

**MORE THAN
A SONG
AND DANCE**

**STEVE
BUCHANAN**

by MARTON RADKAI



Photo: Marton Radkai

“Genius does what it must, and Talent does what it can,” wrote the 19th-century poet Owen Meredith. If this is so, then Steve Buchanan, an American musician living in Geneva, could be classified as a genius.

At first glance, he hardly appears to fit the bill. No stinging bolts flash from his blue eyes, his light gait suggests casualness rather than sheer creative fires. In fact, with his bald head and calm, soft-spoken manner, Buchanan radiates a certain quiet asceticism. But there is a pent up nervousness in his palpitating fingers, which at times look as if he were playing an invisible saxophone. And no sooner does he begin to discuss his art, than his purpose in life rises to the surface. His motivation is finding deeper meaning in music and new ways to express it. It’s a quest for which he is willing to shun life’s potential luxuries and work and live in squats.

Buchanan is indeed more than a musician; he is a composer, a theorist and an innovator as well. He believes firmly that music has a strong healing ability and the power to change society, for good or bad. “Music is a powerful movement of non-material forces,” says Buchanan. “The role of the musician is to make

those invisible movements credible and audible for people.”

On the surface, that might seem to be what any instrumentalist does. But, as a thinker as well as an artist, Buchanan has taken the idea of channelling invisible music quite literally a step further. Pooling his artistic resources as a musician (guitar, saxophone) and dancer, he created a special instrument he calls Second Line, which not only lets him

in dark green and black. Microphones embedded in a special carbon composite under each panel are connected to a preamplifier. This, in turn, is connected to a module that can produce thousands of different percussive sounds. Buchanan admits that he would prefer just a straight sound, but he also realizes that “listeners are quite sound oriented and are used to hearing more, they don’t really care about the complexity of the rhythm.”

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The name Second Line refers to the dancers and revellers at New Orleans parades and funeral processions. Dance and music are by

wow his audience, but also demonstrates how the body can make music.

Second Line evolved for nearly a decade. At its latest stage of development, it consists of 12 interconnected panels that form a 1 sq. metre board. Held up against the wall, it could pass as a sober work of modern graphic art

and large separated in western culture, as opposed to African culture. The moves and thrusts of the New Orleans Second Line, however, do occasionally influence the rhythm played by the musicians. “Second Line is that place where music and dance are in their natural state,” he says, in other words in complete symbiosis.

To 'play' Second Line, Buchanan throws a few switches and twiddles some dials to get the desired sounds. He then puts on his leather-sole shoes and begins an exotic-looking dance on the board, part martial art, part tap dance. The result is remarkable, a complete percussive symphony that ranges from thumping techno beats to shattering Tibetan gongs.

By using pedals, Buchanan can discretely and swiftly change the sound quality. Occasionally, he will add an additional counterpoint either by tapping out a rhythm on the two-bell Brazilian agogo, or by playing the keys of a miked saxophone.

Each key produces a separate pitch, which gives him considerable melodic freedoms. This technique, which he calls 'Bucussion,' generates "the sound of ten African drummers," in Buchanan's words. Occasionally he is joined on the board by another dancer, József Trefeli, for an especially exciting percussive display.

Buchanan was born into a musical family in Philadelphia, a city with a rich tradition of amateur and professional musicians. At the age of 15 he started playing the ukulele and soon moved on to the Spanish guitar, which he would play with a pick, a somewhat unusual technique.

Philadelphia boasted many excellent if unknown teachers, especially in the field of jazz, but the Spanish guitar, while suited to busking, was not appreciated in the plugged-in bands of the time. So Buchanan decided to take up

saxophone, because "it's an instrument that makes a real lot of noise." And he also started studying dance – African, Afro-Caribbean, ballet and modern – with the same single-mindedness: Shyness, he once noticed, made him a singular wallflower at parties.

In 1980, joining the natural flow of all artists aiming for the top, he moved to New York, where he continued studying, refining his art, writing music and performing. He worked in groups and solo, always combining his three instruments, the body, the sax and the guitar. Though he failed to become rich and famous, he does admit his decade in the Big Apple did help him mature artistically and learn the ropes of the business.

In 1991, after several European tours, he decided to move to Geneva, mainly because the busy squat scene here at the time allowed him to live cheaply and focus on his work. Today, he lives in a simply furnished studio apartment on rue de Berne, where he subjects himself to a strict regime of guitar and sax practice, daily reading, studying and yoga.

His studio, where he works on Second Line, is located in a dingy basement stuffed with drums and other instruments and panelled with makeshift sound-proofing.

Until now, reception to Second Line has been good, and Buchanan is optimistic. After his concerts, members of the audience line up to give the board a try themselves. "This is a good thing at this point in history," Buchanan comments, "because people are otherwise quite blasé about things."



Steve playing his Second Line / Photo: Marton Radkai

His fellow artists and promoters, however, have not been as enthusiastic, a fact he attributes to their inability to actually define his place in the musical scene. That, however, is only an irritation when it comes to his marketing efforts. "If you send a sample to a dance festival, they say 'this is music,' if you send a sample to a music festival they say 'this is dance.'"

His main focus is continuing his musical quest. Already now he speaks of having "glimpses" of things to come. "It will become clearer on the new board," he says. And for the dancer in Buchanan, that means it's just a step away.