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Anarchy in Milton Keynes

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Retrieved on September 26, 2010 from libcom.org

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paragraph of her magnificent book Ruth Finne an reflects that *“the reality of human beings is to be found not only (maybe not mainly) in their paid employment or even their thought, but also in their engagement in recognised cultural practices ... Among the most valued and, it maybe, most profoundly human of such practices in our society is that of music”*.

If my purpose was just to write about her book, that is where I would end. But I want you to reflect on what an interesting world we would be living in if we organised everything the way we organise our music. I mentioned Martin Buber’s perception of the social principle as what happens wherever people “link themselves in the pursuit of a common need or interest” and Kropotkin’s concept of this kind of voluntary co-operation as a social structure which would “represent nothing immutable. On the contrary – as is seen in organic life at large” he went on “ – harmony would result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitude of forces and influences”, but above all, “would represent an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes ... temporary or more or less permanent – for all possible purposes.”

Suppose this was the way we chose to organise our work, or our education or the production and management of housing, or our health services, or our transport, or any of the things that make life possible and enjoyable in Milton Keynes or anywhere else?

Everyone has their own definition of anarchism. One I find generally useful is the first three paragraphs of the article Peter Kropotkin was asked to write for the 11 th edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1905. This is the collection of volumes which (however repugnant we now find its sales techniques) is the place we look for a working definition of most things.

Kropotkin’s first paragraph said that:

ANARCHISM (from the Greek, contrary to authority), is the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government – harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilised being.

That’s his first paragraph, and of course he has the usual problem of anyone writing an encyclopaedia definition, he has to be concise, but at the same time, to bring everything in. So his second paragraph goes:

In a society developed on these lines, the voluntary associations which already now begin to cover all the fields of human activity would take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the State in all its functions. They would represent an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees, local, regional, national and international – temporary or more or less permanent – for all possible purposes: production, consumption

and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements, education, mutual protection, defence of the territory, and so on; and, on the other side, for the satisfaction of an ever increasing number of scientific, artistic, literary and sociable needs.”

Kropotkin was a scientist, a physical geographer in origin, and his third paragraph drew an analogy from physics and from biology, and you might even claim from structural mechanics and music. For he claimed that:

Moreover, such a society would represent nothing immutable. On the Contrary — as is seen in organic life at large — harmony would (it is contended) result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitudes of forces and influences, and this adjustment would be the easier to obtain as none of the forces would enjoy a special protection from the State.

These opening remarks express the kernel of his argument for society as opposed to the State, and for the community as opposed to the government.

Society or the State

The next stage in the argument for me, at least, was provided by the philosopher Martin Buber, who wasn't an anarchist, although he had strong anarchist connections. He was the friend and executor of a German anarchist Gustav Landauer, who made a very profound remark, which I quote from Buber's book *Paths in Utopia* (Routledge, 49). “The state”, said Landauer, “is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a

operation in the attaining of more or less agreed ends can all be found in the processes of running local amateur music — indeed they must be found there if it is to continue.”

My claim is that this book encapsulates a marvellous piece of research, described with great sensitivity, and beautifully written. Yet nearly everyone I know in Milton Keynes has never heard of this book published last year, and the one who had heard of it said, correctly, that it was so ludicrously expensive (£35) that he could never dream of buying it. I myself have never seen it reviewed anywhere, yet I see it as the most enlightening piece of anthropological or sociological research that I have read for years. Obviously the price has nothing to do with any wishes of the author.

Yet if I were the marketing manager of the Cambridge University Press I would have instantly seen the opportunities of a paperback run-on, on newsprint if it's any cheaper, of several thousand copies with big lettering on the cover saying ‘Music in Milton Keynes: the truth at last’, and I would have touted it around every bookshop and newsagent in Bletchley, Stoney Stratford, Wolverton and central Milton Keynes, and would find that vast number of citizens would want to buy it, if only because on the evidence of this book a very big proportion of the people who live there are involved in one or another of these plural worlds of music in Milton Keynes.

The lessons

I've just referred to a failure in marketing, and this gives me the chance to draw an obvious implication from this book. For ten years we have been lectured by our rulers about the virtues of the market economy, the alleged magic of the market, and this by a clever propaganda trick has been described as the enterprise culture. Now enterprise has nothing to do with making a profit by buying cheap and selling dear. In the very last

scape made up of a whole series of differing kinds of groups and activities, some tightly organised, visible and populous, others more informal, some struggling or on their last legs, some starting up and perhaps benefiting from the dissolution of others, some established but still vulnerable, some in direct competition with other groups at some times but joining in co-operative ventures at others, some lasting over the years, and some appearing for just one or two events then lapsing. In the rich tapestry that makes up local music, what all these groups and activities have in common—whether large or small, ‘successful’ or not, harmonious or quarrelsome or mixed — is the need for a constant input of organised co-ordinated effort from those who at one level or another participate in them.

Now where have you seen this kind of language before? Well precisely in Kropotkin’s definition of anarchism with which I began. Just to complete the saga, I will quote &om Ruth Finnegan’s next paragraph. “Many of the pictures we are given of cultural activity in this country rest on a top-down model (patronage coming from the state or the large commercial concerns) or on a model of culture, and more specifically music, as essentially and ideally the preserve of specialists or as primarily conducted through the mass media or large-scale professional concerts. Local music-making falls easily within none of these models. Nor does it fit the also common idea that amateur cultural activities are somehow natural, easy and carefree, costing nothing and outside the normal sphere of those who are interested in organisational processes. On the contrary, the organisational processes of effective work, decision making, communication, choice between alternative methods of achieving objectives, delegation of responsibilities and, above all, co-

mode of human behaviour; we destroy it contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” Buber wrote a brilliant essay called ‘Society and the State’ which was printed in English in the long-dead journal *World Review* in 1951, and printed in a book of his called *Pointing the Way*.

Buber begins by making a clear distinction between the social principle and the political principle, pointing out that “it is inherent in social structures that people either find themselves already linked with one another in an association based on a common need or a common interest, or that they band themselves together for such a purpose, whether in an existing or a newly-formed society.” And he then goes on to stress his agreement with the American sociologist Robert MacIver, that “to identify the social with the political is to be guilty of the grossest of all confusions, which completely bars any understanding of either society or the state”.

The political principle for Buber, just as for Kropotkin, is characterised by power, authority, hierarchy, dominion. He sees the social principle wherever people link themselves in the pursuit of a common need or interest. Then he has a very interesting flash of understanding, which I see endlessly illustrated in contemporary politics. What is it, Buber asks, that gives the political principle its ascendancy? His answer was: “The fact that every people feels itself threatened by the others gives the State its definite unifying power; it depends upon the instinct of self preservation of society itself; the latent external crisis enables it to get the upper hand in internal crises ... All forms of government have this in common: each possesses more power than is required by the given conditions; in fact, this excess in the capacity for making dispositions is actually what we understand by political power. The measure of this excess which cannot, of course, be computed precisely, represents the exact differences between administration and government.” Buber calls this excess the “political surplus” and he observes that “its justification derives from the external and

internal instability, from the latent state of crisis between nations and within every nation. The political principle is always stronger in relation to the social principle than the given conditions require. The result is a continuous diminution in social spontaneity.”

Neighbourhood and association

I find this a devastating perception. And I think that a whole lot of people have always had an instinctive feeling that if any community can't organise itself, it is going to find governmental bodies filling the vacuum. There has been at least sixty years of effort to establish local community associations as voluntary, democratic, all-embracing bodies able to become unifying influences in every locality. These efforts are reported in a new book called *Enterprising Neighbours: the development of the Community Association movement* published this year by the National Federation of Community Associations. David Donison provides an interesting introduction welcoming the honesty of this history because its approach to several questionable assumptions that a whole lot of worthy grassroots organisers take for granted, primarily the idea that “people want to spend their time making friends with neighbours rather than because they have shared interests”.

We can define the two possibilities as communities of propinquity and communities of interest. In practice plenty of us belong, for different reasons, to both, fulfilling Kropotkin's aspirations to “an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees” and so on. Students of the social problems that were said to arise in the vast new out-of town housing estates of the inter-war years, like Dagenham outside London or Wythenshawe outside Manchester, were apt to attribute them to the fact that huge new settlements of people who were strangers to each other

ated with the Peace Pagoda, or the musical traditions of the Sikh community and the Muslim population, each with their own musical traditions. Or the Milton Keynes Pipe and Drum Band or the celebration of the Chinese New Year with dragon and drum beat. She stresses once again that “in the limited sense in which the metaphor of ‘musical world’ is meaningful, there is a plurality of such worlds in local music-making.”

Then she examines the home, the school and the churches, clubs and pubs, not only as the physical places for music making, but as providing “a complex of expected roles and opportunities for music” which continues year after year. After all “music does not just happen ‘naturally’ in any society, but has to have its recognised time and place, its organisation of personnel, resources, and physical locations”. And she has two chapters, one called ‘Working at it’ and another on ‘Small working bands’, which illustrate the huge time and effort that vast numbers of people, a much wider group than actual performers, put into making music happen. Once more, I can't resist quoting from the book at length:

Not surprisingly some groups were more effective than others in attracting the necessary personnel, coping with the various constraints, and more or less meeting their participants' aspirations, but even the smallest of them — the precarious church choir of four members as much as the 90-strong Milton Keynes Chorale — ultimately depended on the ordered commitment of its participants: without that none could continue.

When one thinks of local music, then, the correct impression should not be either of the ‘cultural desert’ that some picture, or of a set of smartly operated and highly efficient groups, or yet of the natural co-operation of communally oriented or selfless individuals, but rather a variegated land-

occasion as a musical event". Then she moves to an analysis of composition, creativity and performance. A lot of musical composition happens in Milton Keynes in several ways. "The first is the well-known classical mode of prior-written composition by an individual. This mode is assumed to be the natural form of 'composition' in most serious writing about music." A lot of that happens here, like the work of John Dankworth, working nationally and internationally, not primarily through local musical networks. There's a lot of church composition, hymns and carols, and a lot of music written for local school music festivals, or for the big music dramas from the Stantonbury drama group.

But there are other models of composition which, she sees, "overlap and mutually enrich each other". And she concludes that "once one understands the validity of differing systems for creating original music, each autonomous in its own terms, it becomes clear that there is indeed a remarkable amount of musical creativity and the grass roots. In all forms of music, but perhaps most strikingly of all in the prior-composition-through practice of rock groups, the local musicians are quite consciously and deliberately among the modern-day musical composers."

Pluralism and commitment

I have quoted at length from Dr Finnegan's account of the different musical worlds of Milton Keynes. She is well aware that there are others too. There's the big range of Irish music, both associated with groups like the Erin Singers and the Green Grass Social Club as well as the St Patrick's Day Mass of the Milton Keynes Irish Society. Or there's the Austrian, Swiss and German music at the Bletchley Edelweiss Club, or the Milton Keynes Welsh Society, or the Hindu Youth Organisation that celebrated the Diwali Festival, or the Buddhist group associ-

found themselves living together in places without the familiar community facilities of the places they had come from, and thought that what was needed was a programme of community building.

The lessons were supposed to have been learned in the post-war programmes of New Towns which culminated with Milton Keynes. In practice the stop/go financing of the New Towns all through the fifties, sixties and seventies meant that the aspirations for synchronising new housing, new industry and social and community facilities seldom really happened as planned and as described in the publicity material. But I do think it is fair to say that the money invested in most of the New Towns on the funding of community facilities, including paying the salaries of people described as Community Development Officers or some similar title, was well spent, and contrasts favourably with the experience of the post-war versions of those pre-war out of town housing estates which we all know about: the places where we love to see television films of the blowing-up by public authorities (not anarchists) of tower blocks which won't have been paid for until the early 21st century.

All the same, the worthy citizens who organise local community associations, whom we all know, when they pause and reflect on their labours, talk wistfully of the apathy and indifference of the people all around. They are not angry, they are just regretful that other people don't live up to a particular idea of society and community based on propinquity. It makes me ponder yet again, not only on the very significant observation I have quoted to you from Professor Donnison, but on Kropotkin's aspirations for an anarchist society.

Milton Keynes and music

This is why I need to tell you about my discovery of anarchy, in Kropotkin's sense, in Milton Keynes. It is because I have been reading, with very great pleasure, the book *The Hidden Musicians: music-making in an English town* by Ruth Finnegan, published last year by Cambridge University Press. She is an anthropologist from the Open University, so the particular English town she describes is Milton Keynes. The immense advantage of her ethnographical approach is that she refrains from making those value assumptions about music that most people automatically assume. As we all know, people talk about 'serious' music, meaning the music they take seriously, and implying that all other music is somehow frivolous.

Professor Finnegan has, I am sure, her own musical preferences, but she does not allow them to intrude on her study of music-making. I am reminded of Mark Twain's quip that "Wagner's music isn't really half as bad as it sounds".

Salvation Army bands, the Sherwood Sinfonia, the families dressing up for the Country and Western night, church choirs, the Morris Men and a hundred rock groups are all music, and when you consider the people hiring venues, arranging gigs, negotiating with visiting soloists, drawing up programmes, ferrying their children to rehearsals and carting tons of equipment around, let alone packing in the audiences, you realise that a vast and hitherto unrecorded proportion of the population anywhere is directly involved in the activity of music-making. In fact you feel that the whole population in one way or another is indirectly involved.

This is a remarkable social fact: that music-making is, more than anything else you can think of quickly, the cement of society, the expression of that social spontaneity that Buber was looking for, the most immediate and accessible example of Kropotkin's vision of the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees, for all imag-

own radical claims against the capitalist world" — a form of working-class youth protest.

These views obviously aren't convincing when applied to "the amateur grass-roots local performers and their face-to-face audiences," but all the same, "local participants and observers were still to some extent affected by this series of assumptions and were prepared from time to time to make effective use of such images as their own publicity".

Her own conclusion is that "the most prominent single characteristic of rock players in Milton Keynes — apart from their variety — was their interest in expressing their own views and personality through music-making: a stress on individuality and artistic creation which accords ill with the mass theorists' delineation of popular music". A striking feature she saw running through all the bands was a sense of personal pride and achievement. Her final word on them was that in such bands "their members felt they could really make some individual mark ... in contrast to the hierarchies and insecurities of school, work or the social services, playing in a band provided a medium where players could express their own personal aesthetic vision and through their music achieve a sense of controlling their own values, destiny and self identity."

Creativity

She goes on to discuss the processes by which musicians in Milton Keynes learned the techniques of their art, the nature of performances. Whether the performance was seen as an 'engagement', a 'concert', a 'recital', a 'booking' or a 'gig', there were several forms of social organisation required: "mechanisms to frame the occasion as somehow apart, prior preparation by organisers, and the crucial presence of an audience, not just as passive recipients but as active and experienced participants themselves playing an essential role in constituting the

The country and western world was a co-existence of people interested in the 'western' aspects and those who most valued the music. This co-existence was summed up in the very name of the Milton Keynes Divided Country and Western Club, which as Dr Finnegan says, at first sight suggests dissension, but in practice symbolises fruitful co-operation and an ultimate sharing of interests between these wings of the country and western world.

She moves on to another musical scene, rock and pop, a catch-all phrase since meanings and definitions are always shifting with what Derek Jewell calls the continual flux of the vocabulary of popular fashion. Dr Finnegan describes how "Milton Keynes was swarming with rock and pop bands. They were performing in the pubs and clubs, practising in garages, youth clubs, church halls and school classrooms, advertising for new members in the local papers and lugging their instruments around by car or on foot. There were probably about 100 groups, each with their own colourful names and brand of music ... From the amount of time, trouble and (in many cases) money the players invested in their music, and from their own comments, it was clear that they got great social and personal satisfaction from their band membership — 'making people listen to what you say' and 'finding a way to express ourselves' — rather than regarding it primarily as a profitable enterprise ... The players' ages, educational backgrounds and occupation were more varied than most of the generalisations about modern rock music and youth culture might suggest."

She is greatly sceptical about the succession of scholarly writings about mass culture, one influential group seeing it as "essentially ruled by the market place, soporific and non-artistic, delivered by non-creative and commercialised performers to passive and brainwashed mass audiences," another group of Marxist critics seeing it as dominated by a capitalist power elite, while yet another declares that it is a "cultural struggle" with "the working class struggling to assert their

inable aims; ever changing, ever modified associations which carry in themselves the elements of their durability and constantly assume new forms which answer best to the multiple aspirations of all."

Professor Finnegan manages to sweep aside endless assumptions: the sociologists' preoccupation with class, the distinctions we make between professional and amateur, and, above all, ideas about musical exclusiveness. The same busy performers can find themselves in a brass band one night, in a symphony orchestra another, and in an ad hoc jazz group at the weekend. This is the fluidity of involvement in changing communities that attracted Buber and Kropotkin. It's nice to think that a valuable element of the community quotient of any society, East or West, can be expressed in terms of the sheer number of young people endlessly practising for their big performances in a local pub under the self deprecating group names they choose (Ruth Finnegan lists more than a hundred, of which a mild example is 'Typical Shit'). This is the backhanded way in which shared enthusiasms hold communities together.

Let us take a look at some of the interlocking, mutually supportive communities that her book describes, seeing them as a measure of the community content of Milton Keynes.

The music subculture

She notes how we have a socially defined canon of 'classical music' epitomised by varying combinations of professional players, live, broadcast and recorded, which "implicitly moulded people's views of music" but "there was also a whole grass-roots sub-culture of local classical music. Though perhaps 'invisible' to most scholars, in practice this was the essential local manifestation of the national music system ... one aspect was the provision of audiences with the necessary skills of appreciation for professionals coming to give concerts lo-

cally, but it extended far beyond this to the whole system of local training, playing, actively practising musical groups and public performances by local musicians.”

One concrete example of this continuing tradition is the way in which printed scores and music parts, both vocal and instrumental, get passed on: “These were often borrowed rather than bought and when a local choir, say, found itself, as so often, singing from old and well-marked copies, it was easy to picture the earlier choirs 20, 30 or even 50 years ago singing from the self same copies — and repertoire — of classical choral music in the day when, perhaps, those parts cost just one penny.”

In Milton Keynes, as in anywhere else, the classical music tradition rests on highly trained specialist musicians, so it can be seen as a “high-art pursuit for the few”. But looking a little closer, Ruth Finnegan sees that local musicians “varied enormously in terms of educational qualifications, specialist expertise, occupation, wealth and general ethos.” Take the leading amateur orchestra, the Sherwood Sinfonia, where she found exceptions to the usual assumptions, “like the young sausage-maker, later music shop assistant, who besides being a Sherwood Sinfonia violinist was a keyboard player and composer with a local rock group, or pupils from local comprehensive schools not all in the ‘best’ areas.”

Take too the Brass Band world. Don’t be deceived by the way that people imply that that sector is ‘a world of its own’ confined to families where it had become a tradition. There is endless evidence of this in the tradition of Salvation Army bands, works bands or Boys’ Brigade bands, but we’re all familiar with great and famous performers who belonged as much to the allegedly incompatible groupings of the dance band, jazz group or symphony orchestra. In Milton Keynes, Ruth Finnegan found that no other musical groups, except possibly a few church choirs, had such solid links, sometimes actual instruments and sheet music from long before the new city was conceived: from the Woburn Sands Band of 1867,

Dissent and co-operation

Then she moves to the country and western world, describing the Milton Keynes Divided Country and Western Club, going strong in Bletchley since the mid 1970s. The club’s name, she says, indicated certain options. One of these was in dress: ‘divided’ between those who chose to come dressed ‘just as you like’ and those who preferred ‘western dress’. Either was acceptable, and around half had opted for one or another version of ‘western’ gear which could range from a token cowboy hat or scarf or to the full regalia. “In contrast to rock and jazz events,” she explains, “the audience sitting round the tables was family based, with roughly equal numbers of men and women, several children, and people of every age from the twenties upwards, including middle-aged and elderly people; only the late teenagers were absent. It was a ‘family night out’ ... the secretary welcomed individual visitors from other clubs to interest and smiles from his listeners — an established custom in country and western clubs, in keeping with their general atmosphere of friendliness and personal warmth”.

She makes it sound almost like a meeting of a religious sect like the Shakers in nineteenth century America: “As the evening went on, more and more people got up to dance, adding to and developing the music through their rhythmic movements in the dance — one of the age-old modes of musical expression and appreciation. The atmosphere was relaxed and unselfconscious. and most people whatever their age, sex or build looked remarkably carefree as they danced to the band — the middle-aged woman with her tight jeans, jersey and big leather belt over her well-rounded bulges, the visiting technician and grandfather with his broken smoke-stained teeth, gleaming gun and cowboy gear, the young wife out for the evening with her husband, drawn in by his general interest in country and western music and now sharing his enthusiasm — and scores of others.”

and blues sequences, with beautiful traditional playing interspersed with their own wilder enactments of blues. They spoke of these as ‘improvised out of nowhere, on the spur of the moment’, but they were in practice based on long hours of jamming together as a group.” She goes on to say that “they saw themselves as ‘a community band’, playing ‘to give other people enjoyment ... and for our own enjoyment as well’, a hobby rather than professional enterprise. When they were approached by a recording company and offered money to go professional, they turned it down.”

Her account of the fluidity of the jazz groups sounds like Kropotkin describing his ideal society. She sees the actual instrumental composition of jazz groups as “more variable than in most other musical worlds” and that “jazz musicians were tied neither to written forms nor to exact memorisation, but rather engaged in a form of composition-in-performance following accepted stylistic and thematic patterns”.

For them, jazz was freedom, as compared with either classical music or rock. She says that “far more than other musicians they would break into smiles of recognition or admiration as one after another player took up the solo spot, and looked at each other in pleasure after the end of a number, as if having experienced something newly created as well as familiar. As one local jazz player put it, ‘we improvise, with the tunes used as vehicles, so everything the group does is original’. Local jazz musicians often belonged to several jazz bands, moving easily between different groups ... jazz in Milton Keynes is more a series of venues than an integrated and self-conscious musical world ... and both the musical activity itself, and the shared skills, pride and conventions that constituted jazz playing seemed to be a continuing element in their own identity and their perceptions of others.”

the Wolverton Town and Railway Band of 1908 or the Bletchley Boys’ Brigade Bugle Band of 1928. By the 1980s the constituents of, say, the Stantonbury Brass or the Bletchley Band and the new Broseley Brass had members of both sexes and all ages. Ruth Finnegan was assured that their political commitments were across the whole spectrum and the people involved included postmen, teachers, telephone engineers, motor mechanics, personnel managers, butchers, train drivers, clerks, labourers, storemen and shopworkers, “but also included computer engineers, a building inspector, a midwife and several schoolchildren”.

Forget your assumptions: the brass band world was more representative of class and occupation in Milton Keynes than any political group. And exactly the same was found to be true of the folk music world. One of the things she observed in local folk clubs was their relative transience: “There were others too, even less long-lasting, which for a time engaged people’s enthusiasm but faded out after a few years or months ...” like the Concrete Cow Folk Club. One leading singer at the Black Horse in Great Linford explained that “anybody’s welcome to join in, play along, sing a song, add some harmony to a chorus or simply have a beer and listen”.

Change and variety

This is a reminder of Kropotkin’s important stress on impermanence, and his insistence on “an infinite variety of groups ... temporary or more or less permanent ... an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium”. In the brass world we emphasise the continuity of tradition, in the folk world we love the way in which the mood and the venue change from pub to pub. I see, where I live in Suffolk, how as the venue changes, performers, some of them old friends, others complete strangers, adjust to the mood, the audience and the acoustics,

and play along together, sometimes accompanying a singer none of them have met before, exchanging through gestures and eye-signals information about key and tempo, chords and harmony. It is exactly the same automatic reciprocity that you notice between the members of a string quartet, with the significant difference that people like the Amadeus had played together for forty years.

When the whole variegated patchwork of the folkweave pattern comes together, as in the Folk-on-the-Green Festival in Stony Stratford, they provide, as Ruth Finnegan comments, “a magnificent showpiece of local talent” bringing in other streams like Ceilidh bands to dance to, or the Morns-dancing groups. As one adherent told her, “by playing with other people you get another dimension to performance”.

Then she moves to the world of music theatre, meaning opera, the Gilbert and Sullivan light operas, musical plays – not so much ‘Oklahoma’ or ‘West Side Story’ as local groups could never afford the copyright fees involved, but old favourites and, for example, the series of musical plays based on local history which emerged on the Stantonbury Campus, one of which I have actually seen. It also covers the pantomimes put on at Christmas by every kind of group from schools to Women’s Institutes.

If your measure of the importance of music in human society is the sheer number of people involved in the actual production, music theatre must be the winner. Among performers it brings together both singers and actors, and it also calls for the utmost skill in scene designers, lighting electricians, painters and stage-hands, costume makers, and an enormous number of citizens involved in getting people to rehearsals, feeding and bedding them, booking halls, producing programmes, drumming up the audience and selling tickets. Many such ventures were conducted to raise funds for local causes, and Ruth Finnegan is eloquent about the meaning for the participants

...local soloists flourished and even the less skilled chorus and small-part singers expanded, steeped in music for hours on end, attending constant rehearsals, studying their parts in every odd moment they could snatch from work or family – small wonder that one concluded ‘I ate, slept and dreamt music’. Some members had before had relatively little systematic musical experience, and for them such experience would be a revelation – as for the local plumber unable to read notated music who talked and talked of the joy of singing in operas and pantomimes and his discovery of the beauties of listening to music. For their regular audiences too, the public performances were not only grand occasions of theatrical display, marked by colour, movement, dance and dramatic as well as musical expression, but also an opportunity to hear well-known tunes and arrangements which even after the end of that year’s performance could remain in the memory to evoke that special experience and lay the foundation for looking forward to next year’s production.”

Fluidity and movement

Then there’s the jazz world. The three best-known bands playing in Milton Keynes in the early 1980s were the Original Grand Union Syncopators, the Fenny Stompers and the T-Bone Boogie Band. Dr Finnegan discusses these three with a brief mention of dozens of others in the area. These groups won a huge reputation locally, with wildly unexpected combinations of performers and instruments. Talking of the T-Bone Boogie Band, she explains that “they presented themselves as a zany ‘fun band’, but their act followed many traditional jazz