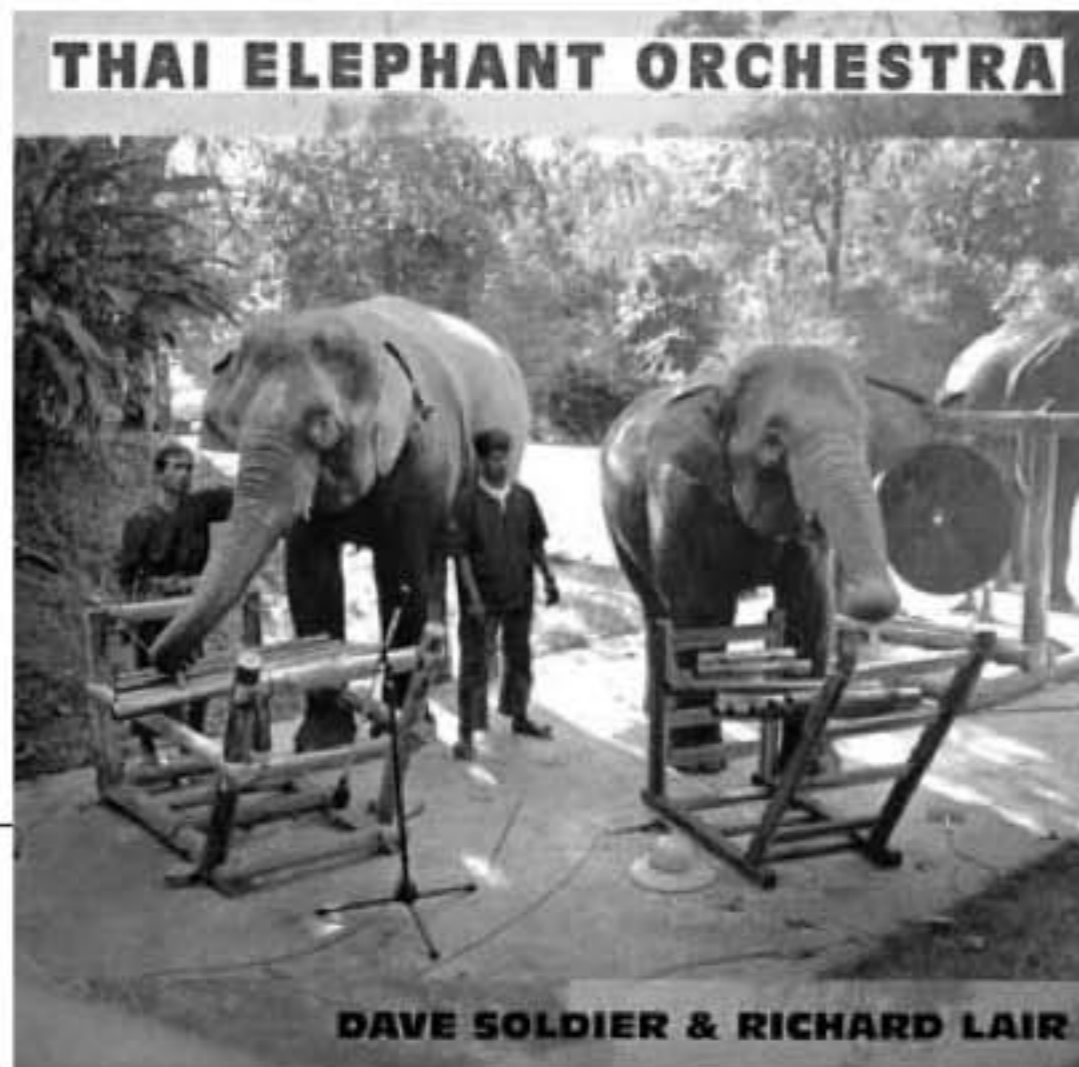


Dream of the elephant gamelan

In Thailand the elephants are on the dole queue, their traditional timber trucking work gone the way of the trees. At one establishment however, the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre, new work-placements have been found. The elephants are getting into the swing, and the results are completely magical



Only half a century ago Thailand was a country with large forests. Today almost all of those are gone, thanks to logging. It was also a country that 100 years ago could claim a population of around 100,000 Asian elephants. Until logging was banned quite recently it was the elephants that were man's unwitting junior partner in the logging industry. They also fell prey to the ivory trade and other bad practices, so much so that Thailand's elephants came close to disappearing. Today there are only about 2500.

Without the logging, these remaining elephants have had to make do with often somewhat demeaning work: as circus performers, tourist ride attractions and the like. Within this rather dispiriting scenario, the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre (TECC) is a beacon of hope. Near Lampang in northern Thailand, the Centre is both a sanctuary to elephants and a research centre into the great grey beast. A few years ago, in consultation with one of the world authorities on Asian elephants, American expatriate, Richard Lair – or, as he is often known, Professor Elephant – the Centre had been exploring all sorts of new and unusual roles for its charges. Knowing that the creatures are often responsive to sound, Lair and his friend David Sulzer, a New

York neurologist and experimental musician going under the moniker Dave Soldier, decided to take things a step further. They built a series of instruments, which would fit into the Northern Thai environs: giant slit drums, three large marimba-type instruments similar to the Thai renat instrument and a string instrument they called the didley bow. They also bought harmonicas, finger cymbals, a mouth organ, as well as a bass drum. From there the pair, aided and abetted by various helpers, along with the elephant handlers or *mahouts* began to encourage six of the centre's 46 elephants out of their musical shell.

They needn't have worried: the elephants took to music-making like ducks to water. Ignoring such muddled species metaphors, elephants have long been recognised as musically adept, even stretching back to the Roman handlers of Hadrian's time. In 1957 Bernard Rensch, a German ethnologist, noted that elephants recognised 12 musical tones and could remember simple melodies. They are known for their keenness of hearing in comparison to sight.

When Lair and Sulzer started listening they were immediately struck by the musicality of what their six prodigies were coming up with. By the fifth session Sulzer, who in his musician guise also runs a small avant garde record label, switched a tape recorder on. The results can be heard on a CD, simply entitled the Thai Elephant Orchestra. It is a genuinely pleasing and enjoyable experience, the various slit drum's gongs slowly chiming in time to each other. Others have observed that the CD's 13 elephant tracks are by turns haunting, melodic, strongly rhythmic, at times somewhat monotonous, but unambivalently music. Sulzer points out they don't hit the instruments randomly, but take careful aim to get the best sound results. He felt there wasn't much point teaching the students human written melodies. What was interesting was what they

wanted to play – and liked to hear. If the elephants are so far being encouraged into playing, Sulzer wonders if there will soon come a time when they initiate the playing. If so, what will this mean for our perception of elephant intelligence? For those sceptical that it is indeed music, Sulzer recommends the Turing test, analogous to whether a computer is intelligent or not – play the music to a friend who knows nothing of the species of the players. I did, on an admittedly small group of unsuspecting locals, and each time it was assumed these were humans – more often than not from Tibet – who they were listening to. It will make you feel as if you have struck a blow for inter-species communication. As the CD sleeve notes says 'Art for all mammals'. OL

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Listen up Stockhausen, the elephants are coming

by Paul Nieman

As a music student in the 70s I was privileged to be immersed into a world of improvisation by my composer/ teacher father, Alfred Nieman.

On rare occasions, some event befalls me which reawakens my sense of musical privilege and grants me access to a wonderful healing world in which my current digitised, western-clutter world evaporates to reveal a heavenly, effortless and playful accord. This CD is such an occasion.

I have played the CD *Thai Elephant Orchestra* a few times for my ears and for those of my friends. The first listenings were deliberately uninformed as to the background and logistics of the project and I was flippant in my response. However on repeated hearings and after some background reading, I found myself being drawn into a wonderful, contemplative world of sound design and improvisatory timings that reveal a world of slow, gentle rhythms and dynamics which show deep listening amongst the players, and wonderful healing synchronicities. I end up feeling good about me and good about the world and grateful that we have elephants to listen to.

Time is not in short supply here and nor does it ever get fragmented and maybe that is a clue as to why it is healing, fascinating and sometimes very funny without sounding contrived.

My respect for the people behind this project is redoubled. The instruments chosen, and adapted for the Elephants to play, sound wonderful in themselves.

There are a few other connections that my mind makes with Stockhausen (Track 15 *Trio for Theremin and Electric Keyboard*) and others notably Messiaen – *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* but the fact is that the music speaks for itself with and without these human references.

Paul Nieman is a trombone musician, web designer, and in the seventies was the guiding light behind the band, Elephant.