The following interview with
TERRY REILY
was conducted on behalf of the Library of Congress
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This interview was conducted by Jennie Cataldo of Accompany Studios

Jennie Cataldo: To start, can I just have you introduce yourself, tell us your name and your occupation?

Terry Riley: I'm Terry Riley, and I'm a musician, composer and performer.

JC: And what is your association with "In C"?

TR: I'm the composer of "In C." I wrote it in 1964.

JC: Can we can we go back to those days? Tell me where you were in your life in 1964.

TR: I had just returned--from spending two years in Europe--to San Francisco, which was kind of my base before I left for Europe. And I think I had been back a couple of months when the idea of "In C" hit.

JC: And tell me about that moment, I understand that "In C" found you.

TR: Yeah. I played piano at the Gold Street Saloon in San Francisco before I went to Europe, and then I got my old job back when I came back to San Francisco. And I used to ride to work on the bus from Potrero Hill to North Beach. And one night that happened to me, I was on the bus and I just heard "In C" kind of coming into my consciousness. And I got quite excited about it. And of course I had to play a six hour shift before I could go home and start writing it down. But, you know, that's kind of the story. It did find me. Maybe the only piece I've ever written that is like that.

JC: I find that this piece was unique compared to what else you were working on. I understand you were doing some experiments with tapes. Can you tell me a little bit about that and how maybe some of that came into play with your idea for "In C"?

TR: Well, before I [went] to Europe in 1962, I was starting to experiment with tape loops. And I was working with Anna Halprin's dance company, and I was making pieces for their dance, basically built out of tape loops, using the voices of the dancers, but also some random sounds

that were in her studio. And when I was in Europe, I got the opportunity to make music for Ken Dewey's play "The Gift." And we hired Chet Baker's quartet to do the music. And you know, I discussed the idea with Chet Baker of how about I just record everybody, and then reconstruct your solos and everything and make tape loops and everything out of it, which he agreed to do. He agreed to give me his raw material. And so that was kind of a precursor to "In C" in a way because I was starting to see the possibilities of instrumental music in its relationship to tape loops and repetition. So it gave me a kind of an idea how that would sound. But it wasn't kind of an intellectual process composing "In C," it was just a bolt out of the blue.

JC: And what was attractive to you at the time with repetition?

TR: It's very absorbing to the mind and spirit when you get into a… listening to a loop and all of the landscape that a loop will present to you because you hear it over and over again, you start noticing details each time it repeats that maybe you didn't hear the first time around. And you know, it's the closest thing that music comes to a meditative state for me, was using repetition. And, of course, age old cultures have used repetition for this very purpose. So it didn't start with me for sure, but it's something that I've always found I return to all the time, in my music, is that to build up this kind of, maybe even call it a groove, you know, something that people can fall into. And then they start losing a sense of themselves because of the groove they're in.

JC: So when you had the idea for "In C," luckily you still remembered it when you got home and put it down on a piece of paper. What then did you have to do to sort of make the piece come alive?

TR: Well, it kind of sat around for a few months. You know, I didn't think about it too much. I was actually trying to get the Monterey Jazz Festival interested in a piece I was writing just before "In C." And so then I was thinking, "Well, you know, they actually, I couldn't create any interest for them commissioning me to do a jazz piece." So the San Francisco Tape Music Center had formed while I was gone. And those were old friends of mine, Ramon Sender, Mortin Subotnick and Pauline Oliveros. So they invited me to come up and have a one-man show of all the music I'd been doing in the past few years. So besides "In C," I'd composed quite a few tape music pieces, just *musique concrete*. You know, a lot of pieces were kind of like a precursor of the sampling that was going to happen later. So, along with "In C," we programed these other pieces too. And also, we played "Music From 'The Gift,'" the recordings I brought back from Europe with Chet Baker's group. So that was a chance to premiere it. And I had met Steve Reich, who was living in San Francisco at that time. And I met him and along with John Gibson and some other people, we rounded up a kind of ragtag band of people with mixed backgrounds--jazz musicians, early music musicians, classical musicians, folk musicians--and started rehearsing "In C" for this concert.

JC: Amazing! And I know there are some instructions that come along with playing "In C." Can you tell us a little bit about just the concept of how the piece is designed?

TR: The page itself has 53 cells, you know, 53 cells that are repeating patterns. And that was the only thing I had at that time. I hadn't written any instructions. I didn't really know how to rehearse it or how it would come together. I knew kind of like it should sound. But knowing how it should sound and knowing how to do it and to direct other musicians is, you know, a different story. So we had some rehearsals fortunately beforehand and kind of worked through some of the ensemble problems of creating a piece like this. And one of the things we found was that in order for the piece to be coherent, people had to really listen to each other and stay within, say, three or four cells of each other so that you couldn't go too far ahead in the piece or lag too far behind. So all these 53 cells, they are in sequence. And you have to play them in sequence, but nothing else is determined, like how long you repeat your pattern or how you integrate it dynamically, how you enter and how you leave. That depends on the sensitivity of the performer.

And we had to really work hard to be able to not get lost. So Steve Reich came up with the idea of putting a pulse in it so that we could stay together. And that helped a lot because at the beginning we weren't all even playing in the same tempo. We were kind of scattered around. So once we got organized and into a beat, so to speak, and started not getting too far away from each other as far as the cells were concerned, it started taking shape.

JC: And what were those experiences like to perform it when it was first coming together in the form that we sort of know "In C" as now?

TR: It was really exhilarating and, it's exhilarating even now to play "In C" in a way because it's the group energy that's really important here. And nobody can predict how that group energy is going to coalesce. We just started out and it depends on everybody's listening really hard and relating to each other. So that all was in the first performance too. Of course, it didn't have the finesse and later performances got because it took several years for people really to understand how to perform "In C." Even the performances I was in. And I'd had experience performing in San Francisco and then in New York. I moved to New York after that and we performed it in New York. But you know, it was a long time to kind of develop into the kind of piece it is today. And of course the kind of piece it is today, I even encourage people to find new creative ways to do it because it needs to stay alive. So people have made "In C" operas, there's been jazz "In C," there's been rock "In C's", and there's been the African "In C," there's been the Chinese "In C," with just traditional Chinese instruments. So the piece has proven that it really is a world music. It belongs to the world music category because you can play it with any instruments in any kind of ensemble.

JC: I find that that theme of inclusivity is really important to the concept of "In C" in that, you know, there are no rules about what kind of instrument you enter with or what level of playing you are. You can be an amateur and still join in. Was that just sort of part of your ethos?

TR: You know, I'm basically a hippie from the '60s, and I like the idea of people having freedom to make their own decisions. And I didn't want to have a conductor or anybody waving a stick at them. I wanted everything to come from the inside of their musical understanding and where they were in space and time and make their own decisions. And I felt that that brought people closer together. And it really does. People, after they've played "In C," they look around, they smile at each other or even while they're playing it. They're feeling a sense of community. I think it was one of the first pieces written that had that aspect to it, that really took into account the community and making people feel connected.

JC: Right. That's great. And with those first performances, I understand, that there was also a lot of freedom in where the audience would sit, for example, or how the band was displayed.

TR: Well, you know, the Tape Music Center was also of this philosophy like with Ramon Sender and Morton and Pauline. They also had a sense of community there, but it was mainly in the sense of new music community, music that nobody else wanted to hear, basically. You know, they were creating the music that they liked. And there were a lot of young people that were coming up there. But they were all kinds of counterculture people from San Francisco that would end up drifting into the Tape Music Center events. So when I thought about the concert, I thought, let's take away also the audience/stage relationship so that when people come in, they have to also make a decision where they're going to sit. So I put all the folding chairs back against the back wall. So when people came in, they could organize themselves any way they wanted to in the room. So people were sitting in clusters. And I think that also gave them a feeling of relaxation, like you're at home listening to music.

JC: So I want to talk about the recording of the LP. The LP recording is what is going to be preserved by the Library of Congress. And so when you were in New York and you had the opportunity to record "In C" for an LP, tell me about that. I mean, every experience I'm sure of performing "In C" up to that point had been different. So did it seem like there was a lot of pressure to-- this is going to be a permanent recording of only one version, but there really are so many different ways to play it.

TR: Yeah, it was important. The first statement to come out. Of course we all were aware of that. I think fortunately, I was up in Buffalo, New York, at SUNY University as a Creative Associate working with a bunch of other musicians, including John Hassell and Stuart Dempster and Yuji Takahashi. And Lukas Foss was kind of the director of us all, although we hardly ever saw him. So we had a chance to kind of hang out a lot. And when we got the opportunity, John McClure was the executive producer at CBS. And John was an amazing visionary. You know, he produced all the Stravinsky and the Harry Partch and so much music, so much early music that exists on vinyl wouldn't have happened without John McClure. And I think that somehow he [led me to]David Behrman. David was working as a producer there too. We got the opportunity, invited to record "In C" for CBS. And so having this group from Buffalo was kind of all ready; I didn't have to look for players. We were all there. And we could also rehearse a little bit in Buffalo before we came down in New York. So actually it was a very fortuitous situation for the first recording.

JC: And what are some of the limitations when you try to put a performance of "In C" onto an LP?

TR: Well, one of the limitations was money, because, you know, we had I think, 11 people in the group and I really heard a bigger ensemble. So I said, "We need to overdub at least two or three layers to get the kind of textures I'm looking for." So they gave us three hours in the studio total. And the piece fills up an LP. We ended up doing three takes. And we had to use everything we recorded. So that was definitely a limitation. We didn't have the option to go insert little parts that we didn't think were working or anything. We just had to accept what the three takes were going to be like. And you know, at that time, I was an unknown composer. They weren't going to spend any money on me.

JC: There's also the idea that an LP can only hold so much time of a recording. And, you know, the performances before that had been quite longer than an LP.

TR: Yeah. And we also had to, because this takes up both sides of an LP, we had to break the piece in the middle. And fortunately we had some really clever engineers at CBS who did a really-- I don't know if you have heard the ending of the first and the beginning of the second part, but they did this kind of like thing where it gets sucked up into space, you know, at the end of the first part and then comes back down from space for second part and [then] takes off again. I thought that was a really, really great solution to the LP division, the division of the piece. And it gives an extra quality. And there really were some great engineers there which were fun to work with.

JC: Was that unusual at the time, for this type of recording, for you to do the overdubs?

TR: Well, this was my first recording except for a solo LP, so I didn't have any experience with doing it. But obviously that was the only option we had to increase the size of the ensemble.

JC: That's great. And on the actual record sleeve, you have printed the score. Tell me why. What was the decision in publishing that? Because the sheet music isn't usually published with a record.

TR: Well, I think one of the main decisions was we could do it, it was only one page of music. And because it was an unusual looking score, that's another reason. And the other reason I thought is that it would help people learn to play the piece. And the early performances of "In C" were all almost photocopies from that score or handwritten copies that somebody borrowed the record and wrote them out. So it was a good way to kind of disseminate "In C's" profile, you know, so people can see how it worked.

JC: And I love the liner note essay on the back from Paul Williams of "Crawdaddy" magazine. What was the strategy of having him write on the back?

TR: I guess John McClure had used him for other projects and thought he would be connected more to the alternative culture world. They saw this as not being mainstream classical music. And so I think that was the-- rather than get a "New York Times" music critic to write the notes --somebody like Paul Williams would appeal more to people who are reading the "Village Voice" and alternative press.

JC: It seems like there was such an openness at the time of people discovering new music and trying things that weren't of a certain genre. Can you tell me a little bit about that and how that may have influenced "In C" and the scene?

TR: I don't know if there was, you know, in terms of like a high level record company, there wasn't really much interest. It was hard to get a label interested in new music composers. So people were either doing their own pressings or connecting with alternative labels that would take a chance on this music. So having a label like CBS doing it was, again, John McClure's powers as an executive in the company, [he] convinced everybody to do it. So, yeah, it wasn't easy to get recordings out in those days.

JC: And how do you see "In C" continuing to evolve in the future?

TR: What future? Oh boy, I hope the world evolves in the future! Well, there's always a certain segment of the music community that wants to do this kind of thing. And I think that it hasn't diminished over the years. I mean, gosh, we're talking 1964, now we're 2022. I never imagined people would be playing it now when I wrote it. I mean, that's a long shelf life. So at least for the immediate future it looks like it's still gaining momentum. And there are "In C" festivals, annual festivals of "In C," there's all this activity around it right now. So it's only increasing at this point. But who knows? Who knows what new technologies will arrive, where the public's interest will go with music? Nobody can predict that, so I'm happy it's lasted this long.

JC: Do you think there's a wrong way to play "In C"?

TR: Yes. I think if you're not paying attention or listening, that's definitely the wrong way. Or if you're thinking it's an opportunity to solo over everybody. The way "In C" works is its integrated parts. And that's why people have to listen. Two people make a composite, a musical image. Three people make another composite image. And so the wrong way to play is to really not be present while you're in the group. And not have the courage to enter into the stream of the music. Some people are a little shy. That's wrong. And even if you're wrong, you should. You should try to, you know, try to keep moving the piece forward with your own offering, with the thing you're doing.

JC: Yes, I do love the concept of it being a group and everyone in the group is going for the same thing, but everyone also gets to be an individual at the same time.

TR: Yeah. And at certain times, certain parts will kind of come forward, other parts recede. So the ideal for "In C" is that people are listening so well that they're creating a very imaginative

orchestration that I wouldn't even be able to write. And the other thing with "In C," you couldn't write it down. You could write something down like it, but what happens in the performances of "In C" is always amazing. There are always amazing moments that the group energy coalesces into some ecstatic mood and everybody's carried away.

JC: Yes, I love that.

TR: Yeah, me too.

JC: And what is it like to play "In C" as a player? I mean, you mentioned some of the decisions you have to make, but it almost sounds like you are reading and writing at the same time.

TR: Yes. Well, of course, you don't have to do a lot of reading because you're repeating a pattern for a long time. So once you play, you can actually not look at the music. You can kind of sense what the people are [doing] around you. My own personal experience in the ensemble is that usually there's a few people I'm sitting close to that, every once in a while, we'll get into a little jam together, you know, and we'll have our two patterns like really cooking together. That's the really fun part of playing "In C" is that, maybe it's not the same person every time, it's somebody else around you or even somebody across the room if you hear what they're doing and they can hear what you're doing. And you'll make a composite pattern out of the two things, two patterns you're doing. So it's really kind of searching for a place to relate.

JC: That's an important lesson.

TR: So, yeah, it's important also. I always tell people laying [it] out is as important as playing in "In C." Listen until you find a place to make a statement yourself, or a place to relate to, something else is going on.

JC: That must make for such a more exciting experience to play than, you know, something that is all pre-written and there's a conductor leading you.

TR: Yeah. I mean, I've written that kind of music too, but I actually as a performer myself, I don't like to have to, in fact it's impossible for me as a performer to play something the same way every time. I just can't do it. Something in me rebels at that. So I always have to veer off some way into a different direction. So "In C" is, you know, even though there's certain parameters that always have to be maintained to make it "In C," you have a lot of freedom to do it differently each time.

JC: That's great. Well, is there anything else about "In C" that you want to tell me that I didn't ask you about?

TR: I can't think of any else. It's only three letters, so… Maybe that's a good thing to say is that I think the title was-- I don't know where the title, how the title came about. How I thought of that. But it was perfect for a piece that's, you know, basically centers around C major. And instead of calling [it]"Walruses at Twilight" or something, just calling it "In C." I think also that added to the popularity of the piece, it's easy-to-remember the title.

JC: Yeah, and I've heard some musicians talk about the key of C as being the key that you learn music on, sort of childlike even. Do you have any thoughts about the key of C like that?

TR: Well, it was interesting that, when I went to India under study Indian classical music with Pandit Pran Nath, he was singing in the key of C. You know, I performed with him for 26 years

and we always tuned the tamburas to C. I don't know if that particular frequency or that particular Hertz has some cosmic meaning or not, but it is something that we always return to. And there's an optimistic quality about C major that doesn't exist in E-flat major or A-flat major. It's in C major. It's a kind of a bright, childlike innocence. And I think that, as you say, kids learn to play easily white keys, you know, “in C.” So I think what people like is it makes them feel-- it takes a lot of pressure out of their life. It's just this innocent little place.