

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GIBBON

“About thirty-five years ago as a by-product of purchasing a ranch in central California I discovered that the steel cultivator blades from old agriculture machinery could be made into wind chimes that, when mounted on a gate, announced the arrival of guests. Soon I was acquiring camel bells from Iran at a time when the Shah was rapidly replacing camels with jeeps, and making camel bells obsolete and reasonably priced. With newfound space at the ranch, I hung them from springs stretched between trees, and planted a whole garden of bells. However, delays in acquiring them eventually led to the point that they were no longer affordable, but the desire for a bell garden remained. I decided to go searching in the scrap yards and make do with what was affordable.

Assembling the acquired objects which had been selected for their sound, into groups or what I called instruments, was a fascinating experience and invited me to become immersed in the now, which has some of the characteristics of passion, but it was ultimately just an absorbing activity that contributed to my environment. In my own eyes I was more of a businessman and land developer than I was an artist. For many years I kept a bell garden as part of my environment while searching for the ideal tuning system for such a bell or sound garden. I discovered Harry Partch and the mathematical perfection and complications of just intonation, and the variety of equal tempered and other scales within the realm of microtonal music.

But none of these theories seemed to apply effectively to the sounds of the bell garden. It took me thirty years of inconclusive investigation to realize that this preoccupation was inhibiting me from exploring the true essence of a bell garden, which might more aptly be called “microtimbral explorations of sound patterns,” not too far from a percussionist’s view of music. But whereas the percussionist was trying to exercise control over himself and consequently control the sounds produced, I was trying to produce instruments that I could play like a toy soldier, offering simple input but nevertheless feeding back to me a complex and ultimately

unpredictable sequence of sounds that were still in some mysterious way connected with the simple rhythmic inputs. Once I realized I was exploring a path that was different from anyone else I knew, I started to feel much more passionate about music than ever before. It was as if I was in a race with time to share and establish a new art form with a different and more interactive set of variables, before I expired or lost the space to manifest my creations. Once I felt free from restrictions about sound frequencies having to have particular harmonious relationships with other frequencies, I became much more able to give attention to the visual aspects of my art, leading to a new passionate specificity that took in both aural and visual phenomena.

It is my first experience of this kind in which specific instruments, which I regard as instruments of what I call a “bell garden” are displayed in an artistic setting. Thirty years ago I took a “bell garden” musical environment made from scrap metal to the Renaissance Fair in Marin County, and the Pumpkin Festival in Los Angeles. But at that time I was almost entirely preoccupied by the sounds and virtually indifferent to the visual impact of the instruments. Now I find the visual implications of my art as meaningful as the sound implications.

I remained dedicated to the idea of offering people new experiences as they immerse themselves in environments where their own movement can be experienced with synaesthetic sound feedback resulting from their movement of dance (to the extent that exhibits of my work can lead people to have these experiences in suitable environments). I would love exhibitions to be part of my future.

I would like my work to invite people’s eyes to dances as they see it interfacing with the light sources in the environment being reflected and distorted in their surfaces. Polish determines much of this quality, and shape determines the number and spatial distribution of these reflections. Ideally I would like to start interacting with the instruments to the point where they begin to make sounds.