

# Grand Designs

Multiculturalism and music in action,  
with the Grand Union Orchestra...

Profile by Andrew Stewart

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**Few would expect a musical production about disease, poverty and social injustice to leave its audience feeling uplifted. And yet Grand Union Orchestra's latest show, *Song Of Contagion*, earned standing ovations and rave reviews. It did so by training the spotlight on diseases preventable for little cost – cholera and malaria among them – while probing the common humanity that might yet save mankind from itself.**

Over the past four decades, Grand Union Orchestra has shown how the passion of protest can be harnessed to music-making of the highest quality. Tony Haynes, the company's founder and artistic director, owns the alchemical skills required to make a harmonious blend of genres and styles. He draws on everything from his early experience as church organist and brass band trombonist, to ideas propagated in the late 1960s by left-wing theatre groups. Delegates at the MU Conference in Brighton had the chance to hear Haynes's compositions during a Grand Union showcase specially devised for the occasion. The performance united big band jazz with sounds from Chinese, Indian and other traditions. It also brought together three generations of musicians, spanning ages ranged from 15 to 70-plus.

#### Arts in action

Tony has been a member of the Musicians' Union for half a century. He served on its National Executive Committee from 1984 to 1988, and lobbied hard for the MU to provide its members with extensive professional services and practical support. "Grand Union received financial help from the Union in our early years, and we took part in initiatives such as Arts for Labour," he notes. "It was good to receive a call out of the blue, inviting us to play at this year's MU Conference."

Grand Union Orchestra grew out of Haynes's work as a freelance musical director in theatre. He discovered his calling in the late 1960s, while balancing postgraduate studies

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in music analysis in Nottingham with a year's work as musical director at the Nottingham Playhouse. The resident repertory company required live music for its productions. "It was a baptism of fire. But I loved it," he recalls. Haynes joined Liverpool's Everyman Theatre in the early 1970s, where he composed full scores for plays by such politically inspired writers as John Arden, Chris Bond and Adrian Mitchell. "We combined music and theatre with tough material – not agitprop but productions with a strong political message. That flowed over into Grand Union."

Tony deepened his commitment to political theatre while creating scores for productions of Brecht and Arden at Newcastle Playhouse and Leicester's Haymarket Theatre. He became a founder member of Belt & Braces theatre company, and was founder and director of the touring band RedBrass. The catalyst for Grand Union came in 1982 when Haynes and John Cumming, best known today as a director of *Serious*, decided to form a touring music theatre company. They took to the road with *Jelly Roll Soul*, a proven critical and box-office hit, fresh from its run at the Lyric Hammersmith. Grand Union began with three white musician-actors, Haynes among them, and two black actor-musicians. When the opportunity arose to tour another small-scale music theatre work, Haynes and his *Jelly Roll Soul* co-writer David Bradford conceived *Strange Migration*, a cross-cultural composition for eight instrumentalists and singers. The new piece set the gold standard for all subsequent Grand Union projects.

"I thought it would be dishonest to do a piece about migration and the refugee experience without performers who came from that background," comments Haynes. He recruited the Ghanaian drummer and dancer Sarah →



## Brian Abrahams

"There is nothing else like Grand Union in my experience. They were exploring cultural diversity long before anyone thought about bringing it into mainstream education. Grand Union were the front runners. There's nothing like it where I live now in Australia, as attractive as the place may be. I've been so fortunate as a musician to travel the world and work in all the diverse categories of jazz. But there's nothing as exciting or rewarding as what I've encountered as part of Grand Union Orchestra."

"I would never have encountered this diversity in music if I had not been invited to become part of this wonderful organisation. Why can't everything be like this? We do not want wars. We do not want hatred in this world. There can be no progress made until humanity unites itself in harmony. If we can't do it together, we are going nowhere. I consider myself one of the most fortunate musicians to have become part of Grand Union Orchestra."

Laryea, Chilean folk musician Vladimir Vega, then recently released after ten years in prison under Pinochet's regime, and US-born Caribbean jazz and blues singer Tunukwa, who had been a press photographer at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. *Strange Migration* made its mark with three 10-week tours. The company gained momentum with shows like *A Book of Numbers* and *Freedom Calls*, hallmarked by their commitment to cultural diversity and the cause of social justice. "It wasn't our intention, but we were perceived as a multicultural company," says Haynes. "We happened to coincide with rising interest in cultural diversity, and were asked to do multicultural workshops, which none of us had done before."

In 1984 Grand Union was commissioned to create a piece for the GLC's anti-racism year. *The Song Of Many Tongues*, first performed in Covent Garden Piazza that September, marked the launch of Grand Union Orchestra as an 18-piece band. South African trumpeter Claude Deppa, a London-based refugee from apartheid, joined for its first orchestral project, and has been a member ever since. There was, he notes, a genuine hunger for the band's work. This debut led to a series of intergenerational cross-cultural participatory projects, beginning with *Threads* in Manchester in 1986. "Crossover in culture has been part of London for centuries," Deppa observes. "Our music belongs to the melting pot that is London life."

Around 40 musicians have worked with Grand Union Orchestra over the years. Saxophonist Courtney Pine and Gail Ann Dorsey – who went on to play bass guitar in David Bowie's band – were among the fine young players to pass through the ranks. The organisation widened its reach in 2007 with the launch of Grand Union Youth Orchestra, in which young musicians are free to explore a world of musical cultures. Its annual summer school convened in London for the first time this



August to mark a decade of artistic adventure, while its monthly workshops are set to resume in Shoreditch this autumn. Quality and integrity, observes Tony Haynes, are key ingredients in the Grand Union mix. "I call it artistic truth," he says. "It's hard to define but you know it when you hear it. Everything we do with schools and communities grows out of that. We're passing on skills and ideas that come from these outstanding musicians from different cultures."

### World of music

Drummer Brian Abrahams was established on the UK music scene, known for his work with his band District Six, when he joined Grand Union. His friend Claude Deppa invited him to a show in the early 1990s. Abrahams arrived expecting an evening of jazz. He was unprepared for the impact of what he heard. "It was a life-changing experience for me as a musician. I'd always modelled my pursuit of music on jazz. But what I found with Grand Union Orchestra was this family of musicians, led by Tony's vision. I'd never encountered

"We're passing on skills and ideas that come from these outstanding musicians from different cultures."





Veteran multicultural musical collective the Grand Union Orchestra delighted the delegates at this year's MU Conference in Brighton back in July with their uplifting sounds.



and sharing their creativity. The experience that Brian, Claude, and all the other Grand Union musicians bring to this is so strong. I couldn't create this music without these wonderful musicians."

#### An uncertain future

While *Song Of Contagion* was widely acknowledged to be the best show in Grand Union Orchestra history, the band faces an uncertain future. Its earned income has declined in recent years, as has its funding from public sources – national and local. The narrow application criteria set by many of the largest charitable trusts often rule out Grand Union's culturally diverse shows, while the patchy nature of post-hub music education provision has done little to broaden the band's portfolio of outreach work.

"We don't know what's going to happen next," admits Tony Haynes. "I can't see *Song Of Contagion*, which we launched in June, touring to venues around the country as it would have 20 or 30 years ago. There's no question that Grand Union and I lived through a golden age. What we've lost in society now is this sense of curiosity and the desire to hear new things. I want to see an open sharing of ideas, of musical techniques and of cultures. We must now encourage those with ability – wherever they come from – to share ideas with others and to help natural talents to learn from their peers. In the end, the music will always come out. We see that with our summer school and Grand Union Youth Orchestra, where natural musicians emerge. We're a practical touring music-making organisation, always creative, always exploring." 🍷🍷🍷

anything like it before. It brought home something that was deep in my heart. Coming from South Africa under apartheid I always wondered why things couldn't be different, why we couldn't have unity, why I was supposed to be different. And here I found this incredible union of musicians, with Chinese, Turkish, Caribbean people in the same show. The beauty of it came from the integration and flow of different music, brought together in a way that embellished it all."

Grand Union, adds Abrahams, reflects London's attachment to artistic freedom and deep history of cultural exchange. The results, he suggests, are unique. "To bring these diversities together is remarkable. Tony knows how to do this. How much more could you ask for? There's a clarity about how things could be. It's this wonderful big thing that the music tells you about the beauty of diversity and how we can all fit together as one. That's a global message, a message for everyone."

Tony Haynes knows that music can entertain audiences at the same time as encouraging them to contemplate serious matters of politics, history and society. "Some might think that what we do is worthy and solemn," he observes, "But so much of it is joyous. We are not a world music organisation, we are about putting together different voices

## Tony Haynes

"We are facing difficulties as an organisation, but I have been inspired by Jeremy Corbyn's appeal to youth. Here's someone who is unfashionable and despised by many in the media, but who has maintained his principles and integrity. He has come through to speak to a younger generation. We older musicians need to do the same now that music is disappearing from the school curriculum, and fewer people are able to afford instrumental lessons. We're acutely aware at Grand Union of the need to reach out to young people through social media. When we work with people from different cultures, we find they naturally want to explore other cultures. It's a rich seam to draw from. I think there's a hunger for ideals and for things that move people, which is why music is so important. I'm surprised that there isn't a social core to more music."