

BOB GILMORE — A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

James Poke

*Ich habe Tote und ich ließ sie hin ... nur du, du kehrst zurück.*¹

So Bob is gone. There is an intense unreality about this, a disbelief, a dissonance – it just doesn't feel like he is gone, or indeed ever could be gone.

Bob was my closest friend for over 30 years, since we met at York University in the early '80s, at the first year introductory party where I was standing around feeling intensely lost, not having the courage to talk to anybody, when this large quantity of red hair approached me and started talking about Bob Dylan for some reason. We happened to share a mutual enthusiasm for the music of this other Bob (as we did for other singer-songwriters like Billy Bragg and PJ Harvey) and quickly we became very close friends, probably learning as much by endlessly sitting around in the notoriously bad Vanbrugh College snack bar, talking with each other and numerous other students about music and anything else, as we did in the Music Department.

Since that time we never lost sight of each other, wherever life decided to take us: we exchanged many letters whilst I was studying in Vienna and Bob in York or San Diego; it was when John Godfrey and I were visiting Bob in Amsterdam in the '80s that the three of us cooked up the plan for what would become Icebreaker; later we visited each other often in London or Totnes; and then when Bob's son, Ben, became a pupil at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Cobham, Bob used to stay over most weekends during term time at my house in Dorking. After Ben left the school, Bob conveniently got a job at Brunel University so, whilst continuing to live in Amsterdam, he was able to use Dorking as a base when in England. I feel tremendously lucky now to have been able to spend so much time with him.

And of course a lot of that time was spent with a variety of other people, who came to stay with Bob, often unannounced. Bob would turn up with a Dutch composer, or a colleague from Brunel, and an inspiring evening would often turn into an unexpected adventure leading to new and fruitful friendships. I didn't realise at that time, perhaps, that one of Bob's prime qualities was bringing people together: his openness, his kindness, his uncomplicated way of approaching the world and its people created a unique space that allowed people to come together and share minor and major bits of life's many ingredients.

Bob was obviously known primarily as a musicologist and writer, as well as a teacher, but I'll leave others to talk about that. Having said that (and it goes without saying he was a fabulous writer, always precise, readable and devoid of pretension), Bob was of course the

¹ 'I have my dead, and I have let them go ... only you, you alone return'. From *Requiem für eine Freundin* by Rainer Maria Rilke.

person to turn to when we needed liner notes for Icebreaker (he wrote four), and was always jokingly described as Icebreaker's official biographer. He was also the person I would turn to for help in improving and refining anything I might be writing – indeed I have every intention of sending this to him to proof read!

But it is as a person that I most want to talk about him. You might get the impression from the many tributes to him so far that he was some erudite academic, with some of the clichés that implies. I feel somewhat in awe reading them: it sounds like somebody so distinguished that he would be unapproachable. Is this who Bob was?

But, as Frank Denyer said at Bob's funeral, describing how he had expected the renowned Harry Partch expert to be a rather distant academic figure and how surprised he was when Bob approached him in an informal way to ask about Denyer's own music, Bob was of course totally down to earth. He seemed to have an extraordinary ability to understand other people and empathise with them, an ability to give undivided attention, to listen and then respond in a respectful and unjudging way. In over 30 years, I never had an argument with Bob – it doesn't seem that it would ever have been possible (despite my own short temper).

And it feels like he was the person who understood my musical identity more than anybody else: he could empathise with my musical opinions, even when he didn't agree with them, and he seemed to grasp the somewhat bizarre ideas behind my occasional compositions. There were many composers whom we both admired and could talk about energetically but, although our respective musical interests could often be very different, Bob's innate, unbounded curiosity for so many musical areas (the likes of Elliott Carter or Helmut Lachenmann excepted of course – another point of view we shared) always allowed for enthusiastic discussions. He was actually the person who introduced me to minimalism in the first place, back in the York days, and his enthusiasm for Diderik Wagenaar's *Tam Tam* was key in getting Icebreaker started – he could in many ways be considered a co-founder of the group. He was always one of the people I turned to for suggestions of new composers to ask to write for Icebreaker, and likewise if I needed an interesting new piece to complete a theme for my internet radio show. It is obvious that these qualities not only made him a wonderful friend, critic and colleague but also a superb teacher and mentor, as so many of his former pupils have commented.

He had a fabulous sense of humour (enlivened with an enjoyment of 'bad' language, which he managed to throw into conversations in amusing ways), and evenings spent with him were always guaranteed to be entertaining. I have a quote from one of his letters to me from the 1980s: 'My love life's going really great, but my work is shit - hang on, it's the other way round'. When I sent him, many years ago, an email with a typo at the top writing 'Hu' instead of 'Hi', he thought this was hugely funny and made this into our regular greeting from then on.

Since his death, it seems like every little detail reminds me of him, whether it's the special red wine glasses that he always liked to use at Dorking (I don't think we used them much before that), or the slippers still in the cloakroom that he kept for his next visit, or the bottle of beer he would hand me whilst I was cooking dinner, or anything where I naturally think, 'I must tell Bob about that', or 'Bob would be able to answer that question', or all the things I just want to talk to Bob about.

And as I attempted to imply with the Rilke quote at the top, Bob doesn't go away: I will tell Bob about that and I will ask him about this problem or for advice on that other thing. Because it seems Bob is all around. Some people when they die, however fond you may be of them, they fade surprisingly quickly, become vague to the memory, 'so rasch zuhaus im Totsein' as Rilke put it.

But not Bob: Bob will continue to be around forever.

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