Visions of Hildegard toured in our very first season in 1995

As Horse + Bamboo ventured out on its first shows, in Rossendale, in 1978 I was in the process of learning to crawl, walk, speak, make noise, baby stuff, important stuff.

As Spot On was birthed, I was a teenager in Newcastle; A Levels and 80s nights, and I was about to leave the band that was a key part of my childhood. When I was 11, my primary school teacher bought a set of steel pans, and the 10th Avenue Band began. For 8 years with them, I played in London, Paris, Holland, at incredible, well-funded festivals with huge dinners in school mess halls, and sneaky underage glasses of Breton cider. All incredible, formative experiences, not least as I was a pretty poor musician.

In September 2025, I went to Honk! Bradford as part of City of Culture 2025, and there was Ken Patterson, the same primary school teacher, still playing, along with many other people I played with and other bands I was around all that time ago. I was reminded how familiar Horse + Bamboo felt when I joined in 2007. The images of street theatre and processional performance, brass and drums, stirred good memories.

Honk! is an American festival started in Massachusetts 20 years ago by John Bell and Trudi Cohen, who learned their trade with Bread and Puppet, a company that is a clear inspiration to Horse + Bamboo and others who have toured with Spot On over the years. The Bradford event was the first in the UK, but there is hope that it's the first of many. In Massachusetts, it is titled 'a festival of activist street bands'. The Bradford iteration didn't use that title. Activist is becoming a difficult word in a climate of anti-protest legislation and rising fascism.

Soon after Spot On started, Horse + Bamboo stopped the horse-drawn touring from which it drew its name. By 1999, the traffic had become too dangerous and too heavy to allow the ambling life that had been the company's core practice. This way of touring took them to the Outer Hebrides, Spain, Dewsbury and many other places over more than a decade. The caravan of horses, vehicles and artists arriving in town to set up camp was part of everyday life for the company.

In 2025, one of our key productions is our summer procession. The costs, associated risks and practicalities of traffic management still play their role in shaping our work. Processions have become a key focus as we develop a Centre for Processional Culture in the UK, a central point for research and practice in all forms of processions - from making and music to sports, faith, trade, and protest. As the world in which we exist becomes increasingly divisive, racist, pressured and difficult, I increasingly feel the need for art to be loud, visible, radical, welcoming and accessible, beyond Equality and Diversity policies.

Visions of Hildegard 1995

Processions seem familiar to everyone; most people have some sense of what you mean by that word. Processions are a long standing Lancashire practice – our Waterfoot Wakes procession and Preston's Encounter Festival leading to the Guild in 2032, processions of Preston North End and Blackburn Rovers as they initiated the football league, Saddleworth Whit Friday Brass Band Contests, a colourful array of carnivals and local field days, many of which will start from the church halls that host Spot On shows. In our present society of deep division, we need some common ground. For us, for now, processions are where we are pitching our tent.

We approach our own anniversary celebration of 50th years in 2028, and we focus on Rossendale nowadays, doing what we can with limited finances to improve life for residents in the neighbourhood, to be present and useful in our town of Waterfoot. We believe everyone is creative and declare this in our company values. This means creativity in all its forms, including but beyond theatre, and so, as was always the case, we embrace music, poetry, sharing food and other practices as core parts of our existence.

Visions of Hildegard, the show that Spot On took to Whalley and Kirkham all those years ago, was about a German nun, Hildegard of Bingen, an incredible composer, poet and botanist who embraced creativity not as singular practices but as a way to face the world.

"We cannot live in a world interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a hope. Part of the terror is to take back our listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light"
Hildegard of Bingen

We hope that bringing people into the streets in celebration, or into our home at Horse and Bamboo, makes space for neighbours to listen and share their voices, building their own interpretations of the world around them. That's what we hope we are today.

Life story of a visionary

YOU have the chance to share in the life story of one of the most celebrated women ever at Whalley Village Hall, tonight.

Abbess Hildegard of Bingen — a visionary, naturalist, playwright, poetess and composer — is considered one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages.

Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company will include maskwork, shadow puppetry and live music, in an exciting and innovative exposition of her life.

The event starts at 7-30 p.m. and further details and bookings are available from Heather Fox, at the Platform Gallery, Clitheroe (01200 443071), or Mrs Grace Gemmell on 01254 823402.

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SPOT ON