collage: Oliver Lowenstein

with various Scottish Highlands and Islands folk traditions. Occasionally, it sounds, as the lilting Gaelic vocals float across the mix, discernibly African in its overall techno-texture: Scotland, Africa, although some of those textures seem as if they could only have been arrived at from people coming out of Scotland, North Sea. The second set, 'Mo Di', three years after, was a complete remodelling of priorities and horizons from that initial recording. Gone are a considerable part of the distinctive "Gaelic" vocals. In place is English, although some pieces are still in Gaelic, the sound is different. It's much harder, funkier, in approach, where it is rock, although with an overlay of Scottish Folk traditon where it isn't. And in autumn 1994, extending the journey Mouth Music are engaged in, a new set, "Shorelife" appeared. A further move away from ostensible roots and into the broad sphere of influence of post-Techno, "Shorelife" brushed off Mouth Music's past incarnations and brought a Techno accommodation to a new contemporary world music constituency.

"Where do you file Mouth Music in a record shop?" said Ian Scott of Triple Earth when I was initially finding out about the gig. "Celtic Outer Space Music," I said frivolously, though the point had been made, that it's pretty much beyond contemporary record bin categories, if inching into the weird shit rock section.

"Martin just wants to be Prince", added Scott, talking of Martin Swan, Mouth Music's moving spirit, talking of his various facilities, multi-instrumentalism and his studio-expertise. And Mouth Music appears to be a vehicle for his diverse hybridising musical interests which encompass ancient 'primitive' instruments to the latest hi-tech.

Considering the hi-tech section of the spectrum was the initial reason for making contact, and formed the weight of my questions to Martin. I was wondering how technology plays into the notion of place, region,

Into their third set of hybrid musical intelligence, 'Shorelife', Mouth Music split last year, leaving their crafted Celtic techno-funk as an influential horizon for 90's Gaelic-Celtic music. Some time before this, MM's Martin Swan discussed the relative merits of mixing ancient with post technology, other techno dilemmas and exotic authentics. Here's the initial original report.

Mouse Mujic out of Scotland, Africa

Mouth Music arrive from Edinburgh in Brighton to play a one-off date in a dispersed spring tour schedule. Eight hours on the road, and I'm surprised they're not wiped out before they begin the evening's events.

They aren't, and they put in a fine, totally danceable funky get-down performance for the small audience to get abandoned to. This is different music to the fragile symmetries of the first album which was released as long ago as 1990. 'Mouth Music' was a radical piece of experimentation belonging to the tradition of world music hybrids which were finding voice in the late eighties, crossing shards of African sounding musics

and location for Mouth Music, who have plied their music under the sign of "Gaelic", a linguistic as much as a geographic region. Would technology dissolve boundaries and region utterly, or is there the possibility it can help to provide identity of place, say with music? Music can be part of the glue that helps express a place's sense of location to its community. Without trying to be purist about identity can regions remain whilst containing a strong regional identity yet advancing alongside the globalising, transnational tendencies of technology rather than being engulfed in this globalisation? Is it a one-way street or will some new non-geographic ambient/electronic layered regionalism

develop in the melee of hybridisation, appearing without boundaries courtesy of wherever a Global Super Highway is at by 2020? World Music crossovers are a track in this narrative, which I would have thought is only at the beginning as the planet continues to contract. Another version of this was relayed by the Guardian in a computer piece on networking and the Orkney Islands. The Orkney Islands are fast becoming a centre of tele-work which is carried on alongside other traditional local activities; crofting and weaving for instance. Will such networking allow crafts and an identity of location to be nourished and remain, or will that local identity disappear in a melting pot of hybridisation, withering on the vine? Another way of looking at this is to recall that Scotland, as much as any of the rural regions of Britain, saw an influx of people returning to the land in the seventies, attempting to reform a connection with place. Much of this centred around rural and agricultural activities, whilst celebrating the indigenous culture that could be found beneath the recent industrial topsoil. But will technologisation, computers, and the distillation of place, technology brings with it do completely away the sense and experience of rural identity? Can such celebration and maintenance of the experience of natural regions continue? In a way, I felt Mouth Music, through commitment to old and new musical technologies which both express place (Gælic singing, traditional instruments) and do away with place (hi tech) provide a soundscape exempler of such reconciliations and dilemmas.

How will such dilemmas develop? It's a matter, I think, of "watch this space", and hope for the best of all worlds. Still, there's Mouth Music, part of a diaspora of musicians exploring a musical space, that of Gaelic/Celtic roots, and pollinating it with other traditions, other tracks, to form further possible hybrids.

Whilst the others of the band sloped off for a pre-gig evening meal I put a few questions to Martin. I began by asking him something which had been providing me with food for thought. It concerned those dilemmas of increasing technologisation, the perception often made, that forms of traditional community cannot survive technology – the two don't seem to be mutually compatible. When someone comes along, and there are quite a few versions of this, and demonstrates the possibility of compatability, those people are viewed as showing a way out, or beyond, this contradictory, paradoxical state.

This appeared, for myself, to be a background of many of the questions that are being asked of world music: Is there a way beyond the dilemma of future = technology, past = tradition? Mouth Music, by a confusion of categories, present a kind of answer.

I began by asking Martin whether the music they're making, "Gaelic technological" music as it were, connects up with Scottish tradition, does it locate Mouth

Music as presently constituted in Scotland? The conversation ensued as follows:

Not particularly... Gælic music exists in a couple of well-defined spheres, one of which is in Gælic speaking parts of the world, which are very few and far between. As something which is a traditional culture, you know, people sit around and sing songs at home or in the pub or something like that. But there's also other identities for it which are much more powerful, like the national Mod which is a competition, which has kind of classicised the whole Gælic thing and, you know, there's a repertoire that people learn to sing in a particular way. Another aspect, is that Gælic songs are taught in schools to children whether they speak it or not.

Do you connect up with that Gaelic-Celtic fringe?

Not at all. No we don't connect up with it in any way – except that various people in the band play in more traditional bands that aren't geared towards recording or performing in large environments, but get together for a session in a pub. That's about as close as we come to traditional music. The first album was entirely Gaelic. The second album and since have gone off on a completely different angle.

Maybe it was a response to this?

Partly, but it was more the fact that the first album was a one-off. It was a particular project.

How did the first album come about?

Because I met a woman, who was singing Gaelic songs and I was really taken by the way she sang them, and saw some potential for them at the time. At that time world music, in the sense of crossovers between different musical cultures, particularly African and European culture, was very hip, what with Salif Keita and people like that. There was obviously some potential interest for it. So it was my fascination with the music as represented by her, plus the fact that there was some chance of persuading someone to put up the money to record something like that, that when Triple Earth said they wanted to do it, it was clear that was just going to be one project.

Do you think the use of technology contributes or plays into a sense of place, or do you think technology has connections with different places?

I would say that most of the blurring of cultural boundaries in pop music that's happened over the last five or six years is due to certain kinds of technology which were available. For instance the possibility of lifting a piece of music off somebody else's record and processing it to the point where it's in time to a track you happen to be working with. And the ease of lifting bits off records or the short wave radio, that make that possible and also you can't be influenced by something

unless you've heard it. That's connected to ease of travel over distribution of other culture's music. I'd say absolutely that technology and music has been counter-regional. Having said that, there's always going to be a purist streak – folkies who won't sing with instruments, or people insist on recording entirely live single takes of songs.

The way you're using technology through mixing elements of traditional music, is that something a lot of people comment on?

I think so yeah. It's never very specific, nor very philosophical. It's just a general concept that people are mildly intrigued by, but don't want to take too far. It seems like an apparent paradox to be dealing with, very old music with very new.

A lot of people are saying that new technology in a lot of fields is causing the decay and destruction of traditional cultures, traditional community life styles. What I found interesting with Mouth Music is that in some way you've found a way through that marries or reconciles the two, rather than one destroying the other.

Well, there's an interesting side issue of how that argument relates to music. People are nervous, cagey, or downright damning of technology which allows people without playing ability to make good music. For me it's definitely a side issue – because music's a series of sounds and if people want to appreciate aspects of playing skill, that's fine but there's a lot of people who are profoundly uninterested in that, and yet they still love music.
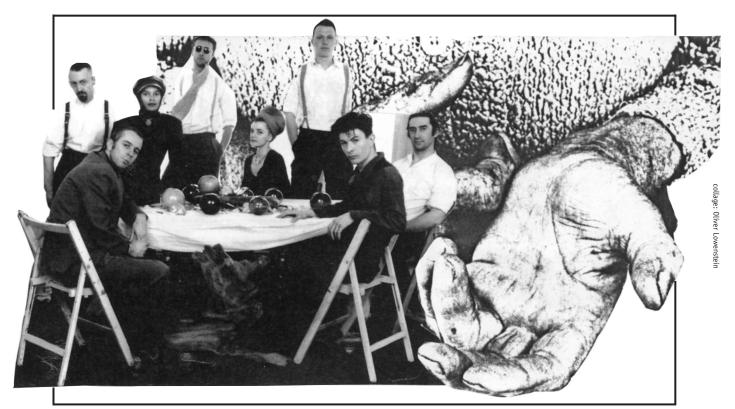
I think there's still always going to be quality judgements. However, whatever kind of technology somebody uses or apparent lack of technology, there is really no such thing as lack of technology. A primitive drum, by the perceptions of someone who invents a wave form synthesis machine, is still a piece of high technology by someone else's standards.

So you're going to get relativistic on me.

Completely, yeah. No difference in quality. It's all down to individual use. And you know there's crap music made with a great deal of computer memory, just as there's crap music that's made with purely acoustic wooden string instruments.

It's a matter of playing any note as long as it's the right note.

Yeah. You have to remember if you took traditional Scottish music, for example, there was a time when the bagpipes were a brand new technological innovation. A lot of people when they think about Scottish music, they think about pipes and drums. You know this military thing. All this kind of military band snare drumming originates from the fact that James IV, forward looking guy that he was, happened to invite a bunch of Morrocan drummers to his court. So it's now considered to be at the heart of a traditional culture. But there's often another truth behind it. You can be

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hand to mouth

separatist about cultures and generally they were sort of loose accidental amalgams in the first place. It's just that they existed in that form relatively unadulterated for such a long time that people forget their origins, just how much cross-fertilisation there was in the first place. At times it's difficult to trace.There are connections that are real and provable, and connections that are perceived. I don't see much difference between the two. I mean it is all on a level of perception.

Do you relate to the music you make as being regional to Scotland in some way, and if that's the case is it a music of location? Or is it a worldwide music?

Well it's regional on several levels. We all live in Edinburgh, to the extent that's where we work. That obviously has some influence. It's much easier to explain yourself to the outside world, if you tell them where you come from, particularly if it's relatively interesting like Scotland or Edinburgh.

In a lot of ways it makes sense to view what's happening with technology as globalising everything, making creativity that you can take from anywhere – and mix any sort of cross-hybridisation that you feel works.

I think that's true. Here's an example. The invention of the piano had a massive and global effect on European music because it encouraged and forced people to think of music as things that could be understood rather like a keyboard. And it had composite elements, top of the keyboard melodic lines, bottom of the keyboard harmonic blocks, maximum of five fingers. It imposed all sorts of things, an emphasis away from singing because the piano is such a defective instrument when it comes to sustain. And I think the same is true of a contemporary recording studio. You can use it just as easily in Dakar as you would in Edinburgh. It imposes a certain kind of discipline on players and yet it puts value quite accidentally on certain skills which are not important in purely live playing. Like, for instance, to reproduce what you've done, to be able to play it again. So that you drop into a track and fit in. You know there's a lot of improvisational uses.

The studio as creative tool...

Yeah, as a musical instrument which has its own set of criteria that you have to meet. So that's one idea. Another one that is connected is that musical traditions emerge through available raw materials and some countries have drums which are made of seal skin and bone, and are very, kind of, muffled and other countries have drums which are made of hardwood and goatskin and are therefore very loud and piercing. All music has evolved through combinations of particular sets of raw material and the way the muscles move. Like all percussion techniques are the culmination of a particular object which you hit and what comes naturally to the body to hit it. And what comes naturally to the body is the same everywhere. But the raw material is different.

What about the technology of the word? What are the effects of your singing in an unknown language to a large proportion of audiences?

Well I think most people, even in Scotland, would listen to Gaelic, in the same way as they would listen to Shona. For the majority of Scottish people it's an alien cultural phenomenon. It is for everybody in the band. It's less alien because we've taken an interest in it, and because if you were into those arguments, you might argue that we had a bit more reason to be doing it but, you know, I don't believe in cultural property so it's not an issue for me. If you imagine somebody in the centre of the Earth, they'd have their own language, generally more than one, because 90% of the world is bilingual. British people are very defective in that respect. So statistically they'd speak two languages. They know a few more they hear on their borders and they know conceptually the existence of many others that they are maybe able to recognise or not. For most people in the world Gaelic would fall into the category of languages that people can't recognise and there's an appeal in music for working with languages that people can't recognise, a voice singing in such a language has form and it has meaning but it's entirely divorced.

But you know, you can't perceive that meaning. You see it in a very pure form of utterances – which you think you might understand the meaning of...It allows a vocalist to express and articulate while sounding behind a veil, if you like.

Do you think the world would be a richer place if there were more spoken languages over smaller area – multiplicities of languages

I think so. But it's a bad question to ask me because the world's quite a small place for me. I spent quite a lot of time on the other side of the globe and Britain is a rather sort of minor dot on the map. I was in a place called the Reunion Islands, which is east of Madagascar, for a couple of years. And that's a dot on the map...It's whole geographical emphasis is completely different. It doesn't look to England at all. It's very well connected being a little island. It has to be. But that's not really a quest, it's more an interest. As one of the main writers in the band – I'm a traveller, and I'd love to think that somebody who has listened to the album would have gone on a little journey.

> Things have moved on since this talk. Ex Mouth-man Martin Swan has formed a new unit, Ambisonic, first music out right about now, two singles 'Angel' and 'Mobilised' and a CD album 'Ecohero' on Nation.