

Art of Covid Chat – Podcast Series
Episode 4 – Sally Rose and Michelle Brace

June 2021

David Johnson: Hello, my name is David Johnson, and welcome to the Art of Covid chat. We're talking with artists who work in the Fens region about the work and the challenges they face during the pandemic of 2020/21.

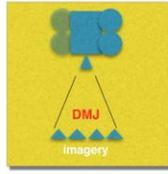
Today we have an artist from the Fenland area and one from the Cambridge area. Please welcome Sally Rose and Michelle Brace.

Guests: Hello!

David Johnson: Thank you for joining us today. Today's artists have a background in music and spoken word. So we are going to look at the use of music and spoken word as part of art and artforms. So Sally, would you like to introduce yourself, please?

Sally Rose: Thank you very much, David. Well, I'm Sally Rose and I live in the March town in Cambridgeshire, and I am mainly a singer, but I'm also a music reader. So what does that mean? Well, it means that obviously I sing, but I like to go out into the community and help support people to find their voices. I help people who have degenerative diseases, such as Parkinson's, keep their voices through voice therapy. And on the side, as if I haven't got enough to do, I like to run a ukulele club as well. So all in and around March, Peterborough, Ely, that sort of place.

My current projects, well, the March Can't Sing choir, which is like Ronseal, does the job on the tin. We have lots and lots of people who enjoy coming together and sing and maybe who haven't been fond of singing before. They've been told they can't sing or they are useless at singing. So we all get together and we make a wonderful noise when we're all together and we just get going and have great fun and have a good laugh. And so we've been sort of like keeping that simmering in the background for the past year but I'm also involved in other projects. I've mentioned the Parkinson's that I do Zooms for since the last year. Before that I was face to face, but I'm also getting more involved with more artistic and creative things through Marketplace. And I'm hoping to be part of something very, very exciting, which I don't think Fenland will ever recover from, or is ever going to see anything like it again! But I hope it comes along and I hope I'm going to be part of the soundscape for that.



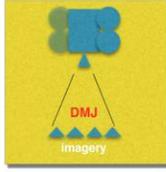
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My artistic influences, well it goes all the way back to my dad, pub-thumping on the piano. He couldn't read music, but he always belted out a good tune. And then my brother got into pop music at the time, coming up in the 70s. And I think the first thing I can remember is Blue Oyster Cult, so guitar music. Very much influenced through everything we did at school, so singing in the choirs at school. So some classical stuff, some secular stuff and all the way through the 70s, all that lovely glam rock. I personally love the songs of the American songbook, but more recently I've been getting into the stillness and quietness of things and I've been coming back around to classical music and really enjoying things like Do Not Be Afraid and stuff like that, which is quite a heavy thing, really, but it's a magnificent thing to listen to. So choral music a big, big influence with me, but I do love a good song. So as long as it's got a nice melody and fantastic words, then I'm into it. So Adele, and I'm a bit eclectic, really. I like Coldplay, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Mozart, Beethoven, you know what I mean? A bit of a mix, that's me.

DJ: Excellent. There's a few on my list on there as well. Michelle, little bit about yourself as well.

Michelle Brace: Yeah, my name is Michelle Brace. I would describe myself as a digital artist. Most of the work that I'm currently doing is digital, also a VJ. So that's kind of my hobby or my passion thing. I collaborate with friends and make visuals in live, in real time. So currently I'm working with a couple of groups in Ipswich. I've been working with adults to support their mental health and wellbeing, working via Zoom and again working visually, but doing all kinds of creative activities which result in some kind of visual output and then using those in a digital mix. So mixing together images and layering images and making something beautiful. But also I feel that the point of the sessions, one of the sessions is called Mindful Making, so the point of the sessions is really to get people into the creative zone. Immersed in it, and the theory being that while you're in that place, your worries, your anxieties, your thoughts about the future, the past, they melt away and you're in this lovely creative space where we're all working together, we're connected, and we're doing something creative. So it's much less about



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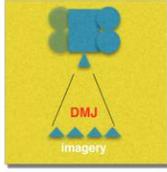
the end product and much more about the process and the experience. So that's what I've been involved with recently. So, yeah.

As well as digital artist, I will also describe myself as a creative producer of projects and events. Obviously, real world events have been much less, well, pretty much invisible over the last year. So making the best of that situation.

DJ: Who are your influences?

MB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, I thought about that. I mean, I think likewise I'm really influenced by, or I connect with popular culture, you know, the imagery of it and you know, the music. For instance, I've been following a collective of artists called Brainfeeder because they do a lot of broadcasting on Twitch and it's always visually really interesting. But also, I would say I was going to mention Imogen Heap because I really follow what she does. I think she's really one of those artists that's completely at the leading edge and she's always experimenting with technology and pushing it into new areas. I've seen some of her work in VR. She's at the moment working through this network called Mycelia, which is a worldwide thing to establish creative passports for artists. So that, I think, this kind of thinking is going to revolutionise the way we as artists do business. So it's going to be much more that we're in control of our creative outputs and are able to trade much more directly and, you know, much more valued as artists in our work. So, you know, I've been really following with great interest what she's been up to. And I also love, was hugely inspired by, her MiMU gloves. What it what it means is tech. She wears wearable technology, which enables her to move around the stage to perform in 3D space her music. So she put it that digital musicians are quite often very boring to watch. I mean, she said they're sitting at their laptops and could be writing emails, you know, there's nothing to see there, really. So she's turned it into a performative sort of three dimensional thing, and it's very expressive and beautiful. So I really love that.

DJ: It comes across as, when I first heard about you, quite separate disciplines. But listening to your backgrounds, there are quite a common set of threads between the two of you and certainly music and the use of music through mental health. That's



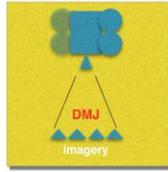
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something that you seem to both be involved, or part of your involvement with art has involved that kind of help and support. Do you want to talk a bit more about that, how you both work with them?

MB: I was going to say, I think my working life has always had a community focus, whether that's community development or music projects with young people, those kind of things. It feels like the responsibility of artists, in this present condition, it feels like there are such great needs in the community for connection, for support, for understanding between people. And if there are things that we can do to support mental health and wellbeing, then it feels like that's the space that artists can move into. It's almost like that's something we need to be doing, thinking about how we can apply our practise for the good of people and society.

SR: Yeah, I totally agree with that. But for me personally, I just know how music makes me feel. If I listen to certain pieces of music, I can be in floods and floods of tears. But I know that if I put something else on, like, Whole Lotta Rosie, AC/DC, I'll be – boom! It'll just give me so much energy and it'll just like - poof! My mood will spring back to life. I think the thing about music is that it is healing when you listen to it, if you can access it and listen to it. But actually doing it and being part of it, it puts a lot of people off because they can't play instruments. As I've said before with the choir, they think that they can't sing. And I just would like people to just go back and back and back and think about people who don't have access to technology or to instruments, and they managed to make the most fantastic sounds from their voices, from bits of wood or great big coconut husks that they found. And it just brings people together. And if you've ever, ever, ever had the pleasure of being surrounded right in the middle, I mean really close - so obviously can't be done at the moment - but just surrounded by voices all singing, you can actually feel the sound waves. It's a physical thing, you can feel it going through your body. And if you sing properly, if you watch an opera singer sing, they are using all of their body, all of their muscles, you know, the way they stand and hold you, you can see their lungs going in and out like this, sideways, like a bellows, and you don't actually realise what a physical thing it is. So it is so beneficial. And – and! - it can release all your endorphins that you like, that you get from chocolate and you still don't put on any



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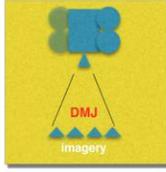
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calories! So what more ... chocolate without the calories?! It is really, really, really powerful thing. And I just wish that I could get across how I feel about it and how I know that it can be a benefit for mental health, and bringing people together. There is just nothing like it, for me.

MB: I think I when you were saying you don't necessarily need technology to be able to enjoy music and your voice, I think that's been my approach as well with the sessions I've been running, trying to minimise barriers to entry. So say, you know, if you've only got a pencil and a piece of paper, then that's fine. We can work with that. You know, maybe a pair of scissors would be useful. Just pointing out that we can be creative and expressive without having all of the latest tech gear. We can still make something. And I think that's what's really important.

SR: Yes, you can do it. But how much more would my experience be if I could access tech and things, the way that - I know there's a boy, well he seems like a boy, he only seems about ten, but I think he's probably about 19, something like that, bit older I don't even know if he's 20 yet, he could be! Jacob Collier. The looping pedals, the things that he can do. He's got MIDI files and all of these things and the sounds that he creates! I mean, he's also a very experienced player. He's a multi instrumentalist as well. So you can put everything down and layer it down and start and stop it when he wants, and change it, and all of these things. I'm thinking how fantastic would that be. In a way you don't really need to know about music just to make a sound. And I don't even think that - I know there are programmes that you don't even need to be able to read music or write music, that then you can write your music, it'll write it for you, so that then it can be passed on to other people to do with it what they want.

But there's just so many branches of it now. You've still got the country music, the folk music, they're still very traditional, and things like that. And all the different cultures, now that are within Fenland. I don't hear the folk songs, but I know that traditional folk songs and the Eastern Europeans, very, very, very strong culture there. But it hasn't come through into the mainstream yet here in Fenland. But there's so many. I remember I went to a wedding a few years back, a Scottish person married an Indian person. And



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so part of the reception was they had Highland bagpipers with the Indian Bhangra drums. My God! It was it was just like, wow! I was away! I didn't know whether

to turn on a light bulb or whether to dig the soil or whether to get out my kilt and, you know, do the Highland Fling! The marrying, there's just endless possibilities, which is still to be discovered and people whose minds will think creatively or outside the box will be able to marry all these together. And it's just a wonderful thing, music.

DJ: Yeah. You talk about the sound of music, I was up in Spalding a couple of years ago for the BBC Folk Festival Awards. A live broadcast from, well, this time it was from Spalding. It was all the folk music from Fenlands. It was really nice to see - surprisingly - young people who were actually on stage. It was about ten bands and they were all singing either Lincolnshire based Fen songs or further south into Cambridgeshire based Fen songs. So there's definitely, I say market, but there's definitely a vibe of Fen music and it is beginning to become more mainstream. And it's good that the BBC are sort of helping to promote that.

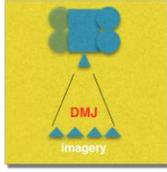
MB: I hear what you're saying, Sally, though, about the more diverse communities in the Fenlands and hearing those sounds. I think that will be really interesting to hear some of that coming through.

SR: Yeah, I would like to hear it. I really would. I think it's just a way to bring the communities together as well and to appreciate each other more.

MB: Exactly, that understanding cultures, I think that music's a really good way in, isn't it?

DJ: Yeah, well, let's just move away. We've talked about music from the minimalistic side of it. I know that, Michelle, you're quite heavily involved in sort of the tech side of it, with the VJing -

SR: Does VJ stand for?



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DJ: Well, I kind of got an idea, but do want to sort of go into a bit more detail?

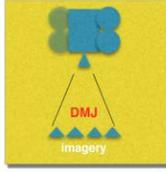
MB: Yeah, sure. I mean, it's something, I would say it's an art form that runs alongside DJing. So hence the name. It's like the visual equivalent of DJing, so you can perform live with visuals. That's essentially what it is. In terms of the relation to the technology, obviously you do need tech tools to do VJing and I use a particular programme called Resolume, which is an absolutely incredible tool and really opens up what is possible. There's so many variables within that, a bit like the equivalent of the loop pedal. You know, you can make all kinds of derivatives of that image and on and on it goes. But for me, the important thing is the content and the idea and the visual imagery that people can relate to, hopefully. So I think in my view, there's a really tech heavy end of it visually. But what I like and what I enjoy is, for instance, using nature as a source of content, or people, or dancing, or movement. I'm really into kind of textures and colours and making beautiful compositions that move. So that's how I've been using it. So it's like adapting a tool to express something, that's where my focus is. So even, you know, I'm interested in visual arts that are not just tech. So then it's the art and the meaning and the idea that carries forward, that is there to communicate with people. That's kind of what I'm trying to do. Where I'm trying to get to, anyway, with my work.

SR: Sounds amazing, to be able to do that. I mean, I didn't even probably... [laughs] Right outside my train of thought, that! Yeah, so taking the images and making them move. Wow. Yeah.

MB: I mean you probably have seen it. Like big, big gigs usually have a visual backdrop these days -

SR: Ah! Yeah, yeah -

MB: And so quite often it's very, you know, it might involve live cameras or it might involve, a band logo or something like that. And it might involve an artist who's mixing in images, telling a bit of a story that goes with the –



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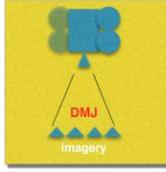
SR: Yes, I've seen it. But just to think, just to bring it... that to me is like separate, you know, it's something which is for big people, not for little people. I guess. Like what I would be. I would be a little personal at this, starting off. Wow.

DJ: Would I be right in saying that this was quite a big thing in the 90s, before the music videos came about. So a lot of the dance bands, I think, like MARRS and some, using an awful lot of visual represented imagery and patterns and things for when they were doing festivals and DJing and stuff, which then evolved obviously into the style of videos that we have now. Would that be right?

MB: Oh yeah, I think so. I think there was a lot of experimentation, wasn't there, with electronic music and visuals. That's completely right. And artists like Cold Cut are really known for actually evolving some of the technology to enable visual performance as well as, you know, electronic music performance. And they have evolved side by side, really. Yeah, they do go hand in hand, but I like thinking about it in other ways, you know, how else can we use this? How else might we be able to interact with it? How else might you be able to get involved with the visuals in some way. So they're the kind of things I'm looking at.

DJ: Are you using tech in any ways or are you still traditional?

SR: Quite... quite traditional. I'm not a tech phobic, but I'm not very, very au fait with it, if you know what I mean. I think it scares me a little bit. You know, just even thinking of using a little bit of a green screen behind us, you know, just putting something on that. The tech side of the music, though. I mean, obviously, we've been having to do things this last year through Zoom, trying to reach out to people through Zoom and it hasn't really worked for the choir. The March Can't Sing choir. I think that quite a few of them are of the older generation and so they, like me, are a little bit nervous about using tech and things. The Parkinson's groups, which I have done Zooms for, it's great to see everybody. We've had one recently and there was quite a few people who turned up. But of course I can't hear them. And so I can't - for me, I don't get any interaction, and that's a big part of things for me. And as a performer, singing and recording or doing a



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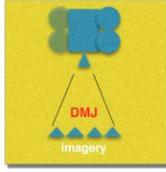
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live via the Internet, you're here. You're just standing there on your own. You don't really know if there's anybody paying any attention at the other end. And so I find it a little bit soul destroying. I know other people have really, really embraced it. And I've been part of a big collaboration in Peterborough and we've just done a big choir for a new production, which is coming out at the Lamphouse Theatre. So we've all recorded our parts and it's been put together. When you hear it and look at it, it looks wonderful. But when you're actually doing it at the time, it's a bit, 'ooh, I don't know how that was' or, you know, 'I think I could've done that a bit better' or whatever. So I've had quite mixed feelings. I mean, I know it's enabled choirs and people to stay reconnected in some way, but it's just not the same for me. It's just not the same being there and feeling it and doing it. You sort of, like, raise your game a bit when you're with other people, and you try that bit harder, I think, or you react to the next piece, the people who are around you. So it's it has been very strange. But I mean, I would just love to get MIDI files, and just do all the sounds altogether and reverse it and loop it and ... cor, the endless possibilities with that! Just let me out there! All I got to do is save my pennies!

[all laugh]

DJ: It does get expensive, doesn't it?

MB: You were saying, Sally, that you really value the feedback that you get when you're in the room with people and that you can respond and react to them in that way. But I was thinking that the tech, in some way – well, really more so the lockdown over the last year - in some ways, it's not changed my way of working. I'm still a freelance artist. I still work from home, from my shed, from my studio. But on the other hand, it has enabled some things like you were saying, you were you were able to work remotely and put together a piece of music, which in the end was a lovely thing. For me as well, there was a project which I've been thinking of for years, for a long time, thinking, yeah, it would be really good to do that. But in my mind, it was about going individually into people's homes and talking to them and capturing stories, and actually then through lockdown, suddenly we were all on Zoom, and it occurred to me that I could do that project much more easily. So a situation a bit like this, recording people in the room and their stories connected to particular objects, and that, you know, that's the particular piece of work that I did with Marketplace was around - we made a digital mantelpiece



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out of people's objects and the stories associated with them. And that was a really, really lovely thing.

SR: That sounds lovely.

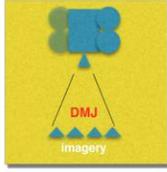
DJ: I have to interject and say that I was part of that.

MB: Yes, David was! And that was great. You know, it was a really nice way of telling quite a personal story, but through an object and maybe bringing a group of people a little bit closer together, enabling them to find out something about each other that they didn't previously know and, you know, just as a trigger for those conversations. So that for me was a big plus. And that project was realised, and not just, like, how do I do this? How do I actually find these people, or have these conversations? So yeah.

SR: It's been good that it's been able to keep people together really.

DJ: As much as we could carry on talking for hours and hours, and I think this probably would be, we may have to have another podcast later on. But just to wrap up the main things before we come to an end, we want to do a challenge. With each group of artists that we've had on the show so far, we've asked them to come up with a challenge to try and encourage the listeners to get creative and to get involved in some of the things that we're actually talking about. Sally, would you like to give us a challenge or something? You can inspire the listeners?

SR: Well, it's just a very, very simple thing. I'd just like you to go out somewhere quiet, if you can. I just want you to walk at your own pace, and I want you to try and connect with that pace and just think of little rhymes that you can talk, either in your head or out loud, as you're walking. Just to feel the rhythm of your feet and the rhythm of the music going through your mouth. And it'll just come like a little song, whatever you make up, it doesn't matter whether then you make up nonsense words, but just try and fit it in. You may find it, if you're walking at the right place, it'll slow your heartbeat, you'll be more aware of your breathing. It's just all part of being, a sort of, like a little musical process.



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And also just listening to what's going on, and the different pitches and the sounds that your feet are making and the teeth and your tongue and things like that. So it's just a little tiny weeny challenge. You don't have to do any music. You don't have to do any singing. Just be aware of what's going on and enjoy the rhythm of your life at that particular moment in time.

MB: Yeah, I thought I'd set a little digital challenge. So if you have a smartphone or, in your web browser, you can find an app called Photoshop Mix. And I thought it might be really nice to have a go at mixing a couple of different images. This is what I do in my practice as a VJ, with layers and textures and colours. So look for patterns and textures and look for something that catches your attention and take a photograph of it and have a go at putting those two photographs together. With an app like Photoshop Mix, it enables you to play with different blending tools between two images. It's quite easy to use and fun to explore. If you don't have access to something like that, then how about take a couple of pictures - print them out! - and then actually have a go at collaging them together. That's equally fun, I think. So, yeah. That would be my challenge. A bit of a collage mix, layering exercise.

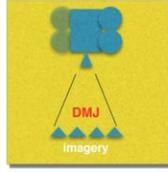
SR: That's good.

DJ: Excellent, something for everyone.

SR: Definitely!

DJ: The last bit is something to take away. We do it because obviously we're trying to encourage art in the Fenland and surrounding areas. Is there something that you can share with the listeners? Something that they can take away, some advice, an idea or inspiration where they can maybe start something they've never done before?

MB: Yeah, I mean, it's not really a specific thing. It's more of a kind of big thing, which is, I think through this pandemic, we've realised that life is short, you know? Do what you love. Do something that inspires or excites you and try and make time for that thing.



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Find a way to express yourself and communicate with your fellow humans. So whether that's through conversations or by making something, singing something, writing a little song or making some visual art, then, yeah, just do it. Don't hang around. Don't wait for tomorrow. Do that thing now. Do a little dance. Right now.

SR: What I'd like people to go back as far as they can remember to the pieces that they first remember, the pieces of music. It doesn't matter what it is. Just make sure that you've got them somewhere. I mean, my cassettes have gone, my records have gone. But now I'm re-finding them down on digital music, on digital platforms and just have a listen. And if they make you cry, just cry. Just go with it. And I'm sure the songs that you - maybe choose about half a dozen - and see what ranges of emotions they bring you. But don't forget them, because pieces of music that you remember are there for a reason. Just don't be afraid to re-listen to them all and make sure you've got them handy for when you need them.

DJ: Yes. There's definitely an association between music and memories. I guess you know, you play music and it will evoke a memory of a place or a person -

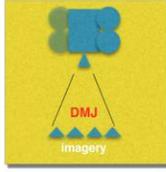
SR: A thing, yeah.

DJ: You never know what you're going to remember when you when you start listening to these pieces again.

SR: Definitely

MB: And as you say, it connects with emotion, doesn't it?

SR: I can remember when I was when I was a girl, we had a next door neighbour and she was quite old, lived by herself. Her husband had died. And I always used to be singing and playing music. And one day she came around with a five pound note, the proper ones, not the plastic ones. And she said, go and buy something. She said, go and buy some music. She said, I just love it, listening to the music, listening to you



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singing. So when I ever I play ELO, because I bought ELO, an LP with that money, that reminds me of her.

DJ: I mean, this is something that we could talk about for hours and you're both very, very passionate about what you do and you can see that and hear it. How passionate music is part of your lives. Unfortunately, we're going to have to draw this to a close. It's so sad. We may have to have another session, talking to the other podcasters. This is just not long enough to talk about the subject. And so maybe have a follow up in six months time, once everyone has returned back to some kind of normality and people are mixing again and going - and in your case - going back to actually having choirs and singing in groups of people, again, maybe have -

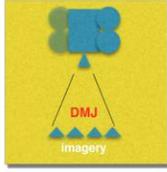
SR: I've got somebody to bring in now to put a good projection behind me!

DJ: You can bring people back in and then we can have another chat and just see how things have changed, how people have changed, and what sort of mental damage has been caused by the last twelve months of lockdown. And whether like you say, music has helped, is a big help in trying to get people on a mental road of recovery from all this. We have nods, so that's good! OK, well, thank you for joining us today.

Guests: You're welcome, it's been -

DJ: I will ask you to leave us some contacts, some links that people can find you at, so we can have that at the end. We'd like to thank our two guests, Sally Rose and Michelle Brace. Thank you to Marketplace for supporting the show. This is the last one of this current run, so I'm sure there will be another series at some point in the near future. And you'll hear about them in social media as well. So until then, take care and we'll see you soon. Thank you very much.

Guests: Thank you!



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Episode 4 – Sally Rose and Michelle Brace

June 2021

[🎵 MUSIC]

DJ: Thanks for joining me David Johnson and my guests today. The Art of Covid Chat podcast is a DMJ Imagery Production working with Fenland Films Initiative and commissioned by MarketPlace: A Creative People and Places project celebrating creative communities across Fenland and West Suffolk. Developed by Arts Council England and supported by National Lottery funding. For more details visit cppmarketplace.co.uk

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