



PHOTO BY ROB ALLEN

the renowned
soundsinger's
transition from
grounded boy chorister
to transcendental free
improviser

towards the ineffable

a conversation with **paul dutton**

BY JAY SOMERSET

PAUL DUTTON DOESN'T KNOW IT, BUT I'M staring at his mouth, hoping for a glimpse inside his body, an explanation of the sounds—the grunts, growls, howls, and groans; the clicks, shrieks, ululations, purrs, yarrs, yaps, and cluckings—I've heard him emit in performance. From behind his white beard, between handfuls of nuts and sips of Ruffles County Ale he tells me, "I'm missing a tooth or two here and there, and I've got a false front tooth [courtesy of a hockey puck in his teens] that's supposed to be a fixed bridge. I once saw it land on the stage at the Music Gallery during a performance."

I first heard Dutton's work while dogsitting for the widow of the late Canadian poet bpNichol. Browsing bp's library, I came across Brian Nash's documentary *bp: Pushing the Boundaries*. I put the tape in the VCR and was thrown into the world of bpNichol, which included a few minutes of performance by the Four Horsemen, the poetry performance and sound-poetry group Nichol formed in the '70s and '80s with Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Dutton, and Steve McCaffery. I'd never heard such strange and wonderful sounds, and to have my introduction while sitting in bp's living room was, well, surreal. Four years later, I jumped at the chance to interview former Horseman Paul Dutton. I had read his articles in *Musicworks* and a few of his books of poetry, but I was relatively new to his sound recordings. After immersing myself in all things Dutton for a few months, I met with him in his living room to discuss sound, poetry, literature, music, and improvisation. With humour and authority, Paul enlightened me about the creative process and what it means to be an artist.



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For more than thirty years, Dutton has criss-crossed Canada, the United States, and Europe as a solo artist and in ensembles, as a musician and a writer. Charting his accomplishments and publications almost requires the skills of a cartographer. The myriad collaborations, recordings, and projects spin off one another along roads and paths that look, in map form, like a visual representation of the Paris subway system: sprawling in all directions like lines in a cracked windshield.

To call Dutton versatile would be an understatement. In addition to his travels, his five books of poetry and one of fiction (his novel *Several Women Dancing*, published in late 2002 by Mercury Press), Dutton has authored an impressive collection of essays and reviews. He's released four solo recordings, the first in 1979, the most recent his 2005 release *Oralizaciones*; four releases with CCMC, the free-improv band first formed in Toronto in 1974 and since 1995 comprising Dutton, saxophonist John Oswald, and pianist Michael Snow; three recordings as part of the now-iconic Four

Horsemen; and the eponymous CD *Five Men Singing* (2003). In 2006, the Dutton recording "Lips Is" appeared on the two-disc compilation *Music Overheard*, released as an audio accompaniment to the SuperVision exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. In February of 2007, he performed at the Voices Amsterdam Festival, along with international artists Shelley Hirsch, Phil Minton, Jaap Blonk, and others. Also in the spring of that year, Dutton took part in the Institute of the LivingVoice sessions in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In the offing is a CCMC DVD called *Reverberlin*, which will consist of a recording of a concert given in Berlin back in 2002, as well as some video workings by Michael Snow. As a writer, Dutton is working on a second novel, currently titled *Oblique Motion*, and is contributing to some upcoming anthologies of poetry and fiction.

In 2003, he formed the soundsinging supergroup Five Men Singing with intercontinental colleagues Jaap Blonk (Netherlands), Koichi Makigami (Japan), Phil Minton (U.K.), and David Moss (U.S.A., Germany). Since 1989, Dutton has been a member of the long-running free-improvisation group CCMC, made up then of slightly different personnel from the current trio with Oswald and Snow. He also performs regularly with French cellist Thomas Charmetant. And there have been, over the years, numerous occasional collaborators, including composer R. Murray Schafer and players such as John Butcher and Bob Ostertag, and Lee Ranaldo, plus numerous free improvising Toronto musicians.

Dutton's work has been called "fascinating, inventive, grippingly obsessive" (*The Wire*), and "rivetting vocal pyrotechnics" (*Chicago Tribune*). In the mid-nineties, he coined the term *soundsinging* to refer to singing governed by sounds that go beyond the voice and include multiphonics, inhaled speech, chirps, tweets—anything and everything the human vocal apparatus is capable of. As Dutton wrote in the liner notes to *Mouth Pieces*, "The very phrase 'vocal performance' is, in fact, inaccurate, since I use a lot of effects that don't involve voice at all—such as tongue-pops, and other mouth percussion, and forced-air effects at the lips and in the nose. Truth be told," he continues, "I make less and less distinction between language and music ... I'm chasing elusive visceral and spiritual game, and don't have time to cavil over categories."

We're sitting in Dutton's living room in Toronto. To my left are stacks of compact discs, including boxed sets of Louis Armstrong, Joe Turner, Jimmy Rogers, the Mills Brothers; to my right, a collection of vinyl records—Eric Dolphy, Henri Chopin, even the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls*; cassettes of various musics litter the surfaces



in the room, and the walls across from me are lined with LPs and CDs. Dutton makes a point of showing me a graphite drawing he's done of Ray Charles.

PAUL DUTTON: I drew this picture around 1956. I'd stumbled upon a radio station from Buffalo's black community—though at the time I didn't realize it was that. There was one particular disc jockey named George Lorenz, a goateed, New York Jew who called himself Hound Dog or more often just the Hound. He played Little Richard, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, and an untold number of bird groups—the Cardinals, the Crows, the Flamingos—and other doo-wop groups like the Moon-gloves, the Clovers, the Drifters. In short, he played everything that rock and roll really was: a synthesis of blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, doo wop, and country.

JAY SOMERSET: This was your first exposure to this type of music?

PD: Everyone's first exposure to it happened then. There'd never been anything quite like rock and roll. At that time, I was a student at St. Michael's Choir School, where we sang choral music, mostly at the cathedral across the street. I had some awareness of classical music, but the liturgical music was what we were mainly fed. Catholic hymns and Gregorian chant didn't quite measure up to the

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excitement generated by the music I was listening to on the radio. This was all at puberty. Puberty and rock and roll ... a potent combination. And the sexual drive is so completely intertwined with the creative. Anyway, I remember my reaction to Muddy Waters, especially. Here was this guy singing about being angry and being horny. I thought, Geez, you're not supposed to sing about this stuff. It's a sin! The whole thing was very liberating and scary and wonderful.

JS: Did this music make you want to be a singer?

PD: Man, I wanted to be a bass singer in a doo-wop group—not that I took it any further than sitting by the record player and singing along with the bass line. My real ambition was to be a writer, which I'd always wanted to be, practically from the time I learned to read. As for wanting to be a singer, well, I wasn't thinking about being a professional singer. I've been singing in public since I was eight or nine but I never thought of making my living from it in any way. And I never called myself a musician until my late twenties, when other musicians—Murray Schafer among them—called me one. I came at what I was doing from the perspective of poetry; I was doing sound poetry, which I recognized as a perfect medium for combining the literary and musical impulses. Before I got into sound poetry I was singing trad Brit folk music in coffee shops. Still love that stuff. And I sing blues, too. Ten years ago I realized that I hadn't thought of myself as a singer because that's simply what I was. That's what I'd always been.

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JS: It's interesting you mention the influence radio had on you. If it weren't for a free-form radio station out of New Jersey—WFMU—I wouldn't be interviewing you today. This station changed the way I listen to music and introduced me to many artists I'd never heard before, including you.

PD: I remember getting a phone call years ago from Ken Goldsmith at WFMU, who was going by the name Kenny G in those days. He was all het up about my work, as were some of the other hosts at the station. Kenny also runs an online poetry Web site called UbuWeb [www.ubu.com], which includes a terrific collection of sound poetry. You can listen to *Mouth Pieces* [Dutton's 2000 solo release] on the site.

JS: Some people correlate words, or vocals, with sound poetry, so does this make you a sound poet?

PD: I'm not a sound poet. I'm a writer and a musician, and my output includes sound poems—along with lyric poems, a serial poem, a novel, and a healthy whack of essays. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines sound poetry as a type of poetry that is most effective when read aloud, with meaning conveyed through the sound of the words rather than their semantic meaning. The dictionary is wrong. Sound poetry, in the strictest sense, has no semantic meaning whatsoever. Hugo Ball's original phrase was *Verse ohne Worte*—poetry without words. Over the years, the rigid standard of "no words allowed" was relaxed, and much that was termed sound poetry contained semantic content, in varying degrees of coherency. The one accurate fragment in the *Canadian Oxford* definition is the bit about most effective when performed—because there's nothing much to be got out of a page of syllables and transcribed phonemes. Anyway, as I like to keep insisting, sound poetry is not so much a sonic approach to poetry (which is there in Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, e.e. cummings, and countless others) as it is a poetic approach to sound.

JS: Do you place music and literature on the same spectrum?

PD: My art is every bit as much music as it is literature, and it is every bit as much literature as it is music. Somewhere I put it more eloquently. In my liner notes for *Oralizations* I speak of my work as a continuum; pure music at one end of the spectrum and pure verblativity at the other end. My work falls at any number of points in between. It's something I've grown to believe through my work and through listening to and reading other people's work.

JS: When did you discover the connection between poetry and sound?

PD: The watershed moment came when I encountered Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry in university. Hopkins focused very much on the sounds of the words, and I was really impressed when a prof

pointed out the vowel symbolism in a line in Hopkins about opening up the heart, and the vowels used in the line became progressively more open. Earlier, I'd taken *Macbeth* in high school and the phrase "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined" occurs in it. I was struck by the way the voiced vowels in *confined* sound caged in, literally confined. Before this, I had perceived some of the visual aspects of poetry, but hadn't really associated poetry with sound so much. Although, come to think of it, I had a grade nine English teacher who would read to us from his scrapbook of favourite poems. It actually had a big impact on me; it was my favourite thing that he did. So when schoolteachers ask me how to teach poetry, I tell them: first of all, you love it; second of all, you read it aloud to your students. Poetry should be heard, so just fucking read it to them.

JS: And how does Paul Dutton learn?

PD: I'm an autodidact. I think the only discipline worth anything is self-discipline. Imposed discipline is ... Well, have you ever heard of the horse whisperer? He was a guy in the nineteenth century who developed a method of getting horses to cooperate by drawing it out of the horse, not forcing or training the horse. This is what education should be: building on what the person has. The first test that made sense to me was in my first year philosophy class. It was an open-book exam; we were given the question and asked to find the answer, find *an* answer.

JS: So is there any point in learning to read music, for example?

PD: Oh, absolutely. I hate reading music, but it's sometimes necessary, and I've partly made my living by doing it: had a part-time job leading congregational singing, soloing, and being

in the church choir. It's not that I devalue entirely the notion of a systemized approach. It's just that I don't flourish in that. I took formal piano lessons based in the classic repertoire, but I wasn't really engaged with the sounds I was making. Much later in life I picked up a piano book on boogie-woogie and learned the basic left-hand, three-chord blues progression. I went at it again and again until I could do it without thinking, which meant my right hand was free to roam. I could play much more complicated rhythmic pieces than were found in that book. I couldn't write it out, but I could play it, so in a way, I was playing by ear, improvising. Michael Snow is that way even more so. I always assumed he had training, but he's a total autodidact—never had a piano lesson in his fucking life, and here's someone who worked as a traditional jazz player in the '50s. [Jazz and blues singer] Jimmy Rushing wanted to take him on tour.

JS: In the liner notes to CCMC's *Decisive Moments*, Michael Snow describes the band's music as "Hot Real-Time Electro-Acoustic Composition." Is this what improvising is, real-time composition?

PD: No. Improvising is not composition. Free improvisation is about something forming at the time, in the moment. It has nothing to do with composition, real-time or otherwise. There should



Caption needed.



Caption needed.

be no pecking order in terms of approaches to making music, and I make no apology about the fact that I'm not composing. My literary writing is scoring for voice, which isn't as precise as musical notation, but that's mostly where I do my composing. I have some sound pieces that I've composed but not notated. With music, composition doesn't appeal to me, as an artist. It's not my mode. Steve Lacey once observed, in a quote cited in Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation*, that the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you need to

decide what to say in fifteen seconds, but in improvisation, you have fifteen seconds.

JS: So how do you decide what to do in those fifteen seconds?

PD: Well, I think Lacey's point was that you're not really deciding—not deliberating, as you might in composing. The decision in improv is in the doing. Improv is very much a question of not thinking. For me, intellectual activity is incompatible with free improvisation. I become mildly alarmed if, when I'm performing, I find myself trying to decide what to do next. My ideal for an



ensemble is every player riding off in different directions but all getting to the same place. That is what free improvisation is all about. It's losing yourself in the bigger thing, the group unconscious, or if you're performing solo, the individual unconscious. For me, it's like I've got something by the tail and I'm following along. In sports, when someone plays well, it's a compliment to say, "Man, you were unconscious tonight. You were in the zone." It's the same with improv.

JS: In an ensemble such as CCMC, how are you able to keep together while each member is freely improvising?

PD: You're not listening at a surface level—he went, "diddle, diddle, diddle," so I'll go, "daddle, daddle, daddle"—you're not riffing off each other in that way. That is an intellectual, compositional exercise. Free improvisation is more intuitive, in tune with what's happening at a deeper level, listening but not paying attention. I'm not paying attention in terms of surface consciousness to what John or Mike is doing—I'm not paying attention in that way. I'm aware of what they're doing, what we're doing, but I'm immersed in my contribution to the performance and to the process of sensing—and I use that term advisedly—what it is that's developing and coming out of all of us at the same time.

JS: Is this something you practice? I mean, do you get together with Mike and John and work on material, or do some soundsinging while you wash the dishes?

PD: We never have worked on material; we've worked on process, and we've worked on it in practice—practice, that is, in the sense of

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doing, not rehearsing. In the old days we were playing at the Music Gallery on average about three times a month. Often enough, there were only one or two people in the audience, sometimes none. I developed my chops on stage, through performance, and through just listening and noticing sounds around me. As for soundsinging at home, I don't do much of that anymore, but I used to a lot, especially when I smoked pot, which can help with deep listening, listening inside your head. Smoke pot and drink—that'll expand your repertoire. Well, anyway, it did mine.

JS: It's certainly given me new ideas, and a few injuries. On that note, how do you protect your voice? It's not like you can replace a reed or guitar string. What happens when your throat is sore?

PD: I've been lucky with injuries, except for one time in Banff. I was in [R. Murray] Schafer's *Princess of the Stars*, an outdoor pageant performed in canoes on a lake. I was playing the part of Wolf, which Murray and I co-wrote, and I was tired of doing all the howling and yipping effects. I wanted to do something different. So at one point in the dress rehearsal I decided to do some barks, because wolves must bark, right? A word of warning: never bark from the middle of a lake to be heard on the shore, at least not more than once, because the next day you're not going to have a voice, and the producer isn't going to be happy when he sees you writing notes because you're trying to get enough of your voice back to make the première performance. "DID YOU BLOW YOUR VOICE?" was producer Michael Century's very unsympathetic question to

me. I was never really 100 per cent for that show. And it took a lot of being quiet and not saying anything to get to the ninety per cent or so that I achieved.

JS: Deep listening is a relatively new concept for me. I often scare my wife—unintentionally—by lying on the floor and listening to music through headphones with the lights off, just letting the sounds fill my head.

PD: When I do workshops, that's where I begin. I get them into a relaxed state and have them listen to their breathing—the sounds that usually go unnoticed—and then get them to incorporate and build on those sounds. This is especially good for multiphonics; because we're all producing multiphonics all the time: none of us is ever making a single, pure sound (which, as I understand it, can only be achieved electronically). And there are ways of hearing and learning those extra sounds that are in there, working with the muscles to make them more pronounced. There's such richness there. I don't do it enough, but I think I'll get back to it because you learn a lot and it's really fucking pleasurable. It's really fun. You don't need to be drunk to enjoy it.

JS: Exactly, and without sounding like a New Age prophet, listening—deep listening—is a spiritual exercise, which is all the more profound when you're clearheaded.

PD: I see my work—I see art—as a spiritual enterprise. It is the highest spiritual activity. Although it was not my conscious intent in the early stages of my work with nonverbal sound, the spiritual dimension—and I use the term *spiritual* in its pure sense, quite apart from and devoid of any specific religious context, which I consider to be not spiritual but material and political—is an essential, indeed vital, aspect of my artistic practice. The nonverbal character

résumé français

J'ai entendu parler du travail de Paul Dutton pour la première fois alors que je gardais le chien de la veuve du poète canadien bpNichol. Comme je parcourais la bibliothèque de Nichol, je suis tombé sur le documentaire de Brian Nash, bp: *Pushing the Boundaries*. J'ai fait jouer la bande et je me suis retrouvé projeté dans le monde de bpNichol, y compris un extrait d'une performance des Four Horsemen, le groupe de poésie sonore et de performance que Nichol a formé dans les années 70 et 80 avec Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Dutton et Steve McCaffery. Je n'avais jamais entendu rien de tel, et être initié à ces curieux sons dans le salon de bpNichol lui-même était quelque peu surréaliste. Quatre ans plus tard, j'ai saisi l'occasion d'interviewer Paul Dutton. Bien que j'avais lu ces articles parus dans *Musicworks* et quelques-uns de ses livres de poésie, je n'étais pas très familier avec ses enregistrements sonores. Après quelques mois d'immersion dans le monde de Dutton, je l'ai rencontré pour parler de son, de poésie, de littérature, de musique et d'improvisation. Avec humour et autorité, Paul m'a éclairé sur le processus créateur et les implications de l'activité artistique.

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of sound poetry and soundsinging lends itself naturally to the spiritual realm, which is by its very nature evanescent, elusive, ineffable, ungraspable. I consider all my work, both literary and musical, to be ultimately an exercise in futility because it is directed towards expressing the inexpressible.

Jay Somerset is a freelance writer and editor. His work has appeared in *Spacing* magazine, *The Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, and *Canadian Home Workshop*. When he's not working, Jay enjoys browsing for vinyl records and attending noisy concerts. He lives with his wife and cat in Toronto.

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