

**Title of Work:**

**Voicings –  
A POSTMODERN SHORT STORY**



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*“Where’s the form? Don’t ask. Don’t think. Don’t anticipate. Just participate. It’s all there somewhere inside. And then suddenly it forms itself.”*

*Keith Jarrett*

*‘Inside Out’, from liner notes, (ECM Records GmbH, 2001)*

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*Early on a Tuesday morning in mid-Autumn of 1902, a young scientist walking past the Thames happened to observe two boys throw two stones, one after another, into the still river. He watched how the ripples spread out, and how eventually the tiny waves, like competing notes on a poorly tuned piano, met in a discordant resonance. The day moved on, however, and he thought little of it. This was unfortunate: a similar observation across the Channel would bring another, slightly older, but then equally as unknown, physicist to a conclusion which would lead to a revolution of the classical ways of seeing the world.*

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**NEW ORLEANS. 1928.**

For sale – baby grand piano. Reasonable condition. Played by Wurly Jones twice.  
\$1500 or offer. Call 7564-4233.

*Brilliant. I should start an ad writing service.*

Hi my name is Plug and I play piana. *Ha – sounds almost like a personal. Let's see – while I'm at it I'm also Good-looking, fun-loving, looking-for-adventure. Call 7564-4233 after 7 for a committed, fun-loving pal. (maybe I should put this one in eh – might get lucky whaddya reckon!!)*

*Or what about this ...*

Musician available for hire – pianist. Will work most nights for country prices.  
No morning jobs ...

*(I'm not a morning person you see)*

... ring me 7564-4233 after 6 for some hot piana action.

*Maybe if I'd become a writer your grandfather would've been proud. Maybe not.*

*Strange place to grow up in – New Orleans in 1928 – still is probably. I remember I was about six or seven and we put an ad in the paper for our piano – your grandfather said we couldn't afford to keep it.*

*He was a conductor – his groups got recorded heaps. I only twice got recorded. First time was a high school where my father was working – I even got in the credits.*

“Voice of the Senior High School”

Track 1: Elgar’s Jerusalem. Conducted by Frank Barthgate. [8.56]

First Violin – R Luiz, First Viola – S Webster; First Cello – M Pooley.

Choir conducted by J Allingtone

Track 2: Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup>. Conducted by Frank Barthgate. [5.19]

Track 3: Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto for Beginners. [4.76]

Track 4: Bebop. Arr. Wynton “Plug” Barthgate. [3.20]

*You see he had put another ad in the paper:*

Wanted – The New Orleans Elementary school requires one pianist to teach two days a week. Educational experience essential.

*Nobody replied so he got me to do it instead. I can still see the look on his face when I explained to him that I’d kinda been teaching Miles Davis not Chopin or something. Started up a Jazz ensemble too – that really ticked him off. That was before we left for Japan.*

*It was an experience I’ll tell ya – going back to my old school. I found my old story book – did I tell you?*

Miss Zimmerman is a silly old bat  
 Miss Zimmerman is a silly old gnat  
 A silly old bat a silly old gnat  
 Miss Zimmerman is silly old and fat.

Nah Nahna Nah Nah you can't read this because it's my secret journal. You said so yourself. You're looking at me now and only I know – I have a secret and you can't find it. I'm a child and you can't read my brain but one day you'll die and I can open up yours – your secret diary.

*It was quite the masterpiece. My teacher used to hate me mostly 'cause she hated my father who she hated because of politics or something. Everyone hated him – Jerry Pig they'd say. I can't remember if Miss Zimmerman ever liked my stories.*

*... I wasn't ever much good at writing stories at school. I remember they would say don't write "The End" at the end of my stories. I hated that. So one day I got a big black pen and wrote it anyway. They made we write the whole thing out again. And commas too – they'd always go through and put them in where I didn't want them ...*

*... I also remember stealing some crayons from school. I always wanted them; they were colourful not like my broken black ones at home. On Saturday they used to teach me that to covet was a sin so I mustn't. I figured that if I nicked them then I wouldn't be coveting them no more would I? So I did and they were mine and the teachers would have to keep their minds from coveting them.*

*I kinda wish I still had some of those stories so I could show it to you. They were all about my first home in Germany. They were pretty damn good I seem to remember. But then again it probably wouldn't live up to how I remember it. That's why I never liked writing much. It's fixed – it's permanent. It tricks you into thinking you can touch whatever it is that you're reading about – but as soon as the words hit the page they kinda die – know what I mean? It's the same reason I hate recording so much. The voices don't change with you. I listen to a disc of me and I hear the voice of The Plug Barthgate Trio on The 12th October 1938 – not the voice of Plug Barthgate – now – in 1984 – age 63 – on This Day.*

*But I promise that I'll do my best to write it all down. Only because you asked me to. And 'cause I know my father would hate me to.*

*Well Rose what do you want me to write? I know why you really asked me though – you all wanna know what I did with that stupid recording don't you? Even you – my own daughter ... Where do I start? I'm looking out the window now at that bitch of a landlady – she's staring back up at me too. Sometimes I wonder why we're still here. Should've gone back home long ago – for good I mean. At least there you can get a drink at all hours and hear some decent music.*



\* [OSAKA, JAPAN. 1984]

... and experience essential. (005)-5456-3442. 16 YR OLD AMERICAN GUITARIST / songwriter seeks creative, keen and committed vocalist and drummer. Preferably sing in tune. Mum says ring before 8.30pm (075)-2103-9687. **THE MAHAVISHNU ORCHESTRA is looking for a new drummer, bass player, keyboard player and violinist. Easy going character, dedication, and high level of personal hygiene an advantage. No time wasters. Phone John (006)-6231-7451.** CROATIAN OR BOSNIAN MUSICIANS needed. Professional or amateurs for the forming band. Must be familiar with Bosnian or Croatian folk ...

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> April 3am

It's raining. Again.

It's 3 o'clock in the morning.

I'm tired, but I can't sleep.

Maybe I should write a poem.

'Lots of rain here.'

How's that – a start? Not Wordsworth, I'll admit, but perhaps an embryonic Eliot?

If I were a poet then I might write a poem about it. I've got my impetus, I have my pen.  
But I'm a musician.

*So write a song about it you're probably saying.*

Perhaps I could – music being the universal language, the elemental stream of meaning without words. My classical pals swear they can hear the pain of childbirth in Bach or the chaos of Tsarist Russia in Rachmaninov. All I can hear in Rach's songs is the pain of the poor fella having to play it. That's the problem. A book can really *say something*. Music happens, and you enjoy it or you don't.

The other reason why I'm not going to is that somebody probably already has written one. Absolutely everything has been done already. That's why most of my song ideas are torn up within seconds.

But I'm being rude, I haven't introduced myself.

My name is John and I play guitar for a living.

The last half of that sentence is an increasingly inaccurate statement. When I was in school I studied History and English, and played music in the moonlit hours. When I left school my band, *The Mahavishnu Orchestra*, met with moderate success. Then, as always happens, the band split, and I became a target of Yoko Ono proportions for the *Mahavishnu* fan club. I took refuge from the more militant fans here in Osaka. The upside of living in the glorious modernity of the 1980s is that almost everyone here speaks English. The downside is that I live in constant fear of my homicidal ex-fan club president who, no matter how far I run, is only 14 hours' flight away.

So, a summary of *me*: I'm an almost famous guitarist with no band, no money and a crappy job at Shingo's Music Store. I have a week to find a copy of my boss's favourite record – an obscure title recorded by Barthgate and his band on the Delta record label. Everyone I've talked to is convinced that there were only 4, all by Kid Rena. But Shingo expects a miracle. He found a taped copy of Delta 5 and now he wants the real thing.

This is all meant to happen in my time off, by the way. I'm a native English speaker, so that makes me (so my boss says) the most qualified to find the record, and also (so I've decided) the most qualified to lose my job.

4.15pm

Guess what – still no luck! I spent the entire day without serving a customer. Phone rang solid, don't forget call Nick tomorrow about the Telecasters. No calls about the ad. Still trying to track down the new owners of Delta, no luck yet with any of that stuff. Too busy trying to find players for the new band. Had a nasty call from Rick's girlfriend, too. Apparently Rick wants to release the Trident Sessions as 'Our Last Recording Together'. Told her to rack off and stop doing Rick's dirty work. It's like a messy divorce, really it is. I tried to tell her it wasn't my fault, it's like trying to tell the Repo men it's not your TV. Thick blonde. Don't ever get one.

I did find the interview Barthgate gave after the band split.

[15/10/1938]

*... There comes a time in any band where you feel that you've achieved as much as you can and either you move on or you die. I think everyone agrees that we are moving in different directions, musically speaking ...*

And the local rag:

*... However, other sources suggest that young pianist and band leader, Wynton Barthgate, has increasingly shown a reluctance to carry out recording obligations under their newly signed contract ... a spokesman for the Delta Record Company said that the young Barthgate, 17, had in fact refused to hand over the latest recording, citing 'Artistic Reasons' ...*

Good on him, I say.

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**NEW ORLEANS. 1938**

*Ah – 1938 – the year the band broke up ... Of course you know why I got the blame – same reason father and I moved here to Japan. Too much German blood by half.*

*Did you ever meet the band, or Kasem? I hope not. Don't get me wrong – I don't have much against them anymore. That was a long time ago. But thing is – I wouldn't want my only daughter to think I ever had anything to do with guys like that.*

*Great thing about Kasem was that you could make jokes about him and he'd laugh. Too high to notice most of the time ...*

*"... how do you know there's a drummer at the door? He – no wait – the knocking, yeah the knocking speeds up."*

*[Kasem laughs stupidly]*

*"why are intermissions only 5 minutes long ... [why?] so you don't have to retrain the drummer!"*

*[hahaha]*

*"Why do drummers have a half ounce more brain than horses?"*

*"Because they don't disgrace themselves during parade."*

*[ditto]*

*I've got a heap more Rosie – wanna hear them? No of course you don't – stop being stupid Plug ... Shoot – how am I meant to know what to write. I told you I hate writing and I hate recording, I can never get my voice down right on paper ... I could do a choose-your-own-adventure though:*

*It's called 'The Search for the Voice'*

*If you want to hear more go to page 12*

*If you want me to get on with the story go to page 12*

*If you are a drummer then go to hell.*

*I'm sure you've heard the story about how the band broke up a hundred times from other people. Kasem and Pete put out a press release, which I got my hands on.*

We regret to announce that the Barthgate Trio has disbanded. Pianist and band leader Plug Barthgate has increasingly shown a reluctance to carry out recording obligations under our new contract, preferring instead ...

*Or a bass player ... If you're a bass player you can also go to hell. I've got some bass player jokes too ...*

*Why do bands have bass players?*

*To translate for the drummer.*

*I'm listening to the Delta now. Side A – a mid tempo blues. Me on piano, the other two on tightly strung catgut and cow gut respectively.*

*One day, maybe on my death bed (can't be too far away can it now) I'll give it to you – and explain you away into silence so you'll never give it away to anyone. Or maybe I'll just make another copy for you and you alone to hear ...*

*... This is a nice chord right here. D 7 #9. Bitch to voice on the piano, if you want the melody (the 5<sup>th</sup>) to come out on top. I learnt how to do that from an old Jazz man who was returning to Japan ...*

**... NEW ORLEANS to OSAKA. 1941**

*Took months to get across the Pacific in those days.*

*We arrived on July 23 1941– the day Japan occupied Indochina – and just before the USA froze all those Japanese assets. A lucky escape I guess. No commercial operators would take us so my father and I played our way across on a private vessel. Wagner Rachmaninoff Armstrong – and countless show tunes. I thought he was a right so and so at first. You've gotta remember that Jazz was an American art form – in our minds no Japanese would ever be able to understand it let alone teach us how to play. Mr Tanaka – he wasn't interested in the chords, the raised fifths, the augmented sevenths, the timing, the swing. The Japs are very melodic people – him especially – he grabbed onto the tune, completely ignoring all that stuff. When he couldn't find it he asked When Was I Going To Play Some Tunes. I was highly offended – after all here was someone who knew nothing about jazz. And having been recorded at 17 I was something of a prodigy. These days anyone can get recorded –back then I was one of the few New Orleans players recorded before the war. That's why they were so angry that I'd taken the master disc with me ...*

*– but after the war I kept coming back to him. Of course my father wouldn't pay for lessons, so it was only every now and again.*

\* [OSAKA, JAPAN. 1984]

9.00pm

A friend of mine tried to warn me about this job – ‘it’s basically a whole lot of sucking ass and unpaid overtime,’ he said. If only I’d believed him.

I’m about to head down to the local *shiidii* shop to see if they can help. Apparently, the masters for most of the Delta records were bought for a small amount (surprised they weren’t paid to buy them judging by my boss’s musical taste) by ‘Circle’. Never heard of it.

Speaking of which Sony rang today. As always, plastic Japanese Smiles and plastic American threats.

10.30pm

Why do I get the feeling my whole life is one big waste of time? The other thing they didn’t prepare me for was popular Japanese music. I should have realised the local shopping mall shop wouldn’t have anything but trashy pop:

‘Meatballs Ham – Let’s play’

An EP full of trashy mini-Moog sounds and Korg pads. Who could enjoy Joni Mitchell after the pure lyrical genius of ‘Honey baby love yeah heh love groove the light’?

‘Super Pasta – Goodnight Mr Salary Man’

Dedicated Pasta fans will appreciate this collection of entirely new clichés, including at least two chord changes. (Sure to have musical academics excited.)

‘Naoko Shimazaki – Beautiful Ping’

This CD is a heart warming demonstration of an individual’s ability to overcome



disability with technology. Born with an acute case of lack of vocal talent, this record has been surgically transformed using auto-Reverb. *Clearly* they're hanging out for the technology to be able to apply a liberal dose of 'auto-tune'.

Time for bed. And I can sleep with the knowledge that Japan's music scene is alive and well.

11.51pm

Another threatening phone call from the agent this time. I think Jan told him I had the Trident Sessions master disc.

Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> April 8.59am

In one minute the doors will open. In will come Stu. He is 15, and spends his life here. He will ramble on about some mixer I didn't even know existed, then talk about how he's going to buy this particular compressor, or that condenser microphone or ... For someone who spends his life at a music shop he cares surprisingly little for music.

He's standing out there now. He knows he's got my job when I get fired, even if he is barely old enough. Shingo loves him. He's a Japanese kid with an American dad. He's got the 'I'll spit polish your shoes if you like' attitude and the connections in the States.

It's my turn to man the front desk. 'No you can't have that guitar for 4500 yen'. 'Yes if you buy a Les Paul you can have a free egg shaker'. 'No we don't sell gaffa tape'. 'Korg and Yamaha are the only brands I would recommend. Only Japanese companies have the technical ability and assurance of quality you need'.

Here we go.

'Found the 5<sup>th</sup> disc yet?'

No, but thanks for your concern about my welfare.

'That's alright. I found out some stuff.' Now he's fiddling with a second-hand Portastudio. He wants one, but can't choose between that and a new Neumann U47.

Yeah like what? (I'm trying not to sound interested – failed, of course.)

'You know these run on AC power, I still can't figure it out, but it uses the same phantom power system as ...' Damn he's annoying.

Like what? (Fool! Now he knows I'm interested – perhaps I should get down on my hands and knees.)

'Oh, just that I think Riverside bought most of the Delta stuff and reissued it. Hey you know Korg is releasing a new keyboard. 12 note polyphony, 3 oscillators ... blah blah blah'.

I love our little discussions. They give me the rejuvenation I need to be nasty to customers all day.

9.15am

Wow, our first (real) customer for the day. Two actually. 16 and 19. Two brothers I think. They look European – when I first came here I was surprised to learn that there's an international school down the road. They're moving past the expensive guitars. They just couldn't resist a rendition of 'Stairway to Heaven', though. Stupid song. We should have a sign.

9.20am

They've moved over to the amp room now. They're starting expensive and working their way down. Marshall, Vox, Fender. Right through all the ranges.

10.40am

Aha, they're moving towards the counter. A purchase?

Yes sirs, will it be the Marshall or the Vox?

'Three picks, actually.'

I see. That will be 30 yen.

'Can we get a discount on that?'

12.05pm

Well it's my lunchbreak and I'm off to look for Shingo's stupid recording. I thought I'd have a look down at the junk CD warehouses. Seems appropriate to me.

1pm

Apparently I'm late. An hour lunchbreak means 50 minutes of running errands for your boss here, apparently. No luck down at the warehouses. Lots of old Frank Sinatra stuff, though. Joy.

FIVE PM

I get to go home on time for once. No customers this arvo. Except some guys who did actually want to buy an amp. They asked for a free lead. It was an alright price so I said no, then I found out they asked some other dude and he said yes. Prick.

I put another ad in the paper for the new band. I know what I'm looking for now. A letter came from Jerry. Didn't read it, of course. Didn't need to. I know exactly what he wants – same thing as Rick.

He wasn't a very good player, anyway. Too grandiose for his own good.

11.50pm

Just finished auditioning some okay players for the one-off gig tonight. Went up to the local school hall. We got kicked out at about 10.30, so got through about five drummers.

They're *all* too grandiose, nobody just keeps a simple beat and does it well, they all want to do solos and steal attention from the guitars.

Gig starts at 2, so I've been reading about 1920s New Orleans to see if they mention anything about Barthgate. Boring stuff.

*... cost cutting. Even the world famous New Orleans Symphony Orchestra had to cut costs by selling its grand piano<sup>35</sup> ... Prior to the crash of 1928, Jazz music had reflected the prosperity of the era ... for every Bessie Smith<sup>36</sup>, who lamented the plight of those the economy had not been kind to, there were countless Josephine Bakers<sup>37</sup> celebrating wealth, dancing and the open flaunting of inter-racial sexuality<sup>38</sup> ... blah blah blah ... Almost by stealth the efforts of rich, white Americans like John Hammond did much for the civil rights movement, bringing the talents of black musicians into homes<sup>43</sup> ... no longer were Negroes slaves, servants – they were musicians, and the effect that “seeing genius in a black person”<sup>57</sup> had on a new generation of middle class whites cannot be understated ... dance may well have done more to bring blacks and whites together than decades of protests ... This was a truly American music.*

Who writes this stuff, honestly ...

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 3pm

Landlady made me breakfast. You've got to love Japanese hospitality. Gig last night was pretty average, there are very few places where you get good crowds these days anywhere, let alone here in Japan. Mainly played popular stuff just to prove I still can. Had a fight with the drummer afterwards. He was technically good but kept on playing too much stuff. I need a drummer who loves to listen to the other players more than himself.

My horoscope has great advice: 'This coming week is a week for aquariums and zoos, museums and art exhibitions'. Great, no really that's super.

To top it all off there was a parcel at my door this morning which contained cuttings from some article Rick wrote after we split.

[Extract from 'Just Friends – Rick Laird, co-founder of the recently disbanded *Mahavishnu Orchestra*, writes on band dynamics', article published in *Drum* 01/02/84.]

*You always remember your first gig. I guess it's kind of like your first girlfriend, first car, first time.*

*My first kiss? Too long ago. My first car? No idea. My first gig? 3.30pm, Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> October 1975 at the local fish and chips shop. For us at age 14 that was our big break. That's when we really 'got lucky'.*

*At the time I was in a three piece – we thought we were the best Rock band anywhere. But better than that we were all buddies.*

*Remember to choose your band members carefully. Being good friends is never enough. I've seen some really messy breakups in my time. Sometimes it's just that those little things start to bug you so much. [Come on be honest Rick, it's your bloody grandiose tone, that's why you're stuck here writing motivational articles*

*for a magazine with a print run that could be done on a library photocopier with a \$1 coin.]*

There should be a musician division in the family court – there really should. Except I would always be made the bad guy and have the security guys on me because they know I will lose my temper. The drummer gets the chicks, the bass player gets the alcohol and the guitarist gets the blame when the thing all falls down. Just look at the Beatles.

Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 8.59am

I've forgotten what it's like to ring up a music shop.

I just rang to see if I could talk to the boss and tell him I'm not coming in today. Instead, all I got was some tacky hold music featuring FM bells and soprano sax solos from some mid range keyboard. We're sorry you have to endure this music, said the voice, but all our operators are currently unavailable – but don't worry by the time you've listened to 2 minutes of this stuff the squeaky rudeness of our sole operator will seem positively reassuring [More wallpaper music]. You're listening to the sensual sounds of the new [insert latest, greatest thingy here], available now – if you buy enough of them we'll stop playing this music!

I'll take ten.

I've found a lead. My favourite 15 year old gave me a number for some record company executive he said he knew well and was good friends with. I rang the guy – Shimazaki or something – and spent the first ten minutes swapping techniques for getting rid of Stu, and, having developed mutual sympathy and understanding for each other, I got some useful information. I plan to take today off to go out and visit him. Brian, I think his name was. Brian Shimazaki.

Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 9pm

What a profitable visit. I found the missing Delta, I returned it to my boss who instantly promoted me to manager. I also met a lovely blonde girl who seems just right for me. I proposed just as the sun was setting this afternoon near the enormous wooden pagoda in the old part of town. Life is sweet.

... Well, except I didn't actually talk much to Naoko (daughter of Mr Shimazaki and apparently one of the *artistes* I listened to the other day, whose hair is actually that funny brown colour Japanese hair goes when they bleach it) because all I did was ask her for directions to her father's office. No, he didn't have it – he said the record I was looking for was 'bery bery great expense'. He said to come back tomorrow or Wednesday.

Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> April 10am

Day off. I'm going to have a lot more of these after Friday.

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> April 1pm

Didn't show for work today. Not much point, really. I'm going to get fired anyway and they have to pay me for this week. I thought about going and seeing Mr Shimazaki again, but the thought of paying 'bery bery great expense' for the privilege of kissing Shingo's arse doesn't appeal to me hugely.

Thought about taking another guitar lesson – you know, see if someone can fill me in on why I seem so destined to fail. I don't think my ego could stand it. One day someone will give me the magic formula and I'll say 'Oh is that all I needed to do', and get on with it.



Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April 7pm

I got bored so I went to Tokyo by train. It's great looking out of the *Shinkansen* windows and seeing huge expanses of rice fields and decrepit old villages flash past you only 5 minutes from the centre of Japanese business. That's what I love about Japan – the texture. It reminds me of, say, an electronic synthesiser rendition of an old Gershwin piece. It's got definite roots, but is absolutely incongruous once you know where it all came from. Everything seems to be covered in a fine layer of grime which says Didn't Move On Fast Enough. It's like when you watch a film from last decade – the colours just aren't crisp.

Work rang. I pretended to be sick. Things got a bit angry and he threatened to 'kick me all the way back to America'. I suggested that that might be a good idea, and I'd probably have a much easier time finding the non-existent record there than I would here on the other side of the world. He really thinks I care about his stupid record, because he ignored me and told me that apparently Mr Barthgate himself had spent some time here in Osaka as a young lad during 'the war'. Apparently his mum was a Jewish immigrant to the States and his dad was a German spy, or so the papers said. I guess everyone hated him, then, poor grandiose bastard. The Americans for being German, the Germans later on for being a Jew, and the Japanese for being a Westerner. He must have copped it from everyone.

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**AKIGAWA, 1947**

*But yeah – my story.*

*I'm not doing so well here am I.*

*I'm sorry – I know you're a busy person. Lots of other people's stories to read I bet. I hope you're not planning on taking up the drums – like I wouldn't want to put you off or anything but stick to the singing. I know you probably don't want to follow in your father's footsteps but there's always the piano, too ...*

*The thing about Piano players is that they all tend to play too many notes. 88 possibilities and 10 fingers. Like not meaning to be rude or anything to the great pianists, but as much as I like Art Tatum and Rachmaninoff, well, just because you can ...*

*Mr Tanaka – he was different. Very different.*

When I hear this me-lo-dy ...  
this strange il-lu-sion takes o-ver me ...

*He taught me a lot about melody ...*

Un-pre-ten-tious  
girl from Mem-phis ...  
saw the fu-ture in her third eye\_ ...  
La da di ... bub bab bi ...

*See – I've got that song stuck in my head now. Doesn't matter what I try, it'll end up driving me mad. It's the melody.*

*I can still hear him – ‘You must find Prug’s own voice. You must not take my voice. You must not take your father’s voice. Prug’s voice’.*

*I read a bit when I can. Seems once a writer finds his voice then he will stick to it. Writes what sells, plays what sells – it is all the same really, eh.*

*It took me years to find my voice. D7 #9 – my favourite chord. My motif. I told you about that. Mr Tanaka helped me to find it but it was still my voice.*

*These days teachers don’t do that – they teach you how to solo in music classes like this. ‘These are the notes of the blues scale. You can go up and you can go down. Make a solo using as many of these notes as fast as possible.’ You don’t write like that – ABCDEFGFEDCBA – do you? No. So why play like that?*

*This is how I was taught to solo on the piano. Take a word. Sea. Good – that’s a nice word. Now what can you do with it?*

*Sea.*

*Water. Blue.*

*Sea*

*Dark. Oily*

*Sea*

*Polluted. Sin.*

*And there you have a solo. Someone like Louis Armstrong would make you see the water – or in his case the frantic city – and then would teach you how to live in it – all in one breath.*

*I don't think Mr Tanaka ever could have seen Armstrong more than once – but he knew exactly what he was doing. He was a great fella my teacher. I always looked up to him – and he taught me everything I know (about life – not just about music).*

*I was probably his worst student.*

*Every Sunday on the 11.04 train to his neighbourhood I'd be trying to think up excuses for why I hadn't played enough of the scales and everything he wanted me to do. Funny – you don't think of an eccentric Jazz master as being too fussed with stuff like that but he was. He was still Japanese – you see.*

How much practice you do last week?

*Eight hours per day – just like you said Mr Tanaka.*

Why you lie to me, Prug? You are very disrespectful to your parents. Japanese children, they always do their practice. There is no excuse.

*He asked all the questions in the early lessons– 'this note – what meaning?' or 'who is Prug?' Very philosophical.*

*I know you are waiting for me to tell you about how I met your mother – but I don't remember any one event like that – know what I mean? She was always there – in the background – a little younger than me. I knew Mr Tanaka had a daughter but I didn't realise she spoke English until one day Mr Tanaka was held up and she invited me in. I was in my late twenties at this stage, and alone in a strange environment with only passable Japanese this was a great thing – to find someone who I could talk to.*

*We couldn't have lessons while the war was on. In New Orleans I was a German – in Japan I was an American – know what I mean? Even when the war was over I was looked upon suspiciously – but your grandfather was kinda sympathetic towards us. Most*

*Japs would've hated me marrying your mother – very shameful. But he saw me I think like he saw Jazz – in a very un-Japanese way. Jazz Is No More American Than You, Prugsan – he would say. I never figured out exactly what he meant.*

*No – most Japanese weren't anything like Mr Tanaka. I've seen them try to do Jazz – they play the blues scale – and they swing cautiously – but they do it in well ordered and disciplined procedures. Ever been to a Japanese protest? They sit cross-legged together with identical signs and get angry together when the boss says to. Mr Tanaka was from a different world.*

*As for the old band – I was sent early recordings of the new trio – out of spite mostly I think. They were quite good but I don't think ever made it big time ... the world was suddenly a very different place – after all ...*

[unidentified cutting]

... at 8.15am Enola Gay dropped 'Little Boy' from 2,000 feet over Hiroshima. Everything changed after that. Us poets, we can't write in innocence any more. Where had our belief in our scientists, our politicians, ourselves got us? Col. Tibbets wrote after dropping the bomb – 'My God, what have we done?'

*Poets can't write from the heart anymore. But there's still always music.*

\*

Most music has drums. They help the music to happen, they are part of the music, but they usually stay in the background. Yet there comes a time in any jazz piece when solos are given. Sometimes the music stops completely, and the drummer takes the spotlight. The band nervously awaits its cue to begin again, hoping that it won't get too out of hand.

Here is my drum solo.

I have a problem.

I just flicked back to page one. It says 'A Postmodern Short Story'. As an astute reader you have had every fair warning that at some point in time I would intrude into the story – much like (that great postmodernist) John Fowles does in his novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* – and make some outrageous statement.

I do not know, either. This story I am telling is almost certainly all imagination. No, these characters never existed outside of my own mind – they are devices. I have pretended to know their innermost thoughts, but in fact they never had any, their names have been clipped from reality and grafted to my imagination to see what would grow.

We know for a fact that Plug Barthgate never existed; Kid Rena *was* the only artist ever recorded on the peculiar 'Delta' label (since acquired by an obscure American company called 'Circle' and never seen again). In contrast, John McLaughlin *does* exist, and as far as I can gather he *is* an egotistical guitar player whose band *probably* broke up because he wouldn't let anyone else have a go at writing material. But that is where the similarity ends – I have the 'missing' *Mahavishnu Orchestra Trident Sessions* in my hand now, which, I *was* going to reveal later in my story, John stole for the same reasons as Plug stole the 5<sup>th</sup> Delta, but which, in the real world, were sitting in a vault somewhere in America until just last month when they were released by Sony in all their glorious 20-bit re-mastered detail.

Yet my writing process has become more tied up in John McLaughlin's search for the Delta than I originally thought. When we last heard from him he was despondently contemplating his search, his life, and his dissatisfaction with his pathetic musical existence. Similarly I just realised, looking back over the last six thousand words, that no matter how hard I try to make these voices believable, a close reading would *clearly* still reveal that it is an illusion – *I* am behind both. *Their* search for a musical voice has really just been *my* search for a satisfactory voice to tell my story.

Allow me to make an even more outrageous statement:

this postMODern

rubbish has been an

*unnecessary* and

OBstructive burden

I promise that from now on I will find a voice and stick with it, and I ask that, if you could find it in your heart to forgive me, you might forget my sins and suspend your disbelief one more time.

So, what happens to John? Let's say he runs away, and has an affair with Naoko (who, incidentally, is about to come take John out for *udon* and give him his birthday present). He needs to make a choice. Chasing the Delta further will only choke his life, and become an all-consuming obsession with the voice of Plug Barthgate. He has taken the first tentative steps towards freedom, but he will have to soon make some hard choices if he is to have any hope of finding his own voice.

What happened to Plug? That requires further investigation ... So at this point I nod to my proverbial band leader and promise 'Never Again'.

\*

*A madman sits, alone, giggling on the train to Osaka.*

*Welcome to post-modern Japan, he thinks, a thriving centre of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity with a peculiarly eastern flavour. To his eyes an obvious satire, but most of the characters he has met seem curiously unaware that they are part of some higher joke. Here is a world of gold plated statues, incense filled shrines, of wooden pagodas and unpretentious, but quietly pleasant, carp filled lakes. That is what the tour guide says, of course in a far more Japanese translation. He has begun to suspect that this place makes a lot more sense through an awkward Japanese translation.*

*The language in the brochure he is reading speaks of matte textures, of expert shading. Of evenly balanced stone paving, of quiet green ripples. It talks about the subdued red of dragons which guard the natural wooden fibre of the man made temple, one built long before these crowded streets. As he follows the words it is as if some skilled photographer is guiding his eyes, one whose sense of aesthetics makes even the most daring Tower of Babel, the gold pagoda, look completely natural – its arrogance dwarfed by the well proportioned hills on either side.*

*Our madman laughs at this vulgar joke as his train enters the tunnel. He is a tourist, nobody seems to take note. He engages with some schoolchildren sitting across the aisle from him. They do not meet his eyes long. They do not appreciate the language he speaks.*

*He feels rebellious. To the annoyance of the people around him he looks up, stands for a moment, and stares out the window at the virgin green of the mountain. But by some chance our photographer is sleeping, and the view is framed – just for an instant – through a grimy mess of wires.*

*The plastic voice of the overhead speaker announces politely his stop.*



*He grabs his bags and steps onto the platform. It is a small suburban stop; he has passed thousands on the way. All identical; he must have glanced into the tiny square backyards of a million people along his way. The train moves off quickly. He starts walking slowly.*

*It is a single platform, with a prefab iron pedestrian bridge. If this were peak hour there would be a few other people, climbing silently and anonymously with heads down. He climbs idly, with his eyes high. Finally he is beginning to look like a tourist.*

*The 516 identical steps take him to the other side of a wire fence. He stops and looks around. There are bikes everywhere, neatly arranged – without locks – in lines. They look hot; there is no shade, except beside the lonely coke machine. Further down the street he finds an image, wedged respectfully between two trinket stores, which catches his eye.*

I see half charred sticks of incense, burning slowly in a greasy aluminium can. Water has washed away the label at some stage. Tiny scars mark the rusted metal sides where the glue once was and where the paper has stuck. I smell, just briefly, over the noise of the trucks and the smell of hot grass, an irritatingly indecisive odour. It smells accusing; artificial and acidic, yet completely natural – earthy, wooden. I touch the token, probably fairly recent, gate which warns me not to go closer. I feel the skin of rusted nobility. I step back and wonder at this shrine's incongruity – a final concession to a Samurai heritage next to an invading modernity.

How grandiose. And that's more than enough of this pompous poetry.

What I've been trying to say is that while I was reading a brochure on the train full of nauseatingly enticing language it struck me that behind the corporate loyalty and extended family values I read a different language. One which exists in the neon red of the night. Where western money meets traditional hospitality in a peculiarly Japanese translation. There is something in this language which causes wives to swear blind they are happy their salary men find fulfilment in a *geisha*. There is something in this

language which enables suicides to be removed expertly and clinically in a matter of seconds. This is a language which will never be used to describe the layered textures of Bill Evans which I heard a few seconds ago from my walkman. If I were a musicologist then I'd say that the freedom and soul of his music is trapped forever in institutionalised bars, a prison which seems as communal as it is insular. But who listens to musicologists.

Again I laughed. At Japan, this time.

It is a vulgar joke, but I'm not offending anyone. I'm a tourist now. At a moment's notice I can, with a wink and a smile, push on through the perfect day, into an existence of squashed sandwiches and fake plastic smiles and losing umbrellas and catching busses and reading advertisements you can't understand.

The language of Japan is not one of freedom, but of control. In addressing his wife, a man is speaking to his slave; as he buys his paper and reads his Kanji he is reinforcing the divide between those who can and those who somehow weren't counted in maintaining the hundred percent literacy rate. The Japanese absorbed the free jazz movement, as they do with all fads, overnight. And in doing so they copied the style and emotion verbatim, imposing rules and order as they went.

Imagine, now, the most unlikely Japanese (permanent) resident you can. My name is John. I am American. I taste the burning *wasabi*, and realise that I am an outsider.

*... this power stems from the language – the reassuring voice of the elite who manufacture a fiction ... which humble citizens serve unquestioningly ... why bother investing money in seeking out problems, when with the stroke of a pen bridges can be mended and nuclear facilities made safe ...*

Isn't it strange how cultures, like languages, exist in layers. Different voices fighting for the same space, inhabiting the same streets, the same menus, the same books even. I placed an ad in an English newspaper as if I were still in America, and people replied as

if they had read it in *The Musician* on a Sunday morning in Chicago. What is it that follows us to whatever country we go, and seeks out others in exile, and forms these layers?

*THE MAHAVISHNU ORCHESTRA is looking for a new drummer, bass player, keyboard player and violinist ...*

What is it about music which is able to exist because, despite, through these layers? How can it communicate meaning if there can be no reference to a common human experience?

Here's the difference between Japan and America. In Japan, the cultures sit in neatly ordered layers. They consume Jazz and place it in an isolated container, suffocate it. In America it is different, perhaps not so much layers, but different voices fighting for attention. Where European art music and ethnic African roots are thrown together in that ugly old pool they do not, cannot, sit in layers. They interact. Spread out. They abandon where they came from, and through that, they get closer to where they want to be.

*... Donen-Genden incident just how close to the brink of uncontrollable catastrophe Japan's nuclear power industry is ... employees dumped a hundred times the safe quantity of uranium into a settling basin ... the workers were following a secret manual prepared by JCO's managers in the pursuit of Kaizen – efficiency at all costs. The workers have no voice to protest, to offer criticisms ...*

Progress is difficult to measure sometimes.

\*

Right now I'm sitting in a pigeon hole room, thinking, writing and playing. I've caught myself for the first time in a long while thinking about home. Chicago is a funny kind of place to grow up in. On the positive side there are some of the best Jazz musicians hanging around local clubs and cemeteries.

*\*Music – Tuition Available – Tanaka ¥3000 per hour. (006)-1345-6178*

It was expensive but I had some money left over from my last pay. Tanaka looked ancient. *He can't possibly understand what I'm saying.* I thought I was safe – I thought that nobody could ever decode what I said with my guitar. *But he does.* As soon as an idea enters my head he's already replied.

I walked out of this first lesson with Tanaka so overloaded with thoughts that I felt like I had to write it all down. That's when I realised that it wasn't just what happened inside that tissue box room that I should be writing down, but this whole last week.

I thought about starting my story with Naoko, but there really isn't much to tell. She's an attractive Japanese girl, something of a pop-star celebrity. We met again after I spoke with her father and went out for a drink together. It's a convenient arrangement we have. Business through pleasure. She's got a lot of connections in the record industry through her father. Her personality is like her music. Unchallenging. Predictable. Mostly. She said she hadn't heard of the 5<sup>th</sup> Delta, but she promised to speak to some people.

*There was a knock.*

I was expecting her. I was playing guitar at the time, and something in my head kept telling me I should answer it, but my hands wouldn't stop.

Tanaka rang me out of the blue last night and told me to meet him at the *Pachinko* parlour. When he finally turned up it was so noisy I could hardly hear him – a problem made worse by my poor Japanese. After about half an hour of me watching him put ball after ball into the machine, a middle aged man – European looking – came up and shook hands with him. The stranger (*'Prugsan'* I heard Tanaka call him) examined me briefly – he spoke with a hint of an American accent. They left and I, having nothing better to do, guessed that I was to follow.

They took me to a small night club. When we arrived there were about thirty or so businessmen unenthusiastically sipping melancholy, none of them paying attention to the live jazz act which was playing. The singer, apparently the stranger's daughter, was good. The band wasn't. 'Hey it's music, even if it's not great', she tried to say as if *the music* could make up for drummer's wild polyrhythmic exploration.

... *Naoko knocked again.*

I don't know whether I will answer it. About an hour ago when I spoke to her she said she had something for me, but she couldn't – or wouldn't – say if it was the Delta or not. About an hour ago I had been excited about the possibility of finding the Barthgate recording, getting one step closer to his real voice. Now the appeal of the thought of walking calmly back into Shingo's – Delta 5 in hand – has definitely faded.

I gathered from their conversation that Tanaka was *Prugsan's* teacher? I didn't ask what brought him and his daughter, Rose, to Japan – although I got the impression that this was a long term stay.

I spoke only a little to her. I found her silence annoying but at the same time intriguing. And her voice, both as a singer and as she spoke, was raspy – yet somehow musical. Like when you speak near an open grand piano in an empty hall, or when you slip and hit a harmonic accidentally on the guitar.

Afterwards we walked around the streets of Osaka, just me and Rose, then down onto Lake Biwa. Around mid-afternoon it's really pretty. But by 3am the moon begins to get tired, and I can't help but feel, I don't know – guilty? Insecure? I started writing a song about those feelings when I got home. Its slow, sentimental trash – it really is. Part of me wants to tear it up like the rest of them.

... But part of me kind of likes it – even though I know it's Been Done Before. I read one poet, I think it was Eliot, who once described this feeling as *a patient etherised upon a table*. He nailed it, he really did. It's right because it's not a definite feeling – it's like a slightly ambiguous voicing of a dominant chord. Unresolved. Like a dream where you are not sure if you're the patient, or the doctor, or the person who just shot the guy on the table.

I have chased the 5<sup>th</sup> Delta for weeks to get closer to Barthgate, and I am no closer than I was to begin with. You can't go back, can you? It's always just out of reach. The problem is that they all belong in a different world. Eliot was a modern, he didn't know about post-industrialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, did he? He lived in a world where you could still believe in 'truth' and 'progress' – and 'art'.

I might allow myself to keep the song. Then again, I might not. Rose and I are going to start working together. Maybe – I'm not sure if a straight Jazz trio is my thing.

... *a final knock*

I dropped my guitar. Ugly sound. Discordant, reverberating, raw. Like a D7#9. An imperfect cadence, unresolved, but the only way to end a Jazz piece.

**Reflection Statement**

*Voicings* is a postmodern story which, for me, is about the earnest search for origins and identity in a postmodern world hostile to both these things. It is also about how the search itself, rather than the outcome, is of ultimate value.

Yet *Voicings* is intended to be approached as an open text, with the audience active in the storytelling process. There is no absolute closure to the work – it ends like a Jazz piece with both resolution and dissonance. Therefore, the audience is free to interpret each event and character differently, and shape different meanings for themselves.

The underlying goal behind my major work is a conciliation of two passions – writing and Jazz music. I sought to find the words to describe an art which evades direct description, which is as much about the feeling as the sound, and which is itself inherently postmodern – a reaction to both traditional Western music, and to life itself. The relationship between music and literature in the postmodern condition is a key value of my work, and through this link I seek to communicate my own personal reaction to the experience of postmodernism. The aim is not necessarily to describe the sound of Jazz directly, nor the story of Jazz historically – but to immerse the reader in the fragmented lives of the musicians themselves, so that the responder can leave the story having ‘heard’ through the personas’ voices something of the freedom and soul of Jazz.

The intended audience of this text is an active reader. The abstract ideas, disjointed structure and open nature of a postmodern text like *Voicings* mean that a responder who approaches the text passively (expecting a closed, linear narrative and a continuous, omniscient narration) may find the experience confusing and unfulfilling. I approached a variety of different people to read my final draft. Those who enjoyed it the most were not necessarily those who had the most sophisticated understanding of the forms and conventions of postmodernism, nor indeed the most extensive experience of Jazz (although both these things helped), but those who were prepared to approach its unconventional form with an open mind. Some valued the postmodern statements the most, some the story – but others enjoyed the voices and images as a purely emotional, artistic experience. Each reading is equally valid, as a postmodern text such as this



requires the reader to play as much of an active role in shaping meaning from the fragmented voices as the author.

In writing this story I have tried to find a balance between presenting a postmodern narrative, and engaging the reader. In keeping with the central motif of 'voice', the primary technique used to accomplish this is the use of intensely personal, first person narrative voices. While structure, text formatting and bracketed annotations play a significant role in attempting to simplify the reader's decoding of the story (and hence secure their continuing engagement), the principle tool is the language itself of each character. In the first part of the story, the reader is introduced to two distinct narrative voices – Barthgate and McLaughlin – who, along with other smaller texts, provide a disjointed narration of the story. In the second part, the Narrator explicitly decides to revert to the less postmodern, single voice of McLaughlin, and so his voice takes on characteristics of the other two personas. The three stories cease to be distinct layers, and instead distort, clash and reverberate with each other (much like the ripples in the Thames).

It is essentially a double-coded narrative. It inhabits the conventions and form of the postmodern genre through the fragmented voices and 'ontological shifts' between fiction and meta-fiction, thus reflecting the postmodern notion that life is just a series of unrecoverable, unexplainable, random events. Yet while explicitly eschewing the values of conventional fiction – plot, closure and aesthetic story-telling – ironically the progression of the narrative is towards a reactionary critique of the postmodern techniques the narrator declares in his obligatory intrusion into the story to be an "unnecessary and obstructive burden".

The three narratives, and in particular the Narrator's story, are intended almost as an allegorical reflection on the real-life process of 'finding my voice', which I undertook in order to create my major work.

I began intending to create a postmodern, interactive, CD-ROM, because I believed that it would be the most effective way to communicate Jazz – itself a postmodern, interactive and intensely aural experience. However, extensive research into the CD-ROM medium (through texts like Deena Larsen's *Samplers: Nine Vicious Little Hypertexts*) convinced me that it was not, in fact, a suitable medium for communicating my ideas. I saw that the interactivity could potentially distract from the story, and alienate my audience – an audience already being asked to be active in its reading. Furthermore, the use of multimedia sound clips would in fact undermine, not aid, my central goal which was to express the ideas and people behind the sound of Jazz.

Likewise, on switching to the short story genre, my research into postmodern literature convinced me of the value of traditional forms and conventions in fiction. It also caused me to question the basic postmodern idea of the futility of our search for origins and truth. I chose not to abandon the postmodern genre, but to use it like other more recent postmodern writers like Michael Ondaatje and Peter Carey to question elements of 'conventional' postmodern philosophy and its associated values. I decided, for instance, that strong story lines and engaging characters are still important, as is some sense of closure – however discordant and open. This conflict is reflected in the Narrator's decision to revert to a single voice, and in John McLaughlin's return to traditional Jazz with the help of Mr Tanaka.

I seek neither to unconditionally uphold, nor completely condemn, postmodern values over modern values. The process of research, as well as the writing of numerous smaller 'pilot' pieces, helped me to realise that to do either would not be a true reaction to the duality of the world in which I live now. The *avant-garde* has moved on, and in effect we live in the 'post-postmodern' age, where postmodernism is just one 'grand narrative' among many. My central message is that both postmodernism and modernism are legitimate, so long as they are not restrictive paradigms, but genuine reactions to experience. The Barthgate of 1934 remains inaccessible to McLaughlin beyond the 'texts' – newspaper cuttings, interviews and of course the disc itself – hence Plug on page six: "It's fixed. It's permanent. It tricks you into thinking you can touch whatever it is

that you're reading about." Yet McLaughlin gets closest to the 'real' voice of Barthgate (perhaps without ever realising it) when he begins to abandon his restrictive obsession with the recording, and meets the real man and his daughter, Rose. In a sense, the outcome of his search becomes irrelevant – it is the process itself which enables him to begin to express his feelings through music.

In addition, the research process involved extensive investigation into the various contexts and subject matters of the story – both the historical period and the musical elements. This has been key to the development of my major work in two ways. Firstly, it was my initial discussions with Jazz musicians like Judy Bailey which led me to the realisation that language and music are bound far tighter than I originally thought – that in fact a musician talking about playing piano could tell me as much about writing as about music. Looking back, I can see how such observations and ideas developed as my research into Jazz progressed – to the point where they became an integral part of the story, through McLaughlin and Barthgate's musical journeys. Secondly, research into the various contexts which I was intending to write about directly shaped the story. Instead of breaking the illusion of realism to make a postmodern statement, I tried to enhance the realism of the story to the point where, despite the self conscious nature of the text, the responder believes that what they are reading is a 'true' story. Central to this is the way in which reality is mixed with fiction, and both rely on extensive research for their believability. I made a conscious decision not to tackle the work with definite stories or characters in mind, but rather to let the story develop as I wrote. Rather than writing a story and filling in the history, I deliberately tried to let the two processes go hand in hand. At times the research would push the story development in a particular direction, and at other times it would work the other way. McLaughlin is a 'real' character, whereas Plug is a conflation of Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie and Buddy Bolden. Hence the independent investigation directly shaped the development of the finished product.

The process of turning my initial ideas into a finished product has led to a significant development in my understanding of the creative process. Undertaking this kind of creative piece challenged me to take what I had studied over several years of schooling,

and process it into ideas and concepts which are my own. While I now realise that I am immersed in postmodernism every day, the study of postmodernism in Extension 1 English directly challenged my beliefs, values and experiences, and so this evolving process of response enabled me to form and consolidate my own ideas, beyond the purely critical or analytical. I have begun to find my own 'voice'.