

# Who were the Harmonics?

1969: Buckminster Fuller poses his 40 Strategic Questions in *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* (1969).

**DM** writes *Personal Delivery* (1998). He sends copies to influential figures including **BD**, David Bowie and Ian Jack. **BD** (and DB) respond positively. **BD** writes two reviews, one of which compares the work to John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1847).

**DM** and **SW** collaborate on SW's security guard installation marking the division of Tate Gallery to Tate Modern and Tate Britain. *Contemporary Visual Art* (2000).

**DM** reflects on the **BD**'s comments when staying at Grizedale, close to Ruskin's home in the Lake District. *The Strangled Cry of the Writer-In-Residence* (published 2002, but written 2001). An advert at the start of this book mentions **DM**'s unpublished collaboration with **SW**, and an extended version of Stay Here and Make Art called The Strange Case of the Man who Burned a Million Quid (i.e. **BD**).

**DM** and **BD** collaborate on *Stay Here and Make Art* (2001).

**Key**  
**GW** = Gavin Wade  
**DM** = Duncan McLaren  
**SW** = Simon Wood  
**BD** = Bill Drummond

**DM** returns to Grizedale with **GW** in 2005, with their email exchange and writing leading to story *The Beast* in *upcycle this book* (2017). **GW** also includes his response to another of Buckminster Fuller's questions - *What is prosaic?* - in this volume.

**GW** draws up plans to answer Fuller's 40 Strategic Questions [www.strategicquestions.org.uk](http://www.strategicquestions.org.uk)

**GW** curates exhibition and catalogue *Strike* (2001), with artists and authors reflecting on an artist strike. **DM**, **BD** and **GW** all provide contributions independently. Another contributor to this volume, James Hyde, is mentioned in *What is Harmonic?*

**BD** writes *How to be an artist* (2002) which includes both his reviews of **DM**'s *Personal Delivery*.

**GW**, **DM**, **SW** and **BD** communicate by email to answer Fuller's question *What is Harmonic?* (2003) and record *This is Harmonic* (2003) for Sharjah Biennial, UAE.

**BD** contributes to a further Strategic Question – *What is Subjective?* (2006).

**BD** takes up residency at **GW**'s gallery Eastside Projects. **BD** publishes *The 25 Paintings*, which includes an interview by **GW** (2014).

**DM** writes blog drawing parallels between **BD** and artist On Kawara (June 2023), and shares it with the other Harmonics.

**BD** publishes new cheaper edition of *How to be an artist*, this time calling it \$20,000 (2010), repeating section on **DM**'s *Personal Delivery*.

Figure and pamphlet produced by Graham Mackenzie (@gmacscotland), to mark the twentieth anniversary of the last recorded output of The Harmonics (an email sent 5 June 2003).

Thanks to **Duncan McLaren** for comments on earlier drafts.

## Who were The Harmonics?

In the 1960s an architect called Buckminster Fuller posed 40 Strategic Questions. One of these questions was “What is Harmonic?” (question 32).

In the late 1990s, **Bill Drummond** (writer, artist and sometime musician) set out to write and publish 40 pamphlets. One of these was meant to be called *Who are The Harmonics?* (Penkiln Burn pamphlet 27; 2003), but it was probably never published. This pamphlet seeks to fill that gap.

In the early years of this millennium, artist and curator **Gavin Wade** laid out plans to answer Buckminster Fuller’s 40 questions. Early 2003 he approached a couple of likely partners – writer and artist **Duncan McLaren**, and **Bill Drummond** – to answer the question “What is Harmonic?”. **Duncan** introduced artist **Simon Wood** to the group. These four writers/artists became The Harmonics.

One output from The Harmonics’ efforts was a box containing a printout of emails from 18 February to 27 March 2003 (*What is Harmonic?* published by **Bill Drummond**’s Penkiln Burn in 2003). This was produced for an exhibit by **Gavin Wade** at the 6<sup>th</sup> Sharjah Biennale, held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at the start of the second Gulf War. The emails, which are colour coded for each contributor as shown in this pamphlet, describe the conception and recording of a 7” record called *This is Harmonic*, which was produced for the Biennale but was not played (you will need to read the emails to find out why). There was also a file of subsequent emails (part 2; 27 March to 5 June 2003) available electronically on request.

On 4 May 2023 Jethro Binks posted a question on a Facebook page for fans of The KLF (a band from the late 1980s and early 1990s that consisted of **Bill Drummond** and Jimmy Cauty). Jethro wrote: ‘I don’t suppose anyone knows the whereabouts of The Harmonics and specifically one of the 5 copies of “This Is Harmonic” PBR003, per PB [Penkiln Burn] poster 51 and PB pamphlet 27 (which I have not read).’ Jethro and fellow KLF archivists Leslie Smith, Nick Gilmour and I explored further and provided some answers.

In 2023 there is little evidence of The Harmonics’ output in circulation. There are pictures on the internet of a Penkiln Burn poster (Poster 51), a few blurry pages from the box shared on a website about Fuller’s questions, a photo of the exhibit on the Biennale website, and a reported play of the 7” record on Resonance FM shortly after it was produced. **Bill Drummond** has pulled the plug on his Penkiln Burn website, so we cannot read more about the poster or see precisely when it was published.

I contacted **Duncan McLaren** on 7 May 2023 to find out more about The Harmonics, and visited him on 21 May 2023 to discuss and read the contents of the box, and listen to the record. I also contacted the other Harmonics and asked them some questions, with varied success.

**Duncan** had a spare copy of the box, and sent me a printout of part 2 a few days after my visit. The 141 pages of emails explore a range of topics, from serious (conflict in the middle east) to philosophical (music versus art) and nonsense (fiddling round with HTML format in emails). It is clear from the emails that there was debate about how many copies of the box and 7” existed even in 2003. The communication between The Harmonics was frequently enlightening, largely harmonious, but at key points erupted into disharmony, with parallels drawn with the fragmentation and breakup of other bands of four white men.

**Duncan** also kindly played me his copy of the 7” record. It is either a version of a Call to Prayer to play in UAE (an idea introduced by **Duncan** early in the emails), akin to the muezzin call from a mosque. Or it can be seen as a prototype of **Bill Drummond**’s choir The17, with three of The Harmonics and a session musician (Kev Reverb) singing the notes C and G for over 8 minutes. It is probably both.

One reason for exploring The Harmonics’ work further was the long and close relationship between the group of artists and the detailed documentation that already existed about their creative processes. Their developing relationship can be pieced together through their published (and unpublished) collaborations before and

after The Harmonics. A summary is shown overleaf. The unedited emails from *What is Harmonic?* give an unparalleled fly-on-the-wall view of these four artists at work together.

Twenty years on, there are rumours of a stash of copies of *What is Harmonic?* that could be put on sale at their original price. At least two copies of the record still exist, but are not for sale.

The discussions and discoveries that have unfolded since Jethro Binks asked his question a month ago have been fascinating to aficionados of Penkiln Burn, The KLF and potentially to a wider audience.

There will be some who wonder whether it is worth excavating an obscure episode from 20 years ago. In April 2023 **Bill Drummond** produced a poster titled *Fuck Social Media* (self-explanatory), which is also reproduced in *The Edinburgh Address* (Penkiln Burn pamphlet 34). In contrast, our explorations over the past month show an (albeit quite unusual) positive example of social media in action. **Bill** is also well known to advise against collecting and paying over the odds for his writing and art. His focus is on experience and the present. I would argue, however, that documenting, discussing and analysing the outputs of writers and artists is important in understanding and respecting their work.

In the spirit of The Harmonics, and their virtual collaboration, I am proud of the role that a group of archivists have played – via social media and in the real world – in unearthing the outputs of The Harmonics, putting their work in context, and hopefully allowing others to find out more.

I am delighted, following this work, that The Harmonics have been in touch with each other. As a direct output of this renewed interest in The Harmonics I recommend **Duncan McLaren**’s new blog about the parallels between **Bill Drummond** and artist On Kawara ([onkawara.co.uk/styled-114/](https://onkawara.co.uk/styled-114/)), which **Bill**, **Gavin Wade** and **Simon Wood** have all read and enjoyed.

Graham Mackenzie (@gmacscotland), 5 June 2023