Music Simon Jeffes
& The Penguin Cafe Orchestra

Music Composed by
Simon Jeffes

'Paul's' Dance composed by
Simon Jeffes & Steve Nye

Music Performed by
The Penguin Cafe Orchestra
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'Camooweal'
Slim Dusty
Composed by M. Cormack, Courtesy E.M.I. Records

'You Reach Me With Your Eyes'
Sandy Catley

'Evil Donald'
Battle Happy
Composed by John Phillips/Gumpy Phillips, Courtesy Rampant Records

The music used in the film could be found in several Penguin Cafe Orchestra albums. For example, *Paul's Dance* (1'45") could be found on the orchestra's second eponymous album, which has a wiki [here](#).

*Telephone and Rubber Band* (2'28"), which turns up to accompany the dancing of the ash cans in the climatic bank robbery - and is perhaps Jeffe's most famous piece - can also be found on this album - DOP David Parker describes the PCO music as "absolutely pivotal" to the success of the film.

Parker mentions that they had in fact had other music scored for the film, "and I remember Nadia ringing up from the stage when it was being scored, and very upset, um, that it wasn't, you know, what she felt was going to work... so we made a decision then, we had actually cut these images to the Penguin Cafe Orchestra, so then it was a matter of trying to negotiate with them. At that stage they were just pretty much a recording band, they certainly hadn't performed. They were all, you know, everything from lecturers to session musos, they were a bunch of guys who'd just go into a studio and just try this stuff out... our editor had exposed us to them, and it was just... really became very important that we got this music... Nadia managed to negotiate with their management and we were able to get these pieces for the
film." (DVD commentary track).

By way of contrast, Tass dismisses the music that was discarded as "patronising" and unable to reflect the complexity of Malcolm's world, instead offering a conventional, twee perspective on a character most would think of as simple, or retarded, or socially inept. "The element of patronising, for me it's anathema, and I was on the lookout to make sure none of that crept in to this film."

(Below: the eponymous album)

Composer Simon Jeffes:

There is a site dedicated to the Penguin Cafe Orchestra, here, which inter alia contains this detailed summary of Jeffes' career (there is also a shop for Penguin Cafe Orchestra stuff, an interview with Jeffes, details of other members, the band in the new millennium and so on).

Ironically however, the only Malcolm mentioned in relation to Jeffes is Malcolm McLaren.

The band also has a relatively detailed wiki here:

Some groups form in school or college, some grow out of teenage friendships and others from 'musicians wanted' ads; nearly all of them are formed with the initial idea of sounding like somebody else. None of the above applies to the Penguin Cafe Orchestra. Nor, for that matter, do most other generalisations about how modern music is and should be made, or why.

The PCO was the brainchild of the English composer and multi-
instrumentalist Simon Jeffes (1949-1997). Because his father's work entailed many foreign postings, his early life was spent on the move around Canada and Europe, an experience which left him, he said, with "this culture of slightly dispossessed people who live in the modern West but haven't got one rooted home."

While at English boarding school, aged 12, Jeffes heard a guitar being played by a new boy. "It was like meeting your destiny" he reported later, "This guitar was actually glowing... there were sort of angels coming out of it. It was absolutely riveting." He played in an r'n'b band at school and when he left, he studied classical guitar and music theory at music college.

Swiftly disillusioned with the factory-like conditions in which he was being taught, Jeffes dropped out and joined a 10 piece avant garde guitar ensemble, Gilberto Biberian's Omega Players, only to find that also rather stifling - "it was a bit too cerebral for me." So he turned to rock, working with the producer Rupert Hine on music for films, as well as Hine's first two solo albums, 1970's Pick Up A Bone and Unfinished Picture (1971).

There are some demo tapes extant from this period which indicate that Jeffes was also then exploring the possibility of becoming a pop reggae vocalist. In 1972 got on the Trans Siberian Railway and spent four months at the other end in Japan. This was where he first became interested in ethnic music, particularly African, which he discovered on a cassette tape made up by a friend.

"This tape just blew my mind, man!" he later told the journalist Andy Gill. "I didn't want to go to Africa, or learn African instruments or sound African. What I heard was straight from the source, why it is we play music, that gut level sound of humans being human. There was a joy to it, an ease and integrity straight from the stomach and the heart. It wasn't mediated by the mind at all."

And so began his plan to emulate the deep humanity of exotic folk music and merge it with his other more westernised enthusiasms within a previously unenvisaged ensemble. It was a mistake, he believed, simply to be a consumer of ethnic music, a goggle eyed tourist at the world's great musical bazaar. "It's good to hear these things, but it shouldn't be the end. The end should be us making our own ethnic music."

A decade passed before this aspiration became a practical, economic reality. For the rest of the 1970's, alongside his Penguin activities Jeffes carried on working as a freelance producer and arranger, working with a rich mix of artists from Caravan and Rod Argent to Yvonne Elliman and the 101-ers. His best remembered work from this period is probably the string arrangement he
contributed to Sid Vicious's version of My Way.

"Through Malcolm McLaren I became a sort of musical consultant to the New Wave. He later asked me to explain the principles of Burundi drumming to Adam Ant." Simon Jeffes' musical taste was omniverous but his special favourites were, in no particular order: Beethoven, Bach, Erik Satie, John Cage, Abba, Wilson Pickett, Zimbabwean mbira, Cajun fiddle, Irish bagpipe, Venezuelan cuatro, West African choral, the Rolling Stones, Stravinsky.

The PCO formed in the mind of Simon Jeffes as a result of a dream-like vision he experienced during a severe bout of food poisoning in the South of France during the Summer of 1972. Simon retold the story often. This was how he remembered it in 1988, just before the orchestra played their first gig in LA.

"I was laying in bed delirious, sort of hallucinating for about 24 hours. I had this one vision in my mind of a place that was like the ark of buildings, like a modern hotel, with all these rooms made of concrete. There was an electronic eye which scanned everything. In one room you had a couple that were making love, but lovelessly. It was cold sex with books and gadgets and what have you. In another room there was somebody just looking at himself in the mirror, just obsessed with himself. In another room there was a musician with a bank of synthesisers, wearing headphones, and there was no sound.

This was a very terrible, bleak place. Everybody was taken up with self-interested activity which kept them looped in on themselves. It wasn't like they were prisoners, they were all active, but only within themselves. And that kept them from being a problem or a threat to the cold order represented by the eye.

A couple of days later I was on the beach sunbathing and suddenly a poem popped into my head. It started out 'I am the proprietor of the Penguin Cafe, I will tell you things at random' and it went on about how the quality of randomness, spontaneity, surprise, unexpectedness and irrationality in our lives is a very precious thing. And if you suppress that to have a nice orderly life, you kill off what's most important. Whereas in the Penguin Cafe your unconscious can just be. It's acceptable there, and that's how everybody is. There is an acceptance there that has to do with living the present with no fear in ourselves."

The music of the Penguin Cafe, Simon broadly regarded as "a very big yes to the survival of the heart in a time when the heart is under attack from the forces of coldness, darkness and repression." When forced to describe it more precisely, he called his music "imaginary folklore" and "modern semi-acoustic chamber music." He very much liked the comment of a Japanese girl
who attended a Penguin concert in Japan and who said afterwards that the music sounded strange, because it was as if she’d heard it a long time ago.

Dissolving the otherwise insuperable barriers of time and space was, and still is, an important function of the magic contained in his music. Simon Jeffes always conceived his Orchestra to be a fluctuating unit rather than a tightly cast group: aside from one other founder member, the cellist Helen Liebmann, there were no regular performers. Dozens of players passed though the Orchestra's ranks in the 24 years of its young life. "It is my context as a composer," he said. "I write for people rather than instruments."

It took four years to translate the original dystopian dream vision into the Penguins' first album. The first edition of what became the Orchestra began playing together as the Penguin Cafe Quartet in London in 1973. There were no public performances but a mysterious other name "the 4 musicians in green clothes". Helen Liebmann played cello, Gavyn Wright played violin, the producer and engineer Steve Nye played electric piano and Simon Jeffes himself played electric guitar. They recorded their first two pieces in 1974, Penguin Cafe Single and The Sound of Someone You Love Who's Going Away and it Doesn't Matter.

In the following year, Steve Nye introduced Jeffes to Brian Eno, who was just in the process of setting up his own Obscure Records label and who invited him to contribute to the series. Working to a tight budget - a total of £870 was spent - and recording on a Revox machine in his back garden, Jeffes and the orchestra stepped up a few gears. Extra personnel drifted, or got drafted, in. Jeffes' friend, a university English lecturer called Neil Rennie, brought along his ukelele and some words. Jeffes' partner at the time, the painter Emily Young - she who was immortalised in Pink Floyd's See Emily Play - sang on a couple of pieces and donated a compellingly surreal painting of Penguin Cafe life that became the album artwork.

Jeffes himself now essayed several unusual instruments, from the spinet to a ring modulator. "Because I'm a composer, I get to do whatever I like," he commented. "It's almost as if in some past life I must have played instruments because when I pick them up, most of them, I can make a nice sound almost instantly, oboe excepted." The centrepiece of Music From The Penguin Cafe was a suite titled Zopf whose most vivid moment, Giles Farnaby's Dream mated an elegant Renaissance air (by Farnaby) with a Venezuelan folk shuffle to create a brilliant new folk-classical hybrid. While the Penguins touched on many styles, it was this timelessly effervescent and totally original piece of ethnically angled chamber-pop which connected most strongly with their audience.
As the punk movement opened doors of possibility to a new generation of musicians and listeners, so an emboldened colony of Penguins ventured out of the studio. They played their first gig in 1977 supporting Kraftwerk at the Roundhouse and in the following year visited the ICA and Acklam Hall with an expanded line up. Geoffrey Richardson, a former member of Caravan, now played viola (and most other things, at some point or another). He brought along a friendly accordionist, Peter Veitch, with whom he shared a recording studio.

An instrument maker with an aptitude for the oboe, Giles Leaman, helped out on woodwind; and the rhythmic elements in the music were emphasised by an itinerant character named Braco, who strolled in and out playing various drums, and Julio Segovia who added cymbals. Now loosely heading a squad of 10, Jeffes took to referring to his group as the Penguin Cafe Orchestra.

Brian Eno: "Given his individuality, his non-allegiance to any particular musical category, and the unfailing eclecticism of his vision, Simon Jeffes could easily be marginalised as an English eccentric - and thus sort of overlooked.

The truth is he discovered a huge musical territory - stretching along the border regions of the whole United Nations of music - and he wandered through it fascinated and, apparently always smiling. These pieces are reports back from those borderlands. Like any good explorer, Simon was both alert and humble. He had no trace of musical snobbery, but delighted in the length and breadth of music, happy to experiment with all combinations."

In 1979 he bought an old garage in a quiet terrace in North Kensington and proceeded to convert it into a recording studio. It was here that in the following year the Penguins began recording an album which, for the first time, properly defined the breadth of Jeffes' musical ambitions. The lilting folk-classical groove sketched out in Giles Farnaby's Dream was taken to new places. Hybrid vigour ran riot.

One way of conveying the pungent flavour of the album called Penguin Café Orchestra is simply to list the instruments featured on it. The 10 members between them were found in charge of: Guitars (2), Cuatros (2) Ukeleles (3) Pianos (1 + 1 electric) Bass Guitars (2) Violins (3) Dulcitone (1), Harmonium (1) Accordion (1) Oboe (1) Cello (1) Viola (1) Electronic Organ (1) Drums, Shakers, Bongoes etc (2) Cymbals (1) Penny Whistle (1) Ring Modulator (1) Metal Frame (1) Rubber Band (1)

The 15 tracks rambled from a radical rearrangement of an old tune by The
Shadows, Walk Don't Run, to a piece hung around a riff made of pure musique concrete: a recording of a telephone ring tone intersected by the engaged signal. (You used to hear that a lot in the days before BT, but only Jeffes heard it as a musical opportunity and looped it onto a tape. Endlessly adapted for commercials and films, Telephone And Rubber Band is probably now his most famous piece).

Each track had an idiosyncratic inspiration and, often enough, an intriguing, bizarrely specific title. Pythagoras's Trousers; Cutting Branches For A Temporary Shelter, The Ecstasy Of Dancing Fleas. Air A Danser was inspired by Madagascan zither music. Numbers 1-4 investigated the application of interlocking numerical patterns as a basis for composition. Simon's Dream by contrast was self-explanatory, but not verbally so.

Words were banished from this album and voices only cropped up once, and then merely la la-ing. "I have a lot of trouble with meaning," Jeffes said. "Words I find very divisive. I'm very suspicious of them. I'm not a wordsmith, I'm not a literary man. I think the voice is a great instrument. But it is an instrument I have to earn my license to use."

Wordless as it was, Penguin Café Orchestra was well received by the discerning few. The Washington Post later praised it as "a landmark predecessor of the world music craze and one of the most elegant pop albums of the 1980's."

Just after its release Marcus Beale, the architect and composer of liturgical music, joined the party playing violin.

With Penguin Café Orchestra, word about the group began to spread and later that year they toured abroad for the first time, visiting Holland and Germany. In early 1982, they went to Japan, a country which held a particular fascination for Simon Jeffes, not least because it was the home of Zen Buddhism, his religion of choice. After the tour ended he stayed on in Tokyo working with the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, then went to the ancient city of Kyoto where serendipity intervened again to inspire one of his best known pieces.

"Walking one evening I found a harmonium on top of other bits of scrap wood apparently discarded in the street. On contacting the owner who was indifferent to its future, I took possession."

Music For A Found Harmonium was the outcome a few weeks later, since which time the tune has taken on a life of its own. Now a firm favourite in Celtic folk circles, it remains the Penguins' most convincing example of
"imaginary folklore." Over the next year or so the Japanese became the Penguins' most appreciative audience.

Another tour and a mini album (largely recorded live in Tokyo) earned the Orchestra cult status in the land of abandoned harmoniums and set them up, back home, to finish recording their third set of original material.

The cast for Broadcasting From Home was even bigger than the one which played on Penguin Café Orchestra. The jazz trombonist Annie Whitehead added an occasional brassy swing to the proceedings, as did trumpeter Dave Defries. A certain amount of coming and going in the rhythm section saw three new drummers helping out - Fami, Trevor Morais and Mike Giles, formerly with King Crimson.

Overall, this album sounded a tad more restrained and reflective than its predecessor despite the inclusion of a couple of reggae-tinged grooves and the jigsome exuberance of Music For A Found Harmonium. But to those who thought that he might be jumping on the increasingly fashionable New Age bandwagon, Jeffes was robust.

"I don't like the idea of music that is all tranquillity without that being balanced by struggle. Somehow that's a bit deceptive. It doesn't quite ring true. I feel that if you block out the heavier, more uncomfortable emotions, then at the same time you block out really joyful ones."

By now this message was definitely being picked up by the reviewers. David Hepworth at Q magazine called Broadcasting From Home a "marvellous record... as delightful as it is difficult to describe." CD Review later pronounced it to be "the third, most accomplished and consistently enjoyable of PCO albums."

From their somewhat reclusive beginnings, the Orchestra were, ten years later, becoming a live attraction with real international appeal. For the next decade, they would spend weeks or months every year on the road in Europe and North America. Ironically for an outfit which stubbornly resisted marketing categories, the PCO were welcomed just about everywhere on the live circuit.

They turned up at jazz festivals, WOMAD, art events, classical avant garde gatherings, alternative rock venues, as well as many of their own evenings at London's South Bank and elsewhere. They got used to TV cameras, appearing first on the Old Grey Whistle Test in 1984 and 3 years later having an entire South Bank show to themselves.

Though he originally regarded himself as an introverted, studio-bound
performer, Simon Jeffes grew to enjoy the unpredictable buzz of playing live. "The music loves to be played," he said in 1988. "The irony is there's so much love of life in the original concept of the Penguin Café but it's taken this long for me to get to the point where I find that life actually in a live situation playing to an audience. What started out as fiction or fantasy has become real." Simon Jeffes

This new emphasis wasn't particularly noticeable at first on Signs Of Life. The opening track comprised a high spirited piece of ersatz zydeco, called Beanfields, allegedly based on an apocryphal story about Pythagoras getting chased by assassins.

But from then on, starting with the stately strings leading off on Southern Jukebox Music - the most beautiful melody Jeffes ever composed - a gentler more elegaic tone was established. Three tracks featured Jeffes on his own, sans orchestra and the extraordinary closing track, Wildlife, was neither wild nor lively. It was an 11 minute piece, sparingly played on triangle, guitar and cello with scattered tape effects. Listening to it was like hearing church bells from an imaginary church lost in some extra-terrestrial landscape.

Achieving a profound meditative effect without resort to ambient noodling it clearly showed Jeffes re-connecting with some of the avant garde ideas he had discarded after music college. It also reflected his continuing interest in Zen Buddhism.

The orchestra got to let their hair down in time honoured fashion on numbers like Swing The Cat but the overall impression here was of Jeffes reining them in rather than letting them go. Though Signs Of Life was full of rhythmic subtlety, the group's new percussionist Danny Cummings had very little to do throughout.

The presence of a new third violinist, Bob Loveday, did not presage waves of sawing violins and although dancing was as always encouraged, tracks like Oscar Tango proceeded to a more lugubrious beat than before.

"After I wrote this," Jeffes remarked, "I thought it vaguely resembled a tango but realising I was no expert I gave it a name that partly suggested the kind of alphabet used in radio communications to demonstrate the non-authentic use of the term." And this from somebody who claimed not to be very good with words...

Life after Signs Of became pretty hectic for the Penguins. The critical response to the new album was universally strong. Writing in Q magazine,
Paul du Noyer delivered a string of noble compliments. "These newest pieces are ingeniously simple, implausibly varied, occasionally humorous and always warmly intimate despite the absence of any vocals. In a field where pseudo-philosophical pretensions and self-conscious experimentation so often cast their baleful spell, the Penguin Café Orchestra...are a valuable human intrusion."

On the live performance front, everybody from WOMAD to Wogan now wanted a piece of their action. Such was their confidence now as concert performers that plans were laid to make a live album, which was duly recorded at the Festival Hall in London in July 1987.

Released in the following year under the teasingly inaccurate title When In Rome... the 16 tracks effectively summarised the PCO’s career so far. With Ian Maidman now looking after the rhythm section with the returning Julio Segovia, Paul Street bringing in more guitars and Bob Loveday adding oomph to the strings, this was a more muscular set than Signs Of Life.

By the time it came out Jeffes was deeply immersed in another, allied project. David Bintley, choreographer with the Royal Ballet and a major fan of the Penguins, had proposed a dance piece based on eight of the PCO’s tunes. Intrigued by the idea, but daunted by the task of scoring his pieces for a full orchestra, Jeffes was lost for months in a world of dotted quavers and minims.

Despite his anxiety that a professional orchestra couldn't or wouldn't swing, Still Life At The Penguin Café was a popular hit with the ballet-going public and went on to be performed all over Britain, in Melbourne and Munich. The Times declared it to be "the most cheerful and amusing new ballet at Covent Garden for well over a decade." The New Statesman praised the way "Jeffes' score cleverly evokes the endless day and night of the wild land."

While nobody would suggest that the Penguins were ever exactly prophets without honour in their homeland, their touring schedule for the next 3 years took them out of the UK a lot, particularly in Southern Europe.

The highlight of this phase was Simon Jeffes' appointment as artistic director at an arts festival in Bologna in the Summer of 1992. For this he programmed 3 shows by a Penguin Café Quintet (a formation he used regularly around this time) which along with a series of concerts featuring friends, Orchestra colleagues and their side projects. This was the closest he ever came to creating a real Penguin Café and for it he was awarded the freedom of the city of Bologna.

The next PCO album turned out to be the last collection of new material they
recorded. Its overall style was more robust than Signs Of Life, reflecting the Orchestra's growing prowess as a working band rather than Jeffes' acknowledged mastery of the studio. The line up had slimmed down and settled down.

Annie Whitehead and Ian Maidman, now a couple, were both in. Julio Segovia was back, again. Jeffes' old friends and allies Geoffrey Richardson and Neil Rennie were still there. And so of course was Helen Liebmann, the cellist and rock on which every incarnation of the orchestra had relied for her instrumental poise and grace.

The most strikingly different piece on Union Café was a composition Jeffes put together while taking part in one of the so-called "recording weeks" at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios near Bath in August 1992. While he was down there, surrounded by musicians from all over the world, jamming and demo-ing ideas together, Jeffes heard of the death of the great American modernist John Cage. He swiftly conceived a piece which brilliantly enshrined the random principle which Cage pioneered and which the Penguins, in their own way, elaborated.

"I immediately recognised his influence and how he would be missed. At the same time I recognised his name as a strong melodic harmonic cell and quickly wrote this piece which simply spells his name in canon over 4 octaves, three durations and two transpositions a fourth up and a fourth down". Alongside this riffing on the CAGE theme, was a piano part playing the notes DEAD in free time.

The rest of Union Café was a vigorous re-statement of traditional Penguin musical values. The African inheritance was again rearranged in Kora Kora; Venezuelan cuatro strums infused Lifeboat; the sound of the deep South of America was subtly hinted at in Nothing Really Blue. The musical conservatory got a name check at least in Scherzo And Trio, as did Jeffes' other, stranger historical preoccupation, in Pythagoras On The Line.

Released in 1993 on Jeffes' own Zopf label (named after the suite on his first album) Union Café ushered in another busy round of touring at home and abroad in 1994. An unexpected highlight of this flurry of onstage activity turned out to be the Orchestra's barnstorming performance at Glastonbury, an event which disclosed the existence of a new, younger and, it must be said rowdier generation of PCO fans.

Having originally conceived the Penguin Café as "an imaginary and rather introverted place which didn't exist in the real world," Jeffes was now happy and proud to admit that "we really take off in concert." Another live album
seemed the obvious way to celebrate this happy state of affairs and so it was that on July 23, 1994 at Wool Hall in Somerset, Concert Program was recorded.

"You can accomplish all kinds of tricks spending days and days in the studio," Jeffes commented, "But what I was trying to capture here was this very gritty and subtle sense that when someone plays an instrument you can hear their soul. Everybody gets so passionate, it's something that has to do with the relationships between us all."

Although the Penguins carried on playing together for another 2 years, Jeffes gradually began to hanker for a quieter life, or more accurately perhaps, a quieter way of making music.

In 1996 he moved from London to Somerset and began to concentrate on solo piano work. Shortly afterwards he fell ill with an inoperable brain tumour and in December 1997 he died.

Sometimes tragic events can only be spoken of in platitudes. It is quite true, anyway, that Simon Jeffes lives on in his music. It is also true that the Penguin Café is an imaginary but necessary place which everybody with an ounce of spirit ought to invent for themselves.

Robert Sandall

(Below: Simon Jeffes and the PCO and a posthumous collection of Jeffes' piano music, available from the site linked to above).