

You have reached October Sound...

John Whiting

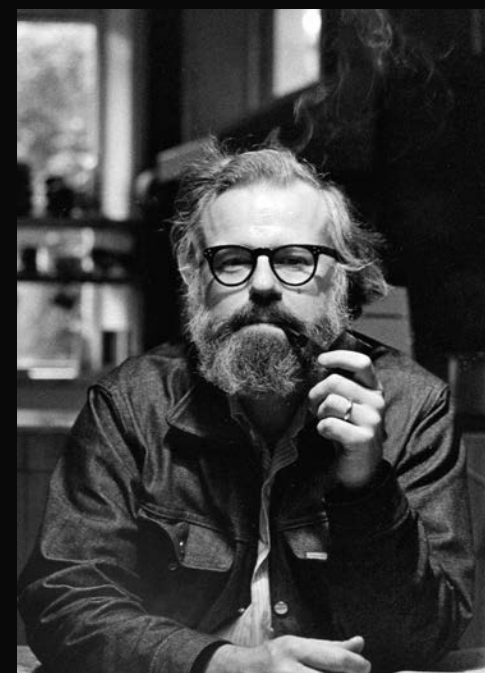
Founder and Director of October Sound, located in the October Gallery basement, 1980-2000. Sound Projectionist for Electric Phoenix the electro-acoustic vocal ensemble. John recorded many Institute of Ecotechnics ecological conferences in France and continues to record for the October Gallery archives.



Mary and I first went to October Gallery, in 1979, as the result of an open invitation to a film showing, transmitted through one of her fellow teachers. 'Let's go', I said impulsively. 'If it's a dud there's a great free house with thirty-two real ales on tap just around the corner!'

As soon as I walked through the old building's institutional front door, something clicked in my medial prefrontal cortex and I thought, 'It's Berkeley in the 1960s! I'm home!' During the film I hardly noticed what was on the screen but sat looking around at the modestly but meticulously restored exhibition space. The building, I learned afterwards, had been a Victorian Anglican girls' school. Three fireplaces had biblical commands engraved above their lintels. One of them read, OBEY THEM THAT HAVE THE RULE OVER YOU, carrying the oblique threat of corporal punishment!

Later in the evening I sat at a table in the Refectory talking with Chili Hawes and Ben Epperson, who were jointly running the newly opened gallery. Ben and I soon discovered that we had been in Berkeley at the same time and realised that our paths must have crossed regularly.



Chili showed us around the building. Below it was a full basement with a labyrinth of corridors and enclosed spaces, including an old wine cellar, its storage bins still intact, and in a space behind the stairs crouched an ancient and ominous furnace, still waiting to incinerate any bad little girls from the school upstairs. There was also a vaulted space with four interlocking shallow brick arches much like those in the vault under Fountains Abbey, but with scant headroom. They weren't strong enough to support a building, so I assumed that the Courtyard must be above.

I was about to lose my modest sound studio near Marble Arch because its owners needed the space for additional offices. It occurred to me that if the dirt floor was dug out a foot or so more, this arched area was just the right size and configuration to house a small but ample recording studio, and so I began to design it in my head. It would consist of a recording area flanked on two sides by an open L-shaped area containing a control desk and an office.

Top: October Sound, studio in the basement of the building, c. 1990.
Photo: John Whiting.

Inset: John Whiting, 1971.

A couple of days later, I phoned Chili and suggested that we get together for lunch. After a properly social interval I put my proposal to her, adding that I had contacts in the London classical music world (in which I was firmly imbedded) through which I might come up with a grant to cover at least part of the cost. 'That's it!' she said, without a moment's hesitation. 'We've been wondering what to do with the basement. Anyway, we will do all the construction and get the place ready, you bring all the equipment.'

Soon an energetic crew of gallery staff, including Chili herself, was digging out the floor and installing the necessary masonry walls. Then came the designing and the carpentry, carried out by the same architect and builder that had created my previous studio and knew exactly what I needed. Finally, I installed the equipment racks and sound desk and soldered the terminals of the wiring from the studio to the patch bay. Within a year the studio of my dreams was operational!

Thus was born October Sound, remembered by some for its answerphone jingle, once broadcast as an amusing example of its type on Radio 4. For twenty years October Sound would exist symbiotically with October Gallery, bringing in musicians who often rented the theatre for rehearsal space and sometimes performed in Gallery concerts. The studio immediately became the resident rehearsal and performance space for Electric Phoenix, the legendary electroacoustic vocal quartet for which I was the sound designer. Eminent musicians and literary figures who came included John Cage, Luciano Berio, Conlon Nancarrow, William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Hedli Anderson, Stanley Kunitz, Tim Souster, Bob Cobbing, Oliver Knussen, Eric Mottram, David Robertson, Erik Bauersfeld (who was the voice of Admiral Ackbar and Bib Fortuna in *Star Wars*)... the list goes on and on.

I also began to record the Gallery's principal events and later travelled to Les Marronniers near Aix-en-Provence to document the Institute of Ecotechnics' ecological conferences. Their list of scientific and artistic speakers was breathtaking! At one of these conferences Buckminster Fuller spent almost three hours explaining (without notes) the various ways in which the regular tetrahedron (triangular pyramid) functioned as the fundamental three-dimensional shape in nature. Afterwards, he was delighted to learn that his talk had been recorded with a Soundfield Ambisonic microphone, which contained four capsules arranged in the shape of - Wait for it! - a regular tetrahedron! He asked me for more information and I sent him an explanatory essay full of mathematical formulae by its designer, Michael Gerzon. Bucky wrote thanking me and saying that the information would be included in his subsequent lectures on the subject but alas, he died a few months later.

Another high point was William Burroughs' summoning of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. It was so evocative that Electric Phoenix commissioned four composers to write four compositions, each dedicated to one of the Horsemen. The most successful was Neely Bruce's *The Plague*, a thirty-five-minute rock cantata, which drew creatively on Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, bringing it up-to-date with a sequence of mysterious new diseases culminating in Aids. The intensive schedule of recording and producing the accompanying tape made each one of us successively ill, giving us all a vivid foretaste of Armageddon.

I spent a large part of 2017 digitising all those hundreds of hours of conference recordings for the Institute's archives, occasionally hearing my own voice coming from the audience during the questions and comments at the end. For me, they encapsulated my twenty-year experience as a vicarious participant in an organisation that embodied the paradoxes of human society in which opposites confront one another and are reconciled. Indeed, seeing great scientists from Russia and America cooperating closely together when their governments were at each other's throats was like watching a lion and a tiger working in close collaboration. Best of all was the fact that artists, musicians, sociologists, philosophers, information technologists and advanced scientists of various disciplines all came together and entered into open discussion, constituting an interdisciplinary force of exactly the sort that's required to solve the problems that threaten our collective existence. For me it was a living echo of the great seminar by my dear friend and thesis supervisor, Eric Mottram, on *The American Imagination of Synthesis*. Everything connects!

The Institute of Ecotechnics, together with its global projects, has become an ostensive definition of synergy. It was the meeting of minds at the Aix seminars that made possible the Institute's greatest single undertaking, Biosphere 2, an exemplum of the challenges facing corporate human existence, together with some of their possible solutions. This small, totally self-sustaining community, in which each participant was entirely reliant upon all the others, interacting with and depending on a totally closed system of flora and fauna, remains a living metaphor of planet Earth, demonstrating in microcosm the obstacles, both natural and psychological, which we must overcome in order to survive. If the rest of us do half as well, we will be around for a while longer.

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John Cage at October Sound, 1985.
Photo: John Whiting.