Poole's Centre for the Arts for Coastal Voices, with funds from the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. The second is a commission for male voice choir that will premiere at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 2012.

John Surman's music transcends familiar boundaries. Although a deep love of the jazz tradition (Ellington is a particular enthusiasm) runs throughout his work, he is equally affected as a one-time choirboy by the melodic qualities of choral music and by English folk music. Much of his work is powerfully resonant of the landscape and tradition of southwest England... "If I look back to what turned me on about music, it is what I heard before I ever came across jazz". The surprise and the enduring pleasure of Surman's art lies in a uniquely personal vision, fired by the contrasts of exquisite lyricism, richly textured sound, and intense, full-bodied improvisation.

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