

PHILIP GLASS: TAXI DRIVER

Produced by Paul Smith

A Just Radio production for BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service

TX: 18th August 2015 (R4), 4th November 2015 (World Service)

10 minute extract

Philip Glass

I was doing the kind of day labour that was very hard on my hands. I worked for a very good friend of mine who was Richard Serra, but that was very heavy work and we were working with lead and hot lead. I had learnt about that by working with a couple guys who had a plumbing outfit. But the trouble with this kind of work was the day of swinging wrenches around and then going home and playing the piano was hard. And finally I ended up with taxi driving. That was the last of the day jobs, because it was the easiest on my hands.

TRACK

Music in Twelve Parts

Philip Glass

I got to know the city very well. Within two or three weeks I could find my way around the city. We have five boroughs here. You could be in Queens or the Bronx or Brooklyn, Manhattan or Staten Island. Wherever I was I could find my way.

Taxi fx

Philip Glass

I enjoyed being in the city. Apart from the moments of terror. The city was a fantastic slice of life in any way you looked at it. Whether you're up in the Bronx or Bed Stuy in Brooklyn or Harlem. There were times you were driving around New York and you didn't know what city you were in. There were bonfires on the corner and people staying warm in the winter like that. And you say, 'where the heck am I? I could be anywhere.'

You go from being way up there in the Bronx. Half an hour later you're down in Midtown taking a lady to Lincoln Centre to go see an Opera.

However it was terrifying in other ways. It was very dangerous in those days. New York became dangerous when the cult of drugs arrived. Drugs brought with it all kinds of criminality and violence. It was a very violent and difficult place to be in.

When I was a student in New York, that must have been ten years before, there was very little drugs in New York and you could sleep in Central Park at night. At night! And now the park is closed at night.

Taxi fx fade

TRACK

How Now

Philip Glass

I didn't play in a concert hall until '74. I wasn't allowed to play in concert halls. I was playing amplified music and people just thought ... they were afraid the paint would peel off the walls when I turned up the volume and of course that never happened. It wasn't even that loud.

TRACK

Gradus

Jon Gibson

My name's Jon Gibson, I'm a composer performer and founding member of the Philip Glass Ensemble. We first started playing for art people in museums, galleries and our initial fans were artists. It took a while for the music world to catch up because I guess it was so different or something that they thought it was too naive or I don't know what.

Philip Glass

The first place I played was at a place called the Cinematheque which was named after of course the cinematheques in New York. Jonas Mekas was a filmmaker and he started this place, basically for underground and offbeat films and I met him at a party and he said 'What do you do?' I said 'I'm a composer.' I knew who he was. I said 'Can I do a concert at your place?' He said. 'Yes.' He didn't have any idea who I was. And he said

‘When would you like to do your concert?’ And I said ‘Well, what about may?’ and he said ‘Great.’

TRACK

Strung Out

Jon Gibson

The cinematheque was Philip’s coming out concert. There was Strung Out for solo violin.

TRACK

Piece In The Shape of A Square.

Jon Gibson

One called Piece In The Shape of a Square for two flutes that Philip and I perform. These were kind of solo pieces and duet pieces. Philip was working with Richard Serra the sculptor as an assistant and this was the only concert where he built these sculptural music stand pieces for the music.

Philip Glass

I showed up with a bunch of painters who helped me load in the equipment. We did pieces that were built around the idea of shapes.

Jon Gibson

Piece in the Shape of a Square was a square that had music attached to the inside of it and the outside of it, so there was inside performer and an outside performer. We’d start in the same place and then work our way around in opposite directions so we’d get back to the same places again.

Taxi fx

John Schaefer

In between these performances, Philip Glass was beginning to drive a taxi through New York.

Philip Glass

I would show up around three o’clock to get a car. Hopefully get out by four. I wanted to be in by one or two because the bars closed by three. That’s not a good time to be driving. People get in the car and then they don’t know where they’re going. Then they

forget they're in the car and they don't know whether they've paid you. So best to get back to the garage before two if you can. You take your hack licence and it was stacked by the other hack licences by the order that you came in supposedly but we always suspected that they shuffled them because we would see someone who came in after us going out before us. But I always got out.

TRACK

Music In Twelve Parts

Philip Glass

I'd come home, sort of 1-6 I'd work on music. In those days I was writing Einstein on the Beach, so I was writing music until about 6 in the morning. And then my kids, it was nearly time for them to go to school. I'd take them to school. Then I would go to sleep and I would sleep til around 3, then head over to the garage. I only had to do that 3 or 4 nights a week. 4 nights would be a lot because I could do it on 3 nights a week. It depended on whether or not I needed the cash. The nice thing about that job was that you had cash by the end of the day.

John Schaefer

By the time Philip Glass got here to New York, he was stepping into something that was a part of the artistic ferment of the city. You had a city that was on the downturn and people could get places to live quite cheaply so much of lower Manhattan became a haven for artists of all kinds and they were friends, they were colleagues, they created work together.

TRACK

Circular Song

Joan La Barbara

This is Joan La Barbara. I was a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble from 1974-76. I believe I was the first singer to work in the Ensemble.

I was doing work in the early 70s with Steve Reich. And it was at a gallery in Soho, someone pointed out Philip Glass to me and I went over and introduced myself to him. I said "I'm a singer and a composer, have you ever thought of using voice in your ensemble?" He said, "Well we're doing a concert over on Bleecker and Bowery this weekend, why don't you come over and listen?"

Philip Glass

We rehearsed once a week. And then on a Sunday afternoon we did a concert. There weren't a lot of people living in Soho in those days. That was originally a neighbourhood for people to make clothing. A lot of manufacturing was done there. Little by little artists began moving in.

Joan La Barbara

As I was walking across Bleecker Street, I recall thinking that things were getting darker and murkier and dirtier and when I finally got the building, I walked up what I remember to be about ten flights of stairs. Past a lot of barking guard dogs. Wire mesh cages over some of the doors with lots of locks on them. And when I got up to the floor where Philip's concert was taking place, everybody was sitting around on the floor, around the circle of musicians.

TRACK

Music In Twelve Parts

Philip Glass

My loft was about 75 by 50 feet so it was a good-sized place. And I had rugs on the floor. And by some accident of fate I found theatre seats that were uprooted and left on the street and I put them around the side of the walls so it was really like a little concert hall.

Joan La Barbara

I listened and after the concert I went up to Philip and said "Yeah I really like it." And he said "Great, well our trumpet player just left the group, so why don't you come in and sing the trumpet part?"

Jon Gibson

Philip's early period, it was very uncompromising music. It was tough and it was not taking any prisoners. Laurie Anderson calls her company Difficult Music. You could call it difficult music.

Joan La Barbara

I think what I found most attractive was the energy this relentless driving rhythm that formed the underpinning of the work. There was a kind of raucousness and roughness about it too. The sounds of the Farfisa organ are quite rough and the saxophones give that kind of funky quality to it.

New York in the 70s was gritty. You really made a commitment when you moved to New York. It was noisy. It was dirty. That was sort of the rhythm of the city. You learnt to walk down certain streets and not other streets and if you saw a group of characters congregating on one side of the street you moved to the other street and walked a little bit faster. The choices of instruments that Philip made I believe were really to reflect that kind of grittiness.