



A Conversation with ETHEL: Dorothy Lawson & Cornelius Dufallo



ETHEL (on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon): Ralph Farris, viola; Mary Rowell, violin; Cornelius Dufallo, violin; Dorothy Lawson, cello. Photo © Steve J. Sherman

Classical Domain: Nice to talk to you, I've done a few articles about your events in the past, so it's nice to finally speak. Before we get to the Truck Stop project I'd like to ask something that has always bothered me about ETHEL's press: Why are we so hung up on the idea of what a quartet should be and should perform?

Dorothy Lawson: That was actually one of the issues that we found most problematic when we started. We knew that what we were doing was fun, but it didn't fit any particular category. Very early on it was an interesting struggle, now we are finally getting to a point where people have some idea what we're up to and are more comfortable leaping into the unknown with us.

I think it was worth the time. There were people trying to assemble words to fit us into some package, at the same time we were assembling "tools" that would obviate the needs for the word.

Cornelius Dufallo: I think you make a good point, I think it shows us something about classical music as opposed to other genres, for example: rock groups, nobody really thinks about the categorization of instruments. People listen to it and enjoy it. People have a strong investment in a quartet being a specific category, the quartet has been such a major part of the development of western classical music, so it's understandable that they would be attached to that idea.

Classical Domain: But it's not like you're jettisoning anything...

DL: No, we're not...

Classical Domain: It seems like we should be in a period when you have the freedom to do what you want...

DL: It might be hard to recognize it currently, but we might have passed a stage of development regarding musical boundaries. In fact, we may be in a place where more and more influences are welcome. If we can just get comfortable with the idea that, in western art-music, influences from outside of the genre can be important. People all over the world are using whatever medium is at hand to make an artistic expression that makes a difference to them and that music connects people. I'm delighted that were we are here working at this moment.

Classical Domain: How do the communities you visit see the quartet, or see ETHEL as a group?

DL: It's a fascinating experience for the quartet to go to a number of these other communities and see that there can be a slightly diffident initial impression of us. They may view classical music as a heavily vested tradition. There is highly involved level of training we also embody, so for many of the local musicians there may be a question of what kind of baggage does the quartet carry, and what do we want — and as important — what are we going to impose on them?

Classical Domain: So there is a wariness that you may be imposing a style on them?

DL: In fact, if there is a single thing that we as a quartet are doing that makes our collaborations different is that we are not bringing a presupposition about what we will use our instruments and equipment for. We enter the room with a lot of skill, and we are interested in learning and sharing, using whatever we've got to communicate. People usually respond with amazement and delight, because we are using tradition and history — without the usual “strings attached” — they are really happy to engage with our ideas.

DL: We are doing what rock and jazz musicians do — and folk musicians have done for ages. It involves a set of skills; skills necessary to think compositionally, to think structurally, even when you're improvising — this is not common training for classical instrumentalists. But the skills that the classical tradition has evolved are phenomenal — but now we want to morph them with the part of us that loves creating. Classical musicians typically are dedicated to recreation, we're turning it back into something; maybe something akin to what it used to be, but also, taking the tools and going somewhere else.

Classical Domain: So even with in your other group of work or other projects, the Truck Stop experience is different?

DL: Yes, the process in each stop involves educational and outreach locally. The presenters are being very bold by taking a risk on this experiment. Over the days we spend in schools and in collaborations it becomes more than a question of new audiences, it — at the end — is more about about creating a feeling of community. Often in the classical touring circuit you

touch down, you play a concert and you're out again. That is exactly the kind of experience that we felt frustrated by.

Classical Domain: What is involved in the community work?

CD: Generally what we do is come in and encourage the students to give us material, to share songs or melodic ideas or rhythms. Something personal to them. If they make music we encourage them to join us.

We sewn a number of their ideas together, maybe ten contributions, you show them each element, they hear them drawn together and developed into a flow — and it sounds good. It's great for them.

Classical Domain: It must get the kids charged.

CD: What gets them charged is hearing their musical ideas realized with our respect and sincerity. It excites them, it may be the first time it's ever happened. When you're a high school kid you might play something on the guitar or piano, but to have some professional come in and play your stuff — then you're **THE** composer.

Classical Domain: For your collaborations do you plan ahead for each musician? Do you tailor an approach to different situations?

CD: It's impossible to say, it's different each time... we don't have any preconceptions, we are collaborating with people who are very accomplished in their genre, but they are also people who are interested in stepping outside the confines of their field and trying something different. We look for that common thread.

DL: The first thing, we see what they want to do, and how then do you express it. If the collaborator is into energetic, rhythmic music, then how do we get into that; we work from there...

One of the things that reveals itself is that the string — fiddling — tradition is virtually universal, nearly every culture has some string music, that is a foundation that we can start with. In the U.S. we can start with some “American” sound, almost everyone can start with the blues as a form to work from.

Classical Domain: Let's talk about January Joe's Pub concert and your collaboration with (Syrian clarinetist) Kinan Azmeh. Have you worked with him yet?

CD: We are finishing a concert (end of December) and we will start to work with Kinan next.

We've met with him, but we have not begun playing yet, Kinan has a group called Hewar. It's a fantastic group, it's Syrian music and jazz, the three of them, Kinan on clarinet, an oud player and a singer, they met as kids in Damascus, they went to school together. Kinan is going to bring us some music that they did together, and we are going to bring to him some of the music that we often use to start our collaborations — that will be our starting point. So, a little bit of show and tell. From there we are going to come up with some new material, some of which will involve improvisation.

Classical Domain: I'm still curious, how does the process start?

CD: When we walk into a room with a musician from a different tradition we simply start to listen, as we hear what they do — we may start with something it may be only a drone and then we continue to listen. We can incorporate their style and some of their ideas that can work for all of us and work in a concert. It's a very organic process, I guess when I say that we come with no preconceptions, you have to come as sort of a “blank slate.” Basically we know what we are going to get into, but we have no idea what will happen.

This is the thing, music can reveal itself to us as an all—encompassing way to engage with people. A lot of our best stuff that comes out of this work is a result of our respect, and a willingness to share. This gives everyone an appreciation for the degree of insight, skill and humanity that it takes to do any of this stuff.

Classical Domain: Clearly you guys are invigorated, so why do we have this feeling that there is a “dead end” in classical music, when there are so many ways to make music?

CD: Certainly there is no dead end, the whole thing is to keep experimenting, that's what we do.

DL: We're really eager to find ways of bringing the world's different musical forms and styles together in unique personal ways. We're kind of lucky that we are on the early edge of this curve — because frankly young people are already thinking in this way and they will do fabulous things.

We are glad to pass along our acquired knowledge, to pass on the helpful aspects and some of the pitfalls when you've engaging with cultures other than your own. There are many kinds of foibles that you bring along, things you always assumed were so, but you get smacked in the face sometimes, not everything you think is universal is universal.

Classical Domain: I'd like to get at least one Truck Stop road story from you. Have you been to Kentucky, because I'm curious to know about the shape note singers....

CD: Boy, that was really interesting, the shape note singers are not performers, they get together to sing hymns, old hymns. They consider it like going to church. When we came along and asked about collaborating they became uncomfortable, the idea of getting up on a stage and doing something that was so spiritual and personal to them was not something that appealed to them. But what they do is very important, the sound of those hymns lead to so much other music that influences us today.

DL: One of the funny little twists for them was contemplating dealing with applause. It was not acceptable to them, they saw it as self-aggrandizement. When we proposed that it was just a way of saying thank you — they were completely in tune with it, they felt fine with performing.

One of the most delightful moments at the concert was when we were all on stage: icons of bluegrass, the old time musicians, a string quartet and the other worldly shape note singers — groups of people who have never met each other — trading solos across the stage.

Classical Domain: Did you record the concert?

DL: No, like a lot of music it's here — then it's gone. We did not record the concert, but we will be documenting our projects, it's part of our plans in the near future to post recordings of our current work on our site.

Classical Domain: After Joe's Pub you are starting on a year-long string of collaborations nationally and internationally, winding up in Brooklyn, at BAM. Where will you find Brooklyn's indigenous music?

DL: Ultimately most of America comes from Brooklyn, so all by itself it's one of the largest cities in the country. There's a huge potential, any ideas?

Classical Domain: Well, this will be the easiest project of your life or you'll exhaust yourselves trying to synthesize all the separate elements of the borough?

DL: The concert at BAM is going to be an “All Star” concert, so it's a little different. But — one thing about the whole process, particularly in education, so with kids but adults too, our making music is not about teaching, it's about an experience — it's exciting for that moment, for it's own sake — it's communication, delight and mutual understanding. The kids get that.

Classical Domain: It's something you'll have to work on with the rest of us.... I think your plans are very exciting, see you at Joe's Pub....