

## Part One : Out of the Frying Pan

Up a concrete staircase, without a signpost, above a snooker hall on a residential and downtrodden street, you'll find one of London's most exciting and unlikely arts venues: The Others, Stoke Newington. I'm here to see "arthurs.høiby.ritchie", a trio consisting of Tom Arthurs on trumpet, Jasper Høiby on bass and Stu Ritchie on drums.

Tonight's gig is one of a regular series of jazz nights put on every Tuesday at The Others by the London based F-IRE Collective (that's the Fellowship for Integrated Rhythmic Expression), a tightly knit but stylistically diverse caucus of improvising musicians. The nights, entitled Out of the Frying Pan, are organised by saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock and guitarist Jonathan Bratoëff, who are often to be found joining in with the bands. For joining in is an important part of the special ethos of Out of the Frying Pan. What generally happens is that the band on the billing play a set of their own music for about an hour. After a short break, they return, but this time invite fellow musicians to join in. Some are invited, familiar associates; others just turn up. "It's a mixed bag," says Arthurs.

The place is nothing if not bohemian – used as an art gallery and rehearsal space, as well as hosting regular comedy, world-music and party nights, it contains (I took notes): two dilapidated leather armchairs, a leather three-piece suite in a similar condition, some soft benches, a table-football table, a makeshift bar, a disco ball and a barber's chair.

The room slowly fills up, and peaks at around forty people. They are mix of students and arty types; the male/female ratio is about four to one. It has the feeling of a gathering rather than a party. The concert begins.

The music the trio is playing here could leave some feeling like a stranger at a wedding: well aware that something beautiful may be happening, but not quite feeling a part of it. For me there is a mixture of pleasure and frustration, as periods of lucidity in which the many complex talons of the music grab and lift me give way to periods where I feel a little left behind. But it is tangibly different, new and inspiring, full of ideas, and rewarding of a little concentration.

Sitting on one of the sofas, squashed among a crowd of UCL students, I hear someone greet his mate beside me and say with ironic understatement, "it isn't easy listening is it?"

I talked to Bratoëff before the gig.

"I definitely believe that F-IRE has created a buzz – people are thinking improvised music or modern music is cool. And it's for young people and not just for grannies. There's a whole new generation, it's really happening now, more and more. These college guys they have F-IRE [fire?] in their minds.

"The F-IRE sound started with the rhythm: lots of rhythmic modulation, rhythmic inflection, just working with rhythm. Putting rhythm into some kind of architecturally interesting form, not just like chi-boom-boom chi-boom-boom-chi or y'know... But then – that's how it started – I think really in a way it's more like being on the edge of anything you try to do, rhythmically or harmonically or melodically, try to find new ways, new sounds. I think for me that's the F-IRE sound. To move forward, and not play a tradition. Not playing something that's been done already, but moving forward, using the tradition."

The second half begins, much as the first, with another of Arthurs' spiky, energetic trumpet compositions. He gives a nod to Bratoëff who casts an eye around the room for musicians. With a big French grin, he sees there's nothing else for it, so he ambles up, straps on his guitar and starts playing himself. The music shifts up to an aggressive vamping funk.

After a solo or two, a man in a velvet jacket strolls casually to an electric piano and seems to enter the melee mid-bar. By now every time someone rises and heads outside to smoke, I get a little excited – are they about to play?

A slideshow of curious artsy photos and images projects onto the walls behind the musicians. In genuinely free improvisation, these apparently random photographs acquire significance. The musicians can see them too – they, like the room and the night and everything else, provide a shared context for musicians and audience.

The music shifts tempo and style organically until suddenly a man gets up with a clarinet, once again, totally unannounced. The musicians hush, the clarinet plays solo, setting out his ideas. Someone whoops. The piano takes up the clarinet's melody, and tries to reproduce the feel. The clarinet player then completes the exchange, sympathetically accompanying the pianist's interpretation of his own melody, a melody which did not exist until a few minutes ago.

An alto saxophone enters, and, on someone's signal, the band begin playing a sparse arrangement from a chart which Arthurs has apparently left behind, having slipped away in the commotion. Over the next hour, new pianists and guitarists take over, the drummer changes and the various horn players take their entrances and exits as they see fit. The music continues almost without interruption. It winds down around 11.30 and Bratoëff thanks everyone for coming.

The Out of the Frying Pan nights are a kind of a playground. They attract enough of an audience to make the events worthwhile, but more than this, they allow members of the collective to get together in an atmosphere that inspires total creative freedom. What you'll hear there may not be the finished product that you'll hear on albums put out by the collective – albums which include two Mercury nominees (Polar Bear's "Held on the Tips of Fingers" and Basqiat Strings's self-titled debut) and countless jazz awards – but it will give you the chance to see some of London's best improvising musicians at work and at play, in a free exchange of musical ideas that is an integral part of arriving at their musical conclusions.

In the second part of this article, I talk further with members of the F-IRE Collective about their unique and creative approach to music making.

[www.F-IRE.com](http://www.F-IRE.com)

The Others  
Top Floor, 6 to 8 Manor Road  
Stoke Newington N16

## Part Two : The F-IRE Collective

The F-IRE Collective began, says Barak Schmool with a pride in his own folklore, with a roomful of musicians drumming in his living room on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1995. Today they run ten international samba courses annually, have two African drum orchestras, run jazz courses for serious pros, have two dozen or so bands working under their umbrella, and have released nineteen albums and counting on their own record label. But more than this: it is the quality of what they do that is astounding; F-IRE are consistently producing some of the most innovative and accomplished music being played in the UK today, both within and beyond the bounds of the jazz scene. It's very tempting to believe that the blueprint for all of this was somewhere in the air, present but unformed in Schmool's mind, back at that first drumming session.

The idea then was simple – it seems so self-evident to Schmool that he takes no credit for it – musicians studying African rhythm together as part of a “collective learning process”, and applying this know-how in playing their own instruments. The band that emerged from those sessions was called Timeline (almost all of the F-IRE bands have abstract names like rock bands, as opposed to the less democratic so-and-so trios more common in jazz). Little by little the collective, with its special way of doing things, expanded.

It provided a community for its members, the drumming providing a common language through which they could learn from each other. Schmool, the unfaltering ideologue, speaks always of a bigger picture, greater than the music itself. “The music was a means to the inter-personal.” It borrowed from African culture out of necessity. “To empower people to make themselves happy, we need to be more open, more non-English.”

It seems ironic to me that a collective on this scale could only happen somewhere like London, and yet it thrives, like so much in the city, on attitudes and ideals that are seldom found indigenously. The collective have flocked here to create something Londoners never would have themselves.

By 1998 they had found the name F-IRE. They began teaching drum classes, mostly to music students who wanted to know how to play like Timeline. Schmool must have seemed like Yoda: “Here's an egg shaker. Learn to communicate.” But they kept coming back.

The musicians played at weddings and funerals within London's African community. In 2000 they ran their first week-long course in rhythmic creativity, enlisting the assistance of Ghanaian master musician Nana Tsiboe. Schmool recalls the first class on musical meaning and communication. Tsiboe's native culture's reliance on music was a revelation for many there: it is the physical experience that consummates the bonds of society. Likewise Schmool explains, “if you're from New Orleans, then you hear music everywhere: church music, marching music, jazz and blues, but it's all part of one perspective.” The F-IRE collective was Schmool's attempt to replicate that sense of community for musicians in London.

Not everyone in the collective that I spoke to is equally idealistic, but remarkably, almost all have played communal samba or African drumming with Schmool, as teachers or pupils, and all of them stick together, financially and creatively. It's hard to know the cold economics of it, but I believe it when they say they pool their resources to get each other's records made. They play on each other's records; they promote themselves and are promoted under the same banner at festivals such as the Ealing Jazz Festival and Rhythmsticks and on weekly residencies that have run at the Jazz Café and the Vortex.

I wonder if audiences are ever taken aback by the diversity of music they are presented with under the one banner. Barak responds, “you know, if you like the dance music, then you'll probably like the listening music. If you like Ingrid [Laubrock] playing free stuff, then you'll probably like her Brazilian stuff as well.” I instantly agree. “Some audiences come because they

think F-IRE is a samba thing, but are always pleased to discover that it covers much more.” Needless to say, their audiences are seldom narrow-minded to begin with.

The lack of a definitive F-IRE “sound” is something all members seem to agree on. Trumpeter Tom Arthurs, a former student of Schmoool’s, says “it’s about people going and checking out a whole bunch of stuff in actually quite a lot of depth, and that coming through in a way which is quite personal. I think that’s the thing that unites it: not one kind of sound, but one approach. In a way that’s something just necessary about just being an artist and in London in the time we live in. There’s so much stuff, so many experiences, both musically and otherwise that’s available to us and in a way not to get involved in those wouldn’t make sense. That’s the unifying direction.”

There may however be a kind of F-IRE personality. “In music you have people who are forward thinkers. You can tell right away. When you play with people who are forward thinkers, it’s a different feel. You know that you can try things that you couldn’t try with someone who’s a little bit more in the tradition and that basically allows you to experiment more,” says Jonathan Bratoëff. Saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock speaks in terms of “musicians who weren’t just the typical jazz musicians that colleges churn out, which in the end is so boring.”

For Schmoool, F-IRE is a philosophy, an almost spiritual bond between the musicians. Others, like Arthurs, may be more pragmatic: “There were plenty of connections between people which weren’t really consolidated in any way. We were all kind of between genres, or the conventional places where people might file you. Even though the individual musics were quite different, the challenges were the same, so there was a certain kind of pragmatism to doing it.”

The immediate future for F-IRE sees album releases by Porpoise Corpus and Mark Donlon, both classed as friends of rather than members of the collective (representing a new development for their label). There will be a mini F-IRE Festival in January at Soho’s Pizza Express Jazz Club, and a “big one” in October 2008 at King’s Place, featuring international guests from sister collectives such as HASK in Paris, which was an early inspiration for F-IRE and the London based Loop collective, a group of younger musicians who have formed in F-IRE’s image. The festival will be headlined by Django Bates, the composer who liberated British Jazz in the Eighties and gave Schmoool his first break in the industry when he hired him as his roadie. (Bates dropped a keyboard, Schmoool was passing below. He caught the keyboard and the rest is history.)

Long term Schmoool says “let’s get a community centre, somewhere people can rehearse, perform, record, teach, dance, bring their kids to.” He really doesn’t want much more than this. It’s a shimmering pure ethos, that seems as out of place in the music industry today as the troupe of white hippies I imagine playing drums at an African funeral. But it is a recipe for success and for growth. It has attracted some of the most innovative musicians around, and by bringing them together has paradoxically produced music that is idiosyncratic and diverse. Schmoool’s attitude as much as his talent inspires the confidence to create in others, and it’s a pleasure that the fruits – on record, on stage and in the classroom – are so abundantly available.

**David Walter Hall**