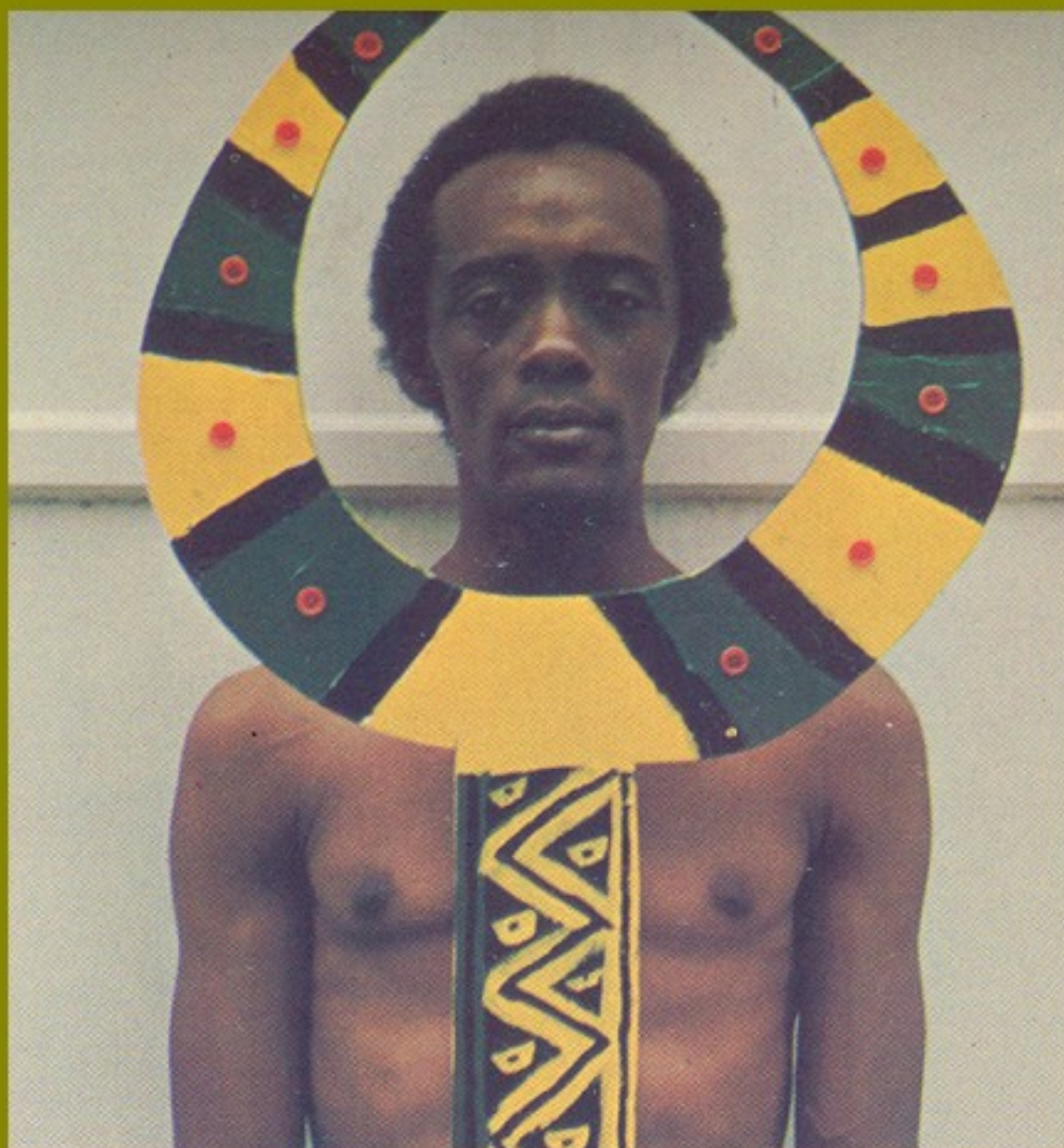


# eartrip

Issue 6 - March 2011



**MARION BROWN DON CHERRY**  
**PETER BRÖTZMANN KEITH ROWE**  
**REVIEWS ARTICLES CRITICISM**

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# EDITORIAL: On 'Free Time'

By David Grundy

As 'eartrip' lumbers into another issue, as words translate into pixels, into pdfs – more data in the internet's all-out assault on our critical capacities – the question I keep coming back to is 'why all this? what need for all this? what is this 'criticism' (good) for?' Stitching together an interview, an 'article', a 'features' section – and, above all, filling up space with the checklist evaluation of records sent, in hope and good faith, by artists from different backgrounds, locations, musical placements; deciding to allocate 500 words, or 200, or a few thousand; making judgements in one sitting, or two, or three, typing while the music plays, eating and digesting simultaneously. That's 'what' – but why? and what for? In what critical economy, what arena of reception, does this take place? Why the haste (or lack of)? What 'job' does this all do?

The writing takes place in the contributors' 'free time' – and yet, even here, there is never enough time. Why, sure, there's time to check the watch, to answer emails or the phone, to tap and type and sort – the organiser, the virtual filo-fax, the ticking clock that governs, that apportion, that parcels out what time we're allowed. You are 'free' to do this, but what toll does the strict semblance of routine – or even the frantic, 'got no time,' multi-tasking rush that might seem its opposite – take? What *is* this 'free time'? Time for free improvisation, time for one more tune; or, as at the 2010 Freedom of the City festival, *no time* for another Wadada Leo Smith piece – health and safety regulations lead to organisational twitchiness, no matter that Wadada might have more to say (and no matter that he's shown us just how much he has to say in previous performances during the festival) – no, the only time we have is that time Wadada & Co. acknowledge, by turning the constraint into a kind of musical/theatrical joke, a full-ensemble 'half-second' blast of sound (perhaps shorter than Napalm Death's 'You Suffer'), an 'encore' that's over almost before it's begun; the stutter, the stammer, the little uncontrolled shriek before one bites one tongue and stiffens one's upper lip, returns to smooth and controlled speech, parcelled within the limits assigned by someone (or something) outside one, outside one's control. Outside even such extreme instances, a virtue must be made of the constraints in which musicians find themselves. Thus, the 'free time' of music might variously be, or include: music that 'makes time stand still'[\[1\]](#), that attempts to quieten the ever-present metronome, ticking away in the background (the nightmare exploited, perhaps even transcended, in Ligeti's 'Poeme Symphonique' for 100 metronomes); music that messes with one's perception of time, in a mad, packed rush of multiple and simultaneous events; music that's 'gone, in the air', that leaves only rumours, whispers, echoes of its presence once it's been played.[\[2\]](#)

Here one must contrast the notion of 'free' or leisure time which sprung up since the nineteenth century as something available to all, rather than simply to the 'leisured classes' – a time which, as Adorno notes, is not really free at all – with a time that might genuinely be free; where free time means focus, commitment, desire: in fact, the moment of becoming fully human. So often, economic imperatives (the need to 'earn a living', as if one's right to live were something that one had to pay one's way towards) mean that the practice of experimental music is reduced to a 'mere leisure time activity; it is judged that

Cecil Taylor makes better use of his time by washing dishes<sup>[3]</sup> than by striving and seeking to create something of true worth (i.e. not measurable by the standards of capital). One is allowed to – indeed, encouraged to – think of one’s whole life as geared towards work, towards labour.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, in Adorno’s words, “Free time does not merely stand in opposition to labour. In a system where full employment itself has become the ideal, free time is nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour.”<sup>[5]</sup> One is expected to fill one’s ‘free time’ with shallow activities – the passive consumption of going shopping or watching TV, where one is bombarded with advertisements – and, even if one does something other than this, the implication is that one is simply practicing a ‘hobby’, ‘messing around’. The simultaneous denial of the right – for example – to make art as a full-time occupation (rather than sitting in an office and chatting about the latest episode of *The X Factor*) – and belittlement as ‘mere leisure time diversions’ of any activities which do not exist outside the remits of one’s ‘job’ or ‘career’, ensures that the arrangement of society which requires and trains people to sell their labour in order to live remains accepted as ‘common sense’, as ‘how things are’. One may be detached from one’s job, in that one must subordinate one’s true desires, needs, wants, &c., to the demands of nine-to-five – must, effectively, stop living as a complete person for eight hours a day – but one is also detached from one’s ‘free time’, too exhausted to put one’s whole self into activities which require and test that self with a rigorous and draining exactitude, and always mindful that ‘society’ considers such activities mere frivolities anyway.

What is needed, then – and what is so very hard to achieve – is a situation where music and life meld, mesh, fuse together – are not parcelled off into boxes marked ‘work’, ‘leisure’, ‘hobby’, ‘career’.<sup>[6]</sup> One thinks back to Marx’s argument against the division of labour:

“For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.” (Marx, *The German Ideology*)

Of course, this is not achievable in society as it is organised now, and any attempt to put it into practice straight-away would be doomed to failure. Instead (as Adorno suggests<sup>[7]</sup>) one may have to substitute it for its opposite: total dedication to a particular sphere of activity, to a particular set of formal concerns (for example, the task of writing verse, or of writing or making music). Yet this sometimes seems almost as impossible to implement as Marx’s proposed polymathic non-specialization – and when it *can* be implemented, too often it means a ‘retreat’ into the academy, and a kind of seclusion from actively making music in the social world.

Such organisational problems are not mere technicalities, but lie at the very root of creation; thus, we must consider how the ‘freedom’ of free time might

relate to the 'freedom' of free jazz. There are dangers here – for one, the term 'free jazz' implies that 'jazz' on its own is inherently 'un-free'. As the late Bill Dixon noted in an interview for BBC Radio 3, one must regard the term as a non-sequitur, a journalist's trick, an inadequacy – and one that might operate in a similar way to the notion of 'free time': a limiting factor disguised as a space for potential and freedom.<sup>[8]</sup> In addition, this music – one should really say, *these musics*, for they cannot be generalised, shivering under one umbrella – is often praised for its 'free' collective, perhaps utopian, potentials. But this tends to remain at a metaphorical level: what is lost is a close consideration of the practical circumstances in which the music is created, out of which it emerges, and upon which, perhaps, it could also have some impact.<sup>[9]</sup> This means looking at the actual organisation of this music in terms, not only of musical interaction, but of the group as a whole – interactions, exchanges, disagreements, comings-together, factions, strategies for 'staying together', the difficulties of organising concerts and securing funding. George Lewis' superb book-length study of the AACM and Benjamin Looker's guide to the BAG are full of points of contention and inspiration with regards to this, and hopefully mark a growing rise in scholarship that goes beyond the usual anecdotalism through which 'the story of jazz' is told.<sup>[10]</sup> To reiterate: music cannot be isolated from its socio-political context – we know this – and might even be able to take an active role, however 'minor' this might seem 'in the larger scheme of things'. So then, we need to ask, once more: what is the social context of this music? Who receives it, how, and why? What problems might arise, and need to be addressed here? One could consider, for example, balances and imbalances of gender balance, race, sexuality – not necessarily because of a desire to impose an artificial model where everybody is incredibly diverse yet gets along just the same – but as a process of asking why certain paradigms are or are not in place.

Given such concerns, this latest issue of 'eartrip' contains a feature on freely improvising collectives in the UK. (Perhaps in future editions, some work can be done on collectives in the rest of Europe, in America and in Asia – if anyone is interested in contributing something along those lines, please do get in touch.) There have been historical studies of how central such associations were in the formation of free improvisation – for instance, Derek Bailey's Company Weeks, or the range of activities centred around the Little Theatre Club – though usually within the context of something else (something biographical, reducing things once more to the individual, or a larger 'scene' – 'the London scene', 'the north', 'the south', 'European Free Improvisation', 'eai' – which it is easier to talk about in the abstract). Yet what is the reality now, in the world of festivals, international tours, government grants, performance public and private? To provide some insight into these questions, there follows what might best be described as a series of snapshots, personal and partial portraits of freely improvising collectives in Oxford & Bristol.

Anyhow: until next time, whenever that may be...

## Notes

[1] Or in some way 'bends' time, as in the following: "and very often i leave the other world behind for vast swathes of time ...and of course we do something which is bending time because so often so much time goes past and however arduous it may be it doesn't really seem that the time could have been a whole hour for me. and i like that. it's a time of slowing down and away from so much

happening at once.”

[2] Most obviously, one might think of the transition from Beat- to Pulse-playing (à la Sunny Murray) that marked the advent of ‘free jazz’ – the freeing up of rhythm to match the harmonic innovations of be-bop et al.

[3] “I was washing dishes in a restaurant at the same time I was being written about in places like *Down Beat*.” Gene Santoro, ‘Cecil Taylor: An American Romantic.’ *Down Beat* 57, no. 6 (June 1990): 16-18

[4] See Nina Power, ‘One Dimensional Woman’ (Zero Books, 2010), especially pp.23-26.

[5] Theodor Adorno, ‘Free Time’ in ‘The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture’ (ed. J.M. Bernstein). p.194 (Routledge, 2003 (2001))

[6] The situation is similar with regards to poetry: “If one is leading a movement against People with Money, they don’t pay you for it (which, in the era of neoliberalism, means you don’t get paid) – until you get coopted or sell out, which requires you to work at it long enough and successfully enough (w/o money) to have something to sell. You have to eke out a living doing something tedious and exhausting, and then, “after hours,” do your organizing work (and there actually are people who do this). This is why poets generally aren’t organizers. They spend “after hours” writing poems and arguing with one another. Academics have to grade papers, prep class, do committee work, get published, etc.; we call this “burrowing from within.”” (Joseph Harrington, ‘Rethinking (Reality-Checking) Poetics’ (blogpost at <http://josephharrington.blogspot.com/2010/06/rethinking-reality-checking-poetics.html>)

[7] See Simon Jarvis, ‘Adorno: A Critical Introduction’ (Routledge, 1998), pp.125-6, and Adorno, ‘Art, Memory of Suffering, in Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), ‘Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader’ (Stanford University Press, 2003), p.332.

[8] “The commonplace genre-tag “free-”, equally deceptive whether seeking to predicate verse or jazz, suffices to indicate not so much what is “irregular” in such practices as the breaking point where critical attention throws in its hat and attempts to conceal the fact of doing so by hanging a flatteringly bankrupt and all-but-irremovable medallion about its subject’s neck.” (Mike Wallace-Hadrill, *Some Thoughts in the Vicinity of the Poetry of Sean Bonney* (Pamphlet distributed at a Reading by Sean Bonney and Simon Jarvis as part of the Cambridge Reading Series (Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio, Cambridge University, 18th June 2010)).

[9] Some of the problems arising from a too-easily drawn critical correlation between ‘free’ music and communitarian politics (or even a kind of utopian, quasi-religious mysticism) are suggested in blogposts at <http://spring-any-day-now.blogspot.com/2010/06/peter-brotzmann-chicago-tentet-live-in.html> and <http://spring-any-day-now.blogspot.com/2010/09/brotzmann-tentet-revisited.html>.

[10] George E. Lewis, ‘A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music’ (University of Chicago Press Press, 20008), Benjamin E. Looker, ‘“Point from which creation begins”: The Black Artists’ Group of St. Louis’ (University of Missouri Press, 2004). In a similar vein, see Kwasi Konadu, ‘A View from The East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City’ (Syracuse University Press, 2009) (Expanded Second Edition of ‘Truth crushed to the earth will rise again!: The East Organization and the principles and practice of Black nationalist development’ (Africa World Press, 2005)

### **Contact (Snail Mail):**

17 Avenue Road  
Old Town  
Swindon  
Wiltshire  
SN1 4BZ

**Contact (Email): [dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk)**

# Minutes Lost

## A Meet Of The Oxford Improvisers

*(with apologies to John Milton)*

Raised to the vantage of the heights of trees,  
Upon the mezzanine white as the silent score,  
Each bedecked in finery of battle -  
And yet their instruments unclasped and set aside -  
Bold extemporisers sat arrayed,  
Their dreadful purpose congress not of sounds  
But monthly words. Mango Doppelgänger hums first,  
Tongue serenely slugged in his lip's den,  
Hair draped nattily on peacock's thread.

My council, noble imps, is workshops grand,  
Wishful artistry and artless wish.

Resonance of silence preceding consequence  
Is all his answer. 'Neath the curved box  
Crouches Pip John, that merry man who makes  
Keys spherical and bold through delicate  
Suspension and sometimes brutal fist.

Later he shall try to climb inside  
And thrust a trembling thistle made of keys  
Beneath the gleaming wires. But now Morton  
Protein pipes up the proletariat.

Munching a bean, the yogic trot bemoans  
The savage acronyms that plague our art.

Baron Forcalquier then plants a scream.

'Twixt carven legs and plaster moulds he glides  
And with calm voice of subterranean pause  
His sonorous objection thus unfolds,

Men and women both that blow and scrape,  
Hark to my song of gnomonic sense! If we  
Impose our mark on those who grant us grace,  
And pay not heed to their own subtle song,  
We risk eclipse of all we strive to make

Light of, and heavy burden may be forced  
On all we do.

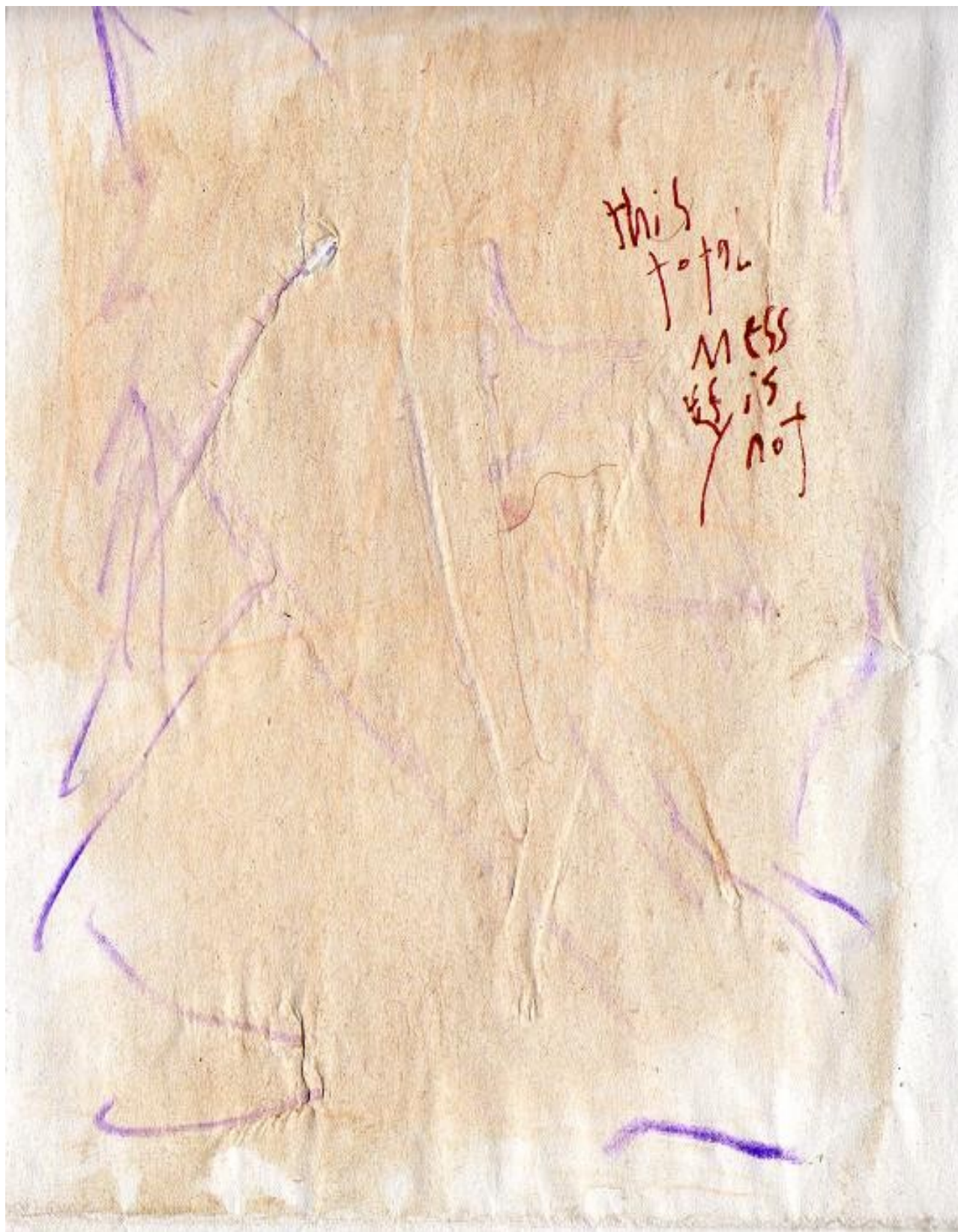
At which, for all to see  
Doctor Whip leans out his tree.  
Workhorse of the sweaty joint, his calloused  
Mitts clutch vainly at his neck. He speaks,  
Impatient with procedure's dearth of slack.  
What's the quite is my point?, he wants to know,  
Whereupon the Daily Renal lets a peep  
Squeeze out from underneath the fretted bed.  
Oh Doctor Spectre! your hollowed body  
Is ever more loquacious than thy tongue,  
Opines Cuss Russet, 'fore he sets a loop  
That disappears among foam-covered bars.  
Mitchell Cleaver first consults his tilted  
Desk, then spits his tongue through plastic cable.  
Friends! We would be best firmly to fix our  
Gaze on that by which we most would benefit.  
Concrete gain is better far than future's pride.  
Hunched amongst metallic button bowls,  
Cinqua Toes – turtle-snail of spiral junk –  
Is silent. This silence marks, if not assent,  
Then exhaustion's threshold. Upon this point  
Jeweller Teaess quietly thrums her viol  
And Porter Tinker prepares himself to leave.  
Then Peas Effigy, Justice Flush and Palle Von Founder  
Raise their joyous noise to eclipse the stars.  
Dervish Solomon ploughs his speed with Rafter Wrekin.  
Jarvis Mourner, Tyler Gnomerock and the  
Jolly cheeks of Derek Gouge with brassy relish  
Do entwine their melody. At last Punk Mélange  
Raises high a final chord and most, in gratitude,  
Repair to the Mephistopheles and Whippet.



# BRISTOL IMPROVISERS COLLECTIVE (BIC)

## Handwritten Reminiscence

by Mark Whiteford



next part

SPENCE: Com

date: Im

Feb 24. My dad had died. I ~~was~~ was playing soprano for the first time.

In 1984 three free improvising friends (Paul Reid, Adjoa Anon: now a tv star on *Who?*) set up the Bristol Improvisers Collective. We were into notions of freedom (a very popular 20th century obsession & anarchy revolution + of course the heroic (male modernist) quest). I was tired of picking up my saxophone only to practise or rehearse getting things 'right' or perform "correctly" a series of orchestrated + repetitive feats. I wanted to be inside music/sound/freedom + to play. What I didn't see then was how unpractised + uninformed I was. I now believe one can't get into any kind of freedom without some thinking + theory because the pressing down upon us by the hegemony isn't gonna be relieved without us knowing what we're doing + what's been done in us + around upon us (Sorry to idealise a simple fantasy of discrete + binary self/otherness.)

So yes, where was I? Bie. The miners strike was still on, we were not yet living in the soulless tomb of post Thatcher/Harantino cynicism + materialism. We believed the revolution was inevitable. (well, I did.) There'd been the Bristol Musicians Co-operative, which I'd encountered during my punk rock days + which, along with punk rock + the beatniks convinced me that free improvisation was the only worthwhile musical activity in town. The Co-operative was dead, its members falling into jazz world music + making money to support the other way of life. So we made some posters with print stick collage felt tips + photocopies + hired the City Council's social club for one night per month.

What I wanted (I speak only for me. I can't remember how collectively held these notions were. I was a somewhat forceful pusher of my ideas + had a habit of believing we were all saying what I was saying. Maybe we were? I doubt it) was to set up a relatively open space where free improvisation (as I understood it) would

take place. The venue had a stage, so true  
to tradition this where we put an amp +  
decided the music would take place whilst  
an "audience" would inhabit the lower  
deck passive + consuming. My main concern  
was to ensure free improv took place.  
I felt that this could be achieved by  
stopping people from doing certain things  
(ie setting up a beat/rhythm following some  
notion of progression: chords melody peaks/  
troughs) (actually I L.e we'd not spotted  
how peaks + troughs were a progression  
preordained then) Now I realise there were  
a few others of w/ outside the Act of  
Love Trio, as we had a few "plants"  
available who we made sure were  
ready to pounce into any grouping that  
threatened to congeal into jazz or  
jamming activity. There were a hand full  
of "rules" (yes the revolution would  
have to be organised / orchestrated or  
we would at least have to have some  
working definitions of free improv or we'd  
fall into the hegemony of other musics.

these are the rules I remember

- ① anyone can get on stage at the beginning of a piece:
  - ② no one can ~~debar~~ bar others from joining them at this point
  - ③ once you begin no one can join you
  - ④ remember to reach a conclusion so that others can play after you.
- the hidden rules were

- ① members of the Cognescenti would not + signal certain experienced improvisors to get on stage if a large group of non-improvisors took to the stage. (we had one particular weapon in our armoury, a very loud very free almost oblivious to all other pressures outside his own cathartic alto playing) he was from the musicians' Co-op. we had a few of those with us.)
- ② at least one of the Cognescenti would always be on stage to lead / suggest / cajole / destroy - if necessary - into free improv.

③ the Congresenti would burst into  
applause at any opportunity if the  
people on stage were descending into  
the death march ~~through~~ aka "a jam":

Reasons for these rules were:

①+② to create an atmosphere of  
actual pieces being performed + to  
keep any pre-formed groupings  
occurring - which would usually result  
in a jam or even a thinly disguised  
song being performed.

③ to keep at bay the tendency for a  
never-ending jam session to ensue  
by more + more musicians seeping  
onto stage ad-infinitum.

①②③ to kill the jam + to bring some  
notion of structure + expertise into  
the proceedings.

(I am a believer in the naive improviser  
and/or the non-musician in improv but  
I feel free improv is extremely unlikely  
to occur without some pedagogical  
process taking place. I actually

have more faith in a non-musician  
Successfully free improvising naively than  
a trained practised instrumentalist. The  
western musical hegemony won't be destroyed  
within musicians that easily!

## Two Voices from the BIC

### Transcription of 'Interview'

David Grundy /// Mark Whiteford /// Graham MacKeachan  
25.01.11 /// The Arts House Café, Stokes Croft, Bristol



**DG:** OK, it's recording.

**MW:** Well, the first thing to say is, sorry we're a bit late. You caught us out there.  
[Puts on bandana]

**GM:** You look like fucking Axl Rose now...Axl Rose, whoever he is.

**MW:** I don't care, I just want to be warm – it's fucking freezing here.

**DG:** So this is going to be the official? / unofficial? history of the BIC.

**MW:** It's how I remember it.

**GM:** It'll be a history.

**DG:** So there were two different Bristol collectives?



**MW:** There was the Bristol Musicians' Co-Op in the '70s/ early '80s. I went to one of their gigs. That's what turned me on to free improv in the first place. But by the time I got into free improv they had folded.

**DG:** Which was...?

**MW:** Well the BIC started, I reckon about '84.

**DG:** When did the co-op fold?

**GM:** They were still doing stuff in about '83, '84, during the last couple of years at Hope Chapel. That was Bob Helson and Mark Langford and Will Menter. They also were still quite active doing gigs in places like Montpelier Hotel. Will Menter had his sewer-pipe percussion and woodblocks, when he was building woodblocks. Bob Helson and Mark Langford used to have a duo, Fender Rhodes electric piano and bass clarinet [Langford], and drums [Helson].

**MW:** Bob Helson became the free/ modern jazz drummer of choice in Bristol – he started really becoming the white Rashied Ali of Bristol.

**DG:** Did you have visiting musicians from America?

**MW:** Well, the co-op put on Leo Smith. And one of the Menter brothers got an arts council grant of some kind to go to Chicago.

**DG:** Oh yeah, there's that review of the concert Leo Smith did in Bristol [with Bob Helson].<sup>[1]</sup>

**MW:** Yeah, that's by Will Menter, and he does a Marxian analysis of the difference between Bob Helson's background and Leo Smith's background.

**DG:** White working class and black working class.

**MW:** Yeah. To me, they'd all gone into playing jazz/ African music by the time I got into...

**DG:** Like African pop, world music, rather than little instruments?

**MW:** No, little instruments. The same Menter got another grant to go to Zimbabwe and study mbiras.

**GM:** They had their heads screwed on, them lads, come on. They got grants!

**DG:** So what happened? How did it fold?

**GM:** We were completely outside of that.

**MW:** So we weren't really involved with that. But what we did see was them doing jazz gigs. There was a very good, if you like, vibrant local jazz club, called the Avon Gorge Hotel, and they had already moved, like so many collectives in my opinion, from collective activity towards gigs. So they were all doing jazz gigs, and to my mind there was no collective activity happening any more.

**DG:** Was there any crossover between the co-op and the BIC?

**MW:** There was a slight crossover. There was John Boulding, Roger Skerman, Paul Shorehouse. And there was that one night where a bass player and saxophone player turned up to the BIC and did a jazz set; bless 'em, that was the one time that ex co-op jazz people came to the BIC.

**DG:** You were all less jazz-oriented...

**GM:** Well, they were a different generation to us.

**DG:** You were more punk?

**GM:** Yeah.

**DG:** Were you both in punk bands?

**GM:** I wasn't. But we were coming immediately after those punk bands, and that idea of learning to play your instrument as you go along.

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[1] 'Notes on Leo Smith and Bob Helson Arising from a Concert' by Will Menter (first published in the collection "Co-operative Music" by Bristol Musicians' Co-operative, 1979. Now available online at <http://www.neufportes.net/leobob.htm>)

**DG:** So it's the punk ethos applied to free improv, rather than actually playing punk?

**GM:** Yeah. I remember we – I – saw them [co-op musicians] as hippies. They would wear maroon clothes and sandals and have long hair and beards, these older people...

**DG:** So it was sort of hippies vs punks?

**GM:** ...at my age, when I was 22 or something, we'd walk into their things and it would be like, yeah, hippies vs punks, in a sense – because that's what it looked like – older blokes with bare feet clapping and shouting and stuff, you know.

**DG:** So you were consciously – did you have a programme when you started? Had you heard about the AACM? Because there's been all that scholarship now with the George E. Lewis book, etc, but that's only recent – back then, was it less known about?

**GM:** I think we knew a lot about that stuff years before we tried to play it. I found out by mail-order records from Glasgow when I was living up in Cumberland in the '70s, when I was at school. I think the only books were Valerie Wilmer, 'As Serious as Your Life', which came out in '76 or '77, and apart from that you just had to read the backs of records, in those days. The only other books were Frank Kofsky ['Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music'] and AB Spellman ['Four Lives in the Bebop Business'], but that was very current in the '70s, when we were getting interested in it.

**MW:** Yeah, we were coming out of Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, AACM...

**DG:** Were you consciously trying to play like them?

**GM:** I couldn't even play *rock* properly...people were showing me where to put my fingers on the bass guitar – it was that real punk thing of, let's have a band and then learn to play.

**DG:** I guess that's a generational thing, because maybe the older generation were more virtuosic jazz players?

**MW:** No, because there was a tradition within British or European free improv of the non-musician.

**GM:** Can I contest that and ask for an example, because I thought it was the other way round...All those people who, in my mind, were responsible for starting the whole British free improvisation thing – John Stevens and Trevor Watts and people like that – were all in the air force bands, and you had to be at an accepted level of musicianship to qualify for those bands. Derek Bailey was a session musician – all those lot could play correctly, and they were jettisoning all the baggage and all the language, all the cultural references...

**MW:** I think there were people – I've got this belief that there were non-musicians, and that there was a slight trend at one point towards playing an instrument that wasn't your instrument, an instrument that you didn't know how to play.

**GM:** I mean, yeah, there was the Scratch Orchestra and Cornelius Cardew and all that stuff, but that was coming more from the classical side – that's how people from art backgrounds, like Brian Eno, came into improvised music.

**DG:** So I guess you've got the jazz side, which is virtuosic, people who play well – cutting contests and all that stuff...

**GM:** It's a weird thing, jazz in this country, isn't it, because it's an adopted culture that's been crystallised as a set of rules – this is correct jazz and this is incorrect jazz – but it's an appropriation from another culture, so in this country it's always been a bizarre thing, a bit like English blues – there's something kind of peculiar about it, second-hand. And I think, in a sense, improvised music let it become local music, like folk music, so that you were making your sounds – or,

let's say, we were making our sounds, to bring it back to what we were doing – we were learning together to make our sounds, and we were also, I think, consciously, trying not to emulate styles that people played in. So we were trying not to play riffs – you wouldn't dare play something off a record that you'd heard and tried to learn – you had to make it up, and make it up in your own localised language, you know? Make a vocabulary out of what you've got, basically – which I think is what was important about that collective; stepping away and making our own collective as a response to not feeling we could be involved in the other, existing collective...

**MW:** It did come from punk – it was that idea that you don't have to play an instrument, but if the motivation's there...For me, there was politics and the music came after that...

**DG:** But you weren't trying to make propaganda music, like Cornelius Cardew's Peoples' Liberation group.<sup>[2]</sup>

**GM:** No, we'd never heard of that stuff at the time.

**DG:** You weren't trying to educate the masses...

**GM:** No, well, I didn't know anything about politics at the time. We came from opposite things – you [MW] came from a Marxist/ Communist/ Maoist background, and I came from rural, conservative, small-village parochialism...

**DG:** So you were basically apolitical?

**GM:** Well, romantically or nostalgically political in the sense that you could identify with black American jazz and that kind of stuff, but in terms of real lived life, the early '80s was more about waking up to the fucking mess that the world was in. Going into music, there was no political impetus in making sounds, but making sounds frees up your mind to think about things in different ways, and you can't help but have some kind of consciousness of the reality that those sounds are happening in.

**DG:** It's the kind of social side of the collective...

**MW:** And also just on a very mundane level, you think, 'well, why am I doing this, and why are so few other people doing this?' – and then you also became aware of, 'what's the pressure on me to not do what I'm doing' – the personal is political. But for me it was the other way round, because I was into the politics first and then I discovered, with the black power movement in America, that, oh my god, there's this music as well – there's a music that goes with it.

**DG (to GM):** Whereas for you, it was the other way round. I guess you can't speak for others, but what were other people's positions in relation to this?

**GM:** I can't even speak for myself...Well, for instance, even the idea of a collective I didn't think of as being a political thing up front, because – and here is another observation: it didn't really seem to be a collective or anything; ideologically, it was just a bunch of mates setting up their own world where they could do what they want. You're delineating a space where you can do what you want to in it – you're setting up an autonomous zone that you can do your shit in. That's what we were doing – we didn't sit around saying, let's have a collective...

**DG:** You weren't sitting around, debating dialectics...

**GM:** No, because we didn't have that vocabulary.

**MW:** It was called a collective just because it was a group activity. But there were outsiders, although it was a group of friends.

**GM:** I contest the collectivity of it insofar as it was a name for the thing, but it was you [MW], Paul Reid, Adjoa [Andoh], me, who organised when we were going to meet the next week and so forth, and it was a core of organisation, but if we

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[2] Peoples' Liberation Music (PLM): see <http://www.musicnow.co.uk/plm/index.html>

were all out of town, that wouldn't happen – if those four people were out of town, those meetings wouldn't take place.

**DG:** Was it every week?

**MW:** It was every fortnight.

**DG:** Did you have a particular venue?

**MW:** Yup, council social club.

**DG:** And they just let you have it for free?

**MW:** Yeah. I think it was subsidised anyway, in those days.

**DG:** What did they think of you using a council-type space?

**MW:** They were great. There was a bar, there was someone working behind the bar, and to this day, I can't remember that person going 'what the fuck is all this shit?' I was a very self-conscious person – I still am, I suppose – and I have no memory of ever wondering 'what's that barman thinking?' To this day I still don't know his name.

There was a stage. This is just a little story really, but the first one we ever did, there was this guy sitting off, at the other end of the bar, in a donkey jacket – and I thought, 'oh fuck, it's a council worker, he's just come to have a pint after work, and here he is stuck in all this noise'. And at some point – anyone could go on stage at the beginning of each piece – he gets up, and lo and behold, he's got a guitar, which I haven't spotted, plugs it into the amp, and it's flippin' Paul Shorehouse, who was quite an involved member of the co-op. He was playing it really, he just sat there drinking his beer and reading his paper...

**GM:** It was like Field of Dreams – "if you build it, they will come"...Having created that little space, in that council social club, people came out of the woodwork: a lot of outsiders, a lot of young students. In those days, all it was was some flyers in record shops, libraries; we photocopied flyers and that was it. We put some caveat there – 'no jazz', or something – just to make sure it wasn't a jam session.

**MW:** A lot of us were very anti-the Bristol jazz scene – well, I was, I felt it had sold its soul.

**DG:** What had it done wrong?

**MW:** To my mind it had got into emulating a kind of thing that wasn't born of our lives and wasn't born of our environment.

**GM:** Not that it's not good, within that idiom – there's a lot of good there...

**MW:** We used to call them 'The Dick Emery Quartet',<sup>[3]</sup> because as far as we were concerned they were impersonating other people, like they were impersonating John Coltrane; there were a couple of saxophonists, tenor saxophonists in Bristol at that point who were just very much doing that thing – it still goes on – basically, the Coltrane thing. And, for me, I wasn't very impressed that they'd moved away from collective free improvisation into jazz gig performance.

I mean, to be fair, I must emphasize, that walking in to that musicians co-op gig, not knowing anything about what I was about to experience, completely turned my life around; I would not have the rich and wonderful life that I have now if I hadn't walked into that gig. It was like Alice in Wonderland, I dropped through

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[3] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/dickemeryshow/>

this hole, and I just went, ‘What the fuck is this? Are these people playing together, or are they just making noises and ignoring each other?’ It was radical. I’d listened to punk rock, I’d listened to the Pop Group, I’d listened to the Sex Pistols, and I’d been told they were radical, but I suddenly thought, ‘no, *this* is something else.’ I didn’t know *what* it was, but I wasn’t discounting of it – I had a faith, I thought, ‘this is worth something, this represents a lot of my thinking and feeling at this moment’, although I didn’t connect with them [the co-op musicians] on a personal level – maybe I didn’t know how to introduce myself; I felt, ‘I’ve dropped through another world, and I didn’t have the language to approach those people’. So I went back to my punk band, but very quickly started to think, ‘what the hell are we doing? all we’re doing is rehearsing songs and performing them’, and I didn’t want to do that any more.

**GM:** I was thinking about that trajectory away from that, which seems to be pretty standard: there’s a lot of experimental stuff and a lot of talk about collectivity in collectives – including the old musicians collective in its first, ‘heroic phase’, as they say – but then there’s a trajectory away from actually collectivity towards a sort of cloud of individualism, and the trajectory also seems musical, in that things become more and more idiomatic, or styles crystallise as each trajectory shifts away from the collective centre. So what you were seeing with the old Bristol musicians’ co-op was people shifting into jazz things here, and this duo here, and this electric band here. The same with the London Musicians’ Collective after it was initially set up – you have a very brief phase where it could be considered collective, and then beyond that, things organise themselves around a tiny nucleus of people who are prepared to fill in the forms and do the administration for that, and it fragments to the extent that we’ve got this project going on here, and this project going on here, and person x forms a kind of jazz group and there’s less and less interactivity between the different spokes of the wheel – that’s what happens, it fragments, and trajectories diverge. So the collective thing, I think, is only ever nominal, apart from a very, very brief flowering. At the moment of inception, the idea of collectivity is at its most potent, and whether it’s human nature or social conditions in this mindset, this European mindset, this culture, I don’t know how far collectivity actually works – it seems to have this half-life where it’s constantly, constantly falling apart; people who are prepared to organise become the inner circle, and we all float around the edges of that and further away from that. The only thing that keeps any collective together is that there are benefits from having the name of something being a collective which a fragmented bunch of individuals control – the use value of the name of it being a collective is stronger than the collective feeling of individuals within it; it gives it clout. It’s an organisational thing, it replicates all other hierarchical organisations.

**DG:** You can say, ‘I work with a collective’, rather than, ‘with a bunch of mates’...

**MW:** I’ve done that, I’ve put it on my CV...

**GM:** Although ‘collective’ these days, it’s a dirty word.

**MW:** What you’ve got to bear in mind is, collectives need maintaining. When I’m doing stuff in Bristol that’s basically consensus based – that stuff, it doesn’t just happen by accident, you’ve got to focus on it. So at a meeting about, ‘shall we use this hall or use that hall?’, someone else has to also be in charge of maintaining collectivity – what’s that word – consensus...

**GM:** ‘Manufacturing consensus...’

**MW:** In non-hierarchical programmes, someone has to stay on top of consensus.

**GM:** That's the inherent flaw in the idea of consensus.

**MW:** Yeah. But the thing that really throws the consensus thing off is the western mind, the western need to achieve something; there comes a point when they go, 'listen, consensus is fine, but we've been here three hours already and we do need to work out how we're gonna trash the cops at G20, so let's just crack on'. So there's this crucial point where there's another factor which becomes more important, gets prioritised over and above, the idea of maintaining collectivity.

**DG:** But is there much point in maintaining collectivity if you don't get anything done?

**MW:** Yes, in order to maintain and get *collectivity* done. And to make sure that you stop *achieving* things, because I think achieving things is to the detriment of our lives, to the detriment of *doing* things...I think that's where it goes wrong; when they think, hang on, I've got to 'achieve' something now.

**DG:** So you have the collective start-off without expectations, and then you think – 'hang on a minute, we could achieve something here; oh look, we could get an arts council grant, and have a gig here, and play with this famous person here' – and that's where the problem starts...

**GM:** All those hooks get into your flesh...

**MW:** It's ego and the outside world. And coming back to technical ability, I think one thing that happens a lot – I think it happened to the Art Ensemble – I know I've got it – is that you're being a free improvising musician, but if you're playing in front of other people, you think, 'yeah, but they're going to think I don't really know how to play the saxophone.'

**DG:** As if it matters.

**MW:** As if it matters. And somewhere in my mind, in my ego, it does matter. Even with my fine avant-garde, outsider status, still, when I go to Safehouse in Brighton and someone gets their soprano out and plays it properly, I think, 'maybe I just need to prove that I can play this thing.' A lot of musicians have that – Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, The Art Ensemble of Chicago – there was that constant thing, 'oh, they can't really play, and the only reason they're playing that music like that is because they can't play.' And for me, listening to the Art Ensemble, there was a point where I fell out of love with them, because they did fall foul of that: they seemed to be playing a lot more jazzily, with long saxophone solos, etc.

**DG:** You think they were doing that because people were criticizing them – wasn't that more paying tribute to an African-American tradition?

**MW:** Who knows? But they started becoming way less tinkly, less spacey. Everything they started to do – a big contingent of it was that they were keeping beats – they were doing stuff that showed they could keep a beat, that they could do blah and do blah. And it's interesting that all the stuff that didn't prove anything, like playing the toys, that didn't prove technical ability, was gone by the '80s.

**DG:** By way of contrast, what I find interesting about The Revolutionary Ensemble was that it was that a lot of what it was playing was very technically good – it wasn't straight-ahead rhythms, but it was very intricate, they could play the hell out of their instruments – but then they would turn the radio on or go up to the microphone and start whistling, so it was integrated.

**DG:** What happened with the BIC, then? How did it implode?

**MW:** It didn't really, it just fizzled out.

**DG:** So it wasn't that process of arts grants, etc, it was just that people moved away...

**MW:** Exactly. Because, as Graham said, we weren't really a collective. There weren't any meetings, there weren't any committees, we were really just a forum for coming together and doing some free improvisation. So I suppose our only directive or plan – the main focus was, how can we stop this music becoming a jam, how can we stop it becoming pop music or jazz. So our whole focus, really, was artistic – it was, how can we have two or three hours on a, whatever it was, Monday evening, once a fortnight, where some free improvisation, as *we* would define it, takes place. So our main goal was to stop people, as I would see it, regressing into a jam session. And to be fair, it worked very well – it was amazing, it really was very effective – I was very, very impressed by how improvised it was, the BIC. There were some people who were into pop music, all kinds of shit, but, just by having these little techniques, John Boulding being one of them – one thing that would happen was that, if we had a suspicion that a little combo was getting on that stage that were going to get into some jamming or some pop riffing, all we'd do is go to John and go, 'John, go up', because he'd go up there with his alto and he would blow everything apart.

**GM:** If you want to know what he sounded like, think of that American band, Borbetomagus – he was like a one man version of them. He played alto and he played guitar as well, and you sometimes couldn't tell if it was alto or guitar he was playing! He just went 'skrrreee'...

**DG:** So there so no way you could riff behind that...

**GM:** Well you could but you wouldn't hear it!

**MW:** He was capable of going up there and blowing everything apart. He's been dead a few years now, and he needs honouring; he played improvised music for all of his life.

**GM:** He was absolutely dedicated to it.

**DG:** But he never got any recognition for it.

**GM:** He was too extreme.

**MW:** And this is one of my bugbears; he didn't fit in the normal hegemonic, social way, so therefore he wasn't accepted as an artist.

**DG:** Are there any recordings?

**GM:** No, I don't think so. I think if the old Bristol co-op had made a record they would have forgotten to tell John to turn up that day...

But this is another thing; there's a huge history – there are countless people who've never recorded, who've been interesting and extreme musicians in one way or another...and not just musicians, artists in general...

It's a folk music, for me, it's a folk music, you can take your instrument and go anywhere and there'll be a tiny little group of people who do improvised music in their homes or out in a hall or even try and book gigs, and you go anywhere and you can play, and you have dialects and languages and you mutter and make your point and try...it's a folk music, the same way that in Ireland you can carry your fiddle and go sit in in a pub...

**DG:** A universal language, universal grammar...

**GM:** You mean like the Egyptian, Kemetic stuff – the seven vowels...I think Braxton talks about that...

**DG:** But you weren't studying esoteric texts...

**GM:** We don't know anything about that. And if we did, we couldn't say...

**MW:** I read and studied a certain amount of shamanic stuff – European and Celtic, mostly. There might well have been a book that was around at that point – that anthropologist...

**DG:** Mircea Eliade?

**GM:** Oh god...that fits on the shelf alongside Blavatsky and Annie Besant and all that theosophist stuff...Although that's becoming increasingly respected now.

**MW:** But I think there was someone, there was some book talking about the spirituality of sound, and we would also have picked up something from Sun Ra.

**GM:** But all that talk about spirituality – it's essentially a way of selling your product, like 'spiritual jazz'.

**DG:** Though there is that [Amiri] Baraka essay ['The Changing Same'] where he's saying that it all comes from the same impulse – James Brown is singing about sex, Pharaoh Sanders is going 'ommmmmmmmm', but it's the same impulse.

**MW:** I think there's a notion – it's almost like when they go to art school and art teachers go 'yeah, that works'; to me, that's a bit like going 'oh, there's a spiritual element to that music' – it's the same thing, it's got no real foundation, and for me there's no spiritual practice to back it up. I just have this feeling, if you're going to lead a spiritual life, you need some kind of practice – that's my personal belief, and I know that Joseph Jarman, for example, has a practice...

**DG:** But you wouldn't bring any of those techniques into the music?

**MW:** Not the sounds, not so much, not these days. It's more the actual way of being in the space, I suppose...

**DG:** Would you say that music is a social space?

**GM:** Yeah. What we do is in a social space; what musicians are doing – musicians like James Brown, that's social. Music has a function, a social function – what I think *doesn't* have a social function is where the consideration of it having a value outside of the space that it's done in takes precedence over the moment that the music's created in. So if you're in a rock band, or a jazz band, or any band, and you're practicing to try and get good, so that you can make a tape, so that you can tout it around and flog it on the market – that doesn't have any social function, you're just being a function of capitalism. If you're in a room with people, and what's happening in that room is between those people, and any other people who are also there to listen, or move about to it – *that's* got a social function. So all kinds of music have social function – James Brown, all that stuff – there's a great history of music that's for a social purpose, predominantly, and only then is it flogged on the market.

**MW:** For me, even the rehearsal was not social function, it was actually a place where you practiced what you might do later. So for me it wasn't social, it was – what's the word – productive. It wasn't about 'how are we in the space', because most rehearsal spaces are disgusting and uncomfortable; and it wasn't about relating to each other as human beings, it was about 'can we get this bit where we all come in right.'

**DG:** Would it work – is it a thing between the people who do it – do you have to know the people who do it...

**GM:** No, it's the doing – the doing having precedence over...

**DG:** Like with the collective, there was a core but anyone could turn up and communicate – you didn't have to know them...

**GM:** Yeah. It's all good, as they say...



**DG:** So when did it [the BIC] dissolve?

**MW:** When we all left town. I left Bristol in '87 – I can't remember whether we kept it going till then. But this is the trouble with western society at the moment, as Graham's already been saying –and you get it within anarchist circles the same – there's a lot of people pushing all the time and saying, 'look, everyone needs to be involved, it doesn't work if one person is the motivating force'. But, with the BIC – me, Paul, Adjoa opened it up every week, we advertised it...

**DG:** What about zariba?<sup>[4]</sup> There's at least ten people who've turned up over, say, the past four years...

**MW:** Yeah, but zariba's not a collective; I orchestrate it...I've completely moved away from collectives. I'm not interested in running a collective. I've quite enjoyed joining *other people's* collectives – and all the language I'm using is exactly what we've just talked about – but I see it as someone else's, I don't see it as 'mine', whereas, if it was truly a collective, it would be 'ours'. I've enjoyed joining the Cheltenham Improvisers Orchestra and Safehouse in Brighton, but for my own satisfaction I like to run collections of hand-picked musicians, because I'm just looking for my own satisfaction, nothing else. Although there's still a political element to the zariba...

**DG:** What is that?

**GM:** You've gone Stalinist, Mark?

**MW:** Yeah, I reckon...ha ha. The political element – I strive to get a lot of female involvement, and I try to incorporate mundane, everyday activity, to get away from the idea of the virtuoso.

**GM:** Have you ticked the ethnic box, Mark, at all?

**MW:** No, it's chronic.

**DG:** Don't you think these things should just happen organically?

**MW:** No, I don't think racism is going to be tackled by organic means. It's endemic.

**GM:** How would you encourage people to willingly come and play improvised music who are, say, nominally non-white people in Bristol?

**MW:** Something about using venues, being in areas; using venues that are not in areas where people wouldn't normally go. So if you look at the pub over the road where you open the door and all the faces you see are white, that's going to set up a barrier towards people joining that kind of social milieu; they're going to walk in and see it as they're the only person in there as a person of colour.

**DG (to GM):** Do you want to dispute?

**GM:** There's a point, I'm not quite sure what the point is – in musical terms it would be the difference or benefit or even just point of attracting to this practice people of, for the sake of argument, a different colour of skin. I mean, if they're not involved, wouldn't there be some element of tokenism in trying to attract them? It's like saying, 'we're a bunch of mates who go down the pub and we don't have any black friends, how can we get a black friend?' It's that kind of mechanism...

**MW:** No, it's that our thinking and our modus operandi is basically racist...

**GM:** I would contest that...

**DG:** I personally get uncomfortable with trying to 'recruit' people; the only reason you want to know someone is because you want to recruit them to your cause – it's not organic.

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[4] Zariba is a loose collation of musicians/ dancers/ poets based in Bristol/ Cheltenham / London who have done occasional public performances/residencies and regular private sessions, organised by MW.

**MW:** But I think the personal is political – you do have to look at your own behaviours and patterns, and ask how much they're feeding into, if not promoting some hegemony that you don't agree with. Because otherwise, if you don't have a conscious checking of what you're doing, you'll end up doing what everyone does. All of us sitting here have made conscious decisions about how we're going to lead our lives, and decided we're not going to do x, y, z. And for me there's a point in just thinking, 'what else do I do that's outside my awareness'? I haven't got any problem with political correctness; the case against it has been overstated. It's usually white people who say it's not needed, that racism doesn't exist anymore.

...But to get back to the BIC, we did our fortnightly things, we did some stuff with the Oxford Improvisers co-op [as was]– if not an exchange, we at least went down there, they paid us to go down for a gig. In the end, we just fizzled out because I – we – stopped putting up the posters and hiring the venue. Because, like Graham said, there wasn't any actual fixed structure that would carry on past the individuals, once they'd left Bristol.

**GM:** And this is another reason why it was a beautiful thing – we never even thought of applying for any money for it, any kind of legitimate promotion from any outside source.

**MW:** We were pure.

**GM:** There was no money, there was no treasury, there was no discussion, there were no rules that I remember – they were more like guidelines, to quote Pirates of the Caribbean.

**MW:** There were a number of us that intervened to stop it becoming a jam session.

**GM:** We had strategies – oblique strategies, or crass strategies, or both.

**MW:** I think what came out of it – there's two things I want to address from what we were talking about earlier: I think what came out of the BIC was a whole load of young people [who] started forming improvising bands; there were these people who'd never heard anything like this in their lives. A lot of people that were playing at the BIC had never ever listened to free improv, Ornette Coleman, none of that shit, and they came and just went, oh, blimey, right, ok – oh shit, you can do this. A lot of bands came out of it; we had a load of bands; Exit Enter Leave...

**GM:** Flob...Trellis...

**MW:** Exit Enter Leave; Flob; Trellis; The Angelic Conversation...All these different combos that came out of it. So it wasn't as though we were opposed to group formation; there were actually quite a few groups that actually did very low-level gigs. And my feeling was that when we all started operating again and came out of the woodwork as the BIC, the feeling I had was that some co-op members, some of the older members, gladly emerged and said, oh, thank fuck, now we can start doing some free improv again: Verity Hawkes, the soprano player, who played in the Feminist Improvising Group with Maggie [Nicols] and also with Cunning Stunts, which was a theatre and improv thing. But, yeah, we did some good stuff, we had some good times...

**GM:** It's rhizomatic isn't it; this one and this one and this one...

**DG:** Spread all over...

**GM:** It's on a tiny, tiny, tiny, level...

**DG:** At a folk level.

**GM:** Yeah, back to that point

**MW:** But I have a feeling that people in Bristol that are currently involved in

experimental and so-called improvisation probably have no idea of the tradition that they're coming from, of the musician's co-op, of the BIC...

**GM:** Yes, and that's how it should be – a non-centred, no-official-history folk music. In one way there shouldn't be an official history of this kind of stuff; there should be as many unofficial histories as there are people who've done it.

**DG:** So we shouldn't be doing this whole interview...

**MW:** You need to say that this is just one figment...

**DG:** A figment of our collective imagination...



**Still to Come:**

**David Grundy on 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun' by Marion Brown**  
**Lutz Eitel on the Visual Art of Peter Brötzmann and Keith Rowe**  
**Youtube Watch: Don Cherry Video Special**  
**Reviews of Recent CDs and Re-Issues**  
**Freedom of the City 2010**  
**Wandelweiser**

## **“A man walking into the future backwards”: Marion Brown, the American South, and ‘Afternoon of a Georgia Faun’**



“It’s high time for a re-assessment of the work of Artist X.” ‘Re-assessment’; ‘re-appraisal’ – these words imply that something has been (unjustly) forgotten, and hence that it must be discovered anew. What, then, is the catalyst for such a process? What makes us (critics, listeners, musicians) suddenly pay attention, having ignored the forgotten object for so long? Sadly, it seems that sometimes it takes the death of a great artist for us to really pay proper attention to what they created during life. And it’s noticeable that the alto saxophonist, ethno-musicologist, composer and writer Marion Brown, who passed away on October 18<sup>th</sup> 2010, is still most frequently mentioned as ‘one of the saxophonists who played on John Coltrane’s *Ascension*’ – this despite the fact that he subsequently produced an impressive body of work arguably equal to that of any of the major artists who came to prominence during the flourishing ‘New Thing’ movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s. True, he had barely played in the last couple of decades, due to ill-health and some disastrous medical procedures, and his straightahead jazz work from the late 70s and through the eighties, while pleasant and melodic, lacked the structural and emotional range of his more experimental period. True also that almost all of his recordings were out of print, though most had become available, in recent years, on music-sharing blogs, and had perhaps even extended their influence to the world of left-field rock music: a few years ago, the band His Name is Alive released a surprisingly effective (and affecting) album consisting solely of Brown’s compositions, combining African percussion with swampy, droning electric guitars and pianos and free jazz horn parts in a way that was both faithful to the spirit of the original music and willing to take it in different directions. In any case, I know that, over the past few years, before and

after the release of that tribute album, I have returned again and again to Brown's recordings, which so generously, so easily give up their riches – accessible on first listen, but with a depth that rewards deeper and further digging, re-listening, re-appraisal, re-assessment.

Despite his neglect, Brown was certainly as good an improviser as the better-known 'New Thing' musicians Archie Shepp (an early friend and mentor) and Pharoah Sanders. All along though, and despite overtly free jazz work with Burton Greene and in his own group with Alan Shorter<sup>[1]</sup>, he wasn't so much 'New Thing' as into his own thing – a good dose of classical influence, an interest in ethnic musics (which, admittedly, Sanders and Shepp shared), and, above all, a sparer approach than the other two musicians. Whereas Shepp and Sanders were well capable of emoting to great effect (the prelude section to 'Creator has a Master Plan', or Shepp's gorgeous, impressionistic reading of 'In a Sentimental Mood' (from 'On this Night', 1965)), Brown was more understated, relying on the carefully chosen phrase, on clear motivic development rather than the pure sound/smear/scream tactic. This approach can be heard at its purest on his two solo saxophone recordings from the late 70s and early 80s, 'Solo Saxophone' and 'Recollections – Ballads and Blues for Alto Saxophone'. The solo concert was a context in which he played often, at small local engagements with perhaps twenty or thirty people in the crowd, and this perhaps accounts for the relaxed feel to the music. Here, Brown is not so much concerned with 'playing free' or 'being innovative' as with simply *playing*, standards mostly. It's almost as if he were practicing in a back room, woodshedding, revisiting the familiar melody, thinking about it as he plays – picking up, for example, on connections between Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy' and 'Ask Me Now', the latter appended as a little coda to the end of the former in a way that sound spontaneous rather than pre-planned. (I'm reminded here of Anthony Braxton's approach to standards on his Piano Quartet recordings of the mid-90s, where the tunes flow into one another, medley-style: improvisation as a method of melodic thinking that harks back to the earliest developmental stages of jazz, where the solo was an extension of the original tune – a counter-melody, or succession of counter-melodies, fitted well within the original contours of the piece.)

In some ways, though, that solo recording is something of an anomaly in Brown's recorded work, for his finest music invariably focuses very much on a group ethic – it's the sound of the whole band that one remembers after the music stops, as much as it is the playing of the leader. This is not achieved through free, collective blowing, but through compositional and organizational strategies similar to those adopted by the AACM (with whose members Brown often played, though he was never a fully-fledged member), or through a loose, groove-based approach that seems to derive at least in part from jazz fusion. The result is a special kind of atmosphere – that intangible quality which critics love to harp on about, perhaps as an excuse not to have to delve into the technical details of how said 'atmosphere' is actually accomplished – that 'grain' which gives Brown's music its special 'voice'. Listen: it's there when he takes elements of the keyboard-rich sound found on early Miles Davis fusion – all those twinkling electric piano melodies and chordal textures – to build something that's soothingly lovely, static and hovering ('Sweet Earth Flying'); it's there when, with different instrumentation, he conjures up the wonderful, hazy, later-summer, small-town feel of a piece like 'Karintha' from 'Geechee Recollections'; and it's

there when he presents a challengingly indeterminate (though in fact, carefully organized) avant-garde soundscape on 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun' - music which seems to be half-asleep, yet is crafted with subtly shifting, delicate improvisational care.

Perhaps it has something to do with Brown's Southern background. Born in Georgia, he moved to New York City where the 'jazz revolution' was in progress, but never forgot his regional roots. Archie Shepp, who also moved from the South up to New York, where he met Brown, commented: "We bonded, in a way. We were both from small towns in the South. Most of my close friends, in general, were African Americans born in the North. It was quite fortuitous meeting Marion. He reminded me of people I grew up with. He always held onto his southern drawl, but had an enormous intellect and spirit."<sup>[2]</sup>

This is not simply a romanticised American primitivism, contrasting with the city sophistication of, say, Cecil Taylor – indeed, the title of Brown's record 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun' specifically invokes the urbane Claude Debussy, in whose music 'nature' is the 'nature' of the Parisian city-dweller's boat trips and river-side picnics, or of an idealised classical arcadia, rather than the 'nature' of genuine rural experience. What Brown is doing is to apply the dreamy, symbolist languor of turn-of-the-century French impressionist classical music to his own Southern childhood – a life, let us speculate, that was governed by changes in the weather and the seasons, by an engagement with light and shade, with touch and taste and sight and smell rather than the adrenaline and stimulant buzz of the city – a life with something 'unreal' about it, something undefined, hazy, dreamy, even surreal; alright, a life that was *never quite like this*, with hardships and injustices that are present within the dream, but downplayed, receding into the background of an imaginative and partly imaginary dreamscape. Importantly, this is the South as recalled from the North, from the big city, the 'Big Apple' (and even from abroad – Brown lived in Paris from 1967-1970<sup>[3]</sup>), drawing on the resources of memory to create a quasi-mythology with which to contrast life as it is lived in the metropolis, a means of coping with that pain, that sense of awkwardness and uncertainty to which early blues lyrics so often attest: "I'd rather drink muddy water and sleep in a hollow log/ Than go up to New York City and be treated like a dirty dog."<sup>[4]</sup> The blues, in all its different forms – the country blues, the town blues, the town-and-country blues;<sup>[5]</sup> not so much the blues as form (Shepp and even Ayler were far more obviously blues and R-&-B based players than Brown (check out Ayler's 'Drudgery')), but the blues as *feeling* – the blues as a reflection of life. Brown was quoted thus in the liner notes to *Porto Novo*: "My reference is the blues, and that's where my music comes from. I do listen to music of other cultures, but I just find them interesting. I don't have to borrow from them. My music and my past are rich enough. B.B. King is my Ravi Shankar".<sup>[6]</sup>

One might argue that this thesis is somewhat tenuous – I may be applying an inaccurate process of imaginative transformation to Brown's childhood – and one might not immediately conceive the mid-60s free jazz dates for ESP as specifically 'Southern' or musics in this way. And yet, listen to the last track, 'Homecoming', on 'Why Not', with its almost Charles Ivesian melody. African-American music was always a melting pot – Afro-Cuban percussion melded to marching-band instruments, 'streetwise' sensibilities that would later manifest

themselves into hip-hop culture melded to music derived from rural worksongs – and Brown’s music makes full use of this diversity in order to reflect on where he has come from and where he is now at.<sup>[7]</sup> After all, it’s not as if the memory of the South just disappeared, was simply swallowed up into new Northern, urban forms of African-American popular music – think of the popularity of Ray Charles singing ‘Georgia on My Mind’ in 1960. And it’s not simply a case of nostalgia, either: as fellow Georgian Lars Gotrich notes in his online appreciation of Brown,

“He stayed in Georgia long enough to see the Confederate stars and bars added to the state flag at the height of desegregation[...] Like its soul food, Georgia's history is lush and cooked down, yet brutal in its lumbering wake. It's near impossible to reconcile what came and what is to come with a state that only in the last decade removed the Dixie from its flag. It is our heritage, yes. And in an odd way, those of us who've struggled with those issues are proud still.”<sup>[8]</sup>

This curious mixture of dreaminess and pain, sensuality and brutality finds its way into Toni Morrison’s fiction, and it finds its way into Brown’s music: thoughts and feelings that are as much tied to the weather, to the soil, (‘roots’ music) as they are to people and their relations with each other – sensations that can’t be ‘pinned down’, but reached and evoked through paradox, metaphor, suggestion. Brown was heavily influenced by the writer Jean Toomer, and the word ‘bittersweet’ barely suffices as a description of Toomer’s exquisite evocation of a storm, from the poem that gave its name to Brown’s album ‘Sweet Earth Flying’: “Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads [...] Bleeding rain / Dripping rain like golden honey.”<sup>[9]</sup> The storm is figured as a flower, as a bleeding human, or animal, and as a supernatural provider of food (like manna from heaven); an overabundance of metaphor and simile, like the abundance of water with which the clouds refresh the earth, like the simultaneous upsurge of feelings at the sight of its approach; an almost sexual sense of sky and ripeness – “Full-lipped flowers/ Bitten by the sun” – that reaches towards the kind of understanding found in mythologies, creation myths, old wives’ tales, magic, folklore, rather than towards that found in western, rationalist scientism. Music is the perfect vehicle for this evocative illogic, with its resource to the suggestiveness of sound, sound that does not need to be encumbered by direct explanation (though often Brown uses words – poetic recitation – and human voices – whispers, sighs – as an essential and sensual part of his music). Here we return once more to Debussy – his languorous ‘L’Après-Midi d’un Faune’, his portraits of the sea, of sunken cathedrals, joyous islands – or the dreamscape of ‘Péleas et Mélisande’ – not so much fulfilling the Romantic fad for ‘programme music’ (which would subsequently translate itself into the mimetic world of the Hollywood soundtracks), as evoking a general sense of place (hence the fact that he could title pieces of music, a non-visual art form, ‘Images’). One might argue that Brown has a comparatively *direct* approach that Debussy lacks, but then again, it’s probably not all that helpful to draw too direct a correlation between the two. As Cecil Taylor remarked when a fan compared his playing to Ravel’s *Sonatine*: “Why don’t you talk about Duke Ellington and Bud Powell?”<sup>[10]</sup>

Instead, let’s talk about Jean Toomer, whose words we have already quoted and briefly discussed. Brown’s ‘Georgia Trilogy’ (*Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* (1970), *Geechee Recollections* (1973), and *Sweet Earth Flying* (1974) – I’d also

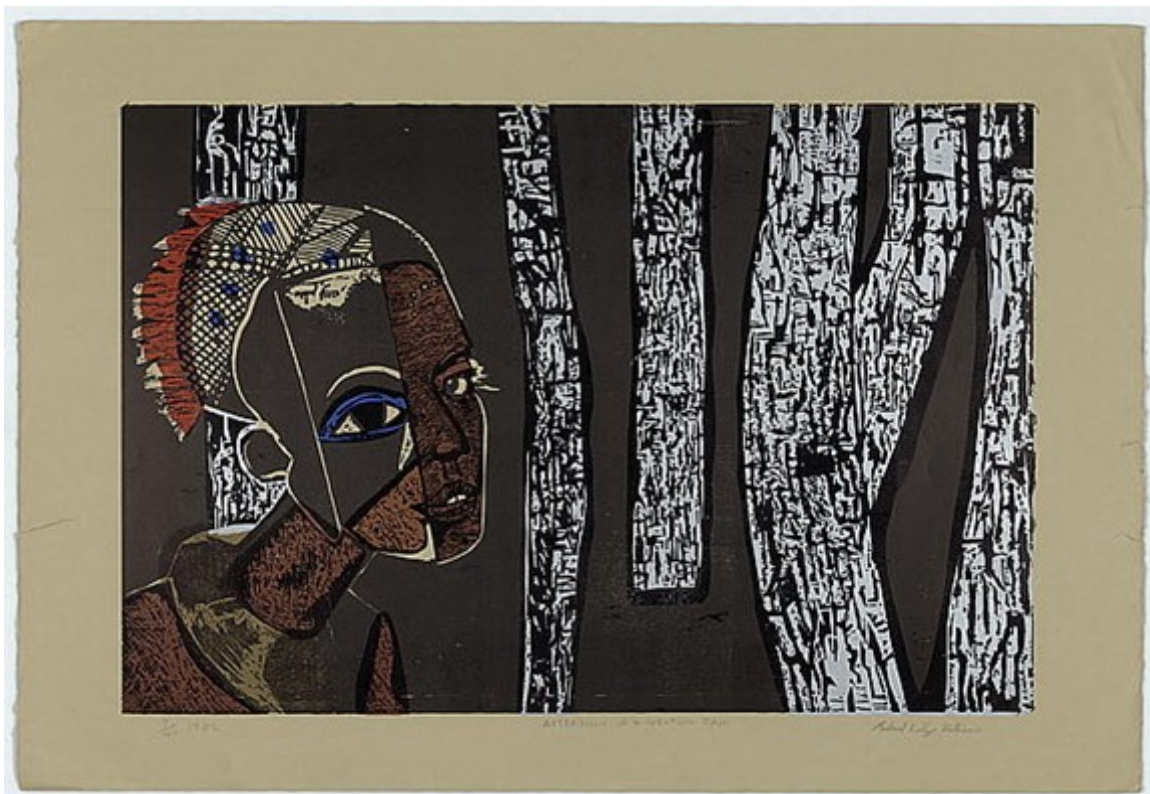
include *Poems for Piano* (1979), in which Amina Claudine Myers plays Brown's Toomer-inspired compositions, and *November Cotton Flower*, from the same year) derives much of its inspiration from the seminal modernist 'novel' *Cane*, a work where prose and poetry are not so much juxtaposed as melted into each other in a languid evocation of the South that seems to have struck a chord with Brown's own up-bringing; where images cluster like grapes, building up in liquid globs, at once sharply distinct and hazy, subject to change at any moment, like (again the simile) the passing storm looming, opening overhead, then passing once more. Brown's use of *Cane* is several-fold: on the one hand, its *atmosphere* is apt, apposite, similar to that of his own music; furthermore, this atmosphere has very personal, autobiographical resonances with Brown's own Georgia childhood; in addition, drawing from a literary text (Bill Hasson recites a section from the book on 'Geechee Recollections') reflects Brown's intellectual bent (he was a "running buddy" of the poet LeRoi Jones, appearing in a minor role in the first production of Jones' play 'Dutchman', and contributing essays and record reviews to several publications<sup>[11]</sup>). White critics often argued (particular in relation to the music of Ornette Coleman), that free jazz was in some way a 'primitive' form of expression, bypassing thought in order to directly access feeling;<sup>[12]</sup> here we see the legacy of the Beats, the notion that African-Americans and their music somehow represented a 'primitive' state, preferable to the cynicism and 'sophistication' of nuclear white America. While such arguments may have been well-intentioned in the latter case, later critics often put a negative spin on them, and the racial connotations were patronising and potentially harmful. Thus, Brown's employment of Toomer, as well as his articulate commentary on his own and other's music, helped to mitigate against the erroneous notion of the untutored 'Negro', playing purely from feeling, with little or no training or compositional awareness. According to Nathaniel Mackey,

"One of the things that Marion Brown said about the new music of the sixties is that he sensed that many of the people who were bothered by the music and were reacting against it were bothered by the level of abstraction of the music and the way in which that level of abstraction being engaged in by black musicians diverged from and called into question certain notions regarding black people's relationship to abstraction, the idea that black people, if not in fact incapable of abstraction, tend to shy away from it in the direction of the immediate, the physical, the athletic, the performative."<sup>[13]</sup>

Brown's music is very much preoccupied with feelings, and moods – all those subjective qualities which at once account for music's sensual and unique power, and risk reducing it to something ephemeral and purely subjective – but it is preoccupied with these in a *thoughtful* way, as part of a theoretical, intellectual consideration that encompasses the social and the spiritual in a fairly direct manner. Brown isn't simply using Toomer's work as a decorous hook on which to hang his music and to give it some literary clout; instead, he has a specific set of intellectual concerns, many of which overlap with those of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). In 1970, Brown recorded a series of duets with AACM member Wadada Leo Smith, a musician whose rural experience also informed his work (for instance, the solo guitar piece 'Bardsdale'), and a large group session entitled 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun,' released on the then fledgling label ECM, which, though it has come to be associated with a specifically 'European' sound in recent years, was initially just as committed to



recording experimental work by American artists (another important early ECM release is the Bennie Maupin album 'The Jewel in the Lotus').



**Michael Kelly Williams, 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun' (1985)**

It's worth examining 'Faun' in depth: the most experimental of Brown's works, it is also one of the richest in terms of its conceptual underpinnings. Indeed, an entire book, entitled 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun – Views and Reviews', was dedicated to the album and published in 1973 (like 'Recollections', a collection of Brown's writings which came out in 1984, this is out-of-print and extremely rare). Brown was not simply 'making a record', 'laying down a few tunes' for jukebox airplay: these were lengthy soundscapes for which the term 'jazz' seemed out-dated. They might not have existed without jazz, but they could not be constrained by the word, by the label 'jazz', or, at least, by the way in which critics and listeners sought to use that label in order to enforce and constraint a certain fixed idea of the music. Instead, things mix and merge, like the 'eight-hour dialogues' Brown remembers having with his fellow musicians, in which "stories go in and out of each other like Bach's counterpoint."<sup>[14]</sup> Dialogue and the sounded voice turn out to be particularly apposite on 'Faun' – while the spoken word itself would not appear until Bill Hasson's recitations on the following two albums in the 'Georgia Trilogy', the vocalizations of Jeanne Lee and Gayle Palmoré do function as a kind of wordless prelude to those recitations ('Prélude a l'après-midi...'); once more that merging, that suggestive blurring of boundaries, between voice and instrument, between speech and music. Between 'professional' and 'amateur' musicians too: the second piece, 'Djinji's Corner,' adapts a practice from Ghanaian music, in which a core of skilled musicians is supplemented by community members with lesser ability. Thus, the main band of six instrumentalists is supplemented by a team of three 'assistants' who use various percussive devices and implements, some of them invented by Brown. While Andrew Cyrille, Anthony Braxton, Bennie Maupin, Chick Corea, Jeanne Lee

and Jack Gregg and can be considered virtuoso practitioners of their respective instruments, here their sonic status is often the same as that of performers who might not even be considered ‘musicians’ in the normal sense: a democratic, if not communistic, openness that anticipates experimental projects such as the Portsmouth Sinfonia and the Scratch Orchestra, initiated by British free improvisers during the 60s and 70s. For Brown, this is an affirmation of the value of improvisation as the equal of composition: unlike composition, it allows *anyone* to communicate and jointly participate in a musical experience. Furthermore, as Brown hints when he talks about “mutual cooperation at a folk level,” the ‘open’ approach finds ‘avant-garde’ music coming to resemble a kind of imagined folk-music, very different in sound to the traditional folk melodies heard in West Africa, or Georgia, or New York City, where the album was recorded, but possessing a similarly radical means of *making*. From the liner notes: “Although I am responsible for initiating the music, I take no credit for the results. Whatever they may be, it goes to the musicians collectively.”[\[15\]](#)

Nonetheless, the music is not improvised in a *completely* free manner; Brown set out an initial structure for the titular first piece, which he described as “a tone poem. It depicts nature and the environment in Atlanta. The vocalists sing wordless syllables. The composition begins with a percussion sections that suggests raindrops – wooden rain drops. The second section is after the rain. Metallic sounds that suggest light.”[\[16\]](#) The poetic descriptions of wooden rain drops and metallic light could have come from Toomer (or perhaps from Surrealism), but they are not there simply as pretty or striking phrases. Rather, Brown shows through them his awareness of the unstable notions here at play, highlighting the uneasy correlation between music and the visual or programmatic (light is not really metallic (unless it reflects off a metal surface), and rain drops cannot be wooden), even as he describes sound in visual terms. (One might also detect in the phrase ‘after the rain’ a reference to the composition by John Coltrane.) Furthermore, this is not simply a case of simple mimesis, of creating ‘nature music’ and ‘scene-painting’ for decorative effect; Brown further comments that the opening ‘raindrops’ section suggests “feelings of loneliness in an imaginary forest of the mind”; a “first person experience” of the world of ghosts and spirits like Amos Tutuola’s Yoruba-inspired ‘My Life in the Bush of Ghosts’, here “told collectively in the musical first person.”[\[17\]](#) These ‘ghosts’ are at once connected to the religion, traditions and ways of seeing of Brown’s African ancestry, and to his memories of everyday childhood experiences and feelings in Georgia; the former, which one might call collective memory, passed down as it is through oral traditions, through stories and reminiscences originating in the experiences of other people, is that which can only be imagined, not directly experienced, the latter, which one might call personal memory, arises from incidents remembered from one’s own life.[\[18\]](#) Personal and collective memories can be drawn together through physical movement and through sound (“mind and body...unified through memory and muscle”[\[19\]](#)) – just as the jazz musician at once plays ‘himself’, his unique and personal style, and beyond himself, by using vocabularies established by his forbears, some of whom are long-dead. This, then, is another meaning of ‘folk art’ – “by connecting his physical skills as an improviser (that is, his technique) to his cultural memories and identity, [the jazz improviser] asserts that improvisation, as the height of black musical expression, connects the artist to his people.”[\[20\]](#)

If the title track of 'Georgia Faun' thus places a certain emphasis on the individual skill and 'technique' of the solo improviser (for instance, during Chick Corea's piano solo during the second section of the piece), the second side of the album evinces a generally more collective approach – it is "structured in such a way...as to all but prevent the dominance of any single idea or of any one player."[\[21\]](#) In Brown's words,

"each musician has a station that consists of his primary instrument, secondary instruments and miscellaneous instruments. The players move from station to station playing their instruments as well as other instruments. He remains at the station for a minute, then goes to another station to begin a new phrase, or to continue developing a subsequent phrase. The composition ends with a blast from a whistle after which the players return to their original station to complete the composition."[\[22\]](#)

In the structured improvisations ('intuitive music') of Karlheinz Stockhausen, individual players were very definitely subordinated to the composer's will; by contrast, the aim here is to achieve a certain general effect or atmosphere, but in a way that emphasizes human interaction and a sense of fun. The 'non-musicians' can make a contribution without negatively impacting on the quality of the music, participating in a collective activity in which the movement between 'stations' and the particular method of handling instruments becomes a kind of dance, an improvised *exchange* of physical objects and positions as well as of sounds. Those with greater skill, with more developed means of personal expression, may take the lead at certain points, but the situation is totally different to that set up by Stockhausen – a set of subordinated performers bending to the wishes of a great genius.

'Georgia Faun' marks the only use of 'non-musicians' in Brown's work, and thus constitutes something of a milestone in his discography, as well as, I would argue, the history of African-American improvised music in general. The parallels and connections between such jazz-derived experiments and the European free improvisation developing at this time are not as often explored as they might be, and certainly suggest a closer and more reciprocal relation between white and black, European and American, than might have been suggested by the racial and cultural rhetoric of the time. After all, many of the most important documents of 1960s and '70s free jazz were recorded in Europe; and Brown's own collaborations with European musicians (Gunter Hampel in particular) provide just one instance of the many musical connections and cross-fertilizations that occurred during this period. In any case, Brown's notion of a "sane sociology of contemporary music"[\[23\]](#) was enacted not only through the specific case of using non-musicians on 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun', but through his attitude to music in general:

"Jazz should be played in stadiums, on baseball fields, in the street... Children love the new music... Children have the imagination you need for the music we play; you can do what you like with it."[\[24\]](#)

And this is the sense that one gets through much of Brown's recorded legacy – a sense of possibility, of openness, a sense that music is fully capable of expressing personal, emotional, social and cultural needs; fully capable of working through

& reconciling complex issues of geography, tradition, & collectivity; fully capable of addressing the relations between the abstract and the particular, between the oral, the visual and the conceptual. Brown was not alone in dealing with such concerns, but his art marks a particularly rewarding & beautiful manifestation of this task. And yes, it is high time for a re-assessment of his work.

*Marion Brown: a masterful musician. Born, September 8, 1931 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA; Died, October 18th, 2010, in Hollywood, Florida, USA.*

## Notes

[1] Currently available are 'Marion Brown Quartet' (download-only, from the ESP-Disk website); 'Why Not?', a second quartet recording for the same label, now re-issued on CD; 'Bloom in the Commune', a date released under Greene's leadership and reviewed in the first issue of this magazine; and 'Live at the Woodstock Playhouse 1965', a recently discovered live performance, also with Greene, released on Porter Records earlier this year.

[2] Archie Shepp, quoted in Bob Flaherty, 'Friends Mourn Jazz Great Marion Brown', available online at <http://www.gazettenet.com/2010/10/22/friends-mourn-jazz-great-marion-brown>

[3] See Eric C. Porter, 'What is this thing called Jazz? African American musicians as artists, critics, and activists' (University of California Press, 2002), p.247

[4] Quoted in LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York City; Perennial (Harper Collins), 2002 (1963)), pp.105-6

[5] For a more detailed discussion of the interplay between 'country' and 'city', North and South, in the development of the blues, see Jones, *Blues People*, pp.104-110

[6] The same could be applied to the music of the black church; compared to, say, Charles Mingus, Brown is not obviously harking back to such music in his improvisations. Nonetheless, there are echoes, reminiscences, feelings that suggest this background. As Brown puts it, "I'm constantly referring to my past...When I was growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, I went to Church every Sunday. I never really play black spirituals but I translate them into my music. Little bits of melody become footnotes to my past." (Linda Tucci, 'The Artist in Maine: Conversation with Marion Brown', in *The Black Perspective in Music*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), pp.60-63.)

[7] As Brown puts it, he seeks to convey "a personal view of my past culture...I'm constantly referring to my past...I'm like a man walking into the future backwards." (Ibid)

[8] Lars Gotrich, 'Georgia Recollections: Goodbye, Marion Brown' (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/ablogsupreme/2010/10/19/130669448/marion-brown>)

[9] Jean Toomer, 'Storm Ending', in 'Cane' (1923)

[10] Gary Giddins, 'Visions of Jazz' (Oxford University Press, 1998), p.462

[11] See Eric Porter, 'What is this Thing Called Jazz?: ', p.246

[12] See, for example, James Lincoln Collier, 'The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History' (1978).

[13] Nathaniel Mackey, 'Interview by Edward Foster', in 'Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews' (Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p.279

[14] Greg Tate, 'Black-Owned: Jazz Musician Marion Brown and Son Djinji' (*Vibe*, November 1994), p.38.

[15] Marion Brown, Liner Notes to 'Afternoon of a Georgia Faun' (ECM Records, 1971)

[16] Ibid

[17] Quoted in Eric Porter, 'What is this Thing called Jazz?' (op. cit.), p. 249

[18] "My music is a personal view of my past culture. I'm transcribing from one time and place to another. I've never been to Africa, you know. These instruments are manifestations of something I've never really seen. But through listening to their music and reading, I've become a part of their environment." (Brown, quoted in Linda Tucci (op. cit.))

[19] Porter (op. cit.)

[20] Ibid

[21] Henry Kuntz, review of 'Duets' (Brown/Leo Smith/Elliot Schwartz), <http://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-one/marion-brown-duets/>

[22] Brown, liner notes to 'Georgia Faun' (op. cit.)

[23] Quoted in Porter (op. cit.), p.250

[24] Marion Brown, Interview with A. Courneau (*Jazz Magazine*, No.133, 1966)

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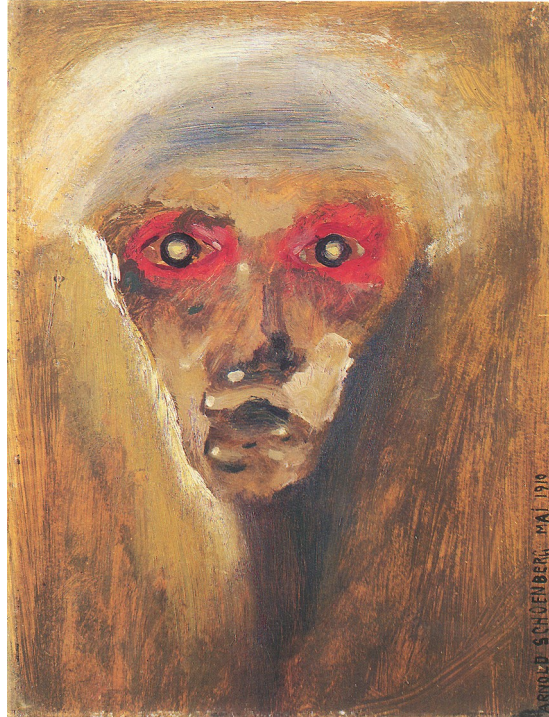
An extremely useful resource in the research for this article was the Marion Brown Discography, compiled by Karl-Michael Schneider and available online at <http://discog.piezoelktric.org/marionbrown/>



# **Peter Brötzmann and Keith Rowe: The Art of the Improviser**

**(as Witnessed in the Artist-Curated Exhibition  
That Is the Gallery of Their Record Covers)**

by Lutz Eitel



**Arnold Schönberg: *The Red Gaze***

## **Intro**

As a painter, Arnold Schönberg was a one-hit wonder. You will find *The Red Gaze* from 1910 in a lot of modern art primers, despite the fact that it's a pretty bad painting. (Should you feel in the mood to challenge that verdict: look at the shape of the eyes. They have been carefully drawn by an artist biting his tongue, and they carry no expression all. The superficial energy of the gaze lies solely in the make-up.) Why has this picture become a part of the wider canon? And not one of those that look more interesting to our eyes today, like the clumsy proto-Gustons and the hilarious proto-Condos? (Well, apart from the fact that our painting has come to look like the ghost of Andy Warhol?)

To the contemporary expressionists, Schönberg was a gift: a consummate artist (as a composer) and at the same time a sort of noble savage who didn't know which end of his brush to shake at a canvas. Kandinsky called it *Nurmalerei* – painting only, no baggage. Schönberg himself said that in painting he could express his feelings directly. (Yes, it was that bad.) He was soon accepted as a full member of the artists group *Der Blaue Reiter*, although Kandinsky came to think that what Schönberg called his 'visions' were actually trying too hard, and he preferred the rather drab self-portraits of the composer as a clerk.

By 1910 Schönberg's music had already gone through its late-romantics and moved into atonality. As a composer he also was an autodidact, but he had proven his abilities. Still his music remained controversial and unfortunately didn't bring in any money. So after trying his hand at painting, he thought maybe he could make an easy buck there. The problem with his pictures isn't so much that they don't adhere to the music's high standards, but that they immediately reveal the composer's cultural upbringing: they remain stuck in the 19th century. They follow a romantic tradition which said that ideas ruled supreme in art and execution was of secondary necessity, or even a compromise forced by profane circumstance. E. T. A Hoffmann wrote marvellous prose about that, was a mildly competent composer and an awful painter. Later of course we had Wagner and the Gesamtkunstwerk, and then the quest for a synesthetic art towards the end of the 19th century. All of that historical baggage plays into the significance of Schönberg's painting, because the modernist movement that would lead into both black squares and serialism grew out of these ideas, and so it happens that Schönberg's crap pictures are nevertheless layered with meaning. They are the very opposite of Nurmalerie.

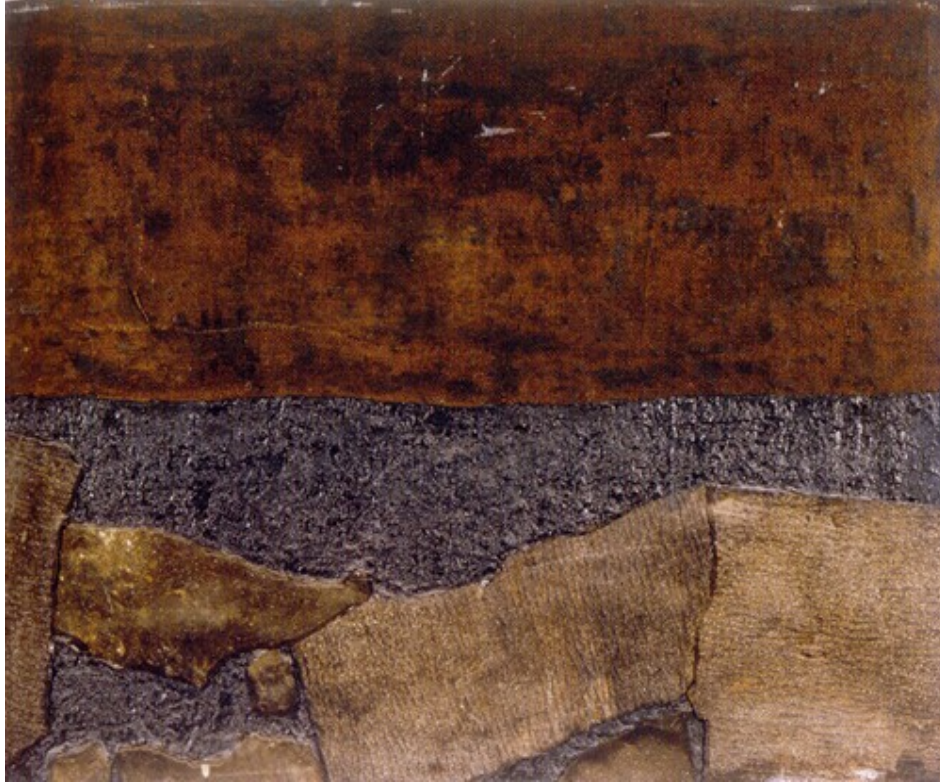
I use the example of Schönberg because when I now discuss the visual work of two artists known for their groundbreaking improvised music, I'm dealing with a similar situation. The paintings and objects that Peter Brötzmann and Keith Rowe create may look like a footnote to the 'real' work, they seem to merely fill in the art school background of both artists, facilitating an askew outlook on musical questions that led to innovations. Which of course is true. And it is also true that both musicians did record covers, they made images that simply packaged the music. (For example, both painted pictures that included all the musical instruments involved in a given session, which is as traditional as you can get on a cover.) Still, many of their visual works also carry a lot of extraneous historical baggage. The artists were born in 1941 and 1940 respectively, and both had their breakthrough in the mid-1960s at a time when there were open fields of contact between all arts and genres, when it became feasible and political to start doing your own thing, having your own label, making your own rules. (This is not meant as an advertisement for a golden age, though in Germany it probably was that. What's important here is that artists were not systematically hindered by a prescriptive use and reception of each single medium. Hell, even Beuys and Roth made records. Although quite frankly I'd rather look at a Schönberg painting.)

It is probably not proper art history to allow the music as a resonance room that gives meaning to a visual work that is curated by the artist for the gallery of his record covers. And we will see that no amount of interpretation will keep some of these images from merely being good packaging, craftsmanship, cover design. But some of these paintings will still reverberate when the music has already become a vague memory.

### **Peter Brötzmann: A Simple Rugged Rightness**

Brötzmann started out from an art school in Wuppertal, not an art centre by any standard. So it is a little surprising how well connected to the larger contemporary movements his early work from when he was around 20 looks today. For his paintings and assemblages he used, besides traditional art materials, a lot of simple stuff which could be found in the street, like pieces of

metal or wood. A work called *Landscape* from 1959 was made from tar paper and earth, and there's a beautiful heaviness to both the rusty sky and the fault lines in the stony ground. An untitled assemblage from 1963 has a large block of wood plated with metal scraps and tin-can lids like armature gift ribbons. These works take their cue from arte povera, Rauschenberg, Dieter Roth and others, but they have a very simple rugged rightness and already speak with a voice of their own.



**Peter Brötzmann: Landscape**



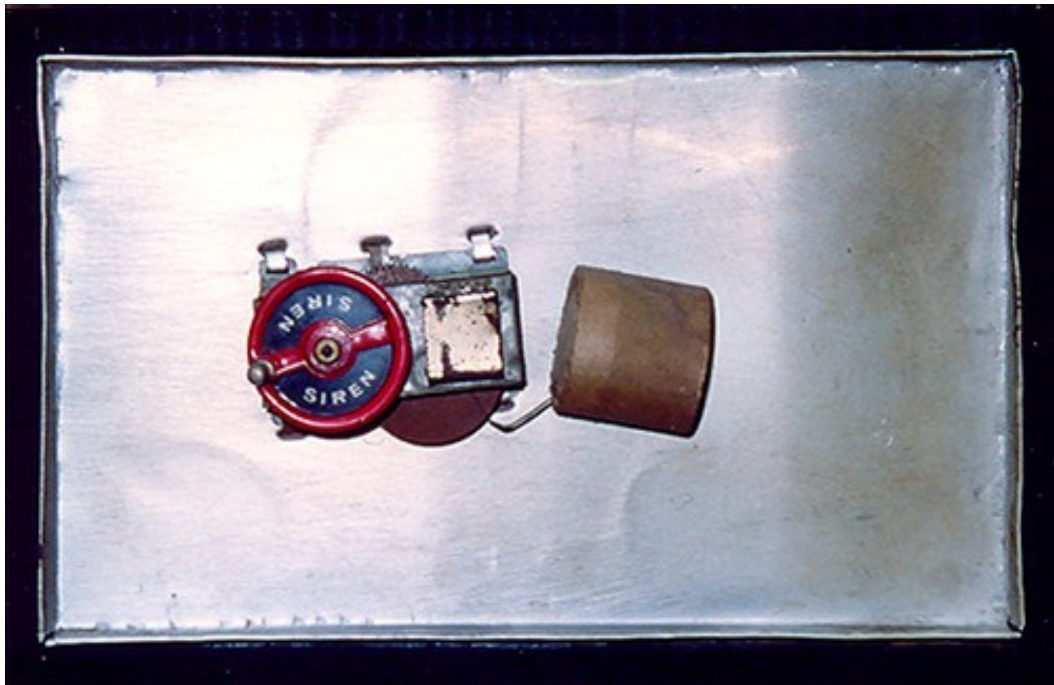
**Peter Brötzmann: Untitled Assemblage**

Wuppertal did in fact have a renowned gallery, Galerie Parnass, where the artist got to know some international avant-garde art in the flesh. To him the most important event was meeting Nam June Paik and working as his assistant, repairing the piano preparations for a performance piece repeated every day for the duration of an exhibition. Through Paik, Brötzmann came in contact with Beuys and Stockhausen, and he began to take part in Fluxus-related events, free-for-all happenings where a host of artists did their thing simultaneously and where, among others, he would meet fellow musicians like Han Bennink.



Somewhen during the mid-1960s, music became the stronger impulse, partly because Brötzmann preferred the lifestyle it offered: he liked the travelling (under what would be pretty punk conditions), playing and all the things that were out there to be done, even soundchecks, as Brötzmann has described it in a number of interviews. (And that seems to make immediate sense still if you watch the man today: he doesn't seem to mind waiting, he hangs around being very there and serenely not wasting energy before the time comes to just do things. Cue for a blast of sound.)

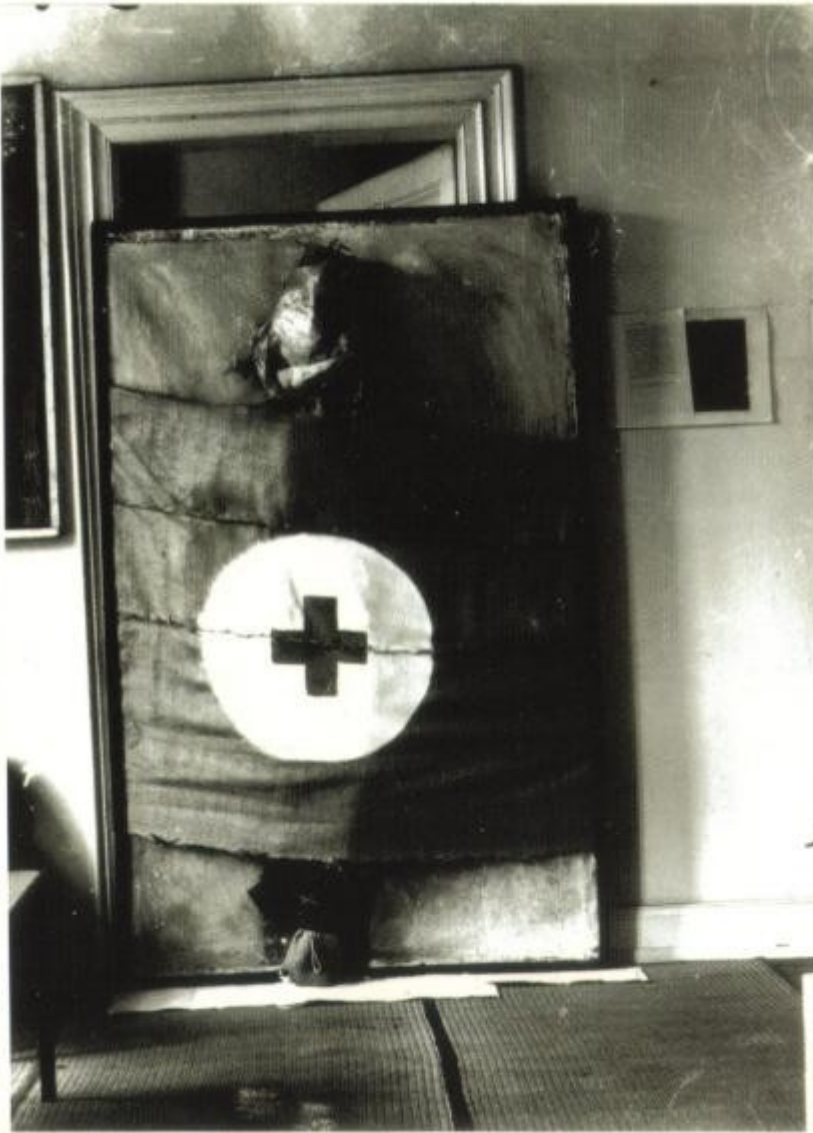
Still in the 1960s, Brötzmann started working sound-, or better, noise-related objects into his assemblages that could be associated with the style of his music – often perceived as wild and violent – like earplugs or later, in a work from 1979, a small hand-cranked siren. By then he had started making small boxes that would take their cue from Joseph Cornell, and also maybe from Beuys. But they are again much simpler objects, little rough display cases one can easily carry around. As if a sax player needed another box to carry around.



**Peter Brötzmann: Siren**

The cover of *Fuck de Boere* gives a tantalizing glimpse of Brötzmann's most ambitious state of the art. The design is of a later date, but the work is from the end of the 1960s. As far as I can make out, it shows a figure with the painted papier-mâché head of a pig (or is it a dog?) and its feet in a gunnysack fastened to a wooden frame that works as a stretcher, painted over with what in a black-and-white image we can only assume must be a red cross. The whole thing is stood up in a doorway. Again, the references appear: Kounellis blocked doorways like that; Beuys used the red cross in several works of the mid-decade, especially in his *Infiltration Homogen* series, where he clad musical instruments in felt and stuck red crosses on them. (I must stress that in all of this referencing I do not get a feeling Brötzmann is immediately copying anything, but that he speaks within the language of the art world he's part of, in a confident and personal if maybe not innovative manner.)

1970  
P. BRÖTZMANN GROUP



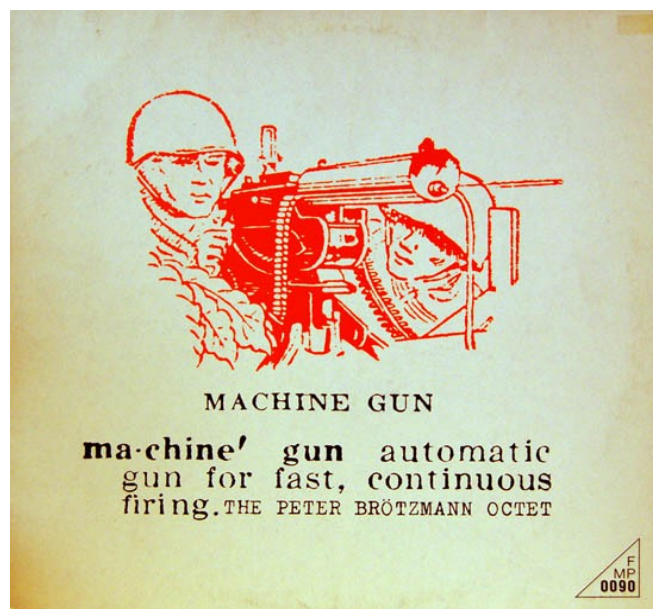
DEDICATED TO JOHNNY DYANI  
FUUCK DE BOERE

**Peter Brötzmann: Fuck De Boere**

The record cover was of course made at a later date and to place the work on it was a curatorial decision on Brötzmann's part. He chose to leave the original meaning of the piece – which, judging from the typewritten sheet of paper hanging to the right, would have been rather explicit – completely in the dark; the booklet doesn't give a title, only a rough date, a year or two before the 1970 recording. The title of the record, *Fuck de Boere*, gives the image a political intent, and it connects the relatively closed social act of what looks like an exhibition in a private studio both to the social upheavals of the time in Germany and, in the larger frame of things (the title being a quote from the dedicatee of this music, South African bassist Johnny Dyani), to the fight against apartheid/racism.

Brötzmann had started his own label in 1967 with *For Adolphe Sax*, before he co-launched the FMP label in 1969. That debut record had a simple photo of the artist on the cover; it was with 1968's classic *Machine Gun* that Brötzmann started using his own art for the design. The original run on the Brö label was a limited edition with hand-silkscreened covers, later it got re-released by FMP. The title is derived from a nickname given to him by Don Cherry, who at that time

was a staple of German radio productions and had from the beginning been supportive of Brötzmann, when the younger man's musicianship was still largely doubted. The record title gains its strength from an acknowledgement of Brötzmann's (still limited) public image as a player who takes no hostages. Illustrating a deadpan dictionary definition of the word ('automatic gun for fast, continuous firing') is a graphic from a year earlier, originally called *Schießscheibe* (Target), that in style is somewhat reminiscent of Sigmar Polke, who would also use found images and translate them into hesitant, purposefully clumsy lines, imitations of pop with a human factor. Whereas Polke would then start to layer the image with colour or patterns, Brötzmann leaves his alone. The passion with which these two machine-gunners go about their job of mowing the listener down glows in a nice orange red. The gunner on the right, who admirably looks over to the main man pulling the trigger, stands for us, the audience, harbouring a fan crush... This record cover, through its sense of self-awareness, and through the self-release as a piece of applied art, moves the music away from an expression of anger and frustration (as which it often was heard at that time, even by fellow musicians) and gives it both an ironic and a political touch. It makes the music literate.



### **Peter Brötzmann: Machine Gun**

While he never completely stopped producing fine art, during the 1970s Brötzmann, besides his musical career, became a very good graphic designer, doing posters and record covers not just for his own undertakings or FMP releases, but also for ECM and festivals. He even developed his own trademark typeface, imitations of which you'll find on German jazz covers that want to signal grassroots honesty to this day. Many covers between this time and the 1990s are reduced to blocky letters, sometimes with a portrait photo of the musician, sometimes without. That Brötzmann's whole outlook was still informed by fine art tactics can be seen on the cover to the 1991 recording *Alarm* which features a graphic score that Brötzmann developed from an evacuation plan for the case of an emergency. This approach of using a completely unrelated image or notation for a musical score would go back to Cage's star charts, but again the fittingness of the metaphor, the direct relation to the perceived content of his musical language, and the straightforward execution make *Alarm* a personal contribution to this artistic conceit.

**ALARM**  
**PETER BRÖTZMANN GROUP**  
 WILLEM BREUKER / PETER BRÖTZMANN / FRANK WRIGHT / TOSHINORI KONDO / HANNES BAUER / ALAN TOMLINSON / ALEX SCHLIPPENBACH / HARRY MILLER / LOUIS MOHOLO

**Peter Brötzmann: Alarm**

Over the last decade, Brötzmann’s art production has picked up again. While he also creates large-format paintings, work for which you would need a studio, what reaches us through the record covers is mostly work on paper. There are new, startlingly conservative landscape watercolours that almost seem to be cast against type on purpose. On *American Landscapes*, a 2006 release with the Chicago Tentet, it is possible to read the shape rising from the landscape into the sky as a mushroom cloud, a welcome suggestion of the theme of violence that will turn up on Brötzmann’s covers or in his titles (*Die Like a Dog!*). But for once the political element does not seem to grow from an inner necessity, and much more interesting are the very simple, straight landscapes, like *The Berkshires* from 2005. They would be very average landscape watercolours from any Sunday painter just learning the medium, but knowing from whom they come I seem to sense something looming behind the placid surface, like in the beginning of a horror movie, where you can expect the idyll to shatter any moment. But, just like it is a critical cliché now to stress how lyrical the old firebrand seems to have become these days, the watercolours might want to be taken at their tender face value. Then, I don’t know.



**Peter Brötzmann: The Berkshires**

Maybe the most interesting development is in Brötzmann's woodcuts, many of which feature a distinct figure he had already used for the cover of *The Tribe*, Caspar Brötzmann's 1988 album (where it seemed to hold much more mystery than his son's patient tabulator math rock). These figures look a little like early Horst Antes doing an expressionist woodcut of the Easter Island statues; originally they were dark, primeval figures, a directly iconographic take on the raw and primitive that Brötzmann has elsewhere avoided. But today they come suffused with a comic strip sensibility which is very fetching. *The Damage Is Done* from 2008 shows one of them in the waters of a flood, mouth gaping in surprised protest, but instinctively taking to the disaster like a fish to the water. Another topic of destruction or violence – here the wasteland seems to have become a natural state (the damage is done, now live with it), a home that sees houses drifting off in the background.



**Peter Brötzmann: The Damage Is Done**

Brötzmann still makes boxes, and they're some of his strongest work. They thematically relate especially well to travelling, finding things, doing stuff. Against them, as already mentioned, there are the large paintings. These keep in metal and earth colours, mostly dark planes that sometimes coalesce into geometrical or sort of cartoon-like forms. See *Night Ride* from 2005. They may well look like Brötzmann's Schönberg paintings – but these works have to stand on their own. It doesn't help or hinder that they've been made by a great musician. They don't bring the baggage, so they would have to emulate the gravitas and utter sense of purpose that comes with the music; they cannot simply pick up on the energy and fly.



**Peter Brötzmann: Night Ride**

### **Keith Rowe: Connotation Overkill**

While Keith Rowe is a very different artist from Peter Brötzmann, they both started under strategically comparable situations. Rowe was born a year earlier, in 1940, and the somewhat provincial art school that he went to stood in Plymouth. There he struck up a friendship with future bandleader Mike Westbrook, who visited the same painting class, that would help take him to other places.

While we have a rather impressive collection of early work from Brötzmann, with Rowe we have to make do with later reflections on his formative period. In a 2001 interview for *Paris Transatlantic*, the artist has told about his ambitions at a time when he was both educated in quasi-academic painting and encouraged to find his own voice: 'I abandoned the canvas and worked on hardboard, using house paint from Woolworth's... In the end my paintings came down to about three colours, which they still are today, I guess. Postbox red. Stripes. Trying to get away from the aesthetics of taste, and from what you were supposed to do.' In music he was still trying to emulate American jazz masters, and the lesson he took away from art school would prove crucial: 'In the painting class I was finding out who I was, making the kind of paintings which were uniquely mine, in a way which was uniquely mine, but with the guitar I was just slavishly copying American guitar players. This was late 1950s, early 1960s.'

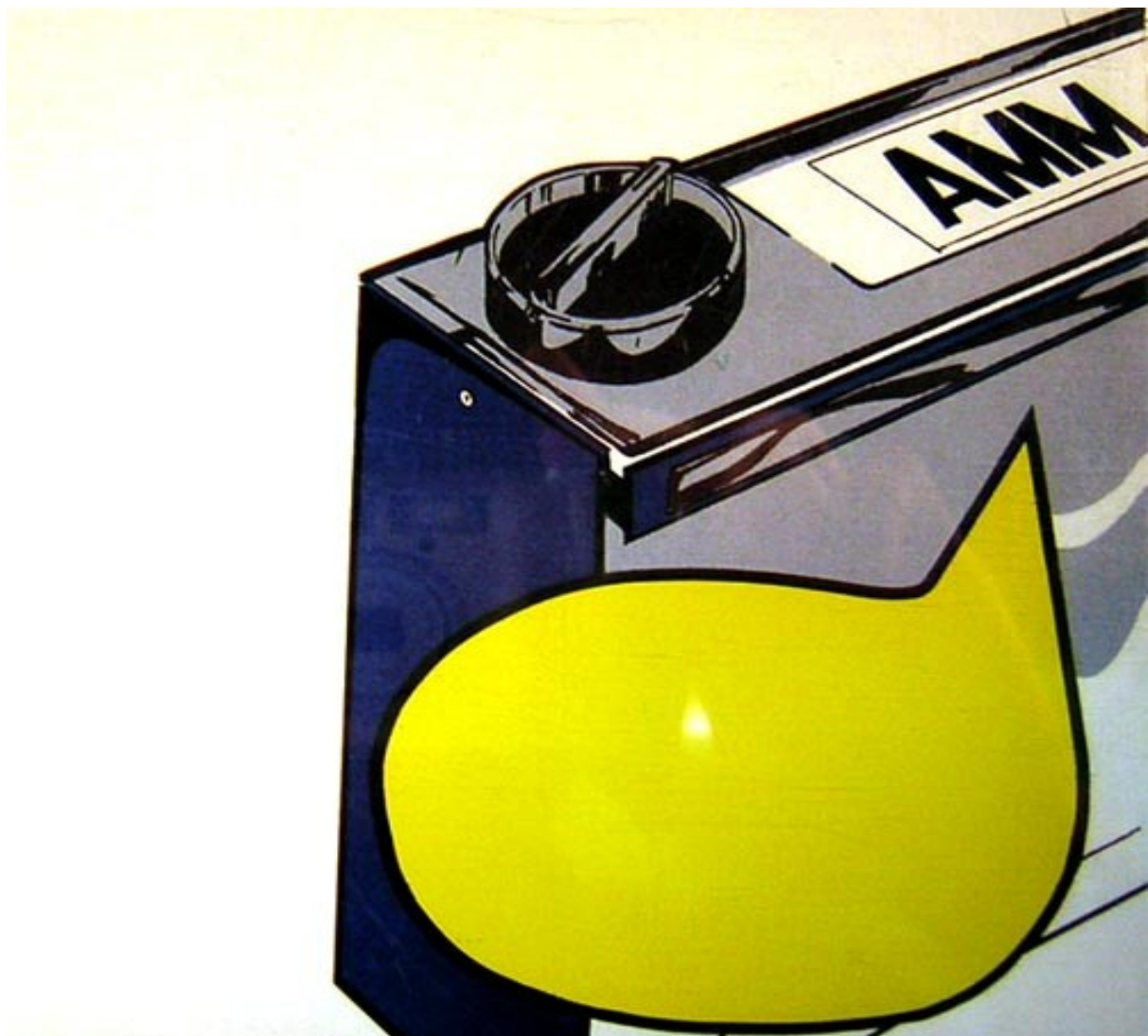
If we now fast forward to the cover painting Rowe would do for the debut record of the improvisation group he co-founded, *AMMMusic* from 1966, this is hard to reconcile, since that image also seems derived from distinctly American sources. Many stylistic traits could be found in the art of Roy Lichtenstein. One

wouldn't call it a slavish copy, since the strong diagonal is completely unlike the American painter, there's more individuality to the line and Rowe makes no attempt to render his image iconic. Also, if Rowe was following that development since the end of the 1950s it would have been concurrent with Lichtenstein's. (While Lichtenstein is not among the artists most mentioned by Rowe, an obvious tip of the hat can e.g. be found in a reference to Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* from the mid-1960s that is central to the cover of Rowe's 2002 record *Live at the LU* with Christian Fennesz.) Be that as it may, it does not seem the point of the picture to express a uniquely individual artistic voice, but rather to use a popular pictorial language which makes for good communication. The image on the cover speaks immediately. I somehow think of it as 'hitting the ground running': a big ebullient tour truck going straight to Mediterranean places where AMM would enjoy life in the sunset, play stadium shows like the big rock acts of the day and probably sell lots of merchandise. It is a very upbeat painting, and it sort of reads the pop agenda backwards. Where pop had taken the commercial image out of its context, rendering it more meaningful but useless, Rowe, like many a designer of the time, is re-appropriating the style for commercial product (with a fittingly ironic twist, since the music would not be expected to turn over large quantities).



**Keith Rowe: AMM Music**

A poster from the same era, which was later used for the release of a 1968 concert under the title *The Crypt*, shows how Rowe was repeating formal concerns. The composition shares the truck's forward thrust, though with an object that should be static, or maybe receive not even that, since the empty speech bubble coming from the transistor radio indicates silence. The radio was one of the tools Rowe started to use at the time, his main instrument being a guitar laid flat on a table. This musical practice would appear much more radical than this imagery and, interestingly, in its process much more informed by the history of visual art. Rowe remembers the creative breakthrough in a 2010 conversation with singer David Sylvian for *Bomb* magazine: 'In the mid-1960s I regarded the electric guitar as an empty white canvas, an object to stare at and imagine: What can I do with this thing? It helped to look at cubist images of guitars and wonder how they would sound. My dissertation was on George Braque's guitars. The sense of liberation that emerged from detaching my grip on the instrument and abandoning its conventional technique was extraordinary. I directly applied the processes of the visual arts to this electric instrument: Pollock's when laying the guitar flat on its back and interacting with its surface; Duchamp's by using found objects such as knives, face fans and cocktail mixers to play it; Rauschenberg's when integrating a radio. Regarding playing as painting offered, almost immediately, a new language for the instrument.'



**Keith Rowe: The Crypt**



Lying the guitar flat became a crucial act of liberation from the bodily aspect of the instrument (if not the most phallic then surely the most masturbatory of them all), and it offered limitless possibilities. Much of it was thematic: Rowe filled his guitar table with sound-making objects that he could choose for reasons outside of their musical properties; they would carry iconographical or psychological meaning. Most of all, though, playing became a gestural act in which the decision-making was close to visual art production – the main, and welcome, difference being that there was no commodity created through the act, but a sound that immediately vanished in time. (Rowe’s perspective on contemporary art is mostly on the Americans, and on Pollock regarding gesture. Still let me add that in France in the early 1940s, Jean Fautrier also laid his canvas on a table or the floor, so he could build thick *hautes pâtes* of plaster paint with a palette knife. With those, he modelled pictures of the heads of prisoners shot by the Nazi occupying forces in France. Sometimes I find Rowe’s approach closer to the concentrated work of the Frenchman, who used a much smaller amplitude of bodily movement, than to the no less deep but always sweeping gestures of Pollock.)

These artistic concepts, which are so central to his musical practice, cannot be found in Rowe’s paintings. Speaking of a much later cover painting, for the 2000 CD *Harsh*, he tells *Paris Transatlantic*: ‘It counters what I’m involved in musically, which is a music of non-adoption. Whereas the cartoon culture is a culture of adoption, assimilation, universality.’

After Rowe’s early pop images of the 1960s, and while he still designed several covers (never to the extent that Brötzmann had come to be a designer), there is a transmission break for his paintings. When they do return on the AMM covers, like for the marvellously titled *The Nameless Uncarved Block* from 1990, they are in a soft and fuzzy illustration style that is vaguely disappointing. (I don’t by the way see the connection of the title to a table with a glass of wine on the beach. This rather seems to harken back to the old golden days on the Riviera.) 1995’s *From a Strange Place* features a very literal translation of the name of the recording venue, The Egg Farm, that could almost be an outtake from a brainstorm for Genesis’ *Nursery Cryme* cover.



**Keith Rowe: From a Strange Place**

The cover which announces a return to form, *Live in Allentown USA*, had already come out a year earlier. *Allentown viewed from the AMM yellow truck (Elektra 1966)* with reference to Georgia O'Keeffe, *New York with Moon (1925)* is the very precise title of the cover painting and it seems like a deliberate taking-up of a language abandoned twenty years earlier, with an added understanding of how to use the comics medium as a message board. From now on, Rowe's process will appear positively loaded with reference (as I'm sure it was earlier and it's just that the documentation has become more thorough) and will offer pure delirium to the brave iconographer. Before we get into that, here is a vain attempt to keep things in perspective, a remark from 19 September 2009 that Rowe posted on the internet forum I Hate Music in reaction to a comment pointing out the reference of the *Allentown* cover to the O'Keeffe painting: "Yes, it's also...AMM's apology to women, the yellow\* phallic structure viewed through a vagina, the apology was referring the fact no women had been part of AMM, something we felt was incorrect, but we never found the appropriate player. We took responsibility for that, hence the image... \*Yellow is the colour of AMM, various yellows are used to indicate the differing aspects of the group's music."



## **AMM Live in Allentown USA**

**Keith Rowe: Allentown viewed from the AMM yellow truck (Elektra 1966) with reference to Georgia O'Keeffe, *New York with Moon (1925)***

Where every shade of a colour and every form is attributed a specific meaning (and just look at the recurrent clouds in *Strange Place* and *Allentown*, I'm sure they're trying to tell me something), we approach the territory of, say, the renaissance hermetic tradition, where the hardly decipherable content of all the symbolic pictorial elements together would make up knowledge transferrable through aesthetic means. It was a language no outsider could read, but communication was hardly the point. Obviously, while every pictorial element in Rowe's paintings seems to have a meaning, we are mostly dependent on the artist

for a key, and as we hear from the quote above, the artist unfortunately has a sense of humour. Which is not to say that the gender discourse explained here by Rowe was not on his mind when he painted the picture. We can easily take the bone he throws us and run. Look at Rowe's 2004 release *A View from the Window* with Axel Dörner and Franz Hautzinger: quite clearly we're are now further back into the womb and denied exit into the world by heavy iron bars...whatever that actually means for us or the CD publication it graces.



**Keith Rowe: A View from the Window**

Equipped with the requisite mindframe, it's plain fun to now go into the cover for the landmark release *Duos for Doris* with John Tilbury from 2003. This is a record that has notes by Rowe, published on the product page of the record's label, Erstwhile. Rowe tells us how he prepared himself for the duo, thinking about the history of zero (among other things), and how the death of Tilbury's mother two days before the session coloured proceedings. The label blurb adds that the cover painting was in homage to L. S. Lowry, a painter of British life who was a favourite of Tilbury's mother. While the bowler hat and footwear quote Lowry, the composition, with barely a hat below and legs dangling into the painting from above, rather seems to be in homage to Ben Hartley, Rowe's painting tutor back in Plymouth, whose *Dragonfly and Legs* would be a possible point of connection. On a completely subjective layer, the bowler and levitation made me think of Czech fantasy figure Pan Tau and his magical hat. Pan Tau doesn't speak, he moves through the noisy world in complete silence. And as Rowe in his notes to the record states: "Zero's history reminds me of the history of silence." So can this be a coincidence?



**Keith Rowe: Duos for Doris**



**Ben Hartley: Dragonfly and Legs**

While some of Rowe's paintings have been exhibited, his most obvious venture into art world proper would be a participation in the 2006 exhibition *Debris Field* at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. Rowe talks about that in an interview on the radio programme *Audition* from 14 May 2006. He had made three reconstructions of historical guitar tables from the 1960s to the 1990s, building them in a rather generic fashion, so they would represent something typical of the times they represent. He fixed guitars and all appliances and gizmos to the boards and hung them on the wall. When you listen to the artist describing the implications of his work, the detail of reflection is quite fascinating. Every guitar embodies the artist's outlook of the times, every tool he uses to touch or circumvent touching the guitar brings its own set of connotations and every cable of the wiring makes its own psychological connections. The table arrangements do not follow the logic of building an instrument, rather everything is chosen for connotations or even aesthetics. The act of hanging the tables on the walls to Rowe is the closure of a circle which began when he first laid a guitar flat on its back.

It is important that these tables are reconstructions, not historical documents, so the work speaks of memory as Rowe intends...but, still, maybe the art context is so much more over-determined than even a complete chart of all connotations within the works could ever be; without ever having seen the pieces, I imagine that submitting them to a situation where they have no choice but be self-sufficient works of art might do them more harm than good. Let me quote the only review I found online, from one Kay Carson: 'Musician Keith Rowe's *Guitar Retrospective* is a delightful piece designed to bring a wistful, nostalgic smile to the lips. Each of his three old instruments comes with its own scattered entourage, providing a social commentary of the era... This is a quirky and touching homage to his beloved discipline.' That's (unintentionally) harsh, but not completely unfair, and especially the fact that one could listen to sound samples from the respective eras on headphones must have given this a touch of an eai hall of fame display.



**Keith Rowe: Guitar Retrospective**

Rowe's 2007 record *The Room* is part of a long ongoing project that has taken Rowe many years to realize. The title indicates the heart of his concept. *The Room* is not just about spaces or more specifically a space of performance, but also about the act of listening itself. In his *Audition* interview, Rowe explains how it can be important to not listen in a musical situation, a central aspect of his practice: 'Not being afraid...not being dogmatic. Challenge the overemphasis of what listening is about. What does it mean? Listening can stop you from being in the room. Not listening in order to be in that place at that time.' All the implications of this strategy would lead too far from a discussion of the painting on the record cover; but it is interesting to keep in mind that Rowe made the recordings at home in his own room over a time, and that although he has engaged with the project for many years, the resulting tracks sound completely in the moment and allow for obviously spontaneous accidents.



**Keith Rowe: The Room [Exterior Painting]**

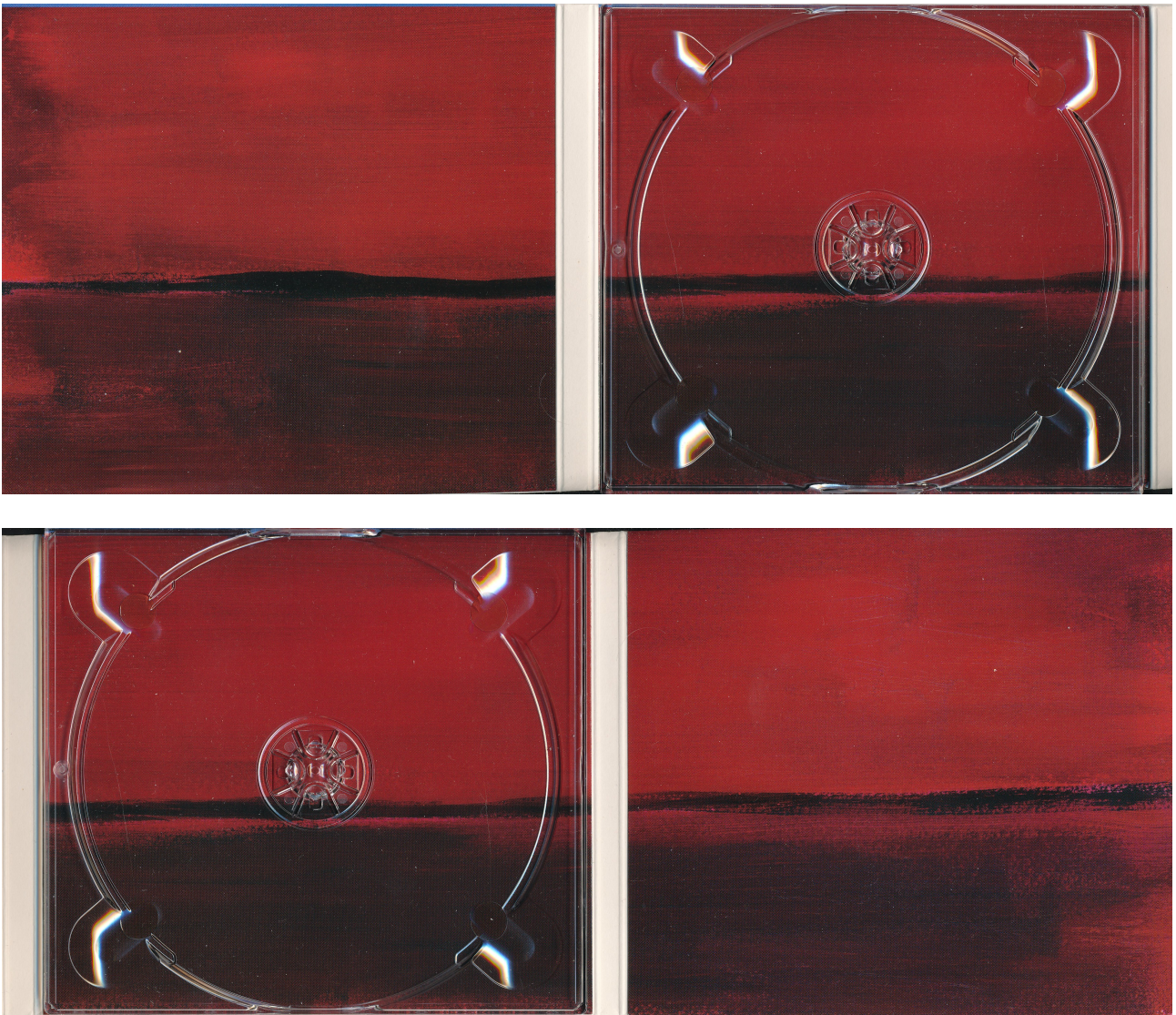
The cover painting is not actually a square, but a landscape format that goes around the flaps of the digipack continually over three panels. It shows a blue area on top of a green area, separated by a black line. This by the way is definitely painting, not illustration, the surface treatment, the brushstrokes... Rowe's work has become more painterly over the years and while the figurative aspects are still rooted in a comics tradition, Rowe does now materially engage with his art-historical inspirations in the same medium. So there are two obvious fields of reference: one to colourfield painting, and then the figurative reading of the composition as a sky over a lawn. The record is titled *The Room*, of course, so the black line might also stand for the edge of a green carpet against a wall. That would seem a rather optimistic image, the room as the great outdoors, walls taken down to offer limitless possibilities where to go from here. (Since the space is empty and the colours are lustreless, the feel of the whole is not really too

happy.) The possibilities that have been realized from within the room would be fleshed out when listening to the music, and it's funny that the visual abstraction of the cover should gain a more concrete meaning through the 'most abstract' of arts, music (the condition of which all other arts are supposed to aspire to).

I am reluctant to take all of this any further, because I am aware that Rowe has written extensive notes for *The Room*, where every aspect and detail of both recording and painting would presumably be discussed, and while I believe that an artist's intentions or after-the-fact explanations are not congruent with his work, still the publication of these notes would render any other thoughts immediately obsolete. If they are in fact published. Actually I have a suspicion that the existence of the notes itself is a reference to Duchamp, who had written copious stuff on his so-called *Large Glass* (1915–1923) which he published in a felt-covered cardboard box in 1934. For a long time it was the holy grail of modernist iconography to tear every limb from the bride and her bachelors, while today the *Green Box* is read more as a postmodern distancing act from all attempts at interpretation. Likewise, the notes to *The Room* could no doubt entertain a roomful of exegetes for decades to come. If you want a taste of that, read Rowe's notes on his Erstlive 007 live recording, which have been published on the *Erstwords* blog – here every single musical event becomes fraught with meaning (and you'll find two references to Marcel Duchamp). These notes offer rich connotation overkill, and, like Duchamp's *Green Box*, they are a work of art in their own right, with a very different effect on our perception process from the act of listening to the music itself.

In a post on I Hate Music from 3 February 2009, Rowe not only mentions Duchamp and explains his fascination with this sort of determinedness of every detail, but also alludes to a deeper layer. He draws the connection to his previous solo record, the aforementioned *Harsh*: 'Perhaps one might see a theme running through *Harsh* which was about the invisibility of harshness (sewn into our jeans trainers t-shirts etc TV quiz show colours...), *The Room* (traces and whispers of process are overtaken by blankness and silence, in these spaces important transactions take place, absorption of a single mood, a contemplative aura)... My inspiration for disguise is of course along with Duchamp, is Rothko, to what extent do the Seagram Murals leak information about the Laurentian library in Florence and Michelangelo?'

When you open a physical copy of *The Room*, you get a painting on the inside, which follows the same simple composition, also stretched over three panels. The colours here are taken straight from Rothko's Seagram Murals – an uncomfortable red with more violet overtones in the ground area. If that's the inside of the room, it is not an easy place to be in... Rowe's notes and interviews are mostly about the intellectual foundations of his work, they place him within an art-historical discourse and they make clear the (sometimes quite radical) leftfield political convictions behind his music...but only seldom do they address the emotional level, which on purely aural evidence would seem to be both at the core and the immediate surface of his music. It is music that can be emotionally draining to listen to. That emotional aspect here shines forth from a cover art that is no longer about assimilation and universality like the earlier pop imagery, but much more 'the absorption of a single mood'.



**Keith Rowe: The Room [Interior Painting]**

## **Outro**

While the careers of Peter Brötzmann and Keith Rowe have partly overlapping timelines, their artistic practices seem almost diametrically opposed. Broadly painted, one would be the man of deeds and the other thrive purely on thought. I could now, to wrap things up, point out the mostly thematic similarities which have already appeared (what's with the stylized landscapes and the single clouds?) and add some new, for example a shared interest in the compositional potential within free improvisation (we have seen the graphic Brötzmann score, we have not yet mentioned that the black line in the cover of *The Room* also would stand for the central line in the graphic score *Treatise*, a work by composer and fellow AMM member Cornelius Cardew that probably Rowe has invested in more than any other performer). But I really don't want to force a conclusion, which I fear would automatically postulate generalizations on artist-musicians that I wouldn't myself subscribe to.

Is it down to taste? Maybe it's interesting that for example looking at a Don van Vliet painting (he was born early in 1941, exactly between the two) does not colour the way I listen to his music, although I like both (well, some of the



paintings). Quite possibly there is a connection between the two media in his work that I just don't see, but I suspect he really comes closer to *Nurmalerei* than the three artists I've discussed here.

Which leads us back to hopeless Schönberg. Well, he could have been a contender. Look at this *Gaze*, also from around 1910. It would surely make a great record cover. You'd just have to find the right music for it.

Do write in with suggestions.



**Arnold Schönberg: *Gaze***



**Peter Brötzmann practising poses for a Blue Note cover, Moers 2010**

# YOUTUBE WATCH – DON CHERRY SPECIAL

In 'The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones', Amiri Baraka remembers how "the trumpeter Don Cherry would announce his arrival by playing so clear it broke through the traffic noise." Of course, as Baraka pointed out in relation to Albert Ayler, that quality can never quite be captured on record, only experienced as something live, in the flesh, but Cherry's unique sound nonetheless manages to come across to a satisfactory extent as we see (and hear) him in a wide range of contexts. There doesn't appear to be any footage of the electrifying playing which made his name during his participation in Ornette Coleman's early '60s groups, and so a performance with Sonny Rollins opens this survey of Cherry TV broadcasts spanning a good thirty years.

## **Sonny Rollins Quartet 1963**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7g-YkEX2zQ>



Following his return from a period in which he temporarily ceased public performance in order to ponder the innovations of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and their implications for jazz in general, Rollins came back with a style that did not explicitly cross over into free jazz territory, but which nonetheless absorbed a looser and freer approach. Indeed, he worked with musicians who had played with both Coleman and Coltrane, yielding a couple of recordings which some have reckoned his finest: 'Our Man in Jazz' and 'East Broadway Rundown'. Cherry and drummer Billy Higgins are the Coleman sidemen here forming half of Rollins' group; the other musician is Henry Grimes, not often seen in video footage, and taking a bowed solo somewhat reminiscent of Paul Chambers, early in the performance.

## **Don Cherry/ Johnny Dyani / Okay Temiz – French TV, 1971**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUIgVzzk9PY>

A decade's hiatus (in terms of footage, but not of performance – Cherry had recorded with firebrand tenor saxophonists Pharoah Sanders and Gato Barbieri in the interim) sees us leaping forward to 1971, and documentation of a complete concert by the trio that recorded 'Blue Lake' and 'Orient'. This particular occasion

was broadcast on the French TV programme 'Jazz Session', and must have been made at around the same time as those two albums. Things open with a recitation by Dyani, soon joined by a shaven-headed Cherry on flute and Temiz on hand-percussion. Throughout the set, Cherry plays as much piano as pocket-trumpet, and things proceed leisurely through a series of vamps, riffs and melodies (often with a South African flavour). Cherry's piano playing, as it was on 'Mu' (his duo with Ed Blackwell), is more 'functional' than soloistic, setting up propulsive grooves for the players to lock into; the free jazz moments are reserved for trumpet, and for Dyani's arco bass solos. Something of the atmosphere of the occasion can be deduced from the way Cherry steps up to a celesta, runs his fingers up and down the keys to produce tinkling, chiming sounds, then quickly makes his way back to the piano and launches into yet another tune. Cherry goes hippie? Perhaps there is a little bit of that in the mix – "musique communale" as the TV announcer describes it, suggests impromptu groupings, jam sessions in the park – but, in fact, the roots are all there in Cherry's work with Ornette from more than ten years earlier, that music so particularly connected to the mouth, to the lungs, to the gut. Highlights here: Cherry making horn-like sounds from a conch shell over roiling, tumbling percussion; or singing and playing the melody line at the same time like a more left-field George Benson; or blowing plaintive trumpet lines into the body of the piano to give the sound extra resonance; or the brief and unexpected appearance of Herbie Hancock's 'Maiden Voyage' for a matter of seconds.



**Don Cherry/James Blood Ulmer/Rashied Ali**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S9eGFOcBEY>

A very fine trio performance, recorded at Rashied Ali's club Ali's Alley in 1978, and excerpted from a Swedish television documentary entitled 'This is Not My Music'. By the time his former employer Ornette Coleman had moved into his own 'fusion' period, soloing with R & B wails and a fresh, seemingly never-ending set of licks in a setting full of Beefheart-esque interlocking guitars and complex rhythmic structures, Cherry had moved more in the direction of 'world music' (although albums like 'Brown Rice' exhibited his own take on 'fusion': eerie combinations of tantric chanting, blasts of ferocious, burred saxophone from Frank Lowe, and supple, spacey grooves from Charlie Haden's wah-wah'd

acoustic bass). But Cherry was still more than capable of playing 'harmolodic' free jazz with Ornette sideman James Blood Ulmer in music that, like the blues that soaks through virtually everything Ulmer plays, is in equal parts ambiguous/'abstract' and astonishingly direct, stuffed to the hilt with gritty physicality. Ulmer's choppy guitar, buoyed by Ali's sparkling cymbal patter, creates a mobile, constantly-shifting texture, with Cherry working melodic lines where Ulmer's guitar chords lead or launching into smearing and piercing runs which dictate their own directions into new territories. Some sense of the sense of *movement* that informs this music can be got from the close-ups of Ali's face, eyes and mouth moving in a kind of gurning tandem with the music's constantly dipping and diving course.



**Janusz Muniak Quartet feat. Don Cherry**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlggyNuGRnA>

In the 80s, Cherry began playing once more in acoustic jazz contexts, as demonstrated by this fine guest appearance with a hard-driving Polish group led by saxophonist Janusz Muniak. The music is somewhere between the energy of hard-bop and the earlier, more adventurous strains of fusion, in which solos are collective and constructed of phrases with plenty of space left between them, to be filled by the onward-driving rhythm section. So here we have hammered, repeated piano chords, well-miked bass, churning drums and Cherry working in tandem with Muniak, alternating between smooth, yet unpredictable lines and sudden blurted bursts. Though this seems to have been a one-off guest appearance, Cherry works so well in this context that it sounds like he's been playing with the regular group for years. (**NB:** *The full TV broadcast is available:* <http://www.youtube.com/user/BibiAudiofil#g/c/E231F4CEC20839A6>.)

**Sun Ra All-Stars 1983**  
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2983815125068096249#>

A great line-up of the free jazz stars of the day (billed as the Arkestra, but in reality a kind of expanded chamber group led by Ra). The presence of three percussionists and two bass players ensures rhythmic variety and textural

contrast (Richard Davis is in particularly fine form), and even Archie Shepp, who stands out from the rest of the musicians by his retro-jazzman mode of dress (he was by now presenting himself as a kind of guardian of jazz tradition), slots in well to the more atmospheric and experimental moments in the music. Ra prowls around the stage, watching closely and listening carefully to ensure that no one gets into a soloistic ego-trip. Cherry's moment in the spotlight comes around 18 minutes into the performance, playing simple melodic figures in tandem with Philly Joe Jones' drum solo.

**Don Cherry/ Sound Unity Festival Orchestra 1984**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG7o0Ao\\_x1E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG7o0Ao_x1E)



A short excerpt from Ebba Jahn's 'jazzfilm' 'Rising Tones Cross', which, through a series of concerts, conversations and interviews filmed around the time of the 1984 Vision Festival, portrays the New York Downtown jazz scene as it appeared in its early days. (For a look at how the scene subsequently developed, see Daniel Huppatz' article on William Parker in Issue 1 of eartrip.) The film as a whole captures the looseness of things at this time of organizational foundation-laying and financial struggle; there's a real sense of place conveyed through establishing shots of the city (such as Charles Gayle's solo performance underneath skyscrapers looming up through a grey-blue haze), as well as of the off-stage personal dynamics and interaction between the musicians. Some issues arise here around the relations that were slowly developing between European improvisers and their African-American counterparts – as George Lewis discusses in his article on 'Gittin' To Know Y'All', Lester Bowie's work recorded with a European group at the 1970 Baden-Baden Festival, things weren't all rosy between the camps; there existed important musical and cultural differences (perhaps inevitably, given that the scenes had evolved on separate continents, in separate political and racial situations). More than a decade after that event, after the spree of recordings for the BYG label, and after the heady early 70s years during which the Art Ensemble of Chicago had based themselves in Paris, it seems that there was now a move in the other direction across the Atlantic. Cherry was, of course, part of this whole cultural exchange, having played all over the world and adopted a musical eclecticism akin to that of the Art Ensemble.

However, given the fact that his music had become, in general, more melodic and less overtly tied to free jazz, it's intriguing to witness the way he manages an ensemble which incorporates several fire-breathing European musicians. (Though one shouldn't, of course, go for a stereotypical comparison of 'melodic Americans' and 'atonal Europeans,' a ridiculous generalization to which watching the film as a whole soon gives the lie.) At times, the likes of Peter Brötzmann and Daniel Carter do threaten to turn the piece 'Kangaroo Hoople' into another free jazz freak-out blowing session along the lines of Brötzmann's 'Alarm', but Cherry manages this element carefully, treading a steady pathway through the whole thing with piano vamps, while Maria Mitchell's dance and Ellen Christi's vocals add a lovely theatrical, celebratory dimension to things.

### **Don Cherry/ Herbie Hancock 1986**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNXePvT5H0s>



This might not seem the most likely collaborative pairing, but, in fact, Hancock and Cherry had played together in the pianist's pre-fusion days (on a fine, free jazz tinged record with members of the Heath family, influenced by Ron Karenga's Black Nationalist 'Kawaida' philosophy). The choice of material also seems somewhat unlikely – Thelonious Monk's 'Bemsha Swing' – but any doubts are soon dispelled. With stalwart Ron Carter on bass and Billy Higgins on drums, Cherry is in buoyant mood, giving Monk a shout-out ("what about Thelonious Monk...he said you can *dance* to my music...") and proceeding to play the theme with suggestive smears and to solo in jaunty melodic phrases, supported by Hancock's bouncy, almost down-home piano. It sounds like the players consciously touching base with older traditions, while throwing more than a dash of showmanship into the mix. "This is what we call a fade-out...we just fade right on out..."

### **Ornette Coleman Quartet – Spain, 1987**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODP\\_P7LvZVw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODP_P7LvZVw)

A reunion of the 1950s Quartet proves more than just mere nostalgia; if anything, hearing the group decades apart from the initial controversy surrounding its performances allows one to get a sense of just how *easy* this music is to

appreciate, how much the looseness of its performances (playing on the 'mood' of the song rather than on the chord changes) came, in the end, from the same fundamental emotional impulses as the blues. Though ostensibly they're playing a ballad here, Ornette's solo sees the tempo quicken as he starts to spin out those R&B derived phrases he used to blare out over the rhythmic thicket of the Prime Time bands. Charlie Haden, meanwhile, rocks his bass from side to side as he plays, leaving odd pauses between the phrases in his solo, as if playing a duet with an imaginary, or silent partner. The theme with which the quartet open and to which they return has an ambiguously wistful edge to it, Coleman's alto and Cherry's trumpet like two yearning human voices, full of delicacy and grace. Listen in particular to Ornette's 'scream' forty-three seconds in, and to the way he and Cherry reprise that scream as the final note of the piece.



**Don Cherry/Orphy Robinson**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdC09tZoS\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdC09tZoS_M)



World music with a delighted-looking Cherry singing and playing the doussn'gouni, a gourd-based stringed instrument which he'd brought back from his African travels (and which has now found another jazz-playing advocate in the person of bassist William Parker). Interesting to speculate on the permutations of

this collaboration: Robinson, as a member of the Jazz Warriors, was part of an energetic British jazz movement creating music that genuinely arose from the black European experience (“Afropeans (definition): to be of African descent and to exist in Europe, culturally, spiritually, or in this case, musically”), rather than existing as a second-hand inheritance from American musicians, while Cherry fused all the continents (an African-American who’d been heavily influenced by Asian philosophy and had settled in Europe). And we mustn’t forget Cherry’s connection to the British punk/jazz scene through his step-daughter Neneh, a member of the group Rip, Rig and Panic (indeed, he guested on the group’s 1982 album ‘I am Cold’). These are connections between generations, nationalities and genres that don’t just exist for marketing purposes (ticking all the right cultural boxes) but arise from a genuine desire for collaboration and cross-fertilization; assertions of identity that don’t need to set up their own borders in order to compete with those already in existence.

### **Multikulti 1991**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z26RQqvD0z0>



Ekkerhard Jost had praised Cherry as one of the most formally innovative of the ‘New Thing’ musicians in his landmark 1975 study, ‘Free Jazz’. At the time, Cherry was working in suite-like forms in which a myriad of themes and fragments were united into long medleys, like one of the patchwork quilts designed by his wife Moki for his album covers, and perhaps anticipating the stretched-out structures of Miles Davis’ electric bands. As the 70s went on, Cherry became more interested in the music of other cultures, developing into a multi-instrumentalist rather than primarily a trumpet player, and can be seen as one of the pioneers of ‘world music’ through his incorporation of rhythms, melodies and instrumental textures from around the globe. Into the 80s, and this global melting pot was still very much a part of the plan, but there was something of a return to acoustic jazz (perhaps most significantly, with the group Old and New Dreams), as well as an embrace of contemporary pop technology. This early 90s date with Multikulti finds tightly-played unison themes following one another in quick succession, with the focus on melodies rather than extended soloing. In that sense it’s like an updated version of the Dyani/Temiz trio which preceded it by 30 years (this band even plays some of the same themes). Cherry plays a lot of keyboard (though with the usual array of other instruments as well: flute, pocket



trumpet, doussn'gouni, melodica), imparting a bright, poppish sound to proceedings, while, in the multi-instrumentalist spirit of things, Peter Apfelbaum comes across as both a competent piano player and saxophonist. While not exactly Cherry's greatest work – his trumpet playing sounds a little ropery, with a thin, slightly wavering tone, and some of the textures can sound a tad dated in the manner of much 80s and 90s fusion – the overall effect is pleasant and very much in keeping with the spirit of the rest of his music. **(DG)**

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- Cornelius Cardew

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## **CD REVIEWS**

### ***ANOTHER TIMBRE: GUITAR SERIES***

- **Küchen/ Rowe/ Wright (AT29)**
- **Volden/ Nakamura (AT26)**
  - **Ap'Strophe (AT28)**

**MARTIN KÜCHEN / KEITH ROWE/ SEYMOUR WRIGHT**



**Tracklist:** Untitled Track

**Personnel:** Martin Küchen: alto saxophone; Keith Rowe: electric guitar;  
Seymour Wright: alto saxophone

**Additional Information:** Recorded by Simon Reynell on 14th June 2009  
at the church of St. James the lesser, Midhapestones, near Sheffield

The sleeve design is spartan, with information as to the musicians, date and location of recording absent from the sleeve booklet, which instead contains a couple of photographs by Lee Patterson. These are close-ups of food, or food-like substances: that adorning the front cover depicts a pink smear, which could be ice-cream, or some less palatable ooze, a shiny yellow glob (mustard?) and what looks like the dark-green corner of a leaf. If we want, we could read in a correspondence between the placing of these three objects and the role of the three musicians within the performance – sitting on the edge of the frame, separated from each other though still largely inhabiting the same space; apparently all very different, but all having something in common (even if that something is only finding themselves within that same space). Such a reading would, unfortunately, be a little overly schematic – I hear the music, for most of the disc at least, more as an all-over mesh than as a work which especially privileges differentiation between individuals. And, it seems, in mockery of any overly pedantic or analytic attempts to read the music, the inside sleeve contains the words ‘additional notes,’ printed in black bold capitals over a dark grey background. Just these words – no written notes, no portions of informative text are forthcoming. No need for extraneous philosophical musings or recording details, then – no need even for track titles; this recording is what it is – shut up and listen. Perhaps, also, these ‘additional notes’ pun on the ‘[musical] notes’ that did not find their way into the performance, for Küchen, Rowe and Wright favour a play of un-transcribable, noise and timbre, with a distinct industrial edge.

Rowe’s de(con)struction of the guitar we know about, and his partners here must undoubtedly have been influenced by that ethos: though ostensibly ‘saxophonists’, it would be very hard to identify them as such on a blind-fold test. When one hears brief, muffled, watery sections of circular breathing, or sudden shrill shrieks, it comes as a surprise to hear the recognisable sound of an actual instrument – and even these are only recognisable to those for whom extended techniques have become a ‘normal’ part of the instrument’s range. As to what *things* exactly (besides the conventional instruments) make the greater part of the sounds we hear, one might argue that such curiosity is something of a quibble: what matters is the quality of the sounds themselves. Nonetheless, it’s very hard, perhaps almost impossible, to think of sounds in such a disembodied way (how does one get one’s head around the notion of a ‘sound-in-itself?’), and the element of ‘what makes what sound’ remains important. Furthermore, there is a point to be made here about how this performance is centred so much on *mechanics*. In other words, the specificity of the devices used, and the way in which they are used, is important, despite what might strike an unacquainted listener as an element of randomness. There is interplay here between the conscious control of resources – the carefully deployment of particular elements at particular times to shape the texture – and a deliberate use of equipment which will create sounds *beyond* control (the space of the unexpected). Radios are the most obvious and well-worn example of the latter: and so we hear Rowe’s bursts of classical music, the intrusion of the idiomatic, the sense of the overheard – and both Wright and Küchen’s preference for using radio in conjunction with saxophone (for instance, placing it in the bell of the instrument to create a particular vibration). But the decision to deploy a burst of music or speech or white noise from a radio is not an arbitrary one; a *person* makes this decision, in relation to the sounds surrounding them, and the action thus taken might even be interpreted as having a moral edge, within the context of the human interaction taking place through

the medium of musical improvisation. This is the case not only for the use of radios, but battery-powered shavers, alarm clocks, and whatever other devices are being employed; and so I can't help but hear the afore-mentioned specificity of devices as having a dimension beyond the merely musical. I don't think it's too facile to say that the music sounds 'mechanical', due to the use it makes of various machines/ instruments/ machines-used-as-instruments. In itself this might or might not be a 'comment' on the industrialisation of society or the role of electronics in everyday life. But it *does* simultaneously mitigate against the glass-cage separation of the exalted instrumentalist-performer from the minutiae of our experience of the world at large (particularly, the world in its sonic dimension), whilst retaining an essential 'alien' quality (and an element of musical expertise in the manipulation of the sound devices). Even to those familiar with the work of these particular artists, then, and even given that those people will probably find no particular surprises as such here, this must remain 'something rich and change': a work of transformation, at once flirting with banality (via the subconscious hum of Radio 4 voices) and, in the final drone section (which is laced with the tiniest fragments of melody), willing to grant moments of genuine emotional affect.

### **HÅVARD VOLDEN/ TOSHIMARU NAKAMURA – CREPUSCULAR RAYS**



**Tracklist:** Scattering; Perception

**Personnel:** Håvard Volden: 12-string guitar, objects;  
Toshimaru Nakamura: no-input mixing board

**Additional Information:** Recorded in Oslo and Trondheim, November 2008

Given that Keith Rowe features on another disc in Another Timbre's 'Guitar Series', one might be tempted to place 'Crepuscular Rays' alongside Nakamura's own duo work with the AMM founder. And yet, it would perhaps be more appropriate to call Volden a guitarist per se than it would Rowe, who has

converted his tools over the years to such an extent that he could just as easily be credited with 'electronics' as 'guitar'. (Perhaps his continued use of the table-top instrument is a kind of acknowledgment of history, just as he continues to reference old masters such as Caravaggio alongside Rothko in relation to his visual art, and just as he continues to appreciate listening to jazz.) True enough, Volden has clearly emerged in a post-Rowe musical world; he does not leave the guitar untreated, micing it up to create sine-feedback similar to Nakamura's own trademark sustained tones, and making more of the metallic quality of the strings than of the wooden resonance of his instrument, with amplified scrapes half-way between the acoustic (they are recognisably the sound of something being rubbed, sound created through direct physical contact) and the electronic (the amplification lending them a harsh, eerie edge). But hanging, zither-like tones hover like strangers over Nakamura's electronic buzzings, crackles, flutters and burbling white noise – this is the characteristic feature of the disc's improvisational logic, where events ring out and then disappear over a constant, though modulating electronic backdrop. And these events are often isolated so that they do not feel like 'events' as such: they possess a sense of stasis rather than of momentum. Nonetheless, there are movements in and out of particular areas, Volden often finding a particular type of sound and sticking to it for a few minutes before moving on, Nakamura doing likewise, though not always in sync, so that the music proceeds in overlapping waves. In addition, there are some moments that call attention to themselves with greater force than others: in particular, the sudden, harsh electronic squalls that Nakamura throws out like hiccupped screams over harmonics-filled guitar around six minutes into the first track. The performance possesses a certain tension to it too: Volden's use of feedback in conjunction with his acoustic instrument means that there are sudden swells in volume, giving his playing something of a volatile quality. This is both expanded on and deliberately kept in check by Nakamura, who seems always on the verge of Merzbow-like walls-of-noise, but instead chooses to let shards and fragments of this noise drip and squeeze their way from his no-input board in quick, curtailed bursts, releasing them with precise, yet often unexpected placement. Thus, whenever the ship seems momentarily to steady – whether through the use of looping or a drop in volume – some harsh, hard-edged burst of mic'd-up acoustic scrape or no-input squall interrupts any tendency to reverie; or more properly, curtails it before it has begun. In some ways this is actually a harder listen than Nakamura's Rowe collaborations: even the 'noise track' on 'Between' gives the pleasures of full-blown release, while the more drone-oriented moments have a kind of calmness to them, despite the electronic strangeness of the sounds. Here, one is not allowed the satisfaction of either approach: the music is slow, but never exactly 'calm'; the sonorities deployed are often harsh, but we never really enter 'noise' territory. One has the sense that this is a *difficult* recording; not so much that it's overly complex, but that the sounds themselves, however starkly or simply deployed, have a certain quality to them which is hard to get a handle on. Nonetheless, it's a serious and sustained piece of work, and an important entry in the dialectic of the electric and the acoustic that continues to play out within contemporary free improvisation.

### **AP'STROPHE – CORGROC**

**Tracklist:** spring; is like a perhaps hand

**Personnel:** Ferran Pages: acoustic guitar; Dimitra Lazaridou Chatzigoga: zither

**Additional Information:** Recorded in Barcelona, December 2008; mixed February 2009.

The third in Another Timbre's Guitar Series sees a more obvious engagement with the instrument in its conventional form, as an acoustic, sound-producing body of metal and wood, rather than one shaped by feedback. And yet it is with an electronic microphone drone that things begin. This is probably created through holding an e-bow on one of the strings, though I'm not entirely certain – in any case, what's produced is a steady, unwavering tone off-set by howling zither scrapes. It's a fairly aggressive opening, or perhaps seems so because of the context, whereas it might not appear that way if it had found its way into the generally louder Volden/Nakamura collaboration. After five minutes or so, the drone fades away, and Fages strums melancholy chords, repeated and resonating over little pops and clicks, presumably produced by Chatzigoga. And then the track ends: this is something of a surprise, but it adds a nice symmetry and sense of neat formality – an encapsulation in miniature, perhaps, of what the duo intend to explore at greater length during the main section of the disc.

Another drone opens the much longer second piece, slightly softer than the first and seeming almost to move through the air as the volume is subtly turned up and down – at once immobile (as emphasised when set against interspersed string-strums) and full of strong rhythmic suggestion. Guitar and zither, generally low-toned and almost hollow-sounding, pluck their way unobtrusively underneath this electronic tone, until, after eleven minutes, the sine wave fades away, to be replaced by creaks, groans and plucks that emerge cautiously from the sudden silence. Fages and Chatzigoga know how to take their time, sticking with an apparently limited palette, not getting in each other's way: notes may be cut off before they have a chance to resonate, or dribble out into a silent void; for some minutes, one of the players transforms their instrument into a door-hinge that needs oiling; now, with alternating single notes, the atmosphere turns distinctly doleful and ominous, Fages' guitar monosyllabic, as if letting out single words interspersed with extended, tortuous pauses, Chatzigoga using the zither as a minimalist percussion instrument ; and eventually even this becomes too much, both musicians sitting for a moment in total silence. The music picks itself up again, drags itself across the floor, the concentration now on squealing bowed zither tones, guitar still resonating with a mournful, monosyllabic lower-end. In truth, it's a somewhat tentative re-start, but it leads into something that caught me completely by surprise. While the other 'Guitar Series' discs have moments of emotional pull, there's nothing quite like the drawn-out melancholy of this section; indeed, 'melancholy' is hardly an adequate adjective for the sense of claustrophobic near-torment, of deep despair that's present – all see-sawing tones, like moaning, crying voices, quiet howls, inexorable whines. This carries on for some fifteen minutes; at a certain point, the howl-scape is joined by another of those electronic tones, this one fluttering like a sedated insect, and initiating a dip in emotional intensity, as chiming hand-bells and mic'd-up finger-taps add a swirling, rhythmic dimension that drags itself out past the disappearance of the electronic tone and into the a final silence. Given the way that the music suddenly develops from subdued textural minimalism to something of genuine, sustained emotional intensity, I find myself rather at a loss as to how to sum up the album's impression on me, especially as other reviewers seem not to have been so affected. But the fact remains that I was actively disturbed by the music's unexpected cumulative power and pull – caught off-guard, one might say. This may not strike some people as a recommendation; but 'Corgroc' is an unusually compelling recording, one which evolves from being 'just' a fine piece of improvisation into something much more: a work of real and remorseless power.

## ***ANOTHER TIMBRE: DUOS WITH BRASS***

- **Davies/ Dorner (AT31)**
- **Hübsch/ Spiller (AT32)**
- **Fabbriciani/ Hayward (AT30)**

**ANGHARAD DAVIES/ AXEL DÖRNER – A.D.**



**Label:** Another Timbre

**Release Date:** July 2010

**Tracklist:** stück un; stück dau; stück tri

**Personnel:** Angharad Davies: violin; Axel Dörner: trumpet

Simon Reynell's practice with Another Timbre seems to be to produce, if not 'art objects' (a term which, for me, mitigates against the essential fluidity which creative improvisation, as a practice, cannot but be intimately associated with), nonetheless carefully-prepared albums, more often than not with fairly short running times (A.D. is 'only' forty minutes long), that encourage one to take a measured approach: to savour them, digest them, play them through several times over, think about them, mull over them, consider them in-depth. I personally do find laudable the desire to 'get stuff out there', the ubiquity of new releases; the use of the technology of the Information Age to push the underground from out of its 'underground' cliques into the bright lights of the World Wide Web. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that there are dangers here – particularly the subsumption of easily-available and constantly-multiplying content into an information overload, a realm of the infinitely-exchangeable, where there is no time to pay *attention* to any one thing in particular (one must always be schizophrenic, listening to Iggy and The Stooges in one browser window while 'the latest "cai" ' drifts by in another); where being captivated by everything, trying to catch hold of the flashing lights, the neon fire-flies flicking past, means that one ends up being *truly* captivated by nothing, burning-out, going blind through over-exposure, going deaf through the endless babble of talk and music, the air-waves and wires and wireless streams of sound all round us. Thus, Reynell's new releases offer a kind of welcome permanence, or semi-(permeable?) permanence; though improvisation is all about transience, what we have here are *recordings* – arguably, different beasts to being in the presence of (the same room as) a live, actual, in-the-moment improvisation. This is not something to deplore, though perhaps Derek Bailey might have it otherwise "so you don't have to give it your complete, full, unadulterated attention? [...] That's one of the things that's

wrong. [...] If you could only play a record *once*, imagine the intensity you'd have to bring into the listening." (From an interview with Ben Watson reproduced as 'Appendix 3' in Watson's 'Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation'). On the other hand, Bailey himself devoted much energy to running Incus records, so the notion of recording as death (or, perhaps, cryogenic freezing) does have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Indeed, to wish recording done away with is not only un-realistic, but, perhaps, actively harmful, given the role that recordings have had in shaping our musical consciousness (as educative tools, if you like, though not in a prescriptive way). Reynells is not simply presenting something 'worthy of study', like a painting or sculpture; A.D. contains no liner notes or information beyond the minimum track-listing, personnel and recording details, and so comes to the listener less burdened with pre-conceptions than a release already surrounded (smothered?) by textual discourse: liner essays, hagiographies, manifesti. Of course, given the means by which the free improvisation community receive and think about their music (online fora and review spaces), many listening to this record *will* be busy making comparisons with previous releases or evaluating reviews that they've already read.

That baggage will not go away – why should it? – and Reynells is obviously keen for the music to appear in some sort of contextual area. The last few releases on another timbre have come under 'headings' – 'The Guitar Series', 'The Piano Series' – and A.D. is part of a four-part selection entitled 'Duos with Brass'. We are being specifically asked, then, to think about this music as part of the history of instrumental practice, rather than as something which is 'just there'; one is reminded of the short (one sentence!) statement that accompanied Seymour Wright's self-released 'Seymour Wright of Derby': "The music is improvised and about the saxophone - music, history and technique – actual and potential." In the case of the 'Duos with Brass', the most pertinent lines of enquiry seem to concern the associations we make with regards to brass instruments (which have become very different listening propositions given the innovations of Dörner and the like), and the assumptions we make about how 'duos' operate.

As one might expect, on A.D., 'duo' doesn't mean the obvious question-and-answer, statement-and-response, proposition and counter-proposition model. Rather, Davies and Dörner play *together* in a variety of different ways; always together because always in the same place (space), but patient enough to let one person say something 'on their own' before the other joins in, or before the other takes their own 'solo' (which is not really a solo as such, because it is unavoidably inscribed by what has gone before it – it is more like a palimpsest than a new line of writing). Dörner is not a 'brass' player as such here, though he makes much of *breath*, blowing burbling, subdued gusts of air; he's as likely to let a sudden rasp of sound convince one, for a split second, that there is a percussionist in the room, or to make circular rubbing motions against the metal surface of his trumpet (as at the start of 'stück dau'). When he plays a repeated note 'straight' (in response to Davies' own deployment of that note immediately before, rendered as a more breathy wisp of sound), the effect is as surprising as if a 'regular' trumpet player had suddenly employed an 'extended technique'. And it sounds as if he realizes this – there follows a silence (a moment of contemplation, of stepping back?) – before the return of the extended techniques. That doesn't necessarily mean he wants to reject what he's just done: after all, such



thoughtful players do not play something frivolously, do not ‘toss something off’. One might even construe it – that repeated conventional note – as particularly beautiful, though it might be a mistake to single out particular moments as idealised, sentimentalised ‘oases’. What is certain is that, in such an environment, the simplest of gestures can take on enormous historical weight: ten minutes into ‘stück tri’, two violin notes become a melody, against which Dörner’s blastings, growlings, mumblings, quiet roarings, become ‘counterpoint’.

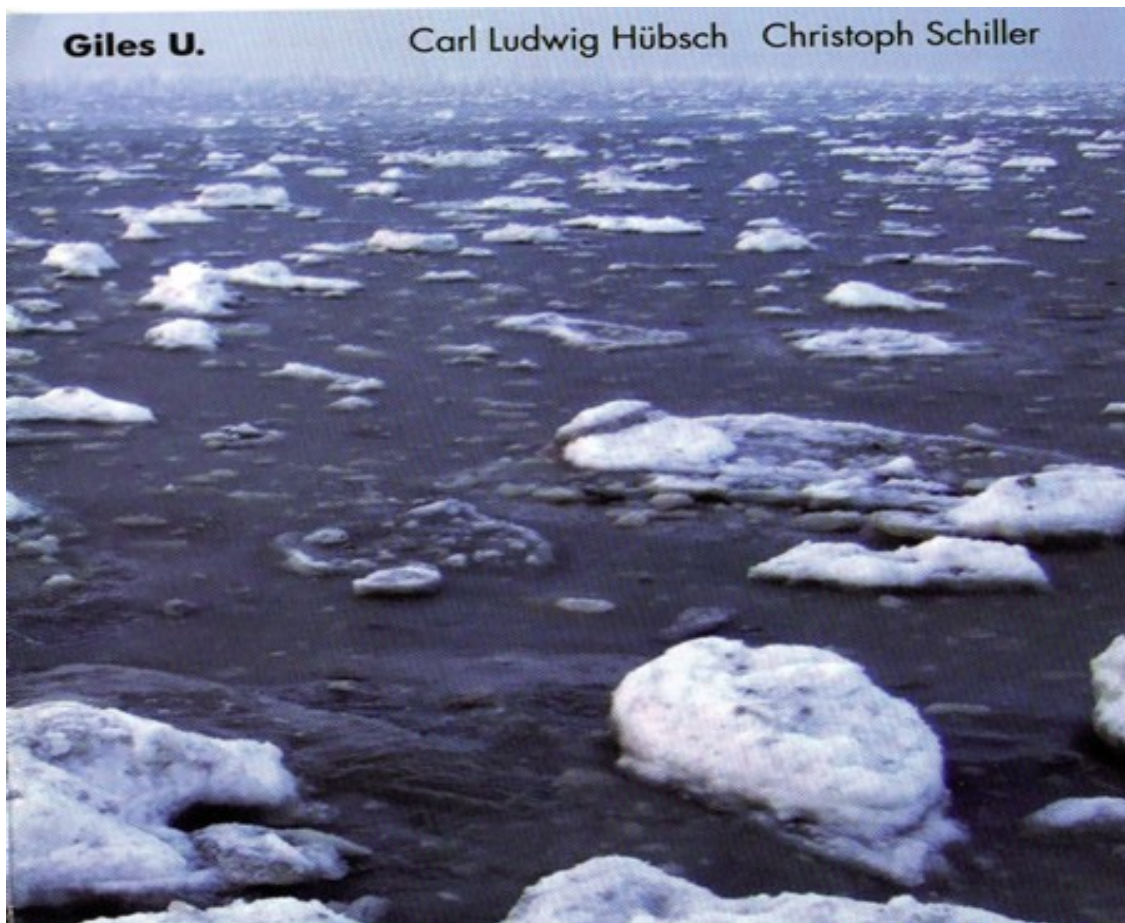
I realize that some qualification may be in order regarding wording: I’ve written ‘Dörner is not a ‘brass’ player as such’, when perhaps what I meant was , ‘a *conventional* brass player’; for, as these new releases want us to realize, the term ‘brass’ in contemporary free improvisation can mean something quite different than it did in the past. Of course, Dörner is perfectly capable of playing ‘normal’ jazz trumpet – and does it very well – but he understands (and wants us to understand) the instrument as more than just that – as containing possibilities which are as much ‘brass’, because they are integral to the physical make-up of the instrument, as more conventionally ‘brassy’ sounds. So too Davies, in relation to the violin, deploying various objects in the strings and playing all parts of the instrument, in what might be called a state of permanent questioning (though it does, obviously, establish its own vocabulary). ‘What do I think of this object *as*? What is this thing I have been taught how to play? What more can I do with it than I have been taught? What are the implications of my making ‘unusual’ sounds with it? What does it mean for a technique to be ‘extended’? ‘

Such thinking makes the instrument seem at once more natural and more alien than if it were treated conventionally: more natural because every aspect of its body, of its sound-making capacity, can be explored; more alien because it is suddenly full of new, previously unknown possibilities. In a slightly different way, the sounds produced on this record are as much ‘natural’ as they are ‘alien’: towards the end of ‘stück dau’, the two musicians create what sounds like a simultaneous impersonation of a gurgling baby and a particularly high-pitched, fluttery bird-song. And this means, despite the ‘limitation’ and ‘restraint’ which seem apparent throughout (the unspoken dictum against ‘emotive’ display, or the peacock-strut of conventional virtuosity), that there is an immense sense of *possibility* here: the creation of a sound-world which does not merely ‘reflect’ the non-human sounds already in existence in our environment (wind, trees, birds, animals), but which suggests them, alludes to them (whether as unconscious by-product or through deliberate intent); *adds* to them, expands on them, merges them with the mediations of wood and metal through the bodies of violin and trumpet, and the further mediations of these instruments through the body and breath, fingers and hands of the musicians playing them. One might reflect that it’s pretty hard to obtain entirely un-mediated access to ‘natural’ sounds, particularly if one lives in an urban environment; and one might even reflect that, given the necessary presence of a human ear to make those sounds exists within the spectrum of human thought and understanding, the concept of an entirely ‘natural’ sound (if ‘natural’ is understood as ‘non-human’) is a rather tricky one in the first place. So what the musicians are doing is akin to the way that we filter ‘natural’ sounds anyway; they are creating something which is at once ‘futuristic’ (‘far out,’ out-of-the-ordinary) and essential, even ‘primal’.

All that said, to construct a theoretical edifice about nature/culture

(perhaps with reference to the increased use of field recordings within this kind of quiet, less obviously 'interactive' kind of free improvisation) might be possible, but is probably not desirable: Davies' and Dörner's meeting here doesn't 'pretend' to anything (in a 'pretentious' sense), and might perhaps, be construed as particularly 'un-fussy', even as it is part of a (permanent) revolution in improvised music (whatever David Keenan might think about it). On A.D., the sounding (out) of the extra-ordinary is not 'trumpeted', blared-out with brassy abandon, but unfolded with quiet and focussed intensity. A neat parallel is provided by the track titles, which mix the German 'stück' with the Welsh 'un, dau, tri', in an acknowledgment of the musicians' respective nationalities; in itself quite an audacious linguistic mash-up, this phrasal quirk comes across not as clever-clever inventiveness, but as a genuine, and welcome, surprise. So with the music: not workmanlike in the slightest, it retains the atmosphere of surprise – of magic – that great improvisation is still so uniquely capable of providing, even within the 'confines' of a by-now well-established and developed vocabulary.

**CARL LUDWIG HÜBSCH / CHRISTOPH SCHILLER – GILES U.**



**Tracklist:** seven untitled tracks

**Personnel:** Carl Ludwig Hübsch: tuba; Christoph Schiller: spinet

**Additional Information:** Recorded in Cologne and Basel, February & November 2009

The most obviously striking thing about this record – striking before one even listens to it, and aptly fitting Another Timbre's remit to explore experimental possibilities within the field of 'new music' – is the instrumentation. One might associate the spinet with an archaic, elegant, perhaps slightly prissy aesthetic,

from the purist, 'period-instrument' school of classical music. The tuba, by contrast, provides useful bottom end ballast and comedic quality in larger ensembles (indeed, it originally filled the role subsequently taken by the string bass in jazz bands), but has not found much favour as a frontline instrument – it's seen as too unwieldy, lacking variety and just too darn hard to play virtuosically (though Vaughan Williams' tuba concerto affords it an attractively perky role, and Howard Johnson's improvising suggests a whole range of relatively unexplored possibilities for it within the field of jazz).

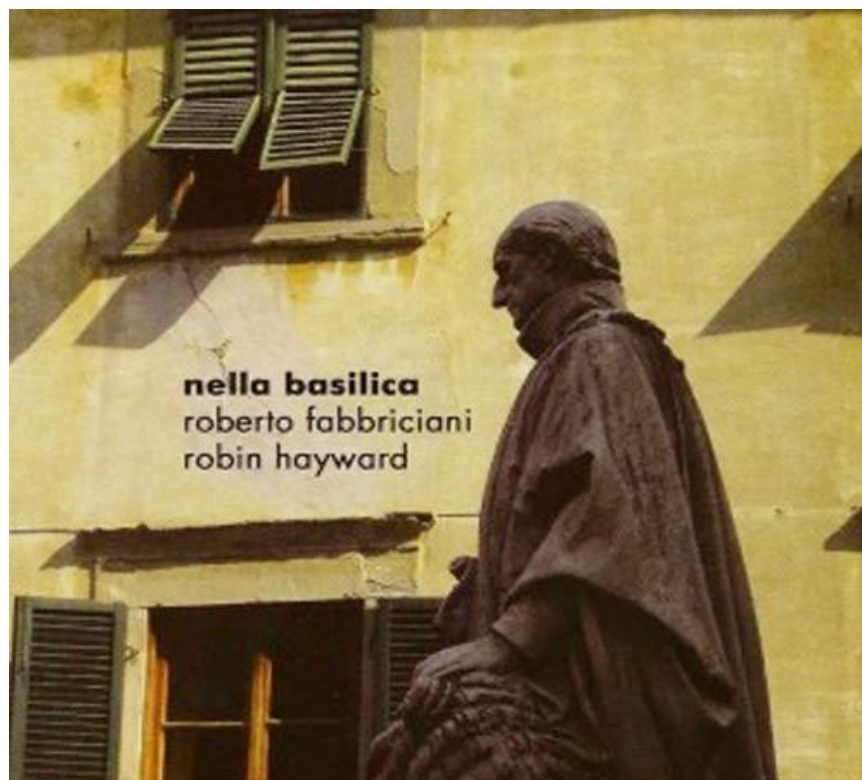
As one might expect, however, this record is a long way from both Vaughan Williams and or Howard Johnson, with neither Schiller nor Hübsch playing their instruments in the conventional manner. The former mostly concentrates on the spinet's strings, using fans and e-bows, and occasionally tapping and scraping in a percussive manner; the latter uses circular breathing, multiphonics, and his voice, to create rumbling drones, groans and croaks that he describes as a kind of "mechanically-generated electronic music". Though a cohesive whole, the record contains a number of distinct performances: the different pieces are far from interchangeable. Perhaps this variety comes from the fact that the tracks were recorded in two sessions, nine months apart (though it's not said precisely which tracks were recorded at which session, an ambiguity that helpfully prevents one from trying to divide the album in too taxonomic a fashion.) The more percussive, active sections might be described as a slightly more subdued, acoustic form of *musique concrète* – evidence of the way in which electronic and acoustic musics have mutually influenced each other so that one can play an acoustic instrument in an 'electronic' fashion, and use electronics in a responsive, 'acoustic' way. (This will no doubt be explored to a greater extent in the planned 'electro-acoustic splits' series which will be released on *Another Timbre* in 2011 and 2012.) Thus, what's particularly fascinating here is that the music is entirely acoustic (though perhaps the battery-powered e-bow could be described 'electronic?'), and yet sounds uncannily similar in places to drones and soundscapes generated in a purely electronic manner. The tuba's timbral quality reminded me at times of another recent improvised album which also features the instrument – 'Selektiv Hogst' by Koboku Senju, in which Toshimaru Nakamura's no-input mixing board joins an otherwise acoustic quintet. Indeed, Schiller's occasional use of plucked strings has a slight similarity to Tetuzi Akiyama's acoustic guitar on that same record; and, whereas Akiyama's playing is more obviously derived from the blues, rendered slowed-down, skeletal, and oblique, Schiller's bent and de-tuned notes do nonetheless have a certain blues quality to them. (At various points, the spinet is made to suggest a guitar, a celesta, a prepared piano, and a koto).

There are, indeed, some surprising elements to this music, not least of which is the turn taken on the last two tracks, where Schiller finally plays the spinet's keyboard at length. The music takes on a jumpy rhythmic quality that persists despite the use of silence and more elusive rumblings and scratchings – indeed, however inaccurate this may be, I like to think of the last piece as the 'riff' track, Schiller's repeated figures at the opening hinting at a melodic compulsion which the duo generally avoid elsewhere. Perhaps this is what Hübsch describes in his liner notes: "risking expressiveness where it is needed, but never overexploiting it."

Structurally, the duo find a number of ways to build their pieces, never overly garrulous, never overstaying their welcome, but patient enough to allow for gradual development and change – in Hübsch’s words, once again, to “let the music grow.” Such an approach has become characteristic of the musicians who appear on Another Timbre releases, diverse as they are: a kind of compositional logic that has developed out of playing, as an in-the-moment response to structural, dialogic and emotional imperatives, rather than a pre-planned theoretical system along the lines of, for example, Schönberg’s twelve-tone technique. Given that this logic has now become ‘established’ as an accepted musical vocabulary, there are moments on ‘Giles U.’ which one might almost call ‘par for the course’: for instance, one can imagine the ending of track five as signaling reflective silence, followed by applause, at a gig. Elsewhere, though, the structural development of the pieces is less obvious. Track two finds Hübsch taking the rhythmical initiative through emphatic breath/mouthpiece sounds: burbles, whispers and whistles that suggest the hissing of stream trains, the distant blare of fog-horns, the breathing and panting of animals. On track three, meanwhile, he plays mournful, slippery tones over Schiller’s eerily sliding pitches, in a tipsily melancholic lament. There are also moments of cohesion, where one can barely separate out the contributions of the individual players, both of whom concentrate on the sounds of exhaling, rubbing and scraping, or where, in perhaps more conventional fashion, both musicians settle together on a dissonant drone, moving from sparse, exploratory gestures to fulsome swell and back down again. Far from being a novelty record (though it may be the only tuba/spinet duo in existence), ‘Giles U.’ is thoughtful, engaging music. If this is the sort of thing that’s currently available, I see no need to fear for the ‘State of Improvisation’ in 2010. [\[1\]](#)

[1] <http://ihatemusic.noquam.com/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=6144&sid=027e2ff67525780af5f2b3e02b55e7c6>

### **ROBERTO FABBRICIANI / ROBIN HAYWARD – NELLA BASILICA**



**Tracklist:** Nella Basilica; Adagio; Riflessione; Colori di Cimabue; Arezzo

**Personnel:** Roberto Fabbriciani: bass-, contrabass- & hyperbass flutes; Robin Hayward: microtonal tuba

**Additional Information:** Recorded on the 28th September 2009 by Simon Reynell in the Basilica di San Domenico, Arezzo, Tuscany.

The second track on 'Nella Basilica' is called 'Adagio', but 'adagio' is a term which might as well apply to the entire disc. This is a near sub-sonic world, made up of sounds which Fabbriciani and Hayward heard in their dreams, in their imaginations, and had to invent instruments (the hyperbass flute and the microtonal tuba) to realize in actuality.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, it has a kind of sleep-walkers' surrealism about it – not a bright and glaring world of fantasy and transgression, but something more lugubrious, ungainly, even. There are no streams of notes or rapid-fingered virtuoso passages here; indeed, a couple of other reviews compare the timbres and textures not only to whales (who by now are accepted as making lovely, if alien music) but to 'hippos making love'. I might add the mechanical rumbles which fill the edges of our twenty-first century hearing, to which we have become acclimatised and which we barely notice: helicopters and aircraft droning overhead, engines at the very first moment they begin to splutter into life, the cavernous breathing of vast industrial processes. In fact, though, the overall effect is far from ungainly: what results from the combinations of sounds is a delicate, even fragile weave in which breaths and the click of fingers on keys signal the human element behind the manipulation of these great behemoths of brass and wind. It might be helpful to think of the instruments, the flutes in particular, as acoustically-amplified breath chambers – in that sense, these players, both operating at the 'vanguard' of New Music, are in fact getting back to those pre-historic moments when man first blew into a resonant object to simulate, echo, have dialogue with the natural sounds of whistling, howling and whispering wind and water.

This is, to some degree, a recording of paradoxes. It's at once 'big' – the basilica acts as a giant, resonant cavern – and 'small', silences pinging out from in between rolls of low sound, barely-audible drips and gurgles on 'Colori di Cimabue' functioning like the most minute of paint flecks on a canvas. Hayward and Fabbriciani had discussed the "aesthetics of risks and imperfection" in Nono's late works beforehand, and one might also make a connection here to the role of 'accidental', 'chance' sounds in the works of, say, Radu Malfatti – sounds which are just as much a part of the whole musical texture as are the actual notes that he plays. There is, however, a difference between the stomach gurgles and spittle-clearing on 'Imaoto', Malfatti's recent duo with Klaus Filip (recorded with such closeness that Massimo Ricci calls it "sonic voyeurism"), the by-now familiar sounds of rumbling Tokyo traffic on onkyo recordings, and what goes on in 'Nella Basilica', where things are more controlled. Clicks, throat-clearing, inhalation and exhalation of breath are not part of the texture as a kind of side-effect – leave a gap and see what fills it – but are adopted to go alongside the 'purer' tones by means of contrast and emphasis. Or, at least, what might at first have been accidental, or incidental, soon becomes a consciously-deployed tactic. For this is a collaboration in which both musicians pay great attention to detail; the concentration on nearly sub-bass frequencies might seem like a limitation, which of course it is, but in other ways it serves to free up a different kind of thinking, a microscopic focus on the smallest intricacies of a particular range of sounds, a determination to get in and really explore the fine details of what might

on cursory listen seem like a constricted area of dull drones, groans and rumbles. Just as high-speed improvisation works from the ground up, tossing off flurries of ideas, second-by-second, to create a 'bigger picture' made up of myriad fragments, so this kind of slow crawl starts off at the wider level and moves in, picking up on nuances and resonances to particular sounds that can only be accessed after minutes of carefully teaching oneself to listen in a particular way. This is only possible because of how closely attuned the two musicians are to each other (even though this was their first improvisation together); they both have a similar approach to space, an understanding of particular modes of overlap, and a tendency to start, stop, pause and re-start in a near-unison which sounds almost through-composed.

As we hear from the first notes of this album, this collaboration is about exchange: Hayward's self-designed microtonal tuba occupies the higher range that would normally be occupied by a flute (with the sense of yawning, yearning, yelping strain that taking an instrument out of its normal range yields), while Fabbriciani, using the rumbling lower register of the massive hyper-bass flute, concentrates on pinging, bouncing tones that have something of an underwater quality to them. You can really hear them playing off the space, Hayward's droning, shofar-like tones spreading out, swelling and contracting, sympathetically merging with Fabbriciani's breathy trills and offset by the latter's sharp, plosive attack. Often we talk about space as something we value in music, whether we mean Miles Davis' careful placement of notes or the silences that have come to predominate in recent 'lowercase' improv. But here there's a real sense of that space as a physical thing – for which we surely owe a debt to Reynell's microphone placement, ensuring that the echoes of the church space translate into something that sounds just as full as presence and depth on a pair of headphones. As a fine example, listen to the eerie moment, towards the end of the first track, where Hayward holds some low rumbles that vibrate at the edges like the drone of helicopter blades, while Fabbriciani whistles into the resonating church. It's that vibrating quality that gives this disc its power, that almost subliminal territory where sound becomes a supremely physical entity, existing on the edge of perception (the liner notes tell us that the hyperbass flute "can produce sounds at the lowest limits of human hearing") – those limit states, those realms, that aesthetic of risks and imperfection. I suppose the danger here is that things become too sluggish, too monolithic, too growlingly austere for a 'beautiful' experience; but beauty lies in more than just the twinkling and pretty sounds with which it can too easily be confused – it's equally, if not more so, about dedication, construction, placement, focus; about working within, and testing, the limits. And, judged on those counts, 'Nella Basilica' really is a beautiful recording. **(DG)**

[1] "Fabbriciani told me he conceived of the sounds before he had the hyperbass flute in hand; the instrument, when completed by the commissioned craftsman, enabled Fabbriciani to realize what he could already hear. 'I have been able to realize absolutely the unknown sounds that have stimulated my fantasy', he wrote me." (<http://crowwithnomouth-jesse.blogspot.com/2010/09/deep-calls-to-deep.html>. )

TETUZI AKIYAMA/ TOSHIMARU NAKAMURA – SEMI-IMPRESSIONISM

KK: 020

蝉  
Tetuzi  
Akiyama  
+  
Toshimaru  
Nakamura

象派  
蝉



SEMI-IMPRESSIONISM

**Label:** Spekk

**Release Date:** 2009

**Personnel:** Tetuzi Akiyama: acoustic guitar; Toshimaru Nakamura: no-input mixing board

**Tracklist:** Semi-Impressionism 1; Semi-Impressionism 2; Semi-Impressionism 3

**Additional Information:** Tracks recorded in May 2008: Göteborg, Norrköping, and Gävle, Sweden, 17th-20th May (1); Stockholm, 15th May (2); Vienna, 26th May (3).

Though they've been collaborators since 1997, Tetuzi Akiyama and Toshimaru Nakamura have not made many appearances together on record –

that is, until the last year or so, in which they've shared album space on Koboku Senju's 'Selektiv Hogst' and on 'In Search of Wild Tulips', a collaboration with Swedish percussionists Erik Carlsson and Henrik Olsson which might be viewed as a companion to 'Semi-Impressionism', featuring as it does quartet recordings from the same 2008 concert tour. Nakamura's work here is much 'busier' and more jolting than on some of his earlier work with sustained tones (the drones that make up 'Weather Sky', for instance), and also stands in sharp contrast to an even more recent recording, 'Egrets', released on Samadhi Sound. The latter, in fact, contains another duo with Akiyama, and, as is the case on much of that record, finds Nakamura working in a more ambient, one might even say mellow fashion, with slow transitions and generalised clouds of sound, rather than the sharp jabs, spurts and fizzes which he favours here. Akiyama's acoustic guitar, meanwhile, emerges as much from American musics – blues, and the 'fingerpicking' of John Fahey – as it does from post-Derek-Bailey improv guitar. Nonetheless, these influences remain hints, suggestions, rather than full-blown allusions or stylistic markers: the playing is slow, resonant, static, elongating both the time between each note and the length of the note itself so that there is little sense of 'progression', of forward momentum or melodic and harmonic 'development'. One might characterise this approach as somewhat austere, but, at the same time, if heard solo, this would likely exercise the same thoughtful, ultimately peaceful effect as Taku Sugimoto's 'Opposite' or Akiyama's own 'Relator'. Nakamura's electronics make this into a whole different kettle of fish, however; rather than merging into the background behind Akiyama's acoustic notes (electronics used as 'atmosphere', as a sound effect sprinkled on top of the 'proper music'), he insists on being a full duo partner, often seeming to deliberately coax out timbres that *contradict* the guitar line: a burst of particularly shrill feedback, or puffs of scuffling, rhythmically-uncertain white noise, like someone breathing disjointedly, and too heavily, into a microphone. This is by no means his only approach, and there is an odd moment of 'direct' dialogue on the final track, where he manages to create a melodic pattern from his feedback, echoing and complementing the repeated figure on which Akiyama has settled, albeit in a skew-whiff and ultimately rather disarming fashion (the feedback timbre is ever so slightly reminiscent of auto-tune). Nonetheless, one feels much of the time that the two musicians exist in co-relation, rather than 'interaction' – much in the same way the music on the CD and the words in the liner notes complement each other, sit alongside one another, but do not necessarily 'explain' each other in a systematic or obvious way. It's an approach to improvised dialogue that seems increasingly common; whether the musicians merge their identities in ambiguous combinations of similar timbres, or emphasise the separation and difference between their approaches in stark and uncompromising fashion, they are not prepared to settle for the old ways of doing improvised 'conversation'. In cases like this, clearly an example of the second 'method', the results can be difficult to get one's head round, going against so much of the rhetoric and tradition in which our listening ears are trained. This is true even if one is coming at 'Semi-Impressionism' from a well-established acquaintance with the world of the 'avant-garde': it would be much easier to get a grip on the music if the musicians were playing solo, rather than together – much easier to divide what they are doing into particular, self-contained approaches. Nakamura's contribution would come across as 'noise music' (albeit not as 'in-ner-face' as the 'power electronics' school) – intermittently shuffling and hesitant, intermittently rhythmic and grating – Akiyama's guitar as spacious, intermittently



melodic: a gentler, acoustic form of improvisation. When these strands co-exist at the same time, however, one has to think on one's feet, to adjust one's parameters and expectations – to expect, if not direct confrontation, an apparent lack of response, as much as overt co-operation and reciprocity. That's not to say that Nakamura and Akiyama are *not* responding to and considering each other's contributions, just that response and consideration may not always take the form one has grown to expect. The results are often difficult, occasionally perplexing, but well worth *working* for. **(DG)**

## **AUTECHRE – OVERSTEPS**



**Label:** Warp Records

**Release Date:** March 2010

**Tracklist:** r ess; ilanders; known(1); pt2ph8; qplay; see on see; Treale; os veix3; O=0; d-sho qub; st epreo; redfall; krYlon; Youp

**Personnel:** Rob Brown, Sean Booth: electronics

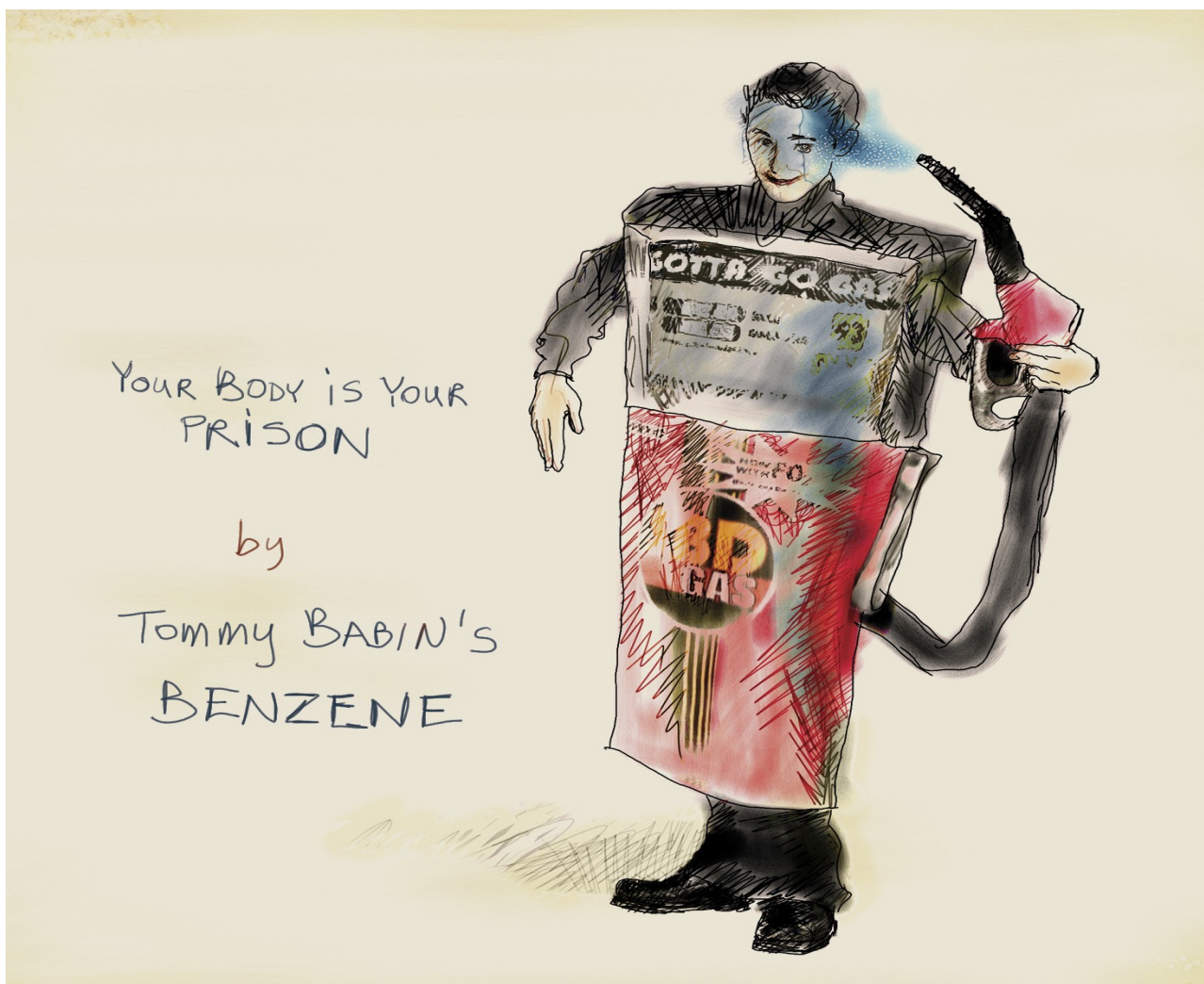
Given the 74-minute running time, and Autechre's reputation as purveyors of 'difficult' electronica, one might be tempted to read the album title of this, their latest release, as suggesting a kind of (over-)ambition. More accurately, however, one can relate the title to the duo's continued efforts to frustrate the 'dance music' impulse for which they supposedly cater and to which they are always indebted, but which they can never quite bring themselves to embrace in a straightforward manner. Thus, the word 'Oversteps' might morph into footballing 'step-overs', full of the flashiness and tricksiness which the album possesses in abundance, but also into phrases like 'out-of-step' or 'mis-step' – a kind of

tripping, hesitating, stumbling and fidgeting that seems almost ungainly. Or would do, were the textures not so *elegantly* off-balance, wrapped in an electronic sheen that vacillates between brooding sci-fi echo and grungy rhythmical impulses, even shot-through with wisps of tenderness (though these may have to compete with robot-beats and drifting fragments of electronic debris, as on 'qplay'). This is music that always contains within itself the potential to fly off in numerous different directions, sometimes all at the same time – it's beautifully poised between twitching, nervous energy, the industrial-chic of dated synthesizers, and fuzzy textures which might be called ambient if they didn't catch one so off-guard. Autechre are not out to catch the listener by the throat, but to play mind-games with them, and opening track 'r ess' is typically hard to get to grips with. It fades in on a looping melody surrounded by a big, boomy echo that threatens to overwhelm it, blurring the line between background atmospherics and 'lead line' in a kind of foggy haze. When a drum 'n bass beat comes in, it feels slowed-down, almost clunky; treated fragments of the initial melody section manage to spurt out before quickly spluttering away again, surrounded by low, descending whines like the distant sounds of car alarms or sirens, and the fade-out is swathed in ambiguity, the avoidance of any definite conclusion. This will prove characteristic of the album's onward progress: tracks seem to bleed into each other, too packed full of shifting detail and simultaneous activity to allow one to entirely relax into the experience, but, by the same token, too complex for easy absorption, even if one does subject each piece to close and careful scrutiny.

Autechre don't so much provide the soundtrack for a warehouse party as reflect back a warped version of what that experience feels like: at points the constant rhythm drifts off into an abstracted, dull thud, details blurring together even as the duo constantly throw in little spits and spurts of glitchy computerized interference and menace. The atmosphere is often downright eerie, electronic choirs weaving and wheezing around just beneath the surface or around the corner of a seemingly perky texture. Sometimes one hears the unexpected ghosts of other genres: 'Treale' contains little bursts of what sounds like a mis-firing attempt to play 60s Hammond Organ jazz, and 'known(1)' has as its 'lead instrument' something that sounds like a harpsichord or clavinet, woozily hinting at a funk bent but never managing to get it together, as individual lines echo, multiply and cross over to create a rhythmically frustrated miasma. And then, of course, there are those characteristic Autechre Melodies (a little reminiscent of Zappa's fiendishly complex synclavier lines); melodies that, due to the sheer quantity of notes and the unexpected connections between them, would prove hell to sing or whistle along to, but which insinuate themselves with a fearsome logic as they repeat over and over, willing themselves into the memory. Of course, by the time the next couple of tracks have passed – with their own set of tunes and rhythmic jiggery-pokery – the original melody gets lost in the information overload. Witness the way that the almost-catchy 'O=0' is followed by the disarming good-times vibe of 'd-sho qub' (the album's most optimistic track, despite the interspersed distortions of ring-modulated keyboards and the transition into a concluding section with a lost-in-space vibe); or the way that the 'main theme' of 'landers' is heaved out via great grinding, booming bass, incongruously juxtaposed with the polished tinkling of a computer-game soundtrack which acts as 'counter-melody'. So that's 'Oversteps': in comparison to the album's rather bitty predecessor 'Quaristice' (reviewed in Issue 2 of this

magazine), Autechre's characteristic blend of glitch, groove and atmospheric here attains a much more satisfying cohesive flow. The result is a record that, like the best of duo's work, unsettles and entrances in equal measure. **(DG)**

### **TOMMY BABIN'S BENZENE – YOUR BODY IS YOUR PRISON**



**Label:** Drip Audio

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Your Body is Your Prison; Damaged; The Thing & I; Citizen Kang; Interlude; Les Trouducuel; Pretty Boy Floyd; They Didn't Know They Were Robots; The Sky Beneath My Feet

**Personnel:** Chad Makela: baritone sax; Chad MacQuarrie: guitar, drums;  
Tommy Babin: bass; Skye Brooks: drums

Led by bassist Babin, this quartet consists of Chad Makela on baritone sax, Chad MacQuarrie on guitar and on drums, Skye Brooks, aka Mr. Get Around (see: Inhabitants & Fond of Tigers) on drums. All the compositions are Tommy's, so those of you that got excited thinking that the tune *The Sky Beneath My Feet* was a Skyclad cover, could very well be disappointed.

The CD's nine songs are indicated on the credits as being part of a suite titled "Your Body is Your Prison," and most of the songs segue directly into the next. To further embrace the continuity of the recording, the tunes were recorded in one-take, in order, straight off the studio floor.

The opening tune, which gives the suite its title, begins with a wonderfully bumpy and rambunctious bass solo and then works into some very propulsive work by Makela – the baritone making the quartet feel a lot bigger than it is and getting into Mingus or Vandermark territory – and all that energy carries into the second tune, *Damaged*. *Citizen Kang*, the fourth tune, begins with a great sax/drums duet, with Brooks wringing a lot of out his kit; when Babin joins in, the tune really takes off.

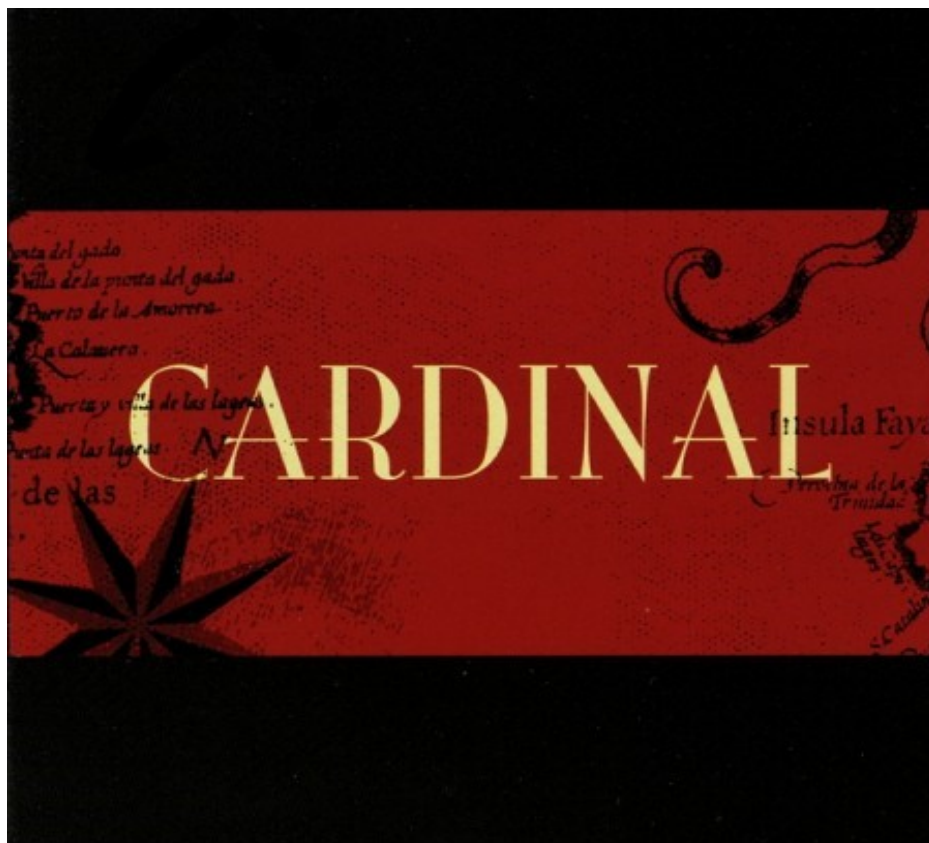
There are some lags in the recording – *The Thing and I* and *Les Trous de Ciel* meander through different sections without settling down into any of them. If there's a weakness, it's when the group sounds like they're trying to 'rock out' – the drumming and guitar sync up and get a little anthemic, which leaves the bass rooting along with the chords and generally leaves Makela the odd-man out.

Thankfully there's enough variation and cadenza/solo highlights to give everybody a chance to strut their stuff. McQuarrie gets a wonderful assortment of tones and textures out his guitar without an overt reliance on effect pedals and Babin's bass, plucked throughout, has a great warm tone.

There's no overall theme or genre being explored here – the title seems to be a play on 'your body is a temple', and the vintage picture of the gentleman about 6 feet in the air above his seat, probably taken at a spiritualist or revivalist meeting, does lend a general air of spiritual concerns but there's nothing overt.

While it's not done at a breakneck pace or with whiplash changes, the quartet do get a lot of mileage out of four instruments. It is wonderful jazz, if by jazz you mean anything goes. **(TH)**

### **COSOTTINI/ MELANI/ MIANO / PISANI – CARDINAL**



**Label:** Grimedia/Impressus

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Vocale; Vento Salto; Radici; Cardinal;  
Jump-U-Funk; Ehe; Mazes Counterpoint; Bianca; Exmod 1

**Personnel:** Mirio Cosottini: trumpet; Alessio Pisani: bassoon, contrabassoon;  
Tonino Miano: piano; Andrea Melani: drums

Restraint is the order of the day here, but in a manner that adds, rather than takes away from the quality of what is presented. The musicians are clearly very careful about the architecture of the music, some of which was created from graphic scores: one player will make a short statement, then leave a gap which another will fill with their own contribution. As a result, pieces unfold through slow, winding melodies, short bursts of individual commentary, complementary phrases, quick responses, and minute interjections.

The combination of trumpet and bassoon has a burnished quality to it that makes for one of the most immediately attractive features of the album, though the all instruments in general blend very well. On the first track, 'Vocale', things are sparse, linear and melodic; unison trumpet and bassoon treat the simple, doleful theme to ascending and descending voicings, not so much cushioned as gently supported by piano chords, while the faintest splash of Andrea Melani's cymbals peers in at the edges, in a colouristic rather than rhythmical role. The horns stop, leaving silence, a short burst of dissonant piano, and then silence again, out of which rises the second track, 'Vento Salato'. Pisani here plays the role of growling snake charmer, repeating a phrase, Miano locking in on piano with a variation on this, Cosottini entering with trumpet countermelodies, each player pursuing his own repetitive element to create an ensemble motor-rhythm. With the entrance of drums providing an even stronger rhythmic basis, the other players start to diverge from their path, one by one, Pisani sticking to longer notes, Melani's tappings suggesting a stronger rhythm than played in actuality, things ending as seamlessly and quietly as before.

'Radici' beings with an almost baroque character, Pisani providing grave counterpoint to Cosottini's trumpet; the tinkle of bells and a short solo section for percussion leads to freer improvisations. On the record's title track, a flowing bassoon lament is peppered by jazzily rhythmic trumpet and by little rhythmic rumbles combining the extreme high and low ends of the piano keyboard. But, as always, just when one player seems to be taking the 'lead' (in this case, Pisani), another takes over, the trumpet assuming prominence as it rises to a barely-suppressed scream; then, building again over a piano that threatens thunder but never quite gets there, a collective combination of yearning, sliding trumpet and bassoon push themselves into another silence.

'Jump-U-Funk' belies its jazz fusion title until right at the end of the track, when the group suddenly locks into a firmly-defined drum beat; before that, a combination of long silences, unison melodies, and wispy screams into nothing. 'Ehe' has a more 'structured' sound, trumpet and bassoon declaiming over repeated piano notes. An extrapolative piano solo (the first time we've heard any one player develop any melodic ideas at such length on the entire record) follows, and continues in freer vein over the return of the unison melody. 'Mazes Counterpoint' is more cautious, the instruments carefully following each other in linear, introspective fashion, Miano punctuating his discourse with occasional

chords that suggest a barely-suppressed sense of crisis, hysteria. Things are, if anything, even more introverted on the next track, with long bassoon notes sounding over eerily sustained, repeated piano figures. Melani's contributions are so subdued (and subtle) that it's easy to forget he's there, until a cymbal splash or a bass drum thump eases itself onto the edge of the aural field. Pretty, filigree piano figures signal a quiet fading away. 'Exmod 1' sounds like it's going to be more overtly 'dramatic' as the whole ensemble enter with a sustained sound-cloud, but Webernian piano, succinct and crystalline, dispels that notion. Something with the quality of a funeral march emerges, breaks down again; tiny scratches on the piano strings can barely be heard; and then nothing can be heard. The music is over.

'Cardinal' is a record that often sounds beautiful, but that never allows itself the luxury of sustaining any idea at too great a length, that always keeps things on edge, each player holding back so that the group as a whole can benefit. Testament to such an approach is the fact that 'Cardinal' contains some of the quietest and most unobtrusive drumming I've heard; Melani contributes significantly throughout without ever drawing undue attention to himself. The result of all this is that every note takes on a kind of immense drama: Webern once again comes to mind, his symphony a kind of insanely-compressed, ten-minute version of Mahler without the grandiosity. Though the record as a whole is far longer than that symphony, it's broken down into shorter tracks, and, within those tracks, into sections that are shorter still; fragments cohered into a whole by the strength of the ensemble interaction, by the absolute fidelity paid to the principle of listening to others at all times. There's also something intensely sad about the music – Cosottini's trumpet on the final track has the vulnerability of 'Sketches of Spain': the muted lament of things said, or half-said, or unsaid, interrupted and swallowed up by the ever-present silence out of which 'Cardinal' rises and back into which it returns. **(DG)**

### **CURRENT 93 – HAUNTED WAVES, MOVING GRAVES**



**Label:** Coptic Cat

**Release Date:** May 2010

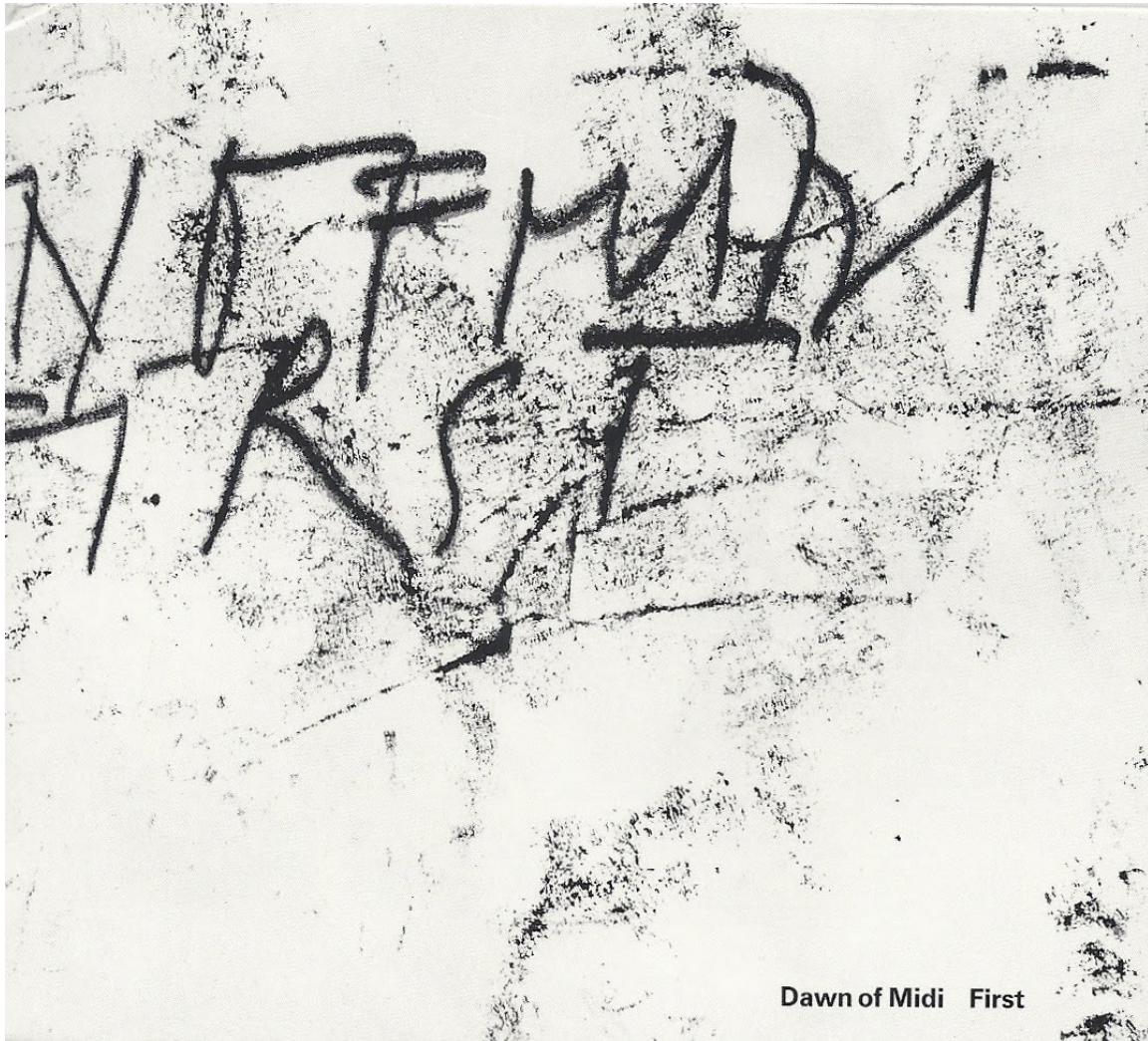
**Tracklist:** She is Naked like the Water; The Sound of the Storm was Spears

**Personnel:** David Tibet; Andrew Liles; John Contreras; Baby Dee

**Additional Information:** Released as a limited-edition, 50-minute LP; also as a 71-minute CD.

A real surprise, David Tibet's latest offering ditches the sung/spoken esoteric/eccentric vocals we've come to associated with Current 93 for an extended, minimal instrumental work that, to my mind, rivals, in terms of both conception and execution, John Tavener's 'The Protecting Veil', the piece to which it bears closest resemblance. Tibet's soundscape is more radically slow-moving, more radically event-less than Tavener's: throughout the entire 71 minute span of the disc, we hear the sound of breaking waves, at first combined with the rumbling after-echo of someone scraping the low-end strings of a piano, set sometimes over, sometimes under, sometimes against sombre arco cello melodies. During the first ten minutes, the piano/waves are louder than the cello, so that the melody enters consciousness almost indirectly, and rather than follow the simple route of a crescendo in which the cello gradually assumes prominence as a solo instrument, things drift in and out so that foreground and background are exchangeable and malleable, the whole piece following the repetitive logic of those waves, of something seemingly unchanging which is, in fact, slowly moving, eroding, changing from high to low tide; imperceptible change too gradual to be effectively registered by our minds, so used to the never-ending onward rush of event and incident. There are moments where the cello simply sustains a single note, a drone which might normally suggest a peaceful, steady ground, but here becomes something unresolved, uncertain; and this is a tension on which the whole work builds, the dialectic of contemplative stillness, lack of change, and chest-filling grief, lament waiting to burst out into fuller and more aggressively anguished expression. Even when more (multi-tracked) cellos enter the mix, in overlapping lines of sorrowful monody, what we get is not a 'climax' but a section that doesn't 'go anywhere' as much as hover in the same sonic and harmonic field for an extended period. And the continuance of the wave sounds into the second track ensures an exquisite yet almost painfully drawn out lack of progression, the cello now replaced by trembling sustained organ. Another ten minutes, whispered voices (a Current 93 staple) whisper, flick and lash round the edges of the soundscape; and then the first genuine change of the entire piece, as melodic piano repetitions join the swirling waves, whispers and organ to inject a more hopeful feeling into proceedings. It all fades out so slowly, to breath-holding silence – and then nothing. Not something one could live with every day (and perhaps, in the end, a little more 'lightweight' than it appears), this is nonetheless a hugely compelling listen. Those wave sounds (whether they're field recordings or, as seems more likely, electronically-generated) might threaten to place the work in a kind of illustrative context (the 'haunted waves' of the title), but this is thankfully left under-developed, as suggestion rather than imposition. And I think that's why I find this piece so appealing, and yet dislike the 'Holy Minimalism' of John Tavener or James MacMillan to which it bears some affinity: there is a lack of religious pretension, a lack of programmatic or explicitly ritualistic portent under whose weight a piece of music can find itself drowning. 'Haunted Waves, Moving Graves' balances a simultaneous sense of half-awake lullaby-lament and a ponderous lack of ease; and in its sense of extreme slowness and lack of development; it is genuinely and convincingly minimalist music. **(DG)**

## DAWN OF MIDI – FIRST



Dawn of Midi First

**Label:** Accretions

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Phases in Blue; Laura Lee; Civilization of Mud and Ember;

The Floor; Tale of Two Worlds; One; Hindu Pedagogy; Annex; No Abhor; In Between

**Personnel:** Amino Belyamani: piano; Aakaash Israni: contrabass; Qasim Naqvi: drums and toys

It's unusual to see such a new band receiving what seems to be almost universally high praise from the critics, indicating that, while Dawn of Midi may not be receiving the jazz press hype they perhaps deserve, there is definitely something rather special going on here. There's no point in worrying whether to call this 'jazz' or 'free improvisation' (though all the pieces are improvised, the vocabulary often has a distinct jazz edge to it). Rather, this group has come about at a time when such worries seem irrelevant, when statements of intent can be made through music rather than ideological or theoretical proscriptions; what matters most of all is the creation of serious and engaging sound.

The record opens with quiet but purposeful bass and drums from Aakaash Israni and Qasim Naqvi, soon joined by the piano of Amino Belyamani. There's no real sense of anyone 'soloing' as such; rather, the three musicians collaborate to create music that contains both the melodic/harmonic legacy of jazz and the textural approach of free improv, but prioritises neither. As they write on their website, "In the global art music setting, one can sense a paradigm shift that



veers towards an appreciation of timbre, color, and the silences that frame a musical offering...In this age of modern improvisation where the distinctions between musical normatives are blurred, DOM's thematic and timbral approach is reminiscent of many genres bound in one simultaneous moment." Without the strictures of chord changes or the 'theme-solos-theme' template, the improvisations are nevertheless full of memories, fragments, wisps of genre, of music heard and absorbed by the players. But this never degenerates into a merely banal *quoting* of genre; instead, the kinship between different musics is recognized as the *background* to the creation of new sounds and discoveries. It's a way of 'making it new' without trying too hard to do so: innovation by stealth, if you like, or innovation by degrees, with the traditions of the past as a rich well to draw on rather than a burden or hindrance.

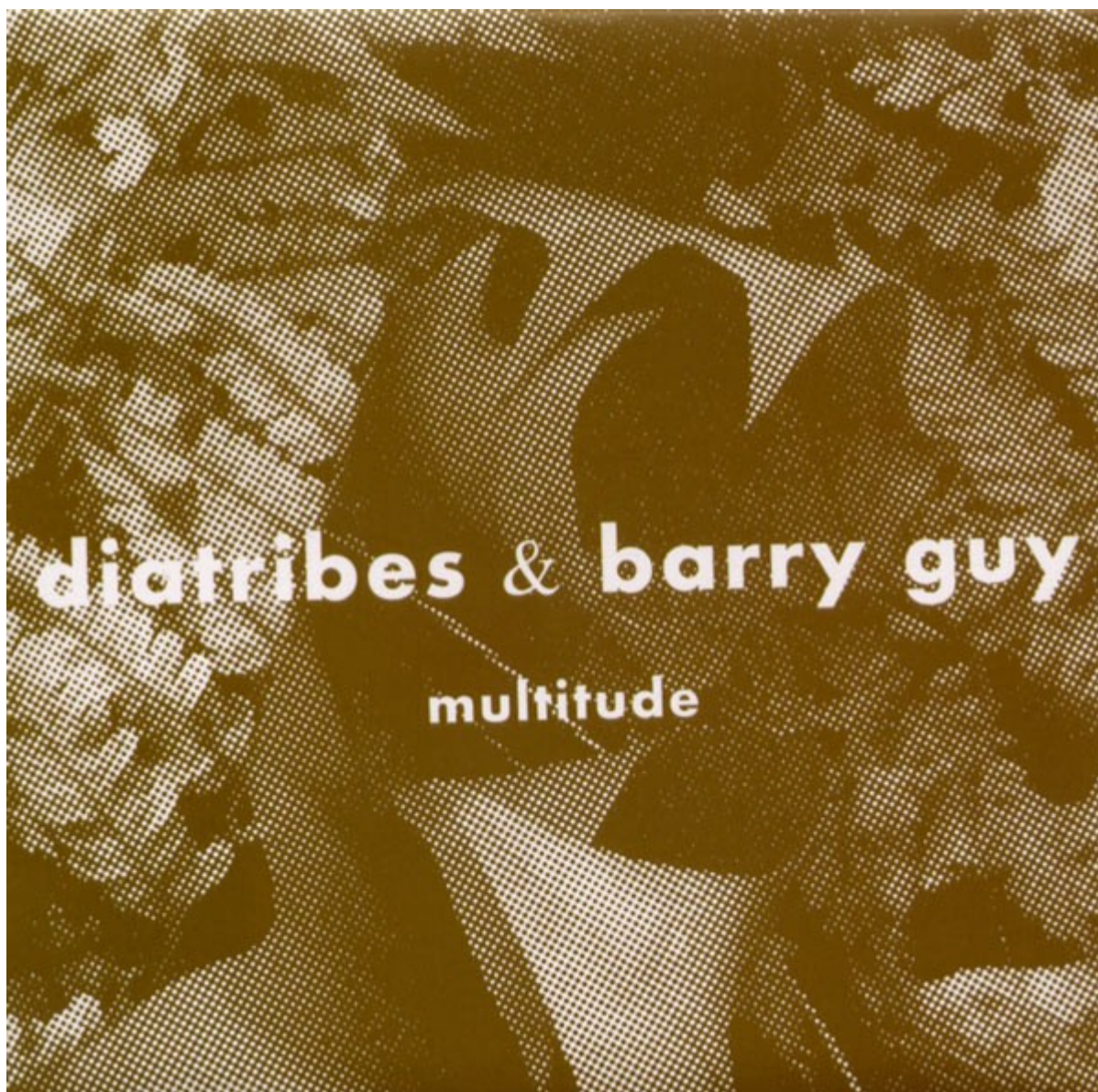
There's nothing flashy or self-consciously dramatic here; the tracks rise and fall, dip and sway, moving away before you can pin them down. Part-way through 'Laura Lee', the piano suddenly introduces a meltingly affective, melancholic chord which feels perfectly appropriate, though it doesn't obviously arise from the territory the trio has just been exploring – and then, even before the sustain-pedall'd echoes of that chord have faded away, Belyamani starts repeating a note, not quite hammering, not quite feathering it. What follows is the most exquisitely judged use of space, bass and drums working in perfect tandem with Belyamani's odd pauses, which are longer than the momentum of the music might lead one to expect, but shorter than a fully-fledged 'silence'. It's as if something really lyrical, flowing, song-like is about to emerge, but is dampened, broken up, forced back underground. This suggestion of what might have been – an allusion to what has not yet come to pass – imparts a wonderful sense of openness. This is a world of possibility in which choices are made at every turn; you can hear the players thinking this music through as they are playing it. Which shouldn't lead to the usual accusations of 'cerebral' and 'intellectual' music, as opposed to music from the heart, from the gut – what Dawn of Midi exemplify is that that supreme control goes hand in hand with the creation of emotional states. This is music tied to the motions of the body and the motions of the mind.

I may not have been very specific in what I've said so far, and it's perhaps best to discover the various techniques and variations DOM spin through real time listening rather than after-the-fact criticism. That said, I will note something that happens quite a lot on the record: an emphasis on detail, one note or minute phrase being returned to again and again, all the development occurring in variations of touch. Mid-way through track five, 'Tale of Two Worlds', there appears a minimal repeated figure, sounded with a cross between bluesy insouciance and something almost despairing, punctuated by the dampened dabs of a note sounded while the finger clamps down the vibrations from the string. One is drawn into this, forced to examine the implications of a musical phrase that one might have overlooked in the general development of the piece; it's as if the players have suddenly decide to zoom in, to focus very closely and specifically for a couple of moments, and one realizes that this could happen at any time, one realizes the trio's great awareness of the myriad of possible implications in everything that they play.

For the ultimate example, listen to the last track, 'In Between', where a

single piano note (and then a small number of alternating notes) sounds out again and again, for minutes at a time, bass and drums gradually boiling and bubbling underneath, a chord in the other hand supporting but never fully developing the scant material, all creating a kind of momentum through stasis; and, finally, a meditative quality, the piano reminiscent of tolling bells, the bass plucking understated counter-melody, drums with the faintest taps and splashes, a trance with off-centre rhythmic accompaniment. Once this lengthy section finally finishes, and the CD ends, something still seems to hang in the air – the silence itself turned into music by what preceded it. How the music will restart on DOM's next release only time will tell, but, on the evidence of this auspicious debut recording, we can expect great things. **(DG)**

**DIATRIBES & BARRY GUY – *MULTITUDE***



**Label:** cave12

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** le grand jeu financier; le poids des humeurs; corrosion du possible; pour les hommes du port; ne plus avoir peur des monsters; un peu plus rouge; exil

**Personnel:** barry guy: doublebass; d'incise: laptop, objects; Cyril bondi: drums, percussions; benoit moreau: clarinet on no.3

Diatribes, despite their name, are not the type to make shouty music, music of polemical over-statement. Nonetheless, what they create is far from laid-back or quietist; it's joltingly, bracingly mobile, full of interlocking and interweaving textures and actions that avoid the more linear unfolding of much 'European Free Improvisation', whereby instruments tend to remain as discrete units, each pursuing their own path in concord (and sometimes discord) with the other members of the ensemble. Diatribes, by contrast, desire to run rings round each-other, in a scintillating, quick-silver, chattering, sometimes clattering, overlapping dialogue that blurs the distinction between who's speaking and when, thereby creating a whole whose parts can never quite be disentangled from each other. They work on the interplay between the percussive and the electronic: Cyril Bondi is nominally a 'drummer', D'Incise nominally plays 'laptop electronics,' but both employ numerous percussive 'objects' which they use in such a way that it can be very hard to tell who exactly is doing what. What results is a kind of musical border region, where percussion stretches out to taut, drone-like sounds, 'wild ascending lisps' and slow, trembling groans, created from the friction of bow on metal, while electronics merge with 'objects' in rustling, scratching, tumbling figures, complementing and contrasting with the recognisable drum playing – yes, the recognisable drum playing that *does* appear through all the thicket of 'small sounds', though in little eddies, scurries, flurries, rather than in big, rhythmic statements.

Barry Guy is perhaps the ideal partner for this duo, never (grand)standing out as the 'special' invited guest, the 'world famous', 'veteran' improviser who's deigned to play with the kids in order to show them how it's done; rather, he leaps right on into their world, for minutes at a time turning his double-bass into something seemingly other than itself, playing at the extreme high register of his instrument to ghostly effect, turning the strings into tuned percussion, thwacking and strumming them, moving from strange, jerked-out blurts to sharp, darting, rippling waves, sliding arco under everything with an almost imperceptible, near-melodic rumble, before dissolving into harmonics that merge with the creaking-door sounds emerging round him. Listen to track four, 'pour les homes du port', where Guy is playing sequences of held notes, figures that rise slowly up the clef only to descend back down like a sigh of resignation – figures that possess the most subtle, melancholic flavour, but are played so quietly they can barely be heard over blacksmith's forge clangs and scrapes. And then from that he's immediately into the almost unbearable tension of grimly-dragged low arco scrape ('ne plus avoir peur des monstres'); and from that to uncertain plucking, resonances almost reminiscent of kora music, raindrop-delicacy, gradually-emerging rhythmic rumble, mesmerically attractive but never safe, always liable to disappear somewhere, to morph into something, else – even into a straight-forward, tapping rhythm, and something approaching a simple melody! ('un peu plus rouge').

And Guy is not the only guest; we mustn't forget Benoît Moreau's clarinet on the third track, 'corrosion du possible': howling, open, not smooth or mellifluous as in the classical repertoire but almost choking its way into the frantic web of trio sound, meshing with Guy's high bass, circular-breathing, bird-tweeting, squawking through piercing tinnitus of barely-audible laptop, cymbal whorl.

Despite the frenetic quality of such sections, one might feel that the music tends to understatement as a whole – an incorrect assessment, but one that's possible because of the way the musicians *creep* up to climaxes (if one can call them that), refusing to signpost them as orgasmic, rising shouts; instead the knuckles whiten as one grips the arm of one's seat more and more, clenches one's jaw, focuses more and more deeply on what is happening – as volume increases, as the group lock into a particular rhythmic or harmonic area with an intensity that's almost harrowing. Diatribes have found a very special way of interacting creatively, a spontaneously-generated form that does seem to possess something genuinely new and fresh – though this has not come about through a deliberate pursuit of novelty for its own sake (gimmickry). They have somehow managed to create a musical space where the usual harmonic or melodic worries and constraints frequently just do not seem to apply, and where the music itself has a vitality that mitigates against any loss that might result; and for this they really *should* be listened to. Or, to put it more simply: 'Multitude' is a flat-out brilliant disc which deserves – no, demands! – that you seek it out and hear what it has to say. Highly recommended. (DG)

**D'INCISE – SÉCHERESSE PLANTÉE EN PLEIN CIEL**



**Label:** Gruenrekorder

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** le fléau ; regarder la croix plutôt que la pouter; trente ans en trois heures; sécheresse plantée en plein ciel; omnipresence; somnolence à Sosnoviec; insouciance apparente; sécheresse en périphérie; couloirs obliques; à quelques orages d'intervalle; la vie immobile

**Personnel:** D'Incise: field recordings, electronics

**Additional Information:** Available in a limited CD-R edition of 50 from [www.gruenrekorder.de](http://www.gruenrekorder.de).

A solo project from D'Incise (of Geneva-based improvising duo Diatribes), 'Sécheresse Plantée En Plein Ciel' shares something, perhaps, of that jittery, skittering, scrabbling electronics and percussion set-up, but only as an element on the periphery of its overall musical vision. This music is more about atmosphere than moment-to-moment interaction and change, though that's not to say it skimps on detail: however, it draws one into its flow through the *repetitive* quality of its 11 tracks, which are structured around beats or droning synthesizer loops. The cover art gives a good indication as to what to expect: flecks of light emerging at the edge of spreading stains of darkness on the one hand, and on the other, landscapes flooded by an orange cloud of dust that renders only the sketchiest details visible – the shadows under stones, the vague outline of a spindly bush. Similarly, the music is expertly constructed out of a mix of primary elements, which continue throughout the piece, and smaller spurts, buzzes, hisses – sampled sounds that disappear almost as quickly as they emerge; unconscious thoughts, sudden traces of movement glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, ghosts stalking the corridors, disappearing round the corner. The effect can be unsettling, though it can also be playful, brooding, perhaps even melancholic. Track 8 is entitled 'sécheresse en périphérie' – 'drought on the periphery' – which nicely captures the record's sense of dread, of a crisis about to happen, or the faintest echoes of one that has already happened, a long time ago, yet lingers on still, the grubby traces of the past imprinted on the mind. Stains can be scrubbed from walls, ruined buildings can be rebuilt, wounds can be stitched up – but the scars of memory are less easy to heal.

And memory is an important factor here – D'Incise created these soundscapes from field recordings made in the Czech Republic and Poland a year before the album was composed in Geneva. Field recordings abstracted from their source, voices and creaks and clankings – a station announcement, the sound of moving transport, the crackle of a lighted match – negate the re-assuring equivalence of sound to something particular in the world, turn it into something that deceives, that echoes, that can't be pinned down. Can one trust one's sense? What is one being *told* through these sounds? Perhaps this is something to do with the very notion of recording – a sound played back, days, weeks, months, years after the event, has lost its connection to what originally produced it, has become an empty echo in technology's endless playback – the natural has become the synthetic, the imitation, the reflection. D'Incise writes: "this album is something like a blur travel diary second reading," and a further layer presents itself here: while he himself may know the source of these recordings, however abstracted and musicked they have become, his listeners do not have that privilege. All they have to go on is guesswork. The result – for this listener at least – is that one cannot entirely surrender oneself to the sounds; at the edge of this 'ambient' music is something troubling; a promise of 'signification' offered by the field recording aspect is like a carrot dangled in the air, always pulled away at the last moment. Whereas a written diary might pretend to offer up its writer's inmost thoughts (those he cannot tell others), might provide access to the core of that person in a way that would never be possible in a social context, this audio diary refuses the narrativizing at the heart of the written diary, leaving only the vague sense impressions, the vaguest feelings. It offers nothing concrete; everything is shifting, elusive. Do the suggestions of a climax, a crisis, at the end of track six 'reflect' a personal dilemma, an emotional trauma, or something as innocuous as a train passing under a tunnel? To pose such questions in the first place is an

error – it is to fundamentally misconstrue the processes of this ‘diary’.

The danger in a project such as this would be using field recordings as just another element in a vague ambient wash of sound – like the ‘whale song’ or ‘rainforest tranquillity’ CDs you might find in an English garden centre. What D’Incise achieves here is something much more interesting. The field recordings are not used in the manic, collage-sampling fashion of something like C. Spencer Yeh’s ‘The Strangler’, which in fact has a stronger connection to ‘signification’ – in the manner of the fragments one catches from a radio station. Rather, they seem to have been interiorized into the very heart of the music, integrated into, and even generating, its textural and rhythmic structure: quietly clanking and clicking loops, suggestions of children’s voices, pizzicato strings, a double-bass, a twinkling ‘riff’; everything suggested, nothing revealed. **(DG)**

**PAUL DUNMALL / CHRIS CORSANO – IDENTICAL SUNSETS**

**PAUL DUNMALL**

**CHRIS CORSANO**



**IDENTICAL SUNSETS**

**Label:** ESP Disk

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Identical Sunsets; Living Proof; Better Get Another Lighthouse; Out of Sight

**Personnel:** Paul Dunmall: border pipes, tenor saxophone; Chris Corsano: drums

**Additional Information:** Recorded live at the Slak Bar, Cheltenham, England, April 2008

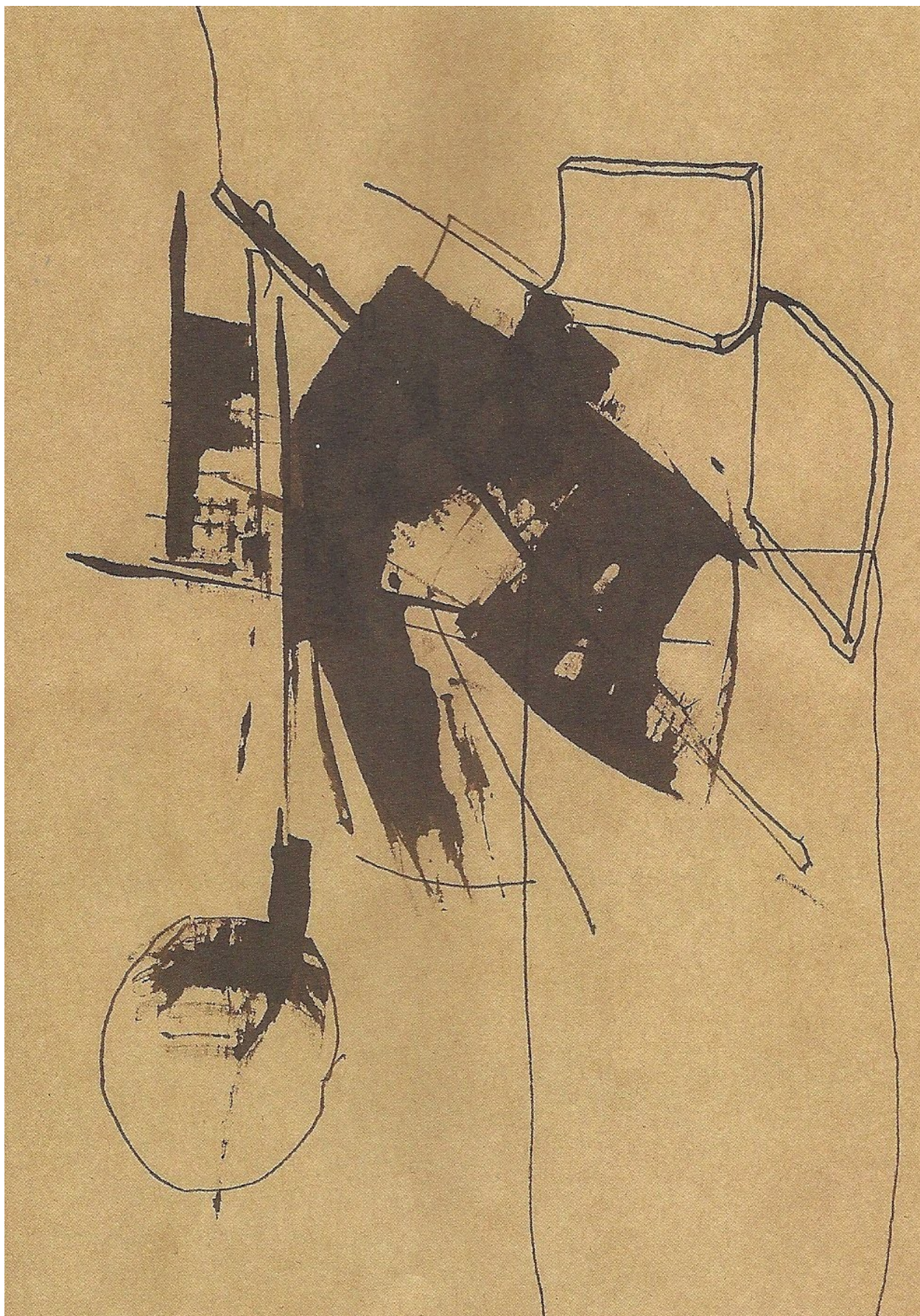
Paul Dunmall's career is deservedly into its fourth decade; with his breadth and depth, he's completely at home in the free improv and folk camps, having played with many UK greats such as Barry Guy, Danny Thompson, and Elton Dean, and in the group Mujician, with Keith Tippett, Tony Levin and Paul Rogers. Though just mid-way through his 20's, Chris Corsano has already had a lifetime's worth of activity – almost 100 recordings with everybody from the Vibracathedral Orchestra to Jandek, Björk, and most members of Sonic Youth; most notably, about a quarter of his discs have been the result of a long and fruitful partnership with sax wildman Paul Flaherty.

The short-ish opening track is *Identical Sunsets* has Dunmall wringing the life out of some border pipes. These pipes are related to the traditional Scottish pipes but, as Wikipedia tells me, are not as loud or raucous; not that you'd think the border pipes are quaint and dainty after that tune. Pipes are not a passing fancy for Paul, given his previous dalliances with them, most notably 20030's Solo Bagpipes on his Duns Limited Edition label. Chris joins in for the next tune, *Living Proof*, and matches Paul's tenor hysterics and acrobatics with aplomb – lighting fast rolls, cymbals and snare scattered about like an old man on a park bench feeding pigeons. The tune dips and rolls with tempo and ferocity as both performers matching each other's jabs with the same intent and vigor. *Better Get Another Lighthouse* opens with some generally restrained stick work from Chris, but it's only a handful of seconds before the velocity ramps up and Paul then leaps on, the music already in full flight. *Out of Sight* carries on much of the same, which is just fine, as you don't fix what ain't broke; near the end, the audience hoots and hollers in agreement.

Recorded live in April 2008 at the Slak Bar in Cheltenham, England, 'Identical Sunsets' is the ESP debut for both performers. Paul and Chris play well and play in simpatico, aping each other only in force and magnitude. While the frantic playing can give the impression that they're both soloing and just happen to be near each other, they respond to each other's push and pull.

By most accounts, Chris generally plays with a very minimal kit – a few cymbals & high-hat, about two toms, snare and bass – and he gets everything out of it. Paul, other than the opening track, sticks with his tenor and employs a variety of techniques and approaches – it's not just rapid-fire runs or skronk, but everything in between, as well as some moments of heartfelt melody. These two make a great pair. **(TH)**

**PATRICK FARMER/ DOMINIC LASH - *BESTIARIES***



**Label:** Cathnor / **Release Date:** 2010 / **Tracklist:** Cinnamologus; Pard; Bonnacon /  
**Personnel:** Patrick Farmer; percussion; Dominic Lash: bass



A bestiary is a Medieval collection of fantastic beasts – the descriptions are based on what travelers think they saw or heard from the locals during long travels to foreign lands and some turned into fodder for Christian symbolism, allegory, or fable. The three songs of this recording are each named after such beasties: a cinnamologus is a bird that lives in a cinnamon tree - reports vary as to how nasty the bird was and whether it makes its nest out of a cinnamon sticks; a pard is a cheetah-type animal with a spotted coat, and when she mates with a lion, apparently a leopard is the offspring; a bonnacon has horns like a ram and emits dung that it can launch a great distance and which burns on contact.

Patrick Farmer is an Oxford-based percussionist with an admirable list of co-performers: John Tilbury, The Hunter Gracchus, and Chora; on his blog – <http://ideasattachedtoobjects.blogspot.com> – he lists his occupation as approaching drums without drums. Double-bassist Dominic Lash is one of the main agitators in the Oxford Improvisers, is very prolific in gigs & recordings, and has several standing groups including the Dominic Lash Trio; high-profile and recent gig mates include Tony Conrad, Joe Morris, John Butcher, and Evan Parker.

This recording is their first release, is all acoustic, and has no external processing. It's up for debate if this music requires rapt attention or can be allowed to fade into the background, though there's a general comment on Patrick's blog to listen to the audio with good speakers to catch all nuances. Thankfully, cranking your speakers will probably not result in any permanent damage as the sounds here do not have savage peaks.

You're a third of the way into the 2<sup>nd</sup> track before you hear the first 'recognizable' notes from the bass - solid but rubbery pizz. But the three songs are suite-like, as the end of *Bonnacon* comes to a clear and obvious rising climax that puts a punctuation mark to the musical sentence of this entire recording. Given the emphasis on non-traditional sounds here, trying to ascertain who made what sound is pointless; after that mental exercise has been abandoned, it does free one's mind to just listen. At that point, this recording is entirely captivating and rewards careful attention. But still, the mind does reel thinking what's been hit, tapped, dragged, crumbled, crinkled, moved, or vibrated across what variety of surfaces (wood, skins, strings) to get the textures, rustlings, and vague sounds presented.

The emphasis here is on sound, not music; hence, this recording presents the questions that you need to answer. Clearly, these are two very patient men; and the payoff for approaching 'Bestiaries' likewise is considerable. **(TH)**

## FOND OF TIGERS – CONTINENT & WESTERN



**Label:** Drip Audio

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Soheb; Continent & Western; Vitamin Meathawk;  
September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005; Grandad; Misc. Romance; Upheaval

**Personnel:** JP Carter: trumpet; Jesse Zubot: violin; Sandro Perri: vocals on 'Vitamin Meathawk';  
Mats Gustafsson: saxophone & electronics on 'Grandad'; Stephen Lyons: vocals on 'Upheaval',  
guitar; Morgan McDonald: piano; Shanto Bhattacharya: bass; Skye Brooks, Dan Gaucher: drums

This band is the jewel of the Drip Audio crown. Led by guitarist Stephen Lyons, the septet line-up hasn't changed – Morgan McDonald on piano, JP Carter (also heard on *The Inhabitants*) on trumpet, violin played by Drip Audio honcho Jesse Zubot, drummers Skye Brooks (*Inhabitants* & *Tommy Babin's Benzene*) and Dan Gaucher, and Shanto Bhattacharya on bass – and certainly offers up enough ammo to provide a rich source of textures. For this recording they pull in two guest stars, with single-track appearances by Sandro Perri, providing lyrics and vocals, and Mats Gustafsson, bringing his sax and electronics.

As usual, odd time-signatures and spastic rhythms abound. At times the group sounds like an angry/amped-up *Godspeed, You Black Emperor*, at times they mellow out like *Tortoise*, but, by still managing to straddle the instrumental line between post-rock and nü-prog, it's no surprise that the band has been

dubbed 'post-everything'. The longer songs are suite-like, with riff-based sections that usually contrast with their predecessor. A general lack of obvious solos is refreshing, but most instruments have their turns at being in the foreground. They're not jazz, but certainly jazzy, as the emphasis is on the collaborative aspect of the music; they're happy to lock-step or groove, at times even getting into some lovely minimalism, especially when one of the drummers is laying on the tuned percussion.

I caught the band at the Guelph Jazz Festival in '08 and the chaos of all the members on stage was not reassuring, not to mention the sound in the large church basement that played host. However, it was clear then and on this disc that they move as a group – on stage, there were no rock pretensions or posturing; everybody knew their part and stuck to it. Granted, this is not music that allows for random noodling, but everybody stuck with the programme.

*Soheb* opens with juicy herky-jerky riffs and bubbling bass that are the foundation for some guitar and trumpet leads before it starts to wobble and then heads into a tight second section. An electronic hum in the background at the beginning lends a distinctly lo-fi vibe to *Vitamin Meathawk* before Sandro's mellow and ethereal vocal comes in. *Sept. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005*'s piano intro quickly gives way to angular and mechanical riffing that varies between being as harsh as FoT can get and some quasi-Reichian phrasing. *Grandad* opens with Gustafsson's squelches and tortured electronics before he wails away with the band as support; the tune then devolves into a shambling improv which provides the most visceral sounds of the entire recording and ends with some lonesome whistling of the main riff of the opening track. *Upheaval* features a few stanzas of lyrics sung by Lyons and an almost sing-along word-free refrain at its close; the slow vibe of this song ends the recording on a reflective and wistful note.

Fond of Tigers are a good, tight band. The intensity is consistently high, even with the variety of tones and textures they've put on this recording, and there's nary a wasted moment. **(TH)**

### **RICHARD HARDING / PHIL HARGREAVES – GRACULUS**



**Label:** whi-music / **Release Date:** 2010 / **Tracklist:** Everything was Possible; Axor; Kiril; Stone; Mytishchi; Silver Lost its Value; Vernal; Almost Comprehensible; Water in a Dragnet / **Personnel:** Richard Harding: classical & electric guitar; Phil Hargreaves: soprano sax, flute, voice

A graculus is another name for a jackdaw, a member of the crow family. The bird is a gregarious scavenger, an opportunistic omnivore. The musical equivalent would be that anything goes. The spiky lettering on the case and a picture of what looks like Shiva angrily playing a theorbo did make me brace for an onslaught. However, the music here is generally on the calm and quiet side.

Both performers are based out of Liverpool. Richard is a classical guitarist (and musical director for the Liverpool Guitar Society) but he's not afraid to occasionally run his classical or electric guitar through effect pedals. Phil plays soprano sax, flute and voice and has been active for most of the last decade, playing with Simon H Fell, Paul Hession, and others.

The opening track, *Everything was possible*, begins with clicks and pops from the soprano sax and some rapidly muted or muffled notes from the classical guitar and alternates between those passages and moments of subdued playing. *Axor* opens with some tasteful glissando chords on the guitar which then becomes the background for the sax before the two instruments depart for mutual exploration; this is one of the stronger tracks on the CD, along with its successor, *Kiril*, which has adventurous guttural voice work from Phil and Richard's heavily processed electric.

During some of the quieter moments on this disc, the music can get a little motionless; the guitar seems to be generally set the tone as to how ferocious the music will be, with the classical resulting in the more ponderous tracks. *Almost Comprehensible* is the exception with a several passages of very frenzied classical.

While not quite the free-for-all that I anticipated, the music is engaging. However, if it was half the length (9 songs with only two coming in under 5min. and a total running time of an hour), the music would be twice as interesting.

As indicated in the liner notes, these tracks were selected from recordings made in a variety of venues between Dec '08 and Dec '09. This recording is available for free via Phil Hargreaves' bandcamp page – <http://philhargreaves.bandcamp.com/album/graculus> - as well as the webpage of Phil's label, Whi Music – <http://www.whi-music.co.uk/catalogue.htm>; hard-copies are also available for purchase via the website. **(TH)**

### **HEU(S-K)ACH – un**



**Label:** Test Tube

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** un; deux; trois; quatre

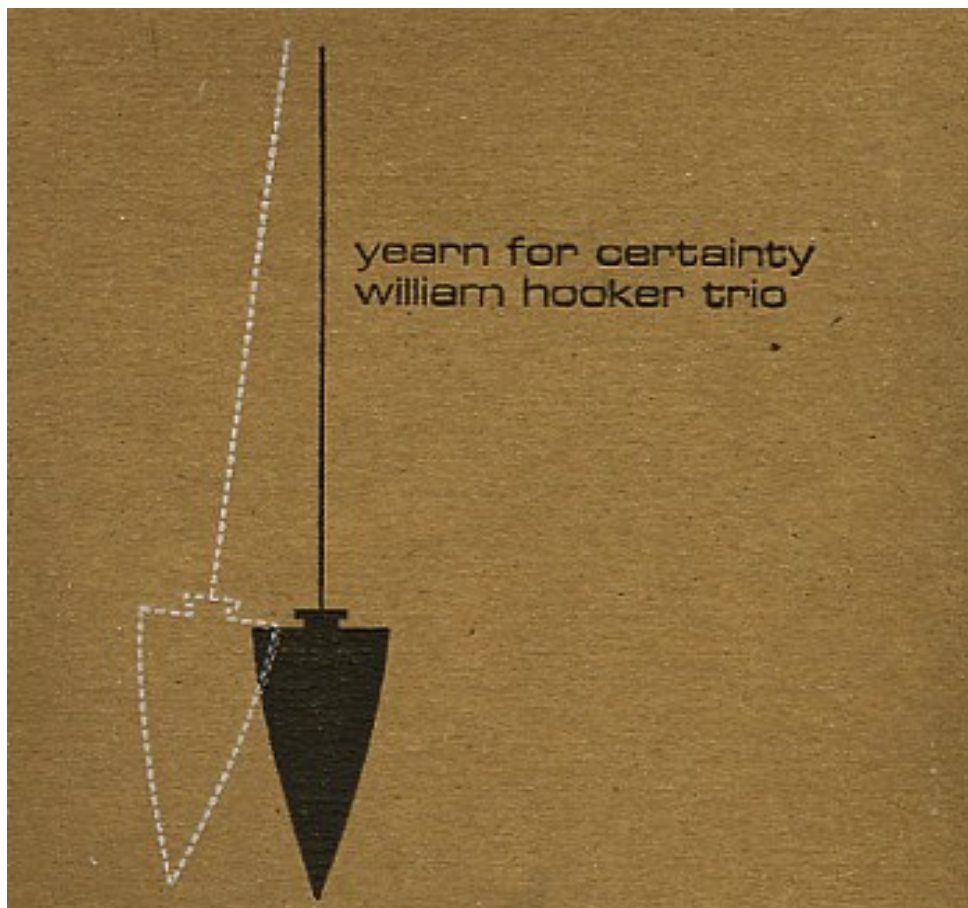
**Personnel:** D'Incise: laptop, objects; Marcel Chagrin: guitar, bass drum

**Additional Information:** Recorded live at Tivoli16, Geneva, 26.06.2009

This release finds D'Incise, who co-leads the duo Diatribes with percussionist Cyril Bondi (and numerous international guest artists), working once again within a free-improvising duo format. His discrete, grainy approach is soon recognisable from within that group – low, beating electronic sonorities laid over a prickly bed of glitches and crackles, alongside acoustic rustlings, squelchings and piercing bowed cymbal scrapes. The first track is striking precisely because it doesn't go for immediate, punch-to-the-gut impact; instead, Chagrin plucks out the same chord over and over, emphasising the softer sonorities of his instrument, though with a smattering of feedback. A gradual rhythmic intersection between guitar and laptop, accentuated by bass drum, lends the music the air of a slowly passing funeral march. 'deux' opens with similar hanging, almost inert guitar sounds, D'Incise creating a mini-whirlpool of squealing and scratching that trickles out to near-silence as the music reaches a moment of quiet stasis, guitar and bass drum at once rhythmic and immobile, a slowed-down heartbeat. Struck singing bowl and the music forces the listener to hold themselves in suspense, to avoid movement, to quieten their breathing, even to hold their breath, at once desiring to be lost within the sound and aware that, at any moment, it could change; there's a fragility here, underscored by the little swirls of feedback, a sense that the electronics creating this calm could soon run away into chattering activity. With great patience and fidelity to the mood, the duo don't let this happen: the music remains on the threshold of inattention, and it's possible that, at any one moment, it could seem either totally absorbing or frustratingly reticent, depending on how much one is enamoured of the prevailing sonorities (everything is still underlain by that near-static guitar). A little swell of chiming percussion representing a temporary increase in volume soon fades to the previous hush, with more soft chimes adding something of a temple atmosphere; except that the ritual ceremonies are heard as if through the fuzz of a semi-sleeping state. Still the bass drum provides a constant tread – progress towards a goal, or marching on the spot? – still percussion rises and rings out, now in a crescendo, the music imperceptibly becoming louder, with swirls and croaks, but dipping back down once more, drum replaced by immobile guitar, then by silence. 'quatre' is the first track not to have at its heart the guitar sonorities laid out at the very beginning of the disc; instead, music-box, rubbed contact-mic, single-note pluck – wispy, whispering, overlapping; guitar in a fuzzy, swirling haze, once more promising some sort of climax through an increase in volume; but then dying away, leaving that climax to slip away between the cracks, lost in the music's tendency to quietude. And yet there is a definite sense here of something have been enacted, the beautiful hush of the final silence providing evidence that all around has somehow been transformed by what came before. It's hard to say what exactly that was: as the description above indicates, this improvisation (for, despite the track divisions, it is really one piece) doesn't work on narrative or linear terms, seeking instead to arrest them in a kind of timelessness, even as its beating bass-drum and repeated guitar are a constant reminder of pulse, of heartbeat, those closest and most unavoidable physical signs of time passing. Often, music is described as 'physical', or to do with 'the body', when it demonstrates a certain quality of 'energy', a certain kineticism or

(some would say) sexual vibrancy, which would seem to contrast sharply with the disc under consideration. But that simple opposition won't do: meditation, the transcendence of the body, comes first through an intense concentration on something bodily (breathing), and perhaps 'un' is like that initial stage, *before* the transcendence of the body, but *after* a radical slowing-down and concentrated focussing of consciousness. The result is a kind of physicality-through-stasis; music that works on the logic of breathing, the logic of rising and falling consciousness, of slowly awakening or slowly falling asleep; a protracted, suspended lullaby, a thing of great patience and of great beauty. **(DG)**

### **WILLIAM HOOKER TRIO – YEARN FOR CERTAINTY**



**Label:** Engine Records (ESP-Disk)

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** ingratiated beam – lero; century's soles;  
commonplace travel; magistrat; yearn for certainty

**Personnel:** Sabir Mateen: saxophone, flute, clarinet;  
David Soldier: mandolin, banjo, violin; William Hooker: drums, spoken word

One might expect this release to be straight-up free-jazz, but the atmosphere is frequently intimate, full of space, silence, clarity of line, melodicism. 'ingratiated beam – lero' finds Spanish-style mandolin underscoring Hooker's recitation of a self-composed poem; an opening that promises to give things time to unfold, rather than bursting straight into the room, opening fire with machine-gun blasts. 'century's soles' finds Hooker playing a steady, almost stately beat. Soldier's banjo twang immediately conjures up bluegrass associations, while Mateen's saxophone provides melodic complement, only

occasionally throwing in some free jazz shrieks that hint at what's to come on 'commonplace travel'. After the segue, Mateen soon heads for the stratosphere of altissimo freakout, in thrilling simultaneity with Soldier's electric violin – the combination reminiscent, perhaps, of Frank Lowe and 'The Wizard' (Raymond Lee Chung) on the ESP classic 'Black Beings', though perhaps a little 'spacier' here – and it's that spaciness which makes it way to the following track, 'magistraït'. Hooker's undulating cymbals threaten to creep up to crescendos, like waves rolling up to their entrances, their crashing climaxes, as Soldier and Mateen link into drone-like figures. The impression here is of something held in to check, something about to break out – serene, magisterial (as the title suggests), but with a suppressed, gripping tension. Rather than building into another freakout, Hooker goes alone, shimmering, wavering figures buttressed by nervous silences; and now it's Mateen's turn, on clarinet, ducking and diving, dipping and weaving, Soldier's strummed mandolin once more imparting a Flamenco flavour, Mateen becoming shriller, the strums more insistent, Hooker's drums coming to the fore once more alongside shouts of encouragement, the frequencies of his bass drum giving his playing an almost melodic flavour. Soldier switches to violin, 'yearning for certainty', a gospel-tinged melody rising in and out of grungy wah-wah and distortion, the melodic base for improvised flights at times brutally electronic, at others tinged with the same raga-rock spirit as Jerry Goodman's work with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Mateen spins round Soldier's tremolo with passionate dedication, eventually locking into a unison sax/violin melody statement which transforms itself into a held note, and silence. A single cymbal shot – silence – and another, followed by a bass-drum thud – silence – Hooker introduces rolls into proceedings – and now sits back as Mateen's flute trills and warbles with breathy liquidity. Hooker's forceful speaking voice jerks us out of our immersion in Mateen's bird-flight, as he asks: "what is this funk again? where is this entertainment mode?" And then he's back in with drum thunder, Soldier, in high spirits, plucking away on his banjo, Mateen's honking sax pumping up the volume – a kind of deliriously poly-rhythmic free jazz hoe-down that brings things to an inspired and joyous close. One of the more unusual free jazz releases of recent years, this record exchanges bombastic power-play for something less easy to classify, and possesses considerable charm as a result. **(DG)**

### **INHABITANTS – A VACANT LOT**



**Label:** Drip Audio / **Release Date:** 2010 / **Tracklist:** Far Away in Old Worlds; Threes; Over it Begins; What About the Water?; Journey of the Loach; Whistling Pass; Let Youth Be Served; Pacific Central / **Personnel:** JP Carter: trumpet; Dave Sikula: guitar; Pete Schmitt: bass; Skye Brooks: drums

Like so many Drip Audio bands, two of the Inhabitants come from Fond of Tigers, seemingly the ur-band from which the label stocks its roster. In this case, it's Skye Brooks on drums and JP Carter on trumpet who share the band with two non-Fondians - Pete Schmitt on bass and, on guitar, Dave Sikula (who's in the duo Carsick with JP (they have a 2006 self-titled release on Drip Audio) and also in a trio with Skye).

What you're getting from the Inhabitants is not that far off from FoT, just not as tightly wound and generally down-tempo. Which, in this case, is not a bad thing. While being a bit slower might bring fears of relentless pummeling, there's enough space between the instruments and rhythmic variation within those spaces to generally keep things fresh. It's always nice to hear a band where the performers don't feel that every second needs to be crammed with activity. And being instrumental, it's thankfully not just pointless noodling or histrionics in solos that demonstrate a whole lot of nothing.

This is riff-oriented stuff - not the nü-quasi-prog that has been recently resurrected, but they are into the post-rock pool and, at times, on the rock-side of fusion. Undermining any attempts to pigeon-hole, the Inhabitants echo enough genres to keep things interesting. (Speaking of echo, what did start to wear on my ears with this recording is the ever-present delay/echo/reverb on the guitar or trumpet that at times reaches into self-oscillation. However, the wake of that particular sonictiy does result in some propulsive churning that provides a wonderful background wash to fill the space.)

The tune are all good and solid. *Threes* and *What about the Water* have a nice ECM- era Bill Frisell vibe with the guitar's wobbly guitar chords and volume swells. As to the prog-tinges, three of the tunes are clocking in over 9 minutes, but that's forgivable here. *Let Youth Be Served* stands out not only as sole up-tempo song but also for the squelching and glitching served up as the intro and outro; the only other smattering of a quick tempo is the middle section of *Over It Begins*. Best riff award goes to the guitar & trumpet harmony section that starts about half-way through *Journey of the Loach*. As a whole: loose but not sloppy, reflective but not boring. **(TH)**

### **KIDD JORDAN/ JOEL FUTTERMAN - INTERACTION**





**Label:** Self-released

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Part I; Part II

**Personnel:** Joel Futterman: piano; Edward 'Kidd' Jordan: tenor saxophone

**Additional Information:** Available from [www.joelfutterman.com](http://www.joelfutterman.com)

For the first few minutes of this disc, Futterman eschews a vertical for a horizontal approach; he plays no chords, choosing rather to engage with Jordan in overlapping and echoing lines that thrust themselves forward in thrilling momentum. The effect is almost vertiginous, imparting the music with a real sense of speed. Thus, though chords will come into the piece (often disarmingly beautiful ones that usher in memories of the great historical spectrum of jazz ballad playing), it's these single-note forays and volleys all over the clefs that first stand out. (Although, in fact, when the notes are played in such quick succession, the effect is almost like that of a cluster(-chord), particularly when combined with pedalling. So maybe the initial distinction doesn't hold quite as fast as one might first suspect.)

Who's leading the charge? At times, it feels as though it might be Futterman, providing prods, pokes, stimuli; but then again, Jordan will frequently take hold of one of Futterman's suggested directions and go his own way with it, launching into brief unaccompanied cadenzas or brawny multiphonics that demand a dextorous and dissonant response. The music follows no overall set pattern; it is very much 'in the moment', with great variations of tempo, timbre and emotional expression virtually every minute. Things *flow*, however; each new section arises out of that which preceded it, even if the transitions may not always be those which one might have expected (and that's the beauty of such improvisation).

Jordan is one of those 'elder statesmen' of the free saxophone, his presence seeming even more valuable given the recent death of Fred Anderson. He therefore has laurels he could so easily rest on: but, luckily for us, he doesn't wish to. Indeed, the commitment he's given this music throughout his career has not dissipated, but perhaps grown even keener; he realizes that he has so much to say, to sing through his instrument, and, sadly, less time to say it than before. But what results is not some angry shout against mortality; simply, he will make the best music that he can, in the time that he has. Here, his playing is frequently *arresting*, the particular intonation, accent or curve of a phrase (sometimes even just one note) sounding out with the force of a command - "you, there, sit up and take notice!" - not through showboating, not through virtuosic display for its own sake, but through force of conviction (which may not be a technical term but is the only way I can think of to convey the powerful *effect*) and a masterful control of timbre. 'Honks and cries' may be part of the vocabulary of every free jazz saxophonist, but Jordan's upper register work in particular has an almost palpable rawness to it that remains startling.

Might this music mean less to the listener if they had not listened to the spectrum of jazz tradition, as these two musicians clearly have? The interaction on display is probably exciting and enthralling enough for even a non-jazz fan to appreciate, but a sense of history, of the living continuance and re-shaping of tradition in the now, is crucial too. Playing such as this encourages - perhaps even demands - that the listener bring a similar commitment to the table, that

they pay attention to where the music is coming from, as well as where it's going: for both are exciting, vital places. (DG)

**KIDD JORDAN/ JOEL FUTTERMAN / ALVIN FIELDER TRIO – LIVE AT THE TAMPERE JAZZ HAPPENING 2000**



**Label:** Charles Lester Music

**Release Date:** 2004

**Tracklist:** Seven Untitled Tracks

**Personnel:** Edward 'Kidd' Jordan: tenor saxophone; Joel Futterman: piano, soprano saxophone, Indian wooden flute; Alvin Fielder: drums, percussion

Fielder makes the opening statement, on tinkling, watery flexatone, then provides a sparse, but expertly placed accompaniment to the weighty, slow tread of the piano's plucked bass strings, Futterman alternating these with squalls of high-pitched sound from an Indian wooden flute. It's a patient, beautifully drawn-out introduction, its slowness belied by the implicit tension packed within it – for, given the 'fire music' proclivities of such a 'spontaneously combustible' group, such a subdued mood can't last long. And, indeed, as Futterman swoops from piano strings to piano keyboard, Fielder springs right in, into the resultant rush of notes, his ticking cymbals providing a constant patter with one hand, while his other hand is free to provide punctuating wallops and crashes from the rest of his

kit. Kidd Jordan is there too of course, his saxophone barking and leaping as he careens over the full range of the instrument, from blasted low notes to vertiginous upper-register hollers. Futterman is an equal partner, rather than accompanist, but he displays a truly sympathetic supporting touch, as when his brief roll of lower-register chords draws out an implicitly lyrical side to Jordan's playing, or when he chases Jordan's melodic figures with his own echoing variations. One might describe this as the musical equivalent of two runners on a track, one fractionally behind the other – though here, the musicians are not so much racing in competition as running *together*, in co-operation (even if the non-stop, ever-changing nature of such spontaneous music requires that they possess a competitive runner's speed of response and reflex).

Thirteen minutes in, the band have somehow locked onto a ballad feel. Given the high volume and pace of what has gone before, one might be surprised that things could so suddenly change direction, yet this is by no means an isolated occurrence. As Ike Levin writes in the liner notes, "Transitions within the musical journey itself are so smooth and flawless that they are not recognizable until the change is completed and suddenly we are aware that the composition has taken a new direction."

A piano solo fades away in the final throes of a sustain-pedalled, drone-like tone, but the applause that signals the next track on the CD is premature, for this is essentially a continuation of the same piece, rather than an entirely new section. Futterman has brought out his soprano, smearing and sliding out sounds, the brief silences between the notes heavy with expectation of the next phrase, then filled with Fielder's bass drum, which suggests Native American music in timbre, if not precisely in rhythmic terms. As Jordan comes in to briefly duet with the soprano, Futterman switches back to piano, the music suddenly bluesy and packed with an intense solemnity. Passages such as these indicate the a real jazz pedigree: the group do not abandon jazz, but take it out to its fullest potential, mindful of such classic attributes as swing, the blues, and individualistic virtuosity, but unconstrained by harmonic or rhythmic imperatives.

There are many ways to focus on what is happening: the listener makes their own journey through the music, sometimes zeroing in on particular details, methods of interaction, and types of transition, sometimes on the quality of tone and timbre, sometimes on the variety of rhythmic development, and sometimes on the harmonic suggestions, which may lead into fully-fledged moments of jazz. A fine example of the latter occurs ten minutes into the third track, where Futterman plays stacked fourths for a few seconds before flying to the upper reaches of the keyboard (where he's matched by Jordan's harmonics), then sliding back down again to those stacked-fourths, then back to super-fast, scampering runs, then back to the fourths...As such inadequate description suggests, it's virtually impossible to provide a moment-by-moment analysis of exactly how the music changes from one thing to the next (a process that's not exactly linear, given the super-impositions that occur when three musicians are pursuing their own individual paths). But just because these nuances cannot be captured in print does not mean that they cannot be picked up the attentive listener, the listener who is willing to go the distance with the musicians, to accord the music the full and complete attention it deserves. The forward

momentum that drives the improvisation forward at all times allows for no chance of a return to previously-played themes, no over-arching melodic material to tie things into an easily-comprehended structure. This does not, however, make the music 'inaccessible', for the musicians' playing is always totally engaging, buzzing with energy and invention whether the textures are dense or whether they have thinned out somewhat. In free jazz, drum solos can sometimes signal something of a 'break' after the high-volume full-ensemble textures – but Fielder's performance, following on from Futterman's furiously intricate high-speed solo on the fourth track, is never less than absorbing. It's that kind of recording: every moment matters, and the group seem to have tapped into some sort of collective reservoir of energy that never once threatens to run dry. In relation to this, one might note Futterman's decision to employ soprano sax as well as piano, which provides a very different textural angle on the music; exercising his lungs as well as his fingers seems to refresh him for his next bout at the keyboard, rather than tiring him out, as it might have done to a less powerful musician.

This performance may have been recorded ten years ago, but it could have been made yesterday, such is the vigour and freshness of the playing and the total impact of the music that is made. Once the listener really starts focussing on what is happening during any given section, they have to stay for the course, for the seamless speed with which one idea follows another allows no break in concentration, and is, moreover driven by a palpable sense of necessity. How often do we let sounds simply drift into the background of our daily activities? That just will not do here. 'Kidd' Jordan, Joel Futterman and Alvin Fielder force us to listen to their music, and reward us with some of the finest improvised music of the new millennium. 'Live at Tampere' is a very special recording. **(DG)**

### **JOEL FUTTERMAN/ IKE LEVIN – *DIALOGUES & CONNECTIONS***



**Label:** Charles Lester Music

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Conversation One (Parts 1-6); Conversation 2 (Parts 1-5)

**Personnel:** Joel Futterman: piano and curved soprano saxophone;

Ike Levin: tenor saxophone, bass clarinet, soprano saxophone

**Additional Information:** Recorded Berkeley, California, December 5th 2009

James Siegel's cover design – an eerie, quasi-Cubist photo assemblage, which forms a composite portrait of the two musicians – provides us some clues as to how this improvised collaboration works before we've even listened to the music. The album is divided into two 'conversations' (extended pieces, split into several parts, which perhaps function rather like the two sections of an LP), and terms like 'conversation', 'dialogue', 'connection' are all appropriate, but there is something more – as the photo indicates, what we hear here is not only a case of sharing and exchange, but also involves a kind of merging, particularly when Futterman and Levin are both playing saxophone – the different personalities and approaches of the two players mesh and entwine in the whole that is the music, without compromising either's individual integrity and unique identity.

Futterman's recent work, a large body of releases available through his website, includes another piano/sax duo, this time with his other regular collaborator, Edward 'Kidd' Jordan. As on that release, the musicians here turn on a dime between any number of styles and moods, working in a suite-like fashion without sacrificing an overall sense of coherence and flow. Things begin with Levin on tenor; towards the end of the track, his playing is underpinned by Futterman's tolling, bell-like lower notes, with a hint of poly-rhythmic, two-handed boogie-woogie. Equal dexterity in all ranges of the keyboard is a characteristic of the pianist's work; he tends to occupy the range and space that would normally be provided by a bass player. At times, this approach combines melody, rhythm and harmony into a composite whole that has its antecedents in horn players, bassists, and even drummers, as much as it does in, say, Thelonious Monk. Futterman points out in the liners to his 1982 trio date with Jimmy Lyons, 'In-Between-Position(s)': "I tend to phrase my music much like a horn player because of those early years [spent studying and working with trumpeter Clarence (Gene) Shaw]."

Back to the music at hand, and altissimo saxophone sounds move swiftly into undulating balladry, Futterman's rubbed and plucked piano strings underscored by a pedalled bass clef tread; Levin picks up on the colouristic change and adds equally eerie bass clarinet. When a lovely, three-times-repeated upwards and downwards run from Futterman – reminiscent of Claude Debussy's quasi-Oriental keyboard works, and beautifully relaxed, as if fingers were being casually stroked over the piano keys – transitions into romantic chord changes, Levin's clarinet becomes mellifluous, though with a woody, clicking edge. A stretch of solo piano – hyperactive bass accompaniment, recurring chords, fleet-fingered jazz phrases, and melodic figures interrupted by more dissonant explorations – cues in Levin, on tenor once more, the music taking on an urgent tone as brief declamatory statements move into passages of close shadowing and imitation. Futterman takes another solo, fraught rumbles and swoops giving way to jazz-derived playing via a repeated phrase, which is translated from one idiom to another in a transition so skilful that it can't help but raise a wondering smile. This kind of micro-level, instant compositional logic ensures that the music's

structural coherence more than matches its emotional favour; in addition, the musicians are capable of thinking on a wider, 'macro' scale, memorizing particular fragments for later use, returning to particular kinds of texture and even to specific themes. Note, for example, the way a certain set of chords recurs through the first conversation, and the re-use of a melodic figure stated right at the start of the second conversation, a figure which has something in common with the themes John Coltrane deployed on such magnificently urgent, turbulent records as 'Sun Ship'. What seems to me to be happening here is that the satisfaction and anchoring possibility of recurrent material is being retained, without the rigidity of a pre-ordained format: the distinction between 'theme' and 'solo' is broken down so that all material can be given equal weight, freeing the musicians to pursue the imperatives of improvisation and interaction – which they do with aplomb.

Both in the parts and in the whole, then, these 'Dialogues and Connections' are rarely less than absorbing; furthermore, one must celebrate the fact that the recording (the album was mixed, like much of Futterman's recent recorded work, by Dr Benjamin Tomassetti) possesses the scope necessary for us to hear the wide dynamic and colouristic spectrum of this performance in its full richness. Fine work all round. **(DG)**

**LEE KONITZ/ CHRIS CHEEK/ STÉPHANE FURIC LEIBOVICI –  
JUGENDSTIL II**



**Label:** ESP-Disk  
**Release Date:** June 2010

**Tracklist:** Odysseus Returns Home; Tomorrow I Shall Dance For You;  
A Music of Tranquility; Float West On A Slender Current; A L'île De Fressanges  
(...Nuit d'Été...); Les Mains De Pénélope (...Le Jour, Elle Tissait...); Phongsaly; Local Heroes.  
**Personnel:** Lee Konitz: alto sax; Chris Cheek: tenor sax; Stéphane Furic Leibovici: double-bass;  
Ensemble on tracks 4 & 7 – Jim Black: glockenspiel, vibraphone, chimes; Dan Dorrance: alto  
flute, bass flute, piccolo; Joy Plaisted: harp; Maria Garcia: celesta; Chris Speed: clarinet

Bassist Stéphane Furic Leibovici's latest recording, a sequel to his 2008 ESP disc with Chris Speed and Chris Cheek, is instantly notable for the presence of veteran saxophonist Lee Konitz, who brings his own cool, yet rigorous approach to bear in a context to which he is perfectly suited. Much of what we hear is composed by Leibovici, but the music unfolds with an almost casual looseness, the easy swing and complementary curve of the musicians' interplay belying the dexterity with which the texture is put together: each instrumental part is attuned at once to the curve of the music as a whole and to the nuances of the moment, so that neither formal logic nor room for manoeuvre is lacking. Indeed, one might think back to Konitz' early free improvising experiments with Lennie Tristano, where simultaneous soloing creates a kind of pointillist, all-over texture made up of entwining small details that nonetheless combine to create a total picture of absolute clarity. For, though one might say that half the music is composition, improvisation is undoubtedly central here as well: rather than rote thematic statements and recapitulations bookending solos where the players can finally cut loose, thematic material is juxtaposed with improvised counterpoint, and proves an important reference point even in apparently more far-flung departures.

If the titles, which reference Odysseus, Penelope, and the sea, suggest an epic, mythological bent, the music is more languorous, its delicate melodies sometimes wispy almost to the point of disappearance, without becoming overly insubstantial. Perhaps the most delightful thing about this recording is the way that the melodic lines of Konitz' alto and Cheek's tenor entwine: both players have a breathy edge to their sound, but also a crisp, smooth, well-defined contour which ensures that the melodies and related improvisations unfold with just the right amount of elegance, though not without a requisite 'depth of feeling' – there is a piping edge to Konitz' higher notes in particular, offset by the anchoring strum and thump of Leibovici's bass. One of the most beautiful instances occurs on 'A Music of Tranquillity', where a rising figure, which seemed at first to be a kind of unfinished clarion call, becomes something more delicate, ephemeral, uncertain: an unanswered question, disappearing into the ensuing silence before a more relaxed section emerges. On the most through-composed piece, 'A L'île de Fressanges (...Nuit d'Été...)', an ensemble of tuned percussion, flute and clarinet bookends the main trio with snaky melodies and tinkling chimes (low, thrumming harp, and higher, piquant glockenspiel, vibes and celesta) whose lack of echo gives the music a kind of crisp, static staccato, like pricks of light emerging from the corner of the eye in a field of luxuriant shadow. The ensemble appears on one other track, 'Phongsaly', where an easy bass lilt and unison flute and saxophone adds a pastoral quality. Texturally, and in terms of speed and overall momentum, we're perhaps nearer to classical music than jazz here, with a touch of Debussy about the instrumentation and a more avant-garde sensibility evident in the use of space. Generally, though, on the trio tracks which form the majority of the record, the vibe is closer to 'chamber jazz', combining gentleness and precision in a winning, even disarming way. This is an album both possessed of an attractive

surface and with enough detail and depth to prove rewarding on a deeper examination; well worth seeking out. **(DG)**

**GIUSEPPI LOGAN – THE GIUSEPPI LOGAN QUINTET**



**Label:** Tompkins Square

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Steppin'; Around; Modes; Somewhere Over the Rainbow;  
Bop Dues; Blue Moon; Freddie Freeloader; Never Let Me Go

**Personnel:** Giuseppi Logan: alto sax, piano, voice; Matt Lavelle: trumpet;  
Dave Burrell: piano; Francois Grillot: bass; Warren Smith: drums

Giuseppi Logan is one of those 'lost and found' stories that seem so prevalent in jazz (arguably due, at least in part, to the socio-political pressures of the 60s, the hard struggle of musicians to find acceptance and to earn a living, particularly if they what they played was 'out'). Having recorded a few dates for ESP in the 60s, he disappeared from view and was assumed dead; but, nearing the end of the second millennium's first decade, he was found homeless, busking in Tompkins Square Park. Help has been found to get him a new apartment, and there have even been a few gigs round town, in which he has performed on saxophones and bass clarinet. While it seems unlikely that there will be quite the



resurgence Henry Grimes experienced after his 'second coming' (Logan was never as prolific as Grimes in the first place), we do now have this album, Logan's third recording as a leader, on which the band play a number of his originals, as well as, less expectedly, covering a couple of standards and Miles Davis' 'Freddie Freeloader'. The recording sound is fine, and the Quintet itself is stellar. Dave Burrell plays some storming 'out' solos, fleet flurries of notes flying from his fingers; he really ups the ante on the more abstract pieces, while playing 'straight jazz' with consummate ease elsewhere. Lavelle has a bright, confident sound on trumpet, clearly emerging from a strong grounding in the jazz tradition, combining all the brassy pizzazz that involves with the sudden, abrasive scurries associated with free players. Francois Grillot and Warren Smith, meanwhile (the latter of whom played with Logan in the 60s), are a suitably locked-in rhythm section. Thus, if Logan himself doesn't always sound at the top of his game, he has a group of musicians alongside him well capable of carrying the music.

For those used to the clinical precision with which post-bebop players deliver the 'heads' of a piece, it may take a while to get accustomed to the off-centre renditions here. It's not entirely clear whether Logan's smearing, raucous tone and attack is due to the years he spent alone on the streets, without regular experience of playing in groups to regulate his more unorthodox tendencies, or whether it is simply the way he approaches the music (listening to his earlier dates for ESP, one might suspect the latter). Lavelle is determined not to play the 'straight man', and matches this eccentricity to imbue a lot of these tracks with a definite 'out' feel, though there's plenty of swing on display as well. Where Logan suffered in the 60s was a tendency for his solos to run out of steam, with the consequence that the rhythm section (which included a young Don Pullen and Milford Graves) rather dominated proceedings. There's again something of that here – sometimes Logan will play a few phrases, as if to begin a solo, and then drop out, Burrell or Lavelle forced to keep the momentum of the music going before he returns. In fact, his strongest playing here comes on the standards: 'Blue Moon,' where he's featured on chunky piano, and the touching reading of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' which drips with woozy, heartfelt emotionalism, sticking close to the contours of the melody. **(DG)**

### **NoMoreShapes – CREESUS CRISIS**

**Label:** Drip Audio

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** White Chicks; Fat Kid; Say Chin; Invisible Glasses; If Only My Chin Had Eyes; Snake Legs; Twice Bitten; If Only...(2); Tears of the Penix; New Years (Yves')

**Personnel:** J.C. Jones: trombone; Jay Crocker: guitar, electronics; Eric Hamelin: drums, percussion

Well glory hallelujah, a Drip Audio band without a Fond of Tigers connection! Of course, these guys are from Calgary and with the Rocky Mountains standing between them and Vancouver, this might just be explained by a fear of geography from those B.C. lower mainlanders.

These guys aren't tyros – they're well established in their home town and come from all over the musical map, heavy on the anything goes. NoMoreShapes is Jay Crocker on guitar & electronics, J.C. Jones on trombone, and Eric Hamelin on drums & percussion. No track credits are listed nor are there obvious 'who's the leader' hallmarks but the band's myspace page is under Eric's name, so we'll denote him as the groups' agent provocateur.

*White Chicks* opens the recording and is a wonderful mash of static, glitch, and distorted-beyond-recognition loops. To keep people guessing, the next track, *Fat Kid*, is a pastiche of cod-swing/trad jazz and noise, but the group pulls it off. A down-tempo number, *If Only My Chin Had Eyes*, is excellent and the best track; however, *Snake Legs*, follows immediately and is a wild'n'wooly fuzz-breaking workout and is a close second for best track.

None of these tunes go north of 6min. and while I'm not a fan of the low-fi/collage/kitschy art on the cover, kudos to the band for a plastic-less CD case. Another small but nice touch is splitting the track listing like there's an a-side and a b-side.

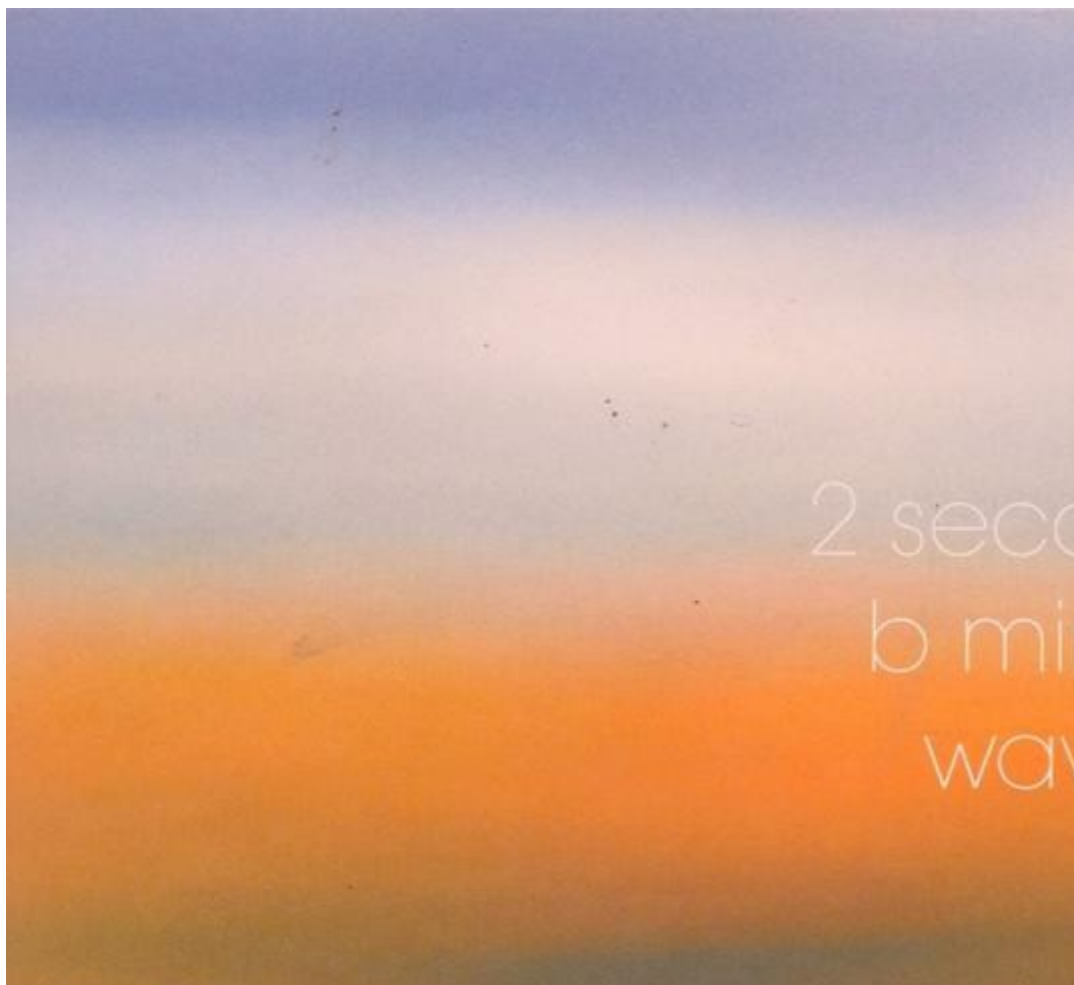
Instrumentally, everybody is involved and there are no 'feature' pieces of overwrought solos; but everybody shines and there's enough tone and texture variation out of this trio to keep the recording interesting and engaging. One of the individual highlights occurs in *Say Chin* where Jay reels off some nice single note runs that echo Joe Morris.

The tunes are polished enough to know that the group just isn't in it for kicks, but there's still the grit to catch you off guard.



**NB:** Eric's myspace page (<http://www.myspace.com/nomoreshapeseerichamelin>) states that the group is generally a duo with Jay; but who knows if that there before or after recording this disc with J.C. **(TH)**

**MICHAEL PISARO/ TAKU SUGIMOTO – 2 SECONDS/ B MINOR / WAVE**



**Label:** Erstwhile

**Release Date:** November 2010

**Tracklist:** 2 Seconds/ B Minor / Wave

**Musicians:** Michael Pisaro: composition, electric guitar, field recordings;  
Taku Sugimoto: composition, electric guitar, miscellaneous.

I'm torn about this one, for reasons I'll go into later: but to start off with, I'll admit that, certainly, it's interesting and valid and an important contribution to the ongoing debate about and evolution of the music. It's simpler (as in, less full of musical events) than the two Toshimaru Nakamura duos with acoustic guitarists that are reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and more obviously transparent; indeed, it lays its materials out so clearly that it could almost be accused of being an entirely conceptual work – Pisaro's and Sugimoto's contributions were recorded separately, after all. That said, the separate recording technique has become common enough recently to justify it being called a legitimate technical resource, rather than a case of one-off experimentation: the MIMEO album 'sight' from a few years back is perhaps the most famous example (though it's actually a slightly different case, as the larger ensemble gives it more of an aleatoric element – the probability of there being concurrences and agreements between the separate recordings becomes lower once the number of participants starts to spread). With duo recordings, however – ones as sparse as this one, anyway – it's much easier to get some sort of concurrence, if not active 'dialogue' in the EFI sense: indeed, if one was played Sachiko M/ Ami Yoshida's collaboration as Cosmos (recorded live, with both

musicians in the same room) and the Nakamura/ Yoshida collaboration 'Soba to Bara' (in which both musicians' contributions were recorded separately), one would be hard pressed to say which one featured the performers in the same space. The new approach to duo playing fostered by the influential 'lowercase' scenes in Japan, Berlin, London is one in which sonic proximity means sharing the same space, rather than direct imitation or facile 'conversational' interplay; each player pursues their own particular direction, following the consequences of one idea or texture or type of sound in a way that overlaps with, rather than directly parallels, the activity of their partner. (A fine recent example would be Angharad Davies and Axel Dorner's 'AD', also reviewed in this issue.) Given this, the separate recording technique fits perfectly; and, given also the way that recent developments of post-Cageian theory and practice have blurred the lines between composition and improvisation (as documented on the new 'Silence and After' series on Another Timbre), one can argue that the music *is* as much conceptual as it is musical, that theory and practice, sound and pre-planned framework/manner of execution are too closely tied to be usefully or easily disentangled.

This does not mean, though, that one cannot judge it by musical standards: indeed, they are the primary means of measurement, the yardstick by which to make one's mind up. The criticism which has developed (mainly on blogs and online fora<sup>[1]</sup>) alongside the new methods (well, OK, by now they're not that new, as Mattin would no doubt argue) does, in fact, stress personal subjective judgement just as much as any theoretical or systematic analytical system: one is more likely to get a story about the circumstances in which the record was listened to, minute details of the sounds of passing cars, neighbours' noises, etc, than one is to get a treatise of aesthetic jargon. It's an interesting intersection indeed, where pursuing theoretical goals with great rigour, embracing deliberate limitation and an almost monastic intensity of focus, leads to the creation of a music in which such simple and 'old-fashioned' criteria as 'I like this sound' and 'that is a beautiful chord' become surprisingly important. That's not to say that there is no critical rigour involved, and most committed listeners to and writers about this music would be able to have a long and considered debate about whether something works artistically or not – it's not just a simple 'I'm partial to this'. Still, all this builds up to the statement with which I began the review: I find myself in two minds about the merits of the disc because both my personal sense of enjoyment (probably not the right word) and my critical, evaluative sense raise problems for me when listening to it.

Firstly, let's consider the conceptual (compositional) framework which has been used to construct the three pieces. All three last twenty minutes exactly; all bring together two separate compositions/performers based on a particular idea. '2 Seconds' is a unit of pulse; 'B Minor' a key; 'Wave' was left more open, with each musician free to make their own interpretation of that word. The opening track finds Pisaro using layers of sine waves, looped to create beats which fit in with rhythmically with Sugimoto's own short, electronic beeps (a guitar tuner?) and striking of what sounds like two wooden objects (claves?). The sine tones build up to create rich chords that are sometimes Sachiko-M-stark (though not quite as tinnitus-inducingly high-pitched – there's a significant low-end rumble which occasionally caused my headphones to vibrate), sometimes gorgeously, spacially rich (this 'beautiful' aspect to sine tones is one that's not been explored

that much – the only example that springs to mind is the work of the clarinet/electronics duo Los Glissandinos). Some of the tones are held to create the chord, but the more abrupt, dial-tone like elements ensure a kind of clipped-feel round the edges; the piece is at once comforting in its rhythmical regularity, and somewhat forbiddingly robotic (like a kind of soft industrial music). Occasionally, we hear sounds from (I presume) Sugimoto's recording which allow 'real-world', non-electronic sounds into proceedings: occasionally we hear the squeak of someone shifting their weight on a leather chair, and at one point what sounds like an electric drill is briefly switched on. Given these fragmented glimpses, one supposes that Sugimoto's contribution had a visual, theatrical/ritualistic quality to it which is lost on the recording, suggesting other dimensions to the piece that belie its apparently fixed and rigid quality, opening out beyond the recording to different spaces, times, contexts. Ultimately, though I do admire the restraint of the concept, I can't quite fully enjoy the track as a whole: at times I admire the bloody-mindedness of the clockwork electronic beep and the sections of layered sine-tones, at others I feel unable to fully pull myself into the soundworld, stepping out of that immersion into which I had briefly been drawn.

My fault? Perhaps. 'B Minor' is next, and evinces the same sort of rigour in terms of the gestures each musician allows himself; this time, though, what is played is deliberately pretty, imparting things with a Loren Connors-style minimalism. Of course, we remember this from the classic Sugimoto of 'Opposite', and we think too of his recent recordings of simple, haiku-like melodies, rendered with a sparse and often beguiling, hesitant delicacy in tandem with vocalist Moe Kamura.<sup>[2]</sup> You can have too much of a good thing, though, and, while this might have been absolutely gorgeous if restricted to three or five minutes (as were the pieces on 'Opposite', and as are the pieces on 'Saritote II'), it does pall somewhat over the full twenty. Both men are on electric guitars: Sugimoto plays the harmony (in B Minor, of course) – slowly-paced, equally-placed chord sequences – Pisaro, the melody– sustained handfuls of notes that mesh with and accentuate the chords, rather than back-grounding them. It *is* lovely, yes, but...And then I think: to what absurd, acerbic levels of 'beauty' have I become accustomed which would lead me to think that this music, perhaps palpably ugly or just plain boring to some people who have no idea of onkyo or taomud or wandelweiser, is *overly pretty*? But we enter a difficult area when we consider beauty as the generation of prettiness, delicacy, sweet tinkling textures: and, while Marion Brown's contribution to Harold Budd's 'Bismali 'Rrahman 'Rrahim' ensures that that track remains one of my all-time favourites, the rest of that Budd record, sans Brown, goes too far into gloom and sickness. Or once again, I know people whose musical views I totally respect, and whom one would hardly call un-critical New Agers, and yet I just cannot share their enthusiasm for Laraaji's 'Day of Radiance,' the third in Brian Eno's ambient series. It's the same here – I'm not sure what the optimum number of minutes for the track would have been, but somewhere, things step over an invisible (l)edge and that kind of simple beauty is not quite enough.

Onto the final track, anyway, in which Sugimoto interprets 'wave' to mean '(sound)wave' – a sustained (e-bowed?) drone – while Pisaro chooses a field recording of ocean waves breaking (or it may be an electronically-generated sound), which enters and drops out of the texture at regular intervals. For me,

this is somewhat spoiled by Pisaro's contribution, which doesn't seem as *integrated* as were the elements that made up the other two pieces. It sits on top of the overall musical flow, rather than being fully integrated – it feels like an add-on, rather than an interesting juxtaposition. And it also works against the rigour of the drone, rendering it almost New-Agey, like an avant-garde version of one of those 'Sounds of the Sea' easy-listening albums you find in British garden centres. Perhaps this is the inevitable consequence of the aleatoric way in which the music was put together, but I'm not sure that's necessarily true: as the other tracks, and other separately recorded improv collaborations attest, it's perfectly possible to create something cohesive and symbiotic using this method. Maybe it's a kind of reminder, a jolt that prevents us getting too comfortable, that lets us know the element of risk and failure we had forgotten about in our easy immersion into beauty and prettiness. Here one thinks of Boulez distinguishing between 'right' and 'wrong' chance operations (in the 1957 essay 'Alea'[\[3\]](#)), and wonders 'have I become as tetchy as that'? On the other hand, I just don't feel that the piece works, whatever the methods behind its construction.

Overall, then, there are elements about each piece I like, both conceptually and musically. Of the three, I think '2 Seconds' probably works best over the entire twenty minutes; 'B Minor' is more immediately pretty/ beautiful, but somewhat outstays its welcome; and 'Waves' is (perhaps deliberately) less cohesive (or at least, more slight), which, for me, makes it less successful musically. Summarising in this way, I'm aware of how subjective, in an almost petty manner, these judgements sound; and I'm grateful to this recording for making me want to examine my own critical approach as much as I examine the album itself. Whether it 'works' or not, it is, as I argued at the beginning, an important document, a springboard for debate, and a musical experience with some genuinely lovely moments; very much worth investigation if you haven't head it already. **(DG)**

[\[1\]](#) For instance, Richard Pinnell's 'The Watchful Ear', Jesse Goin's 'Crow with No Mouth', and Brian Olewnick's 'Just Outside', as well as the message board 'I Hate Music'.

[\[2\]](#) Taku Sugimoto and Moe Kamura, 'Saritote I' (2007) and 'Saritote II' (2010)

[\[3\]](#) As referenced in Jesse Goins' review of this album.

### **MICHAEL PISARO – *FIELDS HAVE EARS***



**Label:** Another Timbre

**Release Date:** November 2010

**Tracklist:** Fields Have Ears 1; Fade; Fields Have Ears 4

**Personnel:** Philip Thomas: piano (all tracks); on 'Fields Have Ears 4', with Patrick Farmer: natural objects; Sarah Hughes: zither; Dominic Lash: double bass + members of the Edges Ensemble – Julian Brooks: laptop; Stephen Chase: conical blow horn; Richard Glover: slide whistle; Johnny Herbert: spring drum; Ben Isaacs: trumpet; Joseph Kudirka: cymbal; Bob Lockwood: melodica; Scott McLaughlin: cello; Liz Nicholas: frog guero; Hannah Sherry: clarinet

This was the first disc of the 'Silence and After' series to which I listened, and it proved so compelling that I chose not to play any of the others until I'd really dug (into) it, acclimatised myself to it, let it form a part of my listening habits for the next few weeks at least. Perhaps I didn't pay it as much close attention as I'd convinced myself I had, for I actually still find it quite hard to write about; but perhaps, also, the fact that this music can resist analysis after being lived with for a certain period tells you more than any lengthy critical spiel would have.

In any case, what we have here are three compositions by Pisaro (I'm assuming that the first two, at least, are fully notated, though the final, ensemble piece, would seem to allow more space for a certain amount of improvisation, within certain, fairly strict parameters, especially given that it's credited as a 'realisation' of the original work). 'Fields Have Ears 1' is for piano and tape (a fairly sparse field recording which features birds, the occasional distant rumble of a passing plane, and the hiss of the recording device). One might say that the tape functions in much the same way that silence does on the other two pieces – i.e. as the actual substance of much of the piece, often seeming to take precedence over any notes that are played. (I'm reminded of Pisaro's comments in the liner notes to last year's Terry Jennings/John Cage release, 'Lost Daylight', along the lines that even the sounds in Jennings' piano pieces have silences in them.) What piano we do hear reminds me, a little, of the way that Jennings' work emerges from European serialism and the La Monte Young/ Cageian turn to Oriental philosophy with what one might call a softer side – being unafraid to use consonant, 'pretty'-sounding chords. As I noted in a separate review of the Pisaro/Taku Sugimoto duo album on erstwhile (see above), this is a risky policy to adopt – the shock of the pretty in an avant-garde context can wear off into mere gloopiness if not done exactly right – but the note combinations Pisaro asks for on these works are actually less up-front in their prettiness than Jennings', particularly given the way that they're strung out between such long silences.

'Fade', a work that is by now ten years old, is more immediately stark: the pianist plays a repeated (pedal'd) note, slowly, before pausing and playing a repetition of a different note, pausing again, playing another note, and so on. There's a kind of lag here that's implied in the title – not in the sense of "echoes, dying, dying, dying", but as something vaguer, a slight blurring at the edges, repetition of the note not so much emphasising it as enclosing it in a kind of haze (a consciousness emerging from the use of delay effects that's been enabled by electronics). I'd concur with Yuko Zama, who writes that, "in Pisaro's piano pieces, the composer and performer's personal voices are not on the centre stage;"<sup>[1]</sup> but this does not make the piece in any way 'mechanical', 'cold', 'impersonal', etc: rather, we approach an egolessness that is at the heart of much

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[1] Yuko Zama, review of 'Fields Have Ears' (<http://d.hatena.ne.jp/yukoz/20101220>)

post-AMM ideology, and that has something akin to the communal approach which western classical music forgot about for a couple of centuries, but which the rest of the world managed to retain and partially teach us back once we began to realise our mistake. I'm not saying that Pizaro's music really has made in common with any of these communal musics – in terms of sound it's very much part of a particular western lineage (the piano being the ultimate symbol of western classical music, even) – but it does approach similar insights from a different angle, particularly on this disc's third track.

'Fields Have Ears 4', the most recent piece, expands things right out, to include an ensemble of fourteen players (in which Thomas' piano is the most prominent and recognisable sound), but it manages the feat of making the large group sound incredibly delicate and small. Here we have exhalations, indentations, modifications of silence; slight change, but no 'development' as such. And yet something is changed; as the ensemble musically breathe together, as they repeat the process of unison sounds followed by silences, those sounds and those silences start to change, to shift. Whilst one is first conscious of Thomas' chiming chords – a kind of early signal at the start of the sounding sections – and can just about pick out a clarinet from the quiet cloud of players, one gradually comes to recognise other elements in the texture; in particular, at the prickling edge of stereo picture (preventing things from becoming too smoothly 'pure'), the rustle/crackle of Patrick Farmer's natural objects. How a large ensemble controls itself to such quietude is quite astonishing, and lends the piece something which a small group playing at the same level could not have achieved – and something which is more than just a trick or an example of human dexterity.

In both 'Fade' and 'Fields Have Ears 4', one might visualise the sounds as having physical presence – sculpturally or architecturally, as objects that hang in space – sound as such being material in space. Let's say, somewhat fancifully, that silence functions like the air between the columns of a colonnade; or perhaps it would be more apposite to reverse the metaphor, so that the sounds are the air, the silences the actual structural that intersects and defines it. Then again, let's just ditch the analogy altogether, for the relationship between sound and silence is more symbiotic than it allows. Sound modifies silence modifies sound (and the subsequent sound/silence of life after you listen). That's the great legacy of 4'33", as explored in Kyle Gann's recent book 'No Such Thing as Silence' – a listening awareness expanded beyond the conventionally musical to include one's environment as a whole (which is an expansion outward but also an expansion inward, into the 'minute particulars' of a particular moment or location or space – "the / flight back/ to where / we are";<sup>[2]</sup> "the original experience of now and here and this; [...] not [...] to look at a different world, but to look at this same world differently."<sup>[3]</sup>) Thus Pizaro's use field recordings – listening back to the world and incorporating it into the music, not so much in a 'chance' manner, but with structural intent. If the aim is not to introduce natural sounds for aleatory effect, neither is it to mimetically replicate anything as a kind of hyper-realist version of programme music, a couple of stages beyond Respighi's or Hovhannes' decorative incorporation of bird- and whale-song into otherwise fairly

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[2] J.H. Prynne, 'Airport Poem: Ethics of Survival', in 'Poems' (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005 (1969))

[3] John Osborne, 'Black Mountain and Projective Verse', in 'A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry' (ed. Neil Roberts) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003 (2001))



conventional orchestral works.<sup>[4]</sup> In point of fact, the sounds we hear on 'Fields Have Ears 1' are not pure field recording – there are a couple of unobtrusive sine tones in there, I believe, though they take up a smaller part of the sonic picture than the tape hiss which is up-front throughout (and yet doesn't give a lo-fi impression at all, perhaps because Thomas' piano playing is so lovingly recorded). The danger, nonetheless, is still that one will be tempted to say 'oh, nice bird song, that's pretty' and leave the music on the level of a BBC sounds effects cassette tape with some added piano chords here and there.

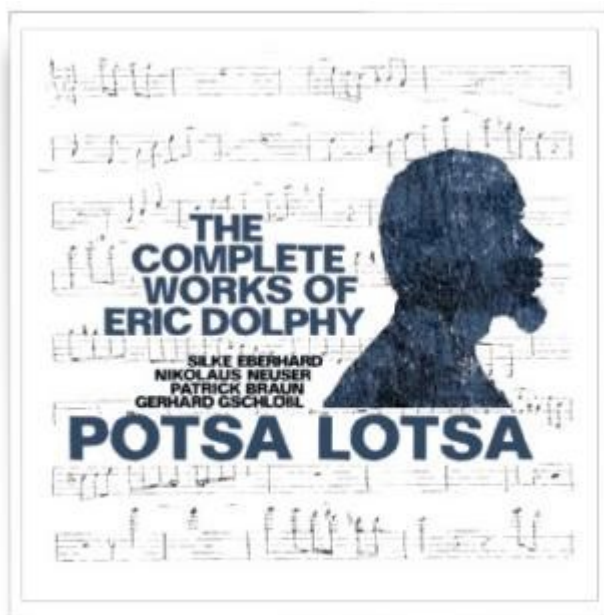
Further, one might argue that the use of field recordings is an established technique for Pisaro now, and is perhaps even in danger of becoming a tad hackneyed at times (I wasn't too keen on the ocean waves that appeared in the third piece of his duo recording with Taku Sugimoto). On the evidence we have here, though, I don't think that at all; I find it impossible not to admire the care of shaping, refining, honing this aesthetic of silence in a way that extends beyond initial theoretical generalisations and into the fabric of the work's construction and execution. Perhaps it's the compositional framework that imposes a necessary rigour on what could become unfocussed, random, or meandering in improv contexts when everyone's having an off-day – though that said, Sugimoto's turn to ultra-ultra minimalism in his recent composed work doesn't, for me, have the same rigour in its translation to disc (live, it may be wonderful, the creation of a specific kind of shared experience). I don't think I could pinpoint exactly why this is, but, somehow, the recordings of Pisaro's pieces that I've heard do work as discs, as albums separated from their live moment of creation; they do still function as compelling experiences.

'Fields Have Ears,' then (the album as a whole), possesses a sparseness which is not emptiness, and a real clarity – each note is weighted and considered and placed, each pause judged, each element considered. In a way, one can't distinguish too easily between whole and parts because it's not developmental (apart from that it occurs in time; as music, it is necessarily linear on the most basic level). Close focus is, then, on the moment, though the music is generous enough to allow for moments of inattention too, occasional drifts in concentration, without severely harming one's ability to pick up the thread again when one zones back in. That lack of distinction between episodes, that lack of build and climax might seem like mere flatness to some, but it's actually pretty hard to achieve, especially on a long, large-ensemble piece like 'Fields Have Ears 4'; a state that cannot be conjured without real dedication, on the part of both composer and performers, to the particular aesthetics which enable & prompt it.  
**(DG)**

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[4] Nor is it to reproduce natural patterns or rhythms in a stricter sense (the 'breathing' effect of 'Fields Have Ears 4' is simply my subjective interpretation, and one could easily listen to the piece without thinking of it as breathing-like at all. That said, it is capable of making one conscious of one's own bodily rhythms, asserting themselves just at those moments when one is trying to still oneself, to hold one's breath, to listen closest (I could feel my ear pulsing against my headphones at the quietest points in the music).

## POTSA LOTSA – THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ERIC DOLPHY



**Label:** Jazzwerkstatt

**Release Date:** January 2011

**Tracklist:** CD ONE: Burning Spear, "Half Note Triplets"; Hat and Beard; Iron Man; 245; The Madrig Speaks, The Panther Walks, "Mandrake"; Red Planet; Les; Springtime; Out There; The Prophet; Number 8, "Potsa Lotsa"; Straight Up and Down; April Fool;  
CD TWO: Strength and Unity; Out to Lunch; Lady "E"; G.W.; The Baron; Something Sweet, Something Tender; South Street Exit; Miss Ann; Serene; In the Blues; Gazzelloni; Miss Movement; 17 West; Inner Fly – Hat and Beard Reprise  
**Personnel:** Silke Eberhard: alto saxophone; Patrick Braun: tenor saxophone; Nikolaus Neuser: trombone; Gerhard Gschlössl: trombone

Dolphy himself does not appear on these 2 CDs of course. Yet all his compositions, including a few that have never been commercially recorded, are performed here in new arrangements by Silke Eberhard, who could for this reason be called the *de facto* leader. She was also involved in the *Ornette Coleman anthology*, 2 CDs of duos with Aki Takase on a mere handful of Ornette compositions, and is probably better known in Scotland for in person performances with a band called *Newt* (possibly still available on an online video outlet) than south of the border in Britain.

The instrumentation here, alto and tenor saxophones, trombone and trumpet, might raise a few eyebrows. Maybe it has no precedent, but the preconception that any one instrument is indispensable was questioned as early as Jimmy Giuffre's mid 50s trios, continuing with AACM line-ups, with Dolphy contributing bass clarinet/double bass duos, solo performances and the unusual, if not unprecedented *Out to lunch* line-up of trumpet, reeds, vibes, bass and drums.

It is worth pointing out that Eberhard is quite impressive on bass clarinet, but chose to focus exclusively on alto here, as the emphasis is meant to be on Dolphy as composer. There is some re-harmonization, without damaging the fabric of at least the familiar Dolphy pieces. The only one I might have found unrecognizable is *Red planet*, aka *Miles' mode*. The whole album sounds as if it

was rigorously rehearsed, with a mastery of formal aspects being noticeable. When a given instrument improvises, sometimes it is unaccompanied, but usually other instruments will provide a commentary or supporting harmonic backdrop. Sometimes the trombone (Gerhard Gschlößl) will provide something like a bass line, at times in conjunction with the tenor (Patrick Braun) in the lower register. On *Hat and beard* the trombone solo (and Gschlößl's technique is such that his command of the higher register makes it hard to tell from a trumpet), later joined for a contrapuntal improvisation by trumpet (Nikolaus Neuser) has some harmonic background provided by the saxophones. There is rarely 'free-for-all' improvisation. The nearest I can hear to this is on *Straight up and down* but even in the collective improvisation here some pulse seems to be implied, or maybe I am reading this in. It is meant to be a portrait of a drunk person trying to walk after all. On *17 west* Patrick Braun's tenor break consists of some mild Brötzmannship (or maybe it's more like Gerd Dudek) before the trombone joins in with the semblance of a walking bass line. On *Miss Ann* an ostinato figure after the opening theme statement breaks up into contrapuntal improvisation, or so it seems, till the quietly repeated saxophone figure is heard behind the fortissimo brass. This mutates into a different ostinato riff for all four instruments before the final theme statement.

If all this suggests that arrangement stifles the spirit of improvisation here, nothing is farther from the truth, as these four sustain interest by the way they integrate the improvised with the arranged factors in such a way that it is difficult to tell them apart. As with the development of Dolphy's own music elements like dynamics, timbre (the use of muted brass now and then), and elasticity of rhythm help to keep the music varied.

The kind of adventure represented by this album is not without precedent of course; Schlippenbach & co.'s idiosyncratic take on the complete Monk on the 3 CD set *Monk's casino* may spring to mind, but a lesser known quartet album by Schlippenbach *Broomriding* features two Dolphy numbers *Straight up and down* plus *Something sweet and tender*, and the improvised passages on these are noticeably looser and more rhapsodic (relatively speaking) than in the album under review.

One warning to the unsuspecting listener: *The complete works of Eric Dolphy* is a work of considerable density, and a continuous listening from beginning to end might not be the best approach for some listeners. But for somebody like me who has lived with Dolphy's music for decades I'm sure this album has still some surprises to be revealed on repeated listening, plus the anticipated fascination of comparing Dolphy's own versions.

This is so far from being a literal-minded repertory reading of brilliant moments from the musical past; it renews Dolphy's music by staying true to the spirit of it. **(SK)**

## **SAINCT LAURENS – S/T**



**Label:** &records

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Sepik; Brazos; Vero; Oria; Adda; Pecos; Volta; Alz; Paix

**Personnel:** Philippe Lauzier: saxophone, bass clarinet, tubes, melodica;  
Pierre-Yves Martel: prepared viola da gamba, two-inch speakers, radios, contact mics

A duo of Philippe Lauzier on sax, bass clarinet, tubes & melodica and Pierre-Yves Martel on prepared viola da gamba, two-inch speakers, radios & contact mics, Saint Laurens finds and maintains a wonderful balance between acoustic and electronic music, with all sounds blending and sympathizing with each other. Both are part of the Montreal improv scene, having individually been on CD's on *Ambiance Magnetique*, and have played together in the group *Quartetski*. Pierre-Yves maintains a profile in early music and his 2006 recording "Engagement & Confrontation" drew considerable praise, while Phillippe leads several ensembles with international membership.

The nine songs (all but one under 5min.) are complete and succinct with an idea explored to a natural conclusion. Perhaps the winding and wending nature of the sounds is the reason why the song titles all come from rivers; further, the CD's title is the French translation of the Saint Lawrence, the Canadian seaway that takes the Great Lakes watershed east to the Atlantic and flows around the Island of Montreal (which is nearly wholly taken up by the city of Montreal) in its course.

There's a wide variety of tones and textures, thanks to the variety of instruments at play here but the music is still subtle and has a consistent intent throughout the CD. And as a credit to the performers, it's not always obvious what the source of sounds is. The sparse CD notes do not indicate if the recording was made without overdubs but, nonetheless, the songs don't grab you by the throat and overwhelm the listener.

It's not all micro scratchings as there are broad and bold musical gestures throughout the CD. The second half of *Adda* begins with a wonderful squelch of static and distortion and contains some obviously electronic-sourced material. And the entirety of *Volta* is a steady wave of wailing feedback and distress, perhaps coming Pierre-Yves' viola da gamba.

A few videos of the duo are up on youtube and indicate that they use pre-recorded sounds; nonetheless, that some sounds are prepared in advance does not diminish the appeal or feeling of adventurousness of this recording. This duo allows sounds to unfold and develop and lets the creativity flow without a heavy hand. **(TH)**

### **SWANS – MY FATHER WILL GUIDE ME UP A ROPE TO THE SKY**



**Label:** Young God Records

**Release Date:** September 2010

**Tracklist:** No Words/ No Thoughts; Reeling the Liars In; Jim; My Birth; You Fucking People Make Me Sick; Inside Madeline; Eden Prison; Little Mouth

**Personnel:** Michael Gira: vocals, acoustic & electric guitar, composition; Devendra Banhart, Saoirse Gira: vocals on 'You Fucking People Make Me Sick';

Brian Carpenter: trumpet, slide trumpet; Grasshopper: mandolin; Kristof Hahn: electric guitar, mouth harp; Norman Westberg: electric guitar, e-bow; Chris Pravdica: bass guitar; Thor Horris: drums, percussion, dulcimer, vibes, curios, keyboards; Bill Rieflin: drums, piano, 12-string acoustic guitar, electric guitar, synthesizer, organ; Phil Puleo: drums, percussion, dulcimer

**Additional Information:** This review refers to the single-disc release of 'My Father Will Guide Me'; the 2-disc edition featuring the remixed version of the album entitled 'Look at Me Go'; and Michael Gira's initial solo versions of the songs, released as 'I Am Not Insane' (all on Young God Records).

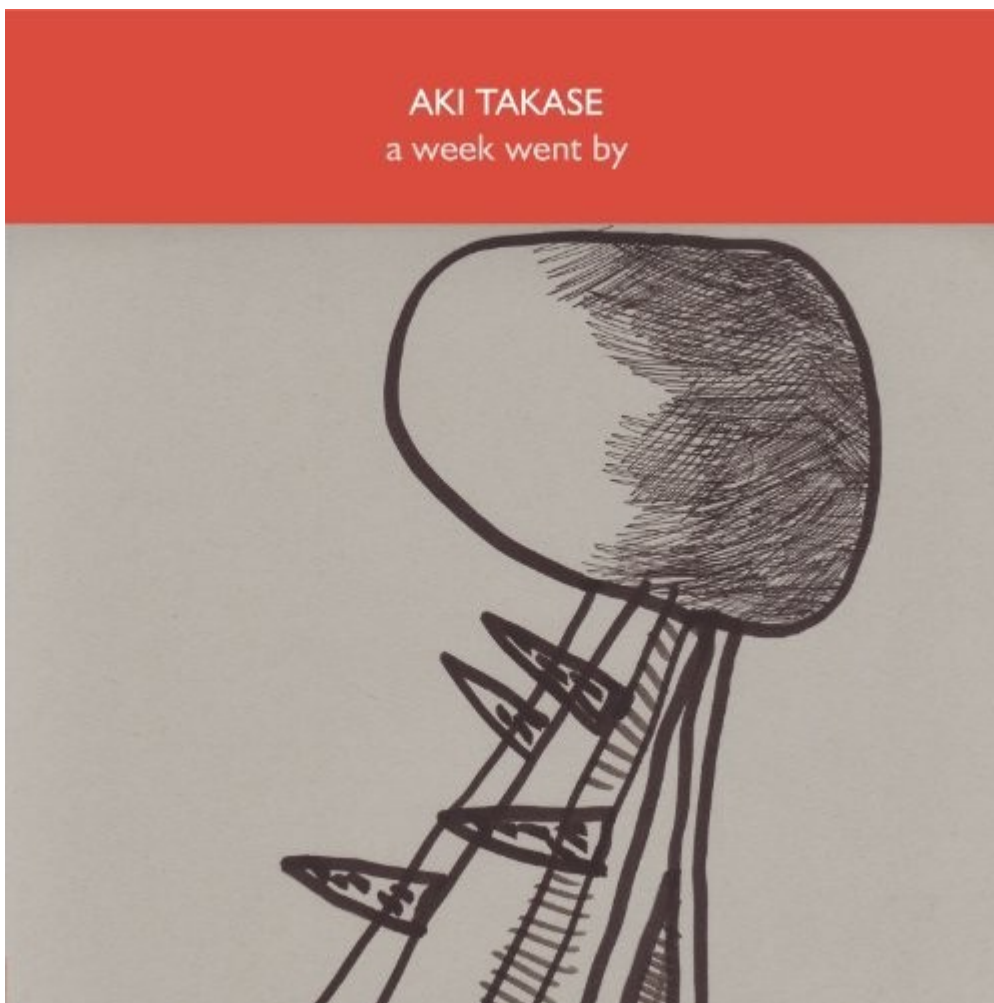
I should preface this write-up by saying that I'm not what you'd call a Swans devotee, though I do admire what I have heard of their work. The band's return after a 13-year hiatus sees them adopting a post-GSYBE, self-consciously

'epic' alt-rock sound, though suffused with the grimmer lyrical strain that one would expect from front-man Michael Gira. Songs will build up on alternating two-chord patterns from or into clouds of Ligeti-esque orchestral dissonance, proceeding from quieter moments such as the start of the album, in which we hear a fairly lengthy passage for what sound like church bells. In a track-by-track analysis of 'My Father Will Guide Me' on The Quietus website, Gira has stated that these introductory sections should have been far longer, and that he was 'cowardly' to leave them as snippets. This would seem to indicate a definitive move away from the stripped-down textures of Swans' 'industrial' period, in which the speaking/shouting/screaming voice was front-and-centre, and towards a more instrumental, orchestral approach. Lyrically, Gira has been interested in Christianity for a while, even if he tends to deploy it for 'resonant', generalised effect (in contrast to the detailed occult/theological speculations of David Tibet); what emerges here, though, does seem to have been crafted (like the album in general) to tread a certain, just-about-cohesive thematic line. Thus, dependency and the need for love in personal relationships are equated with the desires presented in Christian doctrine: the final song's lines "And may I find my way/ To the foot of your throne" could apply equally to a lover and to Christ (who is, after all, metaphorically described as a lover in The Holy Book itself). Similarly, the second-track's campfire sing-a-long 'Reeling the Liars In' (probably the closest the record comes to humour (dark and twisted humour, of course)) suggests the Christian notion of sin and self-mortification abstracted from a specific religious context, chillingly moving from gleeful 'us-against-them' wish-fulfilment fantasy (for a moment I thought this might be a political song about burning Bush, Cheney et al on a big fire) to a sense of personal culpability ("Here is my tongue,/ Now cut out my sin") which is potentially blasphemous in its visceral identification with Christ ("Here is my hand,/ Now drive the nail in"). While at times one suspects this thematic ambition of coming un-stuck in the grand tradition of over-reaching prog-rock concept albums, in the end it's just about vague enough to avoid such pomposity (even such apparently simple songs as 'Reeling the Liars In' can be read in several different ways), and not too vague to seem merely 'Gothick' in a teenage manner.

Certainly, this a work into which a lot of effort has been put, as attested by the associated 'before' and 'after' releases. The first of these is 'I am Not Insane', a solo put out on Young God Records to fund the recording sessions for the main album, which finds Gira playing initial, guitar-and-voice versions of the songs at his desk. I suppose one could call it a series of sketches for how those songs would eventually turn out, but it does stand up as an album on its right – the recorded sound is crystal-clear, and Gira's voice reveals resonances that get somewhat lost amongst all the other sounds on 'My Father'. The second is perhaps more substantial (though less 'Swans-ish'), coming out the other side of the composing process: it appears on the second disc of the special edition of 'My Father', and is a single, 46-minute track, somewhat flippantly entitled 'Look at Me Go'. The music itself, though is anything but flippant: essentially, Gira remixes the separate pieces from 'My Father' into an entirely new composition, more akin to 'contemporary classical' than to 'alt-rock', with more emphasis on orchestral and noise textures and less on his own voice, less on simple song structure, less on rock-based rhythm– in effect, it's a totally different piece, and one that's equally, if not more compelling than the 'main' album. If you find 'My Father Will Guide Me' at all compelling, it's worth checking out these companion

pieces: together they form a trilogy of some depth that illustrates just how much Swans have morphed since their initial incarnation. **(DG)**

### **AKI TAKASE- A WEEK WENT BY**



**Label:** psi

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Surface Tension; A Week Went By; Steinblock; Just Drop In; 57577; Ima wa Mukashi; Cell Culture; Men are Shadows; Yumetamago.

**Personnel:** Aki Takase: piano; John Edwards: double bass (1-3, 7, 8); Tony Levin: drums (1-3, 7, 8); John Tchicai: alto saxophone (4).

These live recordings made in June 2008 at Gateshead feature three solo piano tracks, five trio tracks with John Edwards, bass and Tony Levin, drums, plus one duo track with John Tchicai, alto saxophone.

For someone noted for her success at reconstructing jazz classics ("making it new") from the past (Fats Waller, W.C.Handy, Ornette Coleman among others) in a refreshingly non-neo-con manner, this album features Takase in a completely improvised set.

The interaction with those two world class musicians, Edwards and Levin, is close-knit- they are fluent in the same language and the interaction is such on the title track that I find it hard to decide if some sounds are due to prepared piano or melodic drumming. As far as I can tell Takase is sparing in her use of

the prepared approach. On the closing track, a meditative, almost stream-of-consciousness solo, I detect some dampening of strings, probably from inside the piano, but on *Ima wa Mukashi* (another solo track) an extreme percussive attack sets up a really continuous barrage of overtones. She may have taken a hint from Cecil Taylor's remark about the piano being "eighty-eight tuned drums", but applies it in her own way. She does not sound like a pastiche of Taylor, Pullen, Tristano, Schlippenbach or any other pianist. Bill Shoemaker in his liner notes draws a comparison with Jaki Byard, which is interesting and valid up to a point, but on this album at least we don't hear the kind of potted history of jazz piano in five minutes Byard was apt to give his audiences, particularly during his stay with Mingus. She indulges briefly at one point in some blues clichés à la Ramsey Lewis or Les McCann, but quickly subverts this tendency harmonically, rhythmically and in just about every other possible way. This kind of humour should be familiar to those who know her albums of reconstructions from the past.

(Some other highly listenable examples of her percussive or overtone approach can be heard in the duo with Schlippenbach on *Freezone Appleby 2006*, or *Lok 03*, where the two of them are joined by D.J.Illvibe.)

The duo track with John Tchicai is quite special. The most striking aspect is the rhythmic, as the piece is dense with syncopation within syncopation, a kind of syncopation squared or cubed. The way Tchicai throws in quotes like the ostinato riff from *Night in Tunisia*, or the opening of *Epistrophy* raises the question if this was meant to be an enormous, systematic derangement of all the senses of bebop (to adapt Rimbaud's phrase.) I wonder if any more duo tracks by these duo are lying on a shelf somewhere. They would definitely be worth hearing.

If you already like Aki Takase's music, I would say this is pretty essential listening. Since she has not played in this country for some time now we have albums like this to play till the next time she pays a visit. **(SK)**

### **tusK – BUG**

**Label:** Self-Released

**Release Date:** October 2010

**Tracklist:** 10 Untitled Tracks

**Personnel:** Stuart Chalmers: bugbrand oscillator machine and effects boxes/ loopers

**Additional Information:** Limited availability; contact [skarabee@live.co.uk](mailto:skarabee@live.co.uk).

Given that a total number of only 25 copies have been manufactured, one might say that 'bug' was a 'limited edition' release. But I don't mean this phrase to connote what it so often seems to in the world of contemporary music marketing, where the production of the CD and attendant packaging/ prints/ drawings, etc, seems calculated to give the release the status of 'art object', and thus to enter into the nefarious world of 'the art market'. Stuart Chalmers has made this music and released it on these 25 CDs, not as a means of gaining critical and financial capital in the competition for art world 'success', but because he wants it out there, because he wants you to hear it. He doesn't want you to consume it in one big unthinking swallow, but to digest it, perhaps disagree with it, take issue with it, deal with it. As I wrote about the last tusK release (out on net-label Stoxomine Records), what I particularly like about this



project is how unadorned it is – and, in this case, that extends to the packaging: a single silver printed CD with the album's name and an e-mail address; no track titles, no liner notes, as if Chalmers wished to dispense with the whole physical object/ packaging aspect of things altogether, and present the listener with a purely aural document. The title, 'bug' doesn't refer to the insect nature of the music (remember the term 'insect improv?'), but to the instrument used: a bugbrand oscillator machine, a tiny thing with little circuits and switches, volatile and hard to control, necessitating a close tactile engagement with the means of producing sound: the aforementioned circuits and switches must be manipulated with the most delicate of adjustments to avoid ugly chaos. What I hear on this CD is Chalmers engaging with the mechanics of the bug, trying to ensure a balance between what he wants the thing to do and what it does, almost of its own volition; as if he's finding out what's possible as he goes along, working through, wood-shedding. This isn't trial and error, though, for he's careful to sculpt the sound into structurally coherent shapes, often focusing on a particular area of sound for the duration of one track. Thus, we have moments dedicated to faint white noise hiss, moments to more traditionally 'noisy' blares and grinds, and, on the first track, to surprisingly delicate high-pitches, popping around like firework sparklers. One might be tempted to think at times that Chalmers is running through licks, or tricks, except that it's clear he doesn't have a safety net – no chord changes or standards for him – so that this record of practice (or practise?) is formally clean, not messily hit-and-miss, but still possessing something like the excitingly contingent nature of spontaneous thought. **(DG)**

## **IN BRIEF**

### **JASON ADASIEWICZ'S ROLLDOWN – VARMINT (Cuneiform)**

This album, by a Chicagoan quintet whose names are new to me, was released on Cuneiform in 2009, but sounds like it could have been recorded forty years earlier, clearly harking back to 1960s Blue Note dates by Eric Dolphy (it shares the instrumentation of 'Out to Lunch') and Andrew Hill (whose 'The Griots' is covered at the end of the disc). All the compositions, save the Hill tune, are by leader Jason Adasiewicz, whose vibes float and sting, suspending, sustaining and sharpening notes in the grand tradition of Bobby Hutcherson, and solos are fine and dandy all round, even if none of the musicians come across as truly distinctive improvisational thinkers as yet. For me, the disc highlights are 'Hide' and 'Punchbug', which also happen to be the only two pieces to be written without chord changes. Towards the end of the former, Josh Berman's cornet playing incorporates the breath-sounds, growls and burrs increasingly in use by a new generation of players who straddle the line between improv and jazz, though elsewhere, he tends to stick to more conventional timbres than the likes of Taylor Ho Bynum, Nate Wooley or Peter Evans. On the latter, it's Aram Shelton who edges away from the post-bop manoeuvres, his switch to clarinet leading to more slurred and blurred articulation. Also notable is the ostensible ballad feature, 'I Hope She is Awake', in which the recapitulation of the melody is marked by Frank Rosaly's underlying drum solo – a nice touch. Going for a sound so close to that of one's inspirations is a risky business, but Rolldown just about manage to pull it off, and if their music is not yet on the same level as that of their forbears – their playing sounds less 'modern' than that of either Dolphy or Hill – they are likely still developing, and 'Varmint' manages to avoid being a

repertory-type display for the most part.

### **STUART CHALMERS - *GOD OF DECAY* (self-released cassette)**

Stuart Chalmers seems to change his set-up with each new album; having impressed with the whispering, rustling, kalimba-dominated 'Tlon', released under the Skarabee moniker, he then turned, as 'tusK', to harsher, more rhythmically-assertive music produced using a bug-brand oscillator (see review of 'bug' in this issue). 'God of Decay', for which he uses his real name, documents his latest preoccupation, with the use of cassette tapes - sped up, slowed down, fast-forwarded, re-wound and god knows what else to create surprising textures. When sped-up, the sound that most readily comes to mind is that of chirruping birds, but, as indicated by the doom-metal-type-title and the retro-Noise-cassette packaging (with strategically-placed holes burned into the plastic box using a lighter), this isn't exactly a 'pleasant' recording. The aesthetic, at least at first, is cut-up, quick-fire, jagged; given the silences between sounds (sometimes taken up by that eerie pre-echo you get on cassettes), the bursts and blares and blurts of volume can seem like sudden gun-blasts. However, Chalmers' experience as a free improviser means that he has a good feel for the overall shape and structure of a piece, and he subsequently introduces longer-lasting, almost droney sections based on guitar-pedall'd loops, and less frenetic moments in which one can hear motifs and ideas being developed at greater length. The second side uses a little too much reverb for my liking and is more ear-crunching in effect; however, Chalmers provides a very quiet conclusion by way of contrast, and the album as a whole is less deliberately bloody-minded (more sparse?) than your typical Noise release. It's a limited edition, of course, but it can be downloaded from the FFM Records website in MP3 format.

### **ERGO - *MULTITUDE, SOLITUDE* (Cuneiform)**

Sober, restrained, sometimes lethargic and even depressive, 'Multitude, Solitude' is certainly a distinctive listen, if not a very comforting one. The band who've created it, Ergo, play moody 'post-jazz' (I suppose that's what one would call it), with a distinctive colour deriving from the combination of trombone and electric piano. The recorded sound is lovely, crisp and clear, and there are some involving moments, though there is also a tendency to meander somewhat. The effect is at once woozy and stark, stripped-back, slow and foreboding but with inklings of be-fogged prettiness, like those moments of fuzzed insomnia before sleep finally comes. At first, one might think that 'Rana Sylvatica' functioned as a kind of prelude, with its trembling rhodes piano surrounded by ominous computerized drones and clicks, drums functioning as nervous background wash rather than as driving rhythmic force. However, once one gets into the rest of the album, one realizes that it's actually typical of the musical logic at work throughout - un-showy, perhaps sometimes a little cautious, with a preference for atmosphere rather than for soloistic showcasing. On some tracks, such as 'Vessel', this approach doesn't really do much to catch the attention; but on the following 'She Haunts Me' (which sounds pretty much through-composed), it really pays off. Carl Maguire plays a chord progression that slowly pushes up the keyboard in preparation for the climactic entry of Brett Skroka's multi-tracked trombone(s); this build happens twice, and the fact that it doesn't lead into any extended improvisational exploration of those louder climaxes adds a sense of unresolved

tension which is undoubtedly deliberate, and is perfectly in keeping with the logic of the record as a whole. There are a host of influences at work here; from film soundtracks, we get a somewhat episodic structural sense; from ambient music, an avoidance of groove, an anti-developmental stance; from alt-rock, certain types of chord progression; from jazz, a kind of blueness and melancholy, and elements of improvisational vocabulary. The general ethos at work, though, is somewhat different from all these – too active to produce genuine ambient music, the band nevertheless avoid settling into grooves; tempos are kept slow, pieces often crawling to crescendos and disintegrating back almost straight away. Easy to overlook, but vital to the album's overall sound, are the computerized eddies, ebbs, interjections that slip in and under the cracks of the music, at once filling it out and adding a needling sense of uncertainty. This a very contemporary record, due not only to its range of generic reference, but also to its emotional suggestions, its bleary-eyed, four-in-the-morning, blinking-TV-screens-in-hotel-rooms resonances; worthwhile.

**JEAN-LUC GUIONNET/ CLAYTON THOMAS/ WILL GUTHRIE –  
*THE AMES ROOM* (Monotype Records)**

This release seems to have convinced a few critics whose tastes have moved from free jazz to free improv in recent years that there is still worthwhile material left to explore in the former field. On paper, it looks like a fairly standard-issue release; a trio of saxophone, bass and drums, playing lengthy, high-tempo improvisations. But there is, indeed, something different about it – probably the method in which saxophonist Jean-Luc Guionnet develops his playing, in cellular, repetitive melodic units that recall Roscoe Mitchell's solo work as much as anything. Nice stuff.

**JOOKLO DUO – *THE WARRIOR* (Northern Spy)**

I wasn't that impressed by the Jooklo Duo when I saw them supporting Sonny Simmons & Tight Meat back in 2007 (see review in Issue 1), but this short release suggests they may have something more to offer. There are two tracks, one for each side of the 7"; the titles use the familiar free jazz terminology of fire, warriors, power (something I'm a little sceptical about at times, but we'll let that pass), and the music is, as expected, loud and with little let-up. There's something bare yet punchy about the sax/duo format, and though I've sat through (and enjoyed, I hasten to add) some paint-peeling saxophone soloing in my time, Genta's playing at the very beginning is up there with the most forceful, loud enough to carry across valleys like some ancient sonic signal. Given that free jazz often lends itself to sprawling and extended forms, it's nice to hear such a concentrated burst, and hopefully this tightness and concision can be translated into future full-length albums.

**ORFEO 5 – *A YEAR ON ICE* (The Word Hoard)**

This duo for saxophone (Keith Jafrate) and electronics (Shaun Blezard) leans less towards the electro-acoustic improvisation one might expect than to a kind of ambient jazz, Jafrate's saxophone skating over imaginary chord changes while distortions and echoes rise and fall underneath, sometimes reaching volume-overflow, sometimes looping, sometimes throwing in 'field recording' samples

(snatches of bird-song). Half-way through the lengthy title track, a section of feedback-tinged rumblings and cracklings moves things into a more 'abstract' area (though even here, the use of delay adds a kind of meandering directionality to proceedings), before Jafrate bursts out with exploratory lines that begin to incorporate multiphonics and Evan-Parker-like circular figures. On 'I Looked Back', the wistful, wispy melodicism, drenched in distant reverb, strongly suggests Nils Petter Molvaer, while 'dusk' opens with more abrasive saxophone parps and shrieks (though things soon become flowing and languorous once again). I'm not sure about the addition of a rather stiff, programmed drum-beat on 'later and later' – though there are moments when the groove becomes 'dirtier', and Jafrate locks in for some attractive rhythmic playing. In context, though, it perhaps adds a little more bite to the improvisations, which can tend to be rather too stifflingly pretty. For me, the electronics are not that characterful, coming across as rather samey and lacking a certain interactive bite. That said, there are attractive enough moments, if one is prepared to let the music drift in and out of full attention – to practice a kind of 'hazy listening' as opposed to 'close listening', which is not necessarily a bad thing.

### **DAVID S. WARE – SATURNIAN (SOLO SAXOPHONES, VOL. 1) (AUM Fidelity)**

David S. Ware was hardly playing it safe when he chose, for his first public performance since recovering from a life-threatening illness, to undertake one of the most taxing of instrumental challenges, a solo saxophone recital. Without the propulsive, often groove-based rhythmical accompaniment which was provided for him during the previous twenty years or so by Matthew Shipp, William Parker, and a succession of drummers, he could not afford himself the luxury of stretching out at length over a reliable and continuous backdrop. Instead, as this recording attests, he was forced to draw, alone, on all the technical and organisational resources at his disposal; and those resources are considerable. Rather than utilising circular breathing, Ware works through phrasal development – melodic figures repeated, elongated, expanded, expounded on. Though he's often noted for his 'muscular' sound, it's clear from the start that his playing has more to offer than just sheer power; on 'Methone' in particular, his tone has a lovely fluidity, sounding reedy and almost Oriental as he glides up to high registers and swoops back down with emphatic grounding strokes. At one point, a bluesy figuration is tried out a couple of ways, almost jokingly – the music doesn't feel po-faced, despite the 'spiritual jazz' ambitions, and has a sometimes quixotic liveliness to it, a declamatory and singing urgency and a fizzing energy, easily mitigating against the dangers of austerity and timbral limitation that might have been found within such a setting. It helps here to realize that the 'spiritual' is never too far from the 'secular' – witness Ray Charles – and Ware's characteristic blend of 'godspelized' melodicism and other-worldly exploration of the higher registers is *grounded*, rooted in the earth, as much as it is orbiting the planets. At times, as noted, it's even playful; there's a sense that Ware is juggling with his spontaneously-created melodic fragments – like throwing up a ball in the air and catching it – lending the performance a sense of risk, a darting, skimming sense of movement and exhilaration which never detracts from the consummate skill in execution. Weighty yet weightless, earthy and spacey and spacious all at once, 'Saturnian' is a fitting return and a fine performance from one of the masters of this music. **(DG)**

# RE-ISSUES

MICHAEL GREGORY JACKSON – CLARITY



**Label:** ESP-Disk

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Clarity; A View of This Life; Oliver Lake;  
Prelueoionti; Ballad; Clarity (4); Ab Bb 1-7-3<sup>o</sup>; IOMI

**Personnel:** Michael Gregory Jackson: acoustic & electric guitar, vocal, bamboo flute, timpani, marimba, percussion; David Murray: tenor sax; Oliver Lake: flute, soprano & alto saxophone, talking drum, cowbell; Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet & soprano trumpet, flugelhorn, Indian flute  
**Additional Information:** Originally recorded in 1976 (in NYC, Hartford & LA) & released in 1977.

A player associated with the 'Loft Jazz' movement of late '70s New York, Michael Gregory Jackson (subsequently known simply as Michael Gregory, in order to avoid confusion with his more famous name-sake) adopted that movement's ethic of multi-instrumentalism and a wide-open conception of genre, wedded to a distinct compositional ethic and an elegant, sometimes wistful, sometimes astringent sensibility. On this, his first release, but one of the last to come out on ESP-Disk, we very much hear Jackson as composer; also - occasionally - as folk-club singer-songwriter, and, perhaps less than one might think, as improvising jazz musician. One notable thing about the record is Jackson's refusal to play a supporting role, his continued insistence on being a 'lead instrument' alongside the horns (in contrast to, say, the more jazz-fusion-flavoured 'Gifts' from 1979). This is after all, his record date, these are his pieces;

and who's to say a guitar should always be part of the 'rhythm section' anyway? In fact, Jackson does away with a rhythm section altogether, choosing to pair himself instead with the horns of Oliver Lake (with whom he regularly played as a sideman), David Murray and Wadada Leo Smith. It's no mean line-up, certainly, and if the results don't quite deliver on the caliber promised by those names, it's for reasons that are rather hard to pin down.

For the most part, Lake, Murray and Smith play Jackson's compositions in melodic unison, only occasionally moving into improvised sections, which sometimes (to my mind) sit rather uncomfortably with the more obviously 'formal' material. 'Clarity (4)' finds Jackson moving from guitar to a variety of percussion and wind instruments – gong, marimba, bamboo flute – in a free-flowing dialogue never content to settle on any one texture or melodic impulse. It's the sort of thing that had been pioneered by members of the AACM, and it's an approach that often produces fascinating music, but it's maybe best suited to long-form pieces, and here it feels as though there's never quite enough time for things to develop. Similarly, Jackson's vocal on the title track suggests an intriguing marriage between wistful singer-songwriter material and the more spindly, drawn-out unison lines played by the horns, but it remains a one-off, the only time voice appears on the record. Arguably the most cohesive, and certainly the most immediately attractive track is 'Prelueoionti', a solo guitar piece recorded live in Los Angeles – though the audience are so quiet and attentive one would imagine this to have been laid down in a studio, were it not for the applause at the end of the piece and a single stray cough. Here Jackson concentrates on alternating cyclical patterns and melodies, the rhythmic momentum swelling up to a strongly strummed climax before dipping back down to catch the breath in reverie, then once more building. It's very atmospheric, sunlight-dappled, more in the 'finger-picking' tradition than the compositions that make up much of what we hear on the rest of the record, and a fine example of its kind.

Jackson was only 23 when these selections were recorded, so perhaps those who supervised the album's production were keen to showcase everything he was capable of; and, truth be told, on repeated listens, the album seems more cohesive than I've made out. It's certainly quite different to the rest of ESP's output, the absence of drums ensuring a generally slower, more pensive approach akin to chamber music, and the textural combination of brass and guitar is one not generally found in any genre. In the end, I find myself craving more moments in the vein of the gorgeous section near the end of 'IOMI' (a track which, for some reason, reminds me of Andrew Hill's piece 'Faded Beauty') where Lake's sweet-toned saxophone flurries are joined by Smith's muted trills, Murray's barely-audible breath-tones, and Jackson's accompanying chords. It's a moment that sounds totally spontaneous, yet every individual fits into the whole with delicious formal exactness, each complementing the other and keeping the texture fluid and uncluttered. Elsewhere, though, such a balance proves harder to attain. Things are, in fact, almost *too* clear, too clean, as if the musicians were deliberately reining themselves in (compare, for instance, the reading of the title track here with the much looser, more freer-flowing rendition on the 'Wildflowers' Loft Jazz Anthology, where Lake's saxophone is tart yet sweet, his flute mellifluous and floating, and Jackson's guitar merges with a shimmering combination of arco bass and cymbals). That said, whatever my personal judgements, 'Clarity' never feels false or hollow; it has *integrity*, and is very much worth a closer examination. **(DG)**

## SONNY SIMMONS – *STAYING ON THE WATCH*



**Label:** ESP-Disk

**Release Date:** 2010

**Tracklist:** Metamorphosis; A Distant Voice; City of David; Interplanetary Travellers

**Personnel:** Teddy Smith: bass; John Hicks: piano; Marvin Pattillo: percussion;  
Barbara Donald: trumpet; Sonny Simmons: alto sax

**Additional Information:** Originally recorded & released in 1966.

There is no printed information, no lettering on the front cover of Sonny Simmons' 1966 album 'Staying on the Watch'; instead, Sandra Stollman's black-and-white photograph of the artist takes up the entire space, a striking and intriguing visual statement that still grabs the attention on the occasion of the album's re-issue. Simmons stands on a rock, towering over the New York City skyline on which he has turned his back, looking out of the frame as he plays his horn. The pose he strikes is defiant, confident, bold; he is playing from his experience of the city, of the contemporary climate, of life as it is, but at the same time 'looking ahead', suggesting what the future might bring – as the record's title suggests, he is simultaneously a watchman and a 'seer', someone who sees ahead, who offers us a share in that glimpse.

Simmons had made his first visit to New York City in 1963, when he had recorded a number of sessions with Eric Dolphy and Prince Lasha. Though adventurous and to this day essential listening, the resultant albums did reach the extremes of dissonance, timbral distortion, and pulse-playing that characterized much of the 'New Thing' music with which the ESP-Disk label

became so interlinked. Thus, it was clear that a definite move 'outwards' had taken place in Simmons' music when, on his next visit to New York, he recorded two sessions for ESP. (The three years in between the two visits must have been a fascinating time of development, but, as no recordings survive from this period, we can only guess at the ways in which changes began to manifest themselves.)

'Staying on the Watch', the first of the ESP sessions, finds Simmons leading a quartet comprised of his wife, Barbara Donald, a fine player who was stood out in the jazz world of the time (and still stands out) for being both white, and a woman; the pianist John Hicks, who would go on to have a long and prolific career, playing up until his demise in 2006; bassist Teddy Smith, better-known in mainstream contexts (previous to his work with Simmons, he had appeared in groups led by Betty Carter, Horace Silver, Jackie McLean, Slide Hampton and Sonny Rollins); and drummer Marvin Pattillo, whose only other appearance on record is Pharoah Sanders' debut recording, also for ESP. This is clearly not a thrown-together session – the playing is tight and together, opening compositional material delivered with a crisp and clean articulation, often at high tempos, before each player makes their individual mark through extended solos. Hicks makes interesting play out of McCoy Tyner-esque chords, Simmons combines a ferocious tone – smearing, searing, white-hot – with R&B phrases that disarmingly pop out of nowhere, while Donald makes confident free-bop statements. The theme-solos-theme format is mostly adhered to but also deviated from in ways that keep the music structurally fresh, avoiding the by-rote ordering that besets even some ostensibly 'free' recordings from this period. Brisk opening and closing melodic statements lend proceedings a crisp and bracing edge; though tracks are fairly long (lasting from seven to thirteen minutes), the session doesn't feel sprawling but, tight, compact – a ball of energy packed into forty-four minutes that fairly speed by.

'Metamorphosis', though still credited to Simmons, is apparently an adaptation of a composition by the late Bill Dixon; as played here, in swift unison, it sounds like an opening fanfare, an injunction to 'listen up!' The leader solos first, his alto pitched high and edged rough, though this is certainly not a 'screech-fest' – listen to the way he and Hicks mirror each-other, exchanging melodic lines in a manner that suggests parallel improvisation than 'soloist' and 'accompanist'. Under Donald's trumpet, Hicks switches to more standard jazz comping, giving her solo a 'freebop' feel – indeed, Donald at one point plays a line that sounds fairly similar to some of the more aggressive phrases Miles Davis was beginning to employ during the mid-60s. Her solo ends with a sustained low note, Teddy Smith taking over, bowed and melodic, serious but with a rhythmic spring in his step. Now Hicks, like McCoy Tyner combining busy right hand runs with left-hand chords plonked out at regular rhythmic intervals; unlike Tyner, however, the chords, at least initially, threaten to overwhelm the single-note lines (perhaps due to the rather boxy recording quality?). The runs become freer, more dissonant, interrupting the locked-in chordal juggernaut (which, nevertheless, soon gets itself back into gear), and there might seem to be a slight disjuncture between the two approaches – but, as the solo continues, it's as if something suddenly clicks into place, the player and listener both 'getting it' or 'getting into it'. When Hicks settles on a rolling, lower register figure accompanied by string plucks that sound quite different from the usual 'inside-piano' forays, it feels apt but surprising in the best way. And one has to admire the way in which he jerks



straight out of his solo journey to play the returning full-band theme in perfect tone and time.

'A Distant Voice' provides a nice contrast in mood, tempo, and colour, being a duet for Simmons and Smith that seems, in large-part, to be through-composed. Simmons' oriental-sounding timbre, bending notes and striving to make the harmonies ambiguous, prefigures his later English Horn work, and both players sound closely attuned to each-other, carefully and subtly blending written and improvised material. 'City of David', the record's longest track, opens at a similarly slow tempo, and takes in a pretty bass solo before the speeds suddenly shoot up and Donald plays bright, open lines over sparkling bass and drums. An apparent tape edit take us into a unison theme and Simmons, throwing in an R&B lick early on, holds high, questing tones built up to from coruscating, exhilarating runs. Hicks seems to be winding things down in order to prepare us for a breather after Simmons' impassioned statements, but instead we move into a drum solo which energetically – and, it turns out, succinctly – emphasizes a couple of rhythmic patterns before the horns' thematic blast ushers in Hicks' solo. Once more, as on 'Metamorphosis', this is the longest improvisation on the piece, the pianist hammering home the logic of chordal sequences and occasionally leaving little pauses between on-the-beat-emphasis to add a little tension, as bass and drums keep up a constant forward rush. A touch of gospelly articulation, right-hand runs with renewed vigour, urgent yet grandiose repetitions – Hicks entralls almost by dint of sheer persistence.

The composition at the start of 'Interplanetary Travelers' is in two parts: an elongated initial melody leads to a faster, repeated section. As with all the themes on this record, it's snappy but not riff-like or 'easy' in the slightest. Now Simmons over just bass and drums, going fast, starting out with a scalding shrillness, settling on an almost lilting melodic phrases before whirling out again, the dizzying tonguing and slurring of repeated phrases threatening to dissolve the bass-drum combination's continued patter into a more abstract pulse. The solo ends with a high, staccato passage of great virtuosity, not that dissimilar to the sort of thing one might hear played in contemporary 'European Free Improvisation'. By contrast, Donald almost seems to drag the notes out from her trumpet, in a kind of luxurious, distorted play on fanfare figures, soon giving way to Smith on bass, bending notes, imparting them with a snapped edge, winding down from the preceding high-tempo playing into something more spacious, breathable. Drums lead back to a brief passage where the thematic restatement is mangled into parallel improvisation for the horns, Simmons' extreme staccato articulation throwing things deliberately off-balance, arco bass making its presence felt somewhere underneath. And then a quick unison flourish to end. None of the Coltrane Quartet's swelling codas here (those codas pushed to their full potential by Roland Kirk in the concert film 'I Eye Aye', where a full two-minutes of dissonant closing pounding sees Kirk smashing a chair on-stage as things threaten to erupt into an ecstatic, joyful riot). Instead, Simmons & Co. keep it tight and punchy – the band is on its toes, not dwelling on what has just happened, ready for the next piece, ready for the future, 'staying on the watch'.

**(DG)**

## PATTY WATERS – SINGS



**Label:** ESP-Disk

**Release Date:** February 2009

**Personnel:** Patty Waters: piano (1-7), voice; on 'Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair' (8), add Burton Greene: piano, piano harp; Steve Tintweiss: bass; Tom Price: drums

**Tracklist:** Moon, Don't Come Up Tonight; Why Can't I Come to You; You Thrill Me; Sad Am I, Glad Am I; Why Is Love Such A Funny Thing; I Can't Forget You; You Loved Me; Black Is The Color Of My True Love's Hair.

**Additional Information:** Originally released 1965.

Of Patty Waters' two records for ESP-Disk, it is the second, 'College Tour', that has the greater colouristic range and, perhaps, emotional scope: nonetheless, the very limitation of this, the first record - its frequent concentration on just one dimension, one mood - imparts it with a unique claustrophobic power. The microphone picks up every nuance, every imperfection in Waters' voice; the hesitation before singing the next phrase, the way each line is given near-ponderous, equal weight, piano and voice in a kind of sparse and motionless alternating dialogue. Waters rarely sings directly over the chords and melodic phrases that she plays, instead using the keyboard to accentuate and contrast the vocal line: often, her voice sounds out over the piano's last reverberations (most of her playing is sustain-pedaled), though, occasionally, she uses a kind of solfège effect which actually seems to render the music even more delicate, rather than amplifying its volume and 'power'. Some might argue that the songs on the first side are the disposable items before the real standout, 'Black is the Colour'; and they do indeed all lie within a similar piano range, each

unfolding at the same slow, hesitant tempo, each plumbing the same lyrical and emotional mood of insecurity and fragility. Sometimes, they feel like cast-offs rather than fully-fledged songs; sketches, lasting barely more than a minute. Nonetheless, taken as a whole (for they seem to merge, to melt into one another, insubstantial yet haunting), they create a fitting prelude, as if the emotions packed into the fragile miniatures of the first side expand and explode into the unadorned starkness of the record's best-known track, the near-fifteen-minute 'Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair'. And perhaps, without them, 'Black' would lose some of *its* power.

Structurally, 'Black' would appear to be largely improvised: Waters almost whispers the melody over Burton Greene's dissonant, harp-like playing of the piano strings, before Steve Tintweiss' bass and Tom Price's drums add sea-sick rhythmic articulations as Greene moves to the keyboard, while Waters alternately lets out piercing, terrifying screams, and repeats the word 'black', over and over, with a kind of despairing, obsessive, almost mocking quality. It's impossible not to think of the racial and political connotations that would have been evoked at the time by that word, 'black', despite - and even because of - the fact that Waters' singing seems so strongly *personal*. Fittingly, the last seconds of the record are left to her voice alone, once more whispering fragments of melody, this time wordlessly - not resolution exactly, but the exhausted aftermath of an emotional purging, the last resort of a voice that's been through the gauntlet - crying, screaming, pleading, shouting out - and can find nothing but the merest wisp with which to 'conclude'.

Despite the fact that this album - that final performance in particular - would go on to have such influence on those female singers interested in expanding the range and acceptable 'musicality' of the human voice, its power lies precisely in the fact that Waters' take on jazz song - and on song in general - is so personal, so idiosyncratic, so uncomfortably direct and seemingly unpolished, so unconcerned with its placing in musical history. 'Sings' is not aiming to be a trailblazer, a 'classic', a standout: instead, in whispers and screams, it is the act of an artist reaching deep into herself, both within and without the confines of traditional form, as if willed by an inner imperative, an imperative that still sounds loud and clear nearly half a century on. **(DG)**

## **GIG REVIEWS**

- **SQUINT**  
*Port Mahon, Oxford (April 2010)*
- **FREEDOM OF THE CITY FESTIVAL**  
*Conway Hall, London (May 2010)*
- **ATMOSPHERES/ RED SQUARE**  
*Folly Bridge Inn, Oxford (May 2010)*
- **NACHSTÜCK**  
*Oxford (June 2010)*
- **JOHN TCHICAI TRIO**  
*Folly Bridge Inn, Oxford (September 2010)*
- **MICHAEL PISARO: 'MIND IS MOVING'**  
*The Nunnery, London (February 2011)*

· **WANDELWEISER & FLUXUS: CONCEPT AS SCORE**  
*Holywell Music Room, Oxford (February 2011)*

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**SQUINT**

**Port Mahon, Oxford, Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010**

*(Phil Wachsmann, Eric Clarke: violins; Jill Elliott: viola; Bruno Guastalla: cello, bandoneon; Dominic Lash: double-bass)*

There were moments when one might have said that Squint's improvisations sounded a little like composed pieces by Lachenmann or Per Norgard. This was primarily due to the particular instrumentation, to the use of extended techniques (with the whole body of the instrument as sound-making device) by an all-strings ensemble, which one would not associate with the more jazz-associated aspects of free improvisation as much as with 'modern classical'. That said, the fact that things were completely improvised ensured a more fractured approach than that allowed by written material; the players were less likely to work in and around the same melodic material for lengthy periods, more likely to move on to another section if they felt that the music had begun to stagnate in any one kind of sonic area for too long.

One might also note the fairly considerable diversity in the backgrounds of those playing: Wachsmann studied with Nadia Boulanger and emerged initially from an indeterminate/ Cageian/ art music context; Clarke is a professor at the University of Oxford with extensive academic research on music under his belt; Elliott has been involved in classical, folk and contemporary music in Oxford for 20 years; Guastalla works as a maker and restorer of violins and cellos, as well as playing in a number of Oxford-based free improvising groups; Lash has played with the late Steve Reid, droned with Tony Conrad, plucked in straightahead jazz contexts, scrabbled away in free jazz settings, and participated in quiet textural improvisations. Such diversity by no means led to a clash of approaches: motifs and techniques were passed round in overlapping relays and leaping exchanges.

At times, one might think that one had pinned down the 'role' someone was playing in the group - Clarke as the most melodic player, tending to focus on longer bowed notes and lengthier phrases; Wachsmann as the one keeping things on edge, abrasive, physically engaged; Elliott plucking round the spaces left by other players; Lash providing the lower end of the music in a supportive role, bowing secure underpinnings or plucking harmonies; Guastalla laying out for a few seconds and then launching in with ferocious energy onto a particular idea or type of sound (notable in this regard was his use of a piece of wood against the strings to create a fantastic loud groaning that sounded as if it could almost have been electronically manipulated). But this was most definitely not a music where one could pin down any one player to any one role. Sometimes two musicians would play in near-concord, shifting echoes of one another's phrases, edging round a tonal centre, soon snapped out of it by someone (often Wachsmann) scraping or unleashing plucked flurries. Sometimes there would be contrasts across the ensemble, players dividing into short-lived separate groupings, pairings: Clarke's groaning ship's mast over brief violin harmony, Elliot and Wachsmann tapping out quiet motifs in the midst of the lower instruments'

thunder. At other times, the whole ensemble would dig with slow bowed drones, or some would drop out to leave near silence, the thread of the music hanging on a wisp of sound from bow on wood or string.

This was the group's first gig (though there had been a few private sessions beforehand - it wasn't one of the ad-hoc blowing groups you sometimes find in free jazz contexts) and there were perhaps times when things felt a little tentative: the division into separate pieces (of roughly ten minutes in length) diffused the intense concentration that a single, longer piece would have yielded, for applause means you have to build things back up again, in the process losing the atmosphere and focus of the previous minutes. It must be noted, however, that little hesitation was shown on the re-starts, and furthermore, any sacrifices in terms of total cohesion were more than made up for by the variety of sounds, levels of volume, types of interaction, and musical alliances across the group. The result was intensely absorbing, and it is to be hoped that this group might further develop the many interesting directions they created for themselves during this debut public performance.

**FREEDOM OF THE CITY FESTIVAL 2010**  
**Conway Hall, London, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> & Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2010**



My previous visits to the annual Freedom of the City festival have been limited to just the one, back in 2007. Back then, it was a smaller affair, held in the back room of the Red Rose pub, with a relatively modest number of artists performing. After a year's absence, due to the termination of the Red Rose as an improv venue, it came back all the stronger in 2009, relocating to the more centrally-placed Conway Hall – a far roomier space – and attracting a number of improvisers from abroad to join the mainly British-based line-up. Organizers Evan Parker, Eddie Prévost and Trevor Brent had achieved even more of a coup this year, persuading trumpeter Leo Smith to headline both days of the festival. This was not, of course, the first time that Smith had joined with European improvisers, or, indeed, with those specifically based in England – he played in Bristol back in the 70s, and has recently teamed up with the small 'stable' of musicians associated with Treader, the improv label run by John Coxon and Ashley Wales (a.k.a. dance music duo Spring Heel Jack). It was in something approaching this latter configuration that he closed the festival, holding his own in a noisy quintet featuring Coxon on guitar and the priceless Pat Thomas on piano and electronics; but perhaps the finest moments of the whole weekend occurred during his performances on the first day, playing an electrifying improvised concerto with the London Improvisers Orchestra, then engaging with the double-drum duo of Steve Noble and Louis Moholo-Moholo in an ecstatically-received set that, at its best, was perhaps as fine as improvised music gets.

But this was by no means all that the festival had to offer. I've opted, on the whole, for a blow-by-blow account of the various different set-ups, though it would probably be unfair to set down detailed analysis of performances which I did not find wholly satisfying, for one reason or another. Consequently, I'm not going to review every act. During such a packed schedule (well over ten hours in total), attention can wander, and dissatisfactions which may have very little or nothing to do with the music as such can intrude on critical faculties. I might perhaps make the criticism that the presentation was uniform: one group set up and play, people clap, there's an announcement and a short break, then another group set up and play, people clap, etc. This may be due to my ongoing dissatisfactions with the concert presentation of free improvisation, which I feel could be (needs to be) shaken up in some way – otherwise we approach the deadened sterility of the classical concert hall, against which the vitality of both jazz and free improvisation can set themselves in their finest moments. Perhaps there's no way round the sense of *déjà-vu*, the almost by-rote effect of so many performers coming up on stage in succession; festival fatigue is the inevitable drawback of bringing so many musicians into the same space, on the same occasion. And of course I'd rather hear eight groups in a respectful atmosphere and a conducive setting, than two groups in a dingy pub. In any case, FOTC remains pretty much a unique event in the British improv scene, & needs all the support it can get, given well-documented difficulties in securing funding and cultural acceptance in the UK (surely, as Evan Parker opined in one of his microphone 'rants' between acts, something like this deserves at least a mention in Time Out).

## **DAY ONE**

Before getting onto the music, it might be worthwhile offering some preliminary notes on the venue. The Conway Hall is a fairly large space, and

attendance must have reached 100 or so on the Sunday, the better-attended of the two days; it never dwindled down to less than 50. The décor is a little quaint (my eyes kept flicking to the motto inscribed over the stage: “to thine own self be true”), exhibiting a kind of early twentieth-century liberal ethos (one of the rooms in the building is named after Bertrand Russell, and, on further research, it turns out that the Hall was built as headquarters for the South Place Ethical Society, the oldest free-thought association in the world). The acoustic isn’t that resonant, but this probably suited players like Peter Evans and, in particular, Leo Smith, whose sound is so massive that it might become deafening elsewhere! Upper galleries and plenty of space for seats meant that there was capacity for the audience to move around, rather than having to stick to the same seat for hours at a time, while corridors outside the main stage space gave plenty of space for mingling in between acts. All a far cry from the Red Rose...

The Sunday afternoon session (lasting from 2pm until around 6) opened with a solo set from Peter Evans, who is a very fine jazz left-field jazz musician (‘The Peter Evans Quartet’, from 2007, contains a happy blend of old-fashioned melodies and chord sequences with noise-rock guitar eruptions); he is also, as this performance indicated, an exceptional free improviser. Though based in New York, he has released a solo record on Martin Davidson’s Emanem and worked with that label’s stalwart, Evan Parker. Nonetheless, it seemed that not everyone in attendance was familiar with his work, and they were pleasantly surprised by what transpired. The performance split into roughly two halves, though it was a continuous forty-minute set: the first half found the trumpeter concentrating on circular breathing, amplifying breath noises through a volume pedal, extending the possibilities of the instrument with the use of subtle electronics as John Butcher has done with the saxophone. The second half, in which Evans switched to cornet, was mostly acoustic, with more ‘notes’ in play: jazzy inflections combined with repeated, almost brash minimalist phrases (like tougher versions of John Adams’ fanfares). The latter were perhaps rather over-done (there could have been more of the textural investigations with which Evans began), but they were certainly impressive in a technical sense.



*Peter Evans: Photo by C. Neil Scott*

Cellist Okkyung Lee, like Evans, had travelled over from New York to play here; on this evidence, she struck me as a somewhat limited player, especially having seen Hannah Marshall's superb duo with Mick Beck at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival the preceding Friday. I don't doubt her technical skill, and it's clearly unfair to definitively label any musician on the result of one performance; however, the duo with Lytton didn't really come off. Lee tended to bow with one hand while sliding the other up and down the strings, without pressing down onto the fingerboard. The cello can do more than this: use of the instrument's body, plucking, and even melodic phrases. Lee's approach worked as generalized atmosphere in the later trio with Evans and Evan Parker, but she seemed crowded out by Lytton, unable to fully respond to his energetic twitching round Dalek drums, and an encore, which might have provided the chance to find another angle on things, never really took off either.

By contrast, Lol Coxhill, Tania Chen and Dominic Lash demonstrated a clear mutual understanding from the git-go. Coxhill, as ever, was tartly melodic, spinning out flowing lines or thinning out his sound to almost nothing in breathy textural complement to Lash's multi-hued bass and Chen's rumbling on the lower reaches of the Bosendorfer. The music had a kind of jazz aura to it, but never through overt referentiality, and Chen's sound could be said to owe as much to contemporary classical as to jazz. She left plenty of gaps so that her phrases acquired a certain weight around them, but the music wasn't heavy or sluggish – rather, it had a substantial delicacy to it that, in a way, harkened back to Jimmy Giuffre's groups of the early 60s.

The afternoon seemed to have been constructed, whether by design or accident, in a kind of ascending approach: from solo to duo to trio, and then to a full-blown big band, as the London Improvisers Orchestra took to the stage and beyond, sprawling out onto the floor below. Two hours might have seemed like overkill, given the usual chaotic nature of such large groupings, and the tendency to resort to conduction clichés in order to tame the unruly beast. In fact, though, the performance remained at a high standard throughout, the various conductors picking out particular players and groups of instruments and letting them do their thing for extended periods, rather than cutting them short before they'd had a chance to develop something. Choice combinations included the two-piano interplay of Steve Beresford and Veryan Weston, placed on either side of the stage, and the raucous trombones of Alan Tomlinson and Robin Jarvis. It all built up to the big climax, a short concerto for the festival's 'star performer' Wadada Leo Smith, Dave Tucker stepping out of the orchestra ranks, where he'd been grinding out fierce swirls of sound from his guitar, to conduct. Any doubts as to whether Smith would be audible over the orchestra were soon dispelled; the question was more, would one be able hear the orchestra over his trumpet! His sound bounced off the space with a clarion force, but this wasn't a tasteless, Maynard Ferguson display, for he played with an abundance of considered space between phrases, ending with a gorgeous muted passage over sombre, full ensemble chords. Great too to hear him sing and soar out over orchestral sections – strings, winds, horns – in passages reminiscent of the Jazz Composers' Orchestra's fantastic 2LP-set 'Communications'. Louis Moholo-Moholo, in a corner with Javier Carmona (third drummer Tony Marsh was on the other side of the room) could be heard thumping with huge vigour, even when he hadn't been cued in, as if anticipating his small-group set with Smith later on that day.



By now it was early evening, and there was, it seemed, hardly time to catch breath before proceedings resumed again. One of John Russell's QuaQua groups – on this occasion, a septet – played mostly textural music, Chris Burn controlling his inside-piano rustlings with a volume pedal, saxophonist Stefan Keune concentrating on held, altissimo notes, and Satoko Fukada scratching away on violin (in contrast to her more classically-inflected work with Veryan Weston and Steve Beresford), though Henry Lowther plotted a more exclusively melodic course through things. The following trio was an enticing prospect: Leo Smith in an unusual pairing with two drummers, Louis Moholo and Steve Noble. There was potential here for a more overtly rhythmic approach than that we'd been hearing so far. Noble, is, of course, adaptable to pretty much any style, his undoubted improv pedigree mixed with the ability to play highly attractive rhythmic music that may or may not reference particular genres, while Moholo always brings an exuberance and enthusiasm to his playing, in whatever context. It may have taken a while for things to settle – this was, after all, a first-time musical meeting for the three men – but, by the time they'd all locked-in to each-other's playing, they were able to create something very special indeed. Noble likes gongs and crashes and colour with bursts of on-the-beat playing; Moholo is content to stick to one aspect of his kit, or to click claves and whisper out loud to Smith, "no baby, no." Smith puts his hand in his mouth and makes clicking, clucking noises, else crouches like the electric Miles, silhouetted black against the red back-light, surely deafening the front row with *that sound*...The first piece finishes on a note of perfect satisfaction, there has to be more: Smith announces music "to make the stars go to sleep," then unfurls the most beautiful muted melodies. And it's a melodicism that's totally free of clichés, jazz or otherwise – a rare gift.



Photo (c) Helen Petts

After such a superb set, what followed was bound to seem something of a let-down, but things went downhill quicker than expected. It has said that, in science, only the experiment that proves the hypothesis is 'valid', whereas in music, *all* experiments are valid. There are, though, occasions when things clearly just *do not work*, and the performance by SUM was one of these. Eddie Prévost on freebop drums, Ross Lambert on bull-headed guitar, and Seymour Wright actually producing recognisable notes from his saxophone, attempted a sort of skewed, improv look at jazz (they describe the group as a 'total jazz trio'), but, this time at least, their playing ended up lacking the best qualities of both jazz and improv. Wright stubbornly stuck to a very small selection of notes, obsessively honking the simplest of motifs or shrieking in the extreme upper register of his instrument – free jazz with no sense of momentum, energy or intensity – while Lambert seemed unable to commit to any particular approach, sometimes throwing in jazz chords, sometimes throwing in a few Bailey-like harmonics, but, most crucially, leaving very little *space* in the music. Prévost came off best, manfully negotiating round the edges of bebop rhythms, but the music as a whole came across as ugly, static, stagnant – a real disappointment, given Wright's superb, and very different, solo work, and the undoubted philosophical effort that all three players put into what they are doing. Perhaps that was the problem here: a kind of thought experiment with regards to the jazz tradition that didn't translate into compelling music.

The final trio of Okkyung Lee, Peter Evans and Evan Parker was as expected: one felt that Evans was rather constricted by the kind of phrases Parker played, never really able to propel himself into the bold timbral investigations that had made his solo set so fascinating, while Lee was undermiked and, as in her duo with Lytton, rather pushed into the background of the music. Perhaps a circular-breathing duo, with Parker on soprano and Evans on trumpet, might have offered wider textural possibilities; on the other hand, it would have risked being even more predictable than the trio that did play. Perhaps I'm judging things by the wrong criteria, and as a technical exercise the set was impressive – but it never felt edge-of-the-seat enough for my liking. The musicians were listening to each other, but not pushing each other, not leaving the safe middle-ground which had been established from the outset.

## DAY TWO

I made my way back to the Conway Hall for the second day, having marked out as potential highlights sets by John Butcher, fURT with Adam Bohman and Ute Wassermann, and the return of Wadada Leo Smith. There were noticeably less audience members than on Sunday (though one might bear in mind that the massed ranks of the London Improvisers Orchestra probably bumped up the numbers significantly when they weren't playing); nonetheless, the turnout was respectable.

Butcher was up first, paired with Mark Sanders. Anytime he plays, something absorbing is bound to happen, such is his control of his instrument and sense of the minute detail of the unfolding soundscape, and this performance did not disappoint. Given the history of saxophone/drum duos, it was refreshing that the music here never felt like free jazz, achieving its gripping pull on the listener through clarity of ideas rather than speed of execution or the laying down

of virtuosic mountains of notes. Butcher opened on tenor, multiphonics imbuing the saxophone with an almost glowing sound, the upper reaches tempered by the lower notes' burnished undertones. At first he played what was not quite a full melody, but a definite motif nonetheless, carefully structuring things by twice alternating this motif with another figure, before proceeding: a kind of opening invocation, a preliminary statement, a preparation. The performance then unfolded at a pace which one could almost describe as unhurried; but that turn of phrase suggests a kind of lazy relaxation very far from the close-listening, focussed intensity displayed by both musicians. Sanders used bells, bowls, mallets, displaying an often non-linear sense of rhythm that, given the context, was entirely appropriate, working in tandem with Butcher's smearing, hovering, overlapping frequencies and textures.

After a ten-minute tenor section containing a sustained, crescendoing trill which played with space in a similar manner to Peter Evans the day before, Butcher switched to soprano, an instrument on which he adopted a number of sonic approaches: tongued, finger-slapped, almost percussive sounds that turned the notes away from their harmonic implications, while leaving tonal possibilities within reach; supple strings of notes, which might even have had some connection to conventional soprano sax jazz-isms, but which were peppered with harmonics; and, most strikingly, whistle-frequency sounds that called out with the force of wind, full of shrill urgency and near-physical presence.

The changeable weather outside came peeping through the partially-covered glass roof, the sun's appearances and disappearances behind clouds seeming at times to mirror Butcher's and Sanders' alternations, entrances, and exits – as if in some subliminal or more overtly conscious way environmental conditions outside the building had influenced the performance (or maybe, thinking mystically, the improvisations influenced the weather!). That doesn't mean that the performance was reduced to the merely imitative or illustrative modes of Romantic classical music, for improvisation's concentration is on sound as sound, and on human interaction with instruments and with other humans playing them (rather than the translation into music of a lone composer's inner feelings on seeing a landscape). Yet Butcher and Sanders did create a kind of tone poem, if we take that phrase up on its poetic implications, rather than as musical terminology: obliquely echoing, returning, departing, unfolding within a structure that seemed almost to create itself, participating in its own making rather than forcing more mobile elements into a restrictive, pre-existent mould. Their dialogue was respectful but not 'polite': 'solos', individual statements, were not look-at-me virtuoso displays arising from a false structural obligation, but appropriate opportunities for particular sonorities to be explored, new directions to emerge. One of the best performances of the festival.

A group who'd initially assembled at Eddie Prévost's workshop were next to take the stage. These were not, in fact, some of its better-known participants – Prévost was the only musician on stage that I'd seen or heard of previously – but they appeared to share a dogged determination to avoid the timbral clichés associated with their respective instruments. Whereas Prévost was in 'out jazz' mode the previous day, here he was functioning as percussionist rather than drummer. Indeed, he could barely be called a percussionist as such, spending almost the entire set bowing a gong to produce ringing, sonorously eerie tones;

his snare, the sole survivor of his drum kit, remained unused except when he unfastened it, turned it upside down and used the faint wash of its sympathetic vibrations to feather another bowed metal surface he'd placed atop it. The group's performance refused the sort of structure that was clearly in play even in Butcher's radical re-examination of the possibilities of his instrument (though baritone saxophonist Dave O'Connor was surely influenced by Butcher at least in part; in fact, his playing was even more stripped down to the essentials of breath and tongue and flesh on metal, in and through air). Instead, there was very little linear movement through and towards narrative or signposted 'event', even if there was an almost continuous succession of sounds, with little actual silence. Though overt 'interaction' was avoided (in the sort of call and response, mimicking-of-each-other's lines approach that comes more out of jazz), the music was still about exchange: Jennifer Allum seemed to play her violin more as tapped, scratched percussion than as a stringed instrument, while Prévost played his 'percussion' like a droning string. Grundik Kasyansky's electronics were the loudest element in the mix, but sudden bursts of noise, indicative of the approach he could have taken, were held back for the most part, emerging as sporadic spasms and muffled radio string music. A pebble dropped off the edge of the stage after an age during which he held it poised in the air imparted a rather desultory moment of 'drama'; the players' stillness and tight-lipped expressions have become *de rigueur* for such music-making, it seems, and there is at times a slight feeling of stasis, the lack of a certain momentum. By this I don't mean momentum in the overt free jazz sense, which is irrelevant here, but I do feel that the music can become poised rather uneasily between quietude and something more wrenchingly physical. Perhaps such music is not best suited to the concert environment, more to a small, private (workshop) space, where there's less pressure for something to 'happen'. And the aim of such art is not to create a 'work' but to be part of a continuing dialogue, the continuing exploration of sound for which Prévost's workshop has become such an essential part.

The following set was billed as fURT with Ute Wassermann and Adam Bohman – an enticing prospect, given fURT's wrenching, sped-up electronics, Bohman's maverick table-top assemblage of crunchy junk and resonant bowed glass, and Wassermann's 'birdtalking' (neither quite like speech nor quite like traditional 'singing', the latter is a truly expressive use of the voice, retaining its 'otherness' from man-made instruments, but with a versatility more generally associated with instruments than with the pure power of the lungs). In the event, Richard Barrett wasn't able to make the gig, and was replaced by Paul Obemayer's band-mate from Bark!, the drummer Phil Marks. Ironically, the drum-set didn't have quite the same percussiveness the extra electronics would have provided – the sounds are more conventional, less abrasive – though Marks did have an infectious kid-on-a-candy-rush energy which fitted well with the music's jagged sound-worlds and scampering, flittering, manic intensity.

On this second day, much of the afternoon session (and indeed the evening as well) was dominated by inside-piano players: we had three or four pianists all 'working to extend the parameters of the instrument' (Sebastian Lexer is always billed as 'piano+'), in a manner documented by a recent series on the Another Timbre record label. Yet what resulted seemed to be that they all used the same bag of tricks, seduced by the growling, very lowest notes of the Bosendorfer (so low they have a kind of electronic, clanging sound to them, which must surely

have been attractive to players interested in the interplay between acoustic and electric sounds), and by the harmonious, high-pitched hum of e-bows held over piano strings (which tend to create a rather deadening ambient cloud that sets the direction for several minutes at least, rendering interaction and change less easy to facilitate, and the texture as a whole more predictable, if superficially quite attractive). To play notes or even phrases on the keyboard itself would have seemed *more* unconventional in such a context. Lexer probably had the best of it, his bell-like tones and occasional, vaguely Feldmanesque chords, modulated with a faint touch of lingering electronic echo, slotting quite nicely with Jamie Coleman's inward trumpet, which, though always on the verge of melancholy, never wallowed in it or meandered through a generalised 'blueness'. Meanwhile, electronics man Pascal Battus both functioned as percussionist (banging his hands on a mic'd-up table to create a propulsive crescendo, and amplifying his own neck pulse via contact mic, for example) and filled the more expected role of noise-maker/scrabbling texturalist. I do have some reservations about the (over)use of contact mics by electronic practitioners – it gives an edge to its amplified sounds which can become rather wearing – but Battus mostly steered clear of cliché.

The Stellari String Quartet (Philipp Waschmann/ Charlotte Hug/ Marcio Mattos/ John Edwards) were very fine, as expected. Interesting to note this group alongside another all-string ensemble featuring Waschmann, the Oxford-based quintet Squint, who I also heard at a recent gig; both set-ups obviously have a strong textural similarity with contemporary classical music, with the Stellaris perhaps less inclined to linger over melodic sections, more inclined to spark simultaneous firing-on-all-cylinders from each musician. Edwards forsook his more usual snapping, roaring hardman free jazz role (at which he excels) for sympathetic bowing alongside Mattos (whose approach I found much more nuanced and varied than that of Okkyung Lee); Hug, the group's founder, seemed to favour sustained playing of all the viola's strings at once, using a specially-developed bow that curves over and round the instrument's body. Waschmann, meanwhile, came out with half-melodic suggestions, reminiscent of 12-tone contours, that did not preclude insistent scrapes and glissandi; at one point, he moved the violin away from his neck and held it slightly forward from his body, furiously bowing with greater and greater ferocity as he leaned towards the other members of the group, as if attempting to force – indeed, *insisting on* – a collective change of direction. Textural meshes and overall cohesion did not preclude individuals suddenly launching off into new directions, even bullish ones, such as this, and the Quartet held one's interest throughout their performance.

It was Leo Smith's return that rounded out the evening, and once more he proceeded to play some of the best music of the night. The quintet in which he was involved mixed players from several different generations and traditions, and it wasn't at all clear beforehand what strategies they might try and find to negotiate these: the programme notes, in their attempt to predict what might happen, tried to place Alex Ward and John Coxon as 'post-modern' improvisers, liable to reference any number of genres in their playing, with Smith and Pat Thomas as more connected to a tonal, American jazz tradition. (I'm not sure that description doesn't fall victim to some kind of unconscious racial-musical stereotyping, dividing up the younger, white players from the older, black ones. In any case, attempts to draw lines between the musicians in this way will inevitably

be inaccurate, race or not: for example, Thomas' electronics are more in line with Coxon's noisy guitar than with jazz, and his piano playing has a good deal of 'contemporary classical' to it.) None of these players (the fifth member of the group was Paul Lytton) are known as anything other than confident, individualistic musicians, and the results were consequently loud and raucous, as every one *went for it* at once, forcing each-other to a potentially dangerous level of noise from the off and barely letting up. Particularly by the rousing climax of the second piece, Ward had joined up with Smith's trumpet to form a kind of crazy New Orleans combo, though more as part of the overall texture than as any kind of frontline (Ward's playing also had a touch of klezmer to it, while Smith seemed intent on bringing down the walls of Jericho). Coxon's guitar was used in all manner of different ways: turned on its back and tapped as an impromptu drum, scratched and scraped, noise-rock style, wrapped in carefully-controlled feedback, treated to ringing harmonic chords from the Bailey school, and unexpectedly, sounding out strongly melodic propositions that were quickly joined by Thomas' piano: a fine use of neo-idiomatic texture in a way that felt genuine, arising from the music and the moment rather than from any kind of superficial 'post-modernity'. And Lytton, of course, was right there with them all. On being informed that everyone had to be out of the building by 11, Smith fulfilled the audience's requests for an encore by playing what may be the shortest piece ever heard at a free improv concert: "1/2 a second" in his words. One brief stab from the full ensemble, then – BOOM – Freedom of the City was over for 2010. And worthwhile it was too. Bring on 2011!

### **Note on Youtube Footage of Freedom of the City performances**

Several individuals were filming and taking photographs of the event; it was also recorded for the BBC (presumably to be broadcast on the show's more left-field jazz show, Jazz on 3, probably in excerpt form), and, we may hope that some of the performances might also make their way onto CD releases by Emanem, Matchless or Treader. The footage that's made its way onto youtube generally has fairly decent sound quality, though the picture quality does leave something to be desired. With several different people uploading the videos they've taken, there's inevitably going to be some overlap: for example, at least ten different videos of the Leo Smith sets are available. Probably the easiest way to go about things is to click on the user accounts of those who've uploaded the videos (for which see links below), and to work one's way through what's available.

- 'shuffleboil' – <http://www.youtube.com/user/shuffleboil>
- Helen Petts – <http://www.youtube.com/user/helentonic>
- 'dzgast' – <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzgast>

### **ATMOSPHERES/ RED SQUARE Folly Bridge Inn, Oxford, Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2010**

'Atmospheres', a four-piece, made some compelling music during their continuous one-hour set; unburdened by the presence of a drummer, what they played had a looseness and flowing quality to it quite different from the stop-start interjections of much free improv. Trevor Taylor's credit as percussionist didn't capture the harmonic spectrum of his contribution: using drumsticks on the pads of a MalletKat, a "MIDI percussion mallet controller" which sounds like a

cross between a vibraphone, a marimba, and a xylophone, the sounds that he produced were metallic and bright, giving the music something of a rhythmic punch, as well as suddenly leaping out with electronic whooshes which merged with the phaser effects and repeated note sequences of Phil Gibb's guitar. Nick Stephens got a twangy, percussive sound of his own by using brushes and mallets to strike or stick under the strings of his bass; would switch to bowed drones or harmonics when he sensed a change in the mood of the music; and or even fall into standard jazz accompaniment patterns – but in ways that rendered them more than clichés, playing them arco or slightly out of time to create a lop-sided effect. Paul Dunmall, on soprano for this performance, sat on top of things, taking short pauses between phrases and entries, rather than 'soloing' continuously, even if the sound quality of his instrument tended to carry over the rest of the group in the manner of a 'lead voice'. As befitted the band-name, things were often a little pensive, but Dunmall's playing had some bite to it too, his streams of notes never quite reaching free jazz ferocity, but with an edginess to them that prevented the music from wandering into ECM territory.

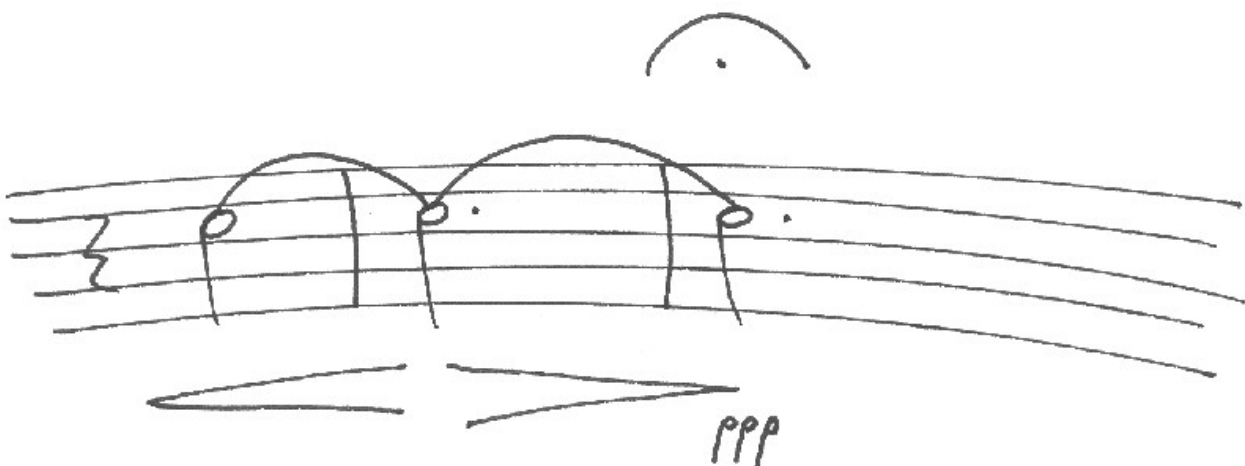


Red Square have been going since the 1970s, and though their reputation suggested a much noisier, more 'in-ya-face' approach than Atmospheres, there were more similarities than might have been imagined. In particular, both bands featured soprano players with strong jazz capabilities, neither of whom went for the 'exotic', Oriental sound popularized by Coltrane; nor for the kind of hyper-active squawking that resulted when the instrument became popular with fusion players; nor for the syrupy smoothness of Jan Garbarek and smooth jazz. Both Dunmall and Jon Seagroatt played with a well-defined tone, a real clarity of ideas, and consistently strong melodic invention. Similarly, the rock elements in Red Square don't involve the tendency to straight-forward time-keeping that characterized even Last Exit, at least in part. Roger Telford's approach to his kit is resolutely free, while Ian Staples takes his cue from the volume and timbral qualities of the electric guitar, rather than from any set of punk chords or grandstanding 'guitar hero' clichés; his playing is grungily distorted, sometimes sliding into metal-style riffs (which he was playing even before metal had become

part of the musical landscape), and very rarely simply settling into mere slabs of noise. Seagroatt's sax spins through riff-like and looping figures, but he never seems to repeat himself to the extent that one could identify recurring licks, and his style never feels like artificial excitement building, as its affinities with prog-rock and jazz fusion might have suggested. On occasion, the instrument is treated with electronic effects, so that it becomes oddly mechanical in sound, adding a whole new, eerie texture to the music; as does the Kaoss pad, which combines with Telford's bowing of each cymbal in his kit, in turn, and with pedal-treated guitar, for relatively brief sections that are less about the articulation of individual notes, more about the general texture and quality of sound. Seagroatt's bass clarinet really cuts deep, smoothly swooping from low-end droning vibrations to upper register figures with none of the shrill squawks emitted by free jazzers – the instrument sounds particularly ominous, turning the tone of the music to a kind of volatile melancholy. What's nice about Red Square is that what they play feels so fresh, even now; they don't sacrifice rock grunginess for tricky fusion- or jazz-isms, and don't sacrifice jazz clarity and skill for simple, obvious beats or noise aggression (though they are certainly loud!). The music feels very open, setting out a particular kind of sound, but with plenty of scope within that sound – jazz, even (and this is something I thought I could also detect with Dunmall) hints of folk (Seagroatt is a member of the re-formed Comus, and is married to Bobbie Watson, one of the band's vocalists). I'm reminded, if anything, of those vital '60s and '70s cross-overs between ancient traditions and modern innovations, folk materials and new musical technologies, that just happened to take place in England, involving Soft Machine, Comus, John Stevens, and The Third Ear Band, to name a few. It's certainly encouraging to know that that spirit lives on: not overly indebted to jazz or rock, but free to use both genres' freshest and most interesting elements within a freely improvised context, in a manner that is both organic and engaging.

### **EVA-MARIA HOUBEN - NACHSTÜCK**

**Performed by Dominic Lash – Contrabass. Oxford, 13th June 2010.**



The first in a series dedicated to the music of the Wandelweiser group, this was intriguingly set up as Dom Lash performing a 'gig' in his house: chamber music in the original sense of that term. So no stuffed-shirt concert-hall aesthetics here, as the cold summer air (yes, this is Britain) blows in from the garden and a tap drips, somewhere off to 'stage left'.



One piece on the programme – an hour-long Eva-Maria Houben composition for solo bass which, while not exclusively quiet, does feature frequent silences, the most delicate of high pitched-harmonics, and an extremely ‘stripped-down’ range of material. The piece is not exclusively about the creation of sound (making a noise); rather, that aspect exists alongside the equally important element of *listening*, hearing. As Houben puts it, *Nachtstück* “allows hearing to take place.”

That phrase is from her short programme note for the piece, in which she also describes “music happen[ing] all by itself, seemingly uncomposed – like the sound of the Aeolian harp, its strings set in motion by a passing wind.” Of course, one immediately feels like quibbling that this is a composition; furthermore, the problem with Aeolian harps (as evidenced by the selection on the obscure LP ‘Songs of the Wind Harp’) is that there is no discrimination between sounds, no decision-making process, no shaping of material – in other words, no sense of human agency – and it is human agency which, ultimately, does drive Houben’s piece, which makes it an involving and rewarding experience, a piece of human interaction. So is the Aeolian Harp analogy simply a ‘poetic’ image – something which sounds nice written as a programme note but doesn’t mean too much when you ponder what it means? Well, no, I would argue that there is something important in the choice of simile, perhaps as a *gesture* towards a certain looseness, by means of contrast with the stereotype of the controlling composer who is not willing, as Houben is, to give the performer, the audience, or the sounds themselves, a certain freedom. (Note that this looseness, this freedom is by no means absolute, for control and limitation are vital factors here.) In addition, the notion of ‘uncomposition’ is perhaps meant to hint at the extreme simplicity of the material (the hour long piece almost exclusively uses natural harmonics and one particular droning string, punctuated by long silences; this is even more ‘minimal’ in terms of melodic material than late Feldman), which lends it a certain ‘anonymous’ quality (on which more below). At the same time, the degree of virtuosity required is very great – but this is virtuosity not for its own sake, for display, for showing off, but in the service of a radically limited and focussed selection of material that, while it may inspire admiration for the performer’s abilities, does not take this as a *raison d’être*, does not make it the primary element.

While it might be going too far to speak of ‘melody’ as such, the piece does have a melodic quality, with its repeated, returning progression of notes; and the return of the low drone after a passage of exquisitely delicate, high-pitched harmonics, resounds (almost) like a grandly returning main theme at the climax of a symphony. One could see this as essentially Webernian – the compression of extreme drama, extreme event, into tiny spaces. But, in fact, the opposite is true of this piece: ‘*Nachtstück*’ actually concerns the expansion of extremely limited material into a large space, a large time span. Or maybe it’s about the eradication of time, about achieving a state akin to the ecstatic, a-temporal moment aimed at in meditation. By this I don’t mean to imply that the music is simply some piece of hip, arty Zen (or even a genuinely Buddhist experience, which is perhaps something aspired to in the music of Eliane Radigue). It does not aspire to levitate from the body, to abandon the earthly delusions of *maya* for disembodied bliss; rather, it makes one profoundly aware of one’s surroundings and of one’s body – the sound of one’s own stomach gurgling, even the sound of one’s own breath.

(This is true of 'reductionist' music in general, but I don't think that makes it any less relevant to this particular performance). It's a kind of framing of environment, I guess – the music transforms the 'background sounds', and these sounds transform the music; something is shared between performer and composer, performer and audience, audience and performer, environment and music, music and environment, the connections, the loops, the interlinking chains, forming a kind of exquisite slow dance.

As such language indicates, this music is far from 'sterile' or 'cerebral'; on the contrary, it tempts one to utopian generalisation. Because a fair portion of the piece is devoted to 'silences' (when the performer is not making any sound), the audience must assume an 'active' role (audience participation without the awkward sense of obligation it can sometimes assume in a theatrical context). They must collaborate with the composer and performer in 'creating', or shaping the silences, through bringing a certain quality of attention to them (although that itself is coloured by the notes that have sounded before). In the end though, these things are out of the audience's hands as much as they are out of the composer's or performer's; in this performance, we had a duet for buzzing flies, birdcalls, a jet engine meshing with a particular droning bass frequency, a brief snatch of 'O Sole Mio' via an ice-cream van, occasional voices and shouts from distant gardens, and, towards the end of the piece, a non-metric rhythm provided by a summer rain shower (shades of Taku Sugimoto's 'Live in Australia' – can a natural occurrence be said to 'refer' to a previous work of art?). One could even go so far as to say that both 'composer' and 'performer' are virtually eradicated – the composer because they are concentrating on sounds so 'simple' that they might be said to resonate with the anonymous, primal resonance of folk music: sounds that, because they belong to no one author, belong to *everyone*, as their shared possession. (I'm not so much thinking here of 'folk tunes' as such, but of that most crucial element of folk music, the drone; 'Nachtstück' reminded me, in terms of a certain limitation of sonority, extremely powerful in its impact, of the Khazakstany one-stringed viol, the kobyz.) As for the performer, their 'eradication' comes about because the material cannot be 'emotionally interpreted' as most of the 'great works' of classical music can; rather, it must be played with an almost overwhelming focus on accuracy (or as much accuracy as is possible). In addition, neither the performer nor the composer can control the silences (nor, for that matter, can the audience, but they *can* choose to shape the silences by the kind of attention they pay to them, as discussed above). This makes it sound as if I'm saying that the audience shape the music more than either the composer or the performer, which is simply not true. But there is a kind of sharing here which is more common, perhaps, to improvised music: an interpretation of post-Cageian attitudes to 'silence' which I will not taint through the utopian generalisations I threatened above. So perhaps now would be a good point to stop writing – and to congratulate Dominic Lash on hosting, and giving, this very fine performance.

### **JOHN TCHICAI TRIO**

**Folly Bridge Inn, Oxford, Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2010**

One might not think of the still yawning gulf between the quality of the music and the size of the audience in the world of improvised music as particularly advantageous, and, broadly speaking, one would be entirely correct. Nonetheless, there is a more fortunate side effect resulting from this state of

affairs: because of the music's low profile, one can get to see such superlative practitioners of the art as John Tchicai in settings such as that in which he performed on this night – unamplified and close, not barking down at the audience from a stage on-high, his instrumental voice (mis-)translated through the electronic boom of a PA system, but at the same level as the audience, on the same floor, just a few feet away from the front-row chairs – where a movement from one side of the room to the other can create a perceptible shift in dynamics, in the weight of sound, where the 'accidentals' (the thwack and thud of feet on floor, the sound of breath, of the exertion evinced by total mental/physical commitment to the music) are not drowned out, but can take their place as a vital part of the music's continuing argument, a kind of sub-plot to the main drama taking place in the world of notes, tones and harmonies.

I say 'exertion', and I have in mind Tchicai's two accompaniments on this occasion, the English drum and bass pairing of John Edwards and Tony Marsh. Both Edwards, who at times let out a mumbling vocal murmur in accompaniment to his bass playing, Jimmy-Garrison style, and Marsh, who, like Tchicai, spent most of the performance with his eyes closed (so well does he know his way round his kit), dropped musical implements (Edwards his bow, Marsh a drumstick), during moments where their physical involvement with the music had reached its most fevered pitch. Tchicai himself, a striking figure with an elegant six-foot-plus frame, showed his involvement for the most part simply by playing beautiful, engaging and engaged music, though there were occasions where his knees bent in the kind of calisthenics for which John Coltrane became known in his later performances. His main instrument of choice since the 1980s has been the tenor saxophone, rather than the alto for which he became known in the 1960s: nonetheless, the particular quality of tone he extracts from both members of the saxophone family is remarkably similar, piquant and individual, like an extension of, or a musical complement and alternative to his speaking and singing voice (which he may also deploy in the course of an improvisation). Whereas many free jazz players emphasize the growling, honking lower register potential of the tenor, Tchicai mostly avoids such sounds, and even the multiphonics and altissimo that mark the opposite, high-register extreme. Instead, he plays inventively melodic and captivatingly open improvisations: lots of phrases are repeated, sometimes with shades of the ecstatic driving-to-abandon of the blues 'gut-bucket' honkers, though more often as if to tease out the full implications of the repeated phrase until it springs into a new phrase, a new area of investigation. He is no hurry, willing to let the music evolve and do its work at a speed which will do it justice, with no shortage of ideas but no need or wish to rush headlong through them all at lightning-speed.

There were a couple of sheet-music stands on 'stage', but the music was never governed by a simple theme/solos/theme structural template – Ornette Coleman's great innovation in the 50s, playing on the 'mood' of the song rather than its chord-change structure bears fruit still, half-a-century later, in such contexts as these: melodic yet open, rehearsed yet elastic. 'You Don't Know What Love Is' made a brief appearance in the first piece; the second was a calypso, Tchicai emphasizing with relish and almost humorous exaggeration the long, deliciously extended downwards smear that ended the melody. Edwards was – once again! – outstanding, his playing displaying, perhaps more than usual, overt jazz touches that meshed well with Tchicai's vocabulary, but also plenty of 'out'

techniques, all adapted to and from the emotional, colouristic and textural needs of the moment. Thus, we had strummed double-stops, punchy thwacks, and buzzing, vibrating strings, walking bass patterns, careening figures produced by sliding both hands in succession over the neck of the bass, and muted accompaniment, produced through variation in finger pressure on the strings, to Tchicai's flute playing. Some of this was displayed in group work, some in solo spots, and Marsh was also afforded some solo time, his playing radiating a joyous sense of possibility and a sense of melodic invention, as he developed engrossing solo patterns on the kit and traded playful fours (or near-fours) with Tchicai. There was no supporting act on the evening, which seemed just right: wonderful that a band like this should be able to expand and develop their interplay over the course of a whole gig, rather than being squeezed into a single slot where everything has to coalesce instantly and at speed.

After an interval, the second set found Tchicai playing flute as well as saxophone (he brought things to a quiet close on this instrument, his repeated incantation shadowed by bowed bass), and reciting some lines of poetry. "Truth is found/ in between / the mother of all recipes" – these were lines intoned, almost song-like, which seemed to spur on a particular vigorous section of saxophone playing; later, some words about geography and direction (movements north, south, east, west), with a Coltrane reference (Giant Steps – though this was fleeting, and the poem was, thankfully, not another 'Coltrane' poem bulked up by quotations of song and album titles), and then a speculation on what it would be like if all those humans and animals whose feet and claws made marks on a beach were brought together at the same time, in that same place. Like Cecil Taylor, Tchicai has not had books or even pamphlets of his work published, though a poem does appear in the recent anthology 'Silent Solos: Improvisers Speak': like that recited in Oxford, it concerns itself with speculative and only-half rhetorical questions, dreams, imaginings – in this latter case, a visit to "that/ strange looking star in the lower Milky Way." "On arriving," continues Tchicai, "I put my ear to the rubbery surface of the star/ and I heard a sound as if a great crowd of people came toward me." [1] The poetic concern in both cases seems to be with the imprints left by people in physical space, on physical surfaces, the history embedded in sand or soil or star, the sense that, in some way, the earth itself is voiced, in exchange with the multitude of speaking and singing humans who inhabit it: that travel is not simply a matter of temporal and geographic progress (though the lines about geography do indicate this as a thematic concern), but something that can be accomplished in the present moment, as a means of communication with the past, with 'other worlds' (other spheres of experience, modes of being and apprehension). The 'here and now' is thus revealed as more than just a banal present-ness in which we are trapped by routine and the force of circumstance: rather, it is a world of possibilities, echoes, prophecies, borrowings, sharings. Which transfers appropriately to this trio's performance: it was all about communication with the audience, with each other, with the history, present and future of the music. "The mother of all recipes," in/ deed.

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[1] John Tchicai, 'untitled' (pp.145-6), in 'silent solos: improvisers speak' (ed. Renate de Rin) (buddy's knife jazzeditions, 2010)

**MICHAEL PISARO: MIND IS MOVING**  
**The Nunnery (Bow Arts Centre), London, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2011**



***Jennifer Allum (violin), Rebecca Dixon (cello), Dominic Lash (double bass), Henri Växby (guitar), Jamie Coleman (trumpet), Tim Parkinson (voice).***

Michael Pisaro's star has been rising recently – at least, his work has become a frequent subject of discussion within improv circles, and there's been an increase in the frequency with which his works are performed (albeit in small and sparsely-attended venues). What this means in relation to the usual connotations of 'rising stars' is harder to judge; and, indeed, one of the main points of interest with Pisaro, and other composers and performers associated with the Wandelweiser group, is the fact that they are hard to place within pre-determined narratives and positions. Thus, Radu Malfatti comes from a background playing 'high-energy' free jazz, while Pisaro assumes the role of 'academic composer' (he teaches at CalArts); but it doesn't seem strange to discuss their works in the same sentence. Of course, this closeness has always existed (AMM, Musica Elettronica Viva and Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza come to mind), contra the journalistic method of building up and stratifying divisions which are not nearly as important to the practitioners of the music themselves as to critics and 'taste-makers'. Nonetheless, there is a definite sense that something new is afoot, given the way that Malfatti, Pisaro et al straddle clear-cut lines between 'modern classical composition' and 'free improvisation', finding common aesthetic ground within both camps.

The 'Mind is Moving' series is actually a fairly early work, dating from 1996, and it's interesting to come to it, in a new ensemble 'arrangement', on the back of the 'hype' of the past couple of years. At the same time, it's hard to disentangle serious critical consideration from what might seem almost petty concerns

relating to the physical circumstances of attending a continuous three-hour concert performance on a British winter's evening.

Performances like these come to seem like endurance tests, not just because of the extreme length, but because of the details of the music itself, which, rather than 'moving forward', alternates between non-developmental drones, staccato plucks and bursts, and lengthy silences, or near-silences. Furthermore, the fact that what we were actually witnessing was the simultaneous performance of several separate solo works added to the 'severity' of the aesthetic: just as a particularly gorgeous swelling concord between several different instruments was reached, one voice would suddenly drop out, introducing an abrupt change in texture. This was not music that one could easily relax into, as can be the case with more 'blissed-out' drone material, but neither was it an exuberant, chaotic Fluxus happening. Despite the softness and the quietness, the simultaneity was something jagged and uncompromising, to which the listener had to adjust themselves –to move their minds to the movement of the music. Once this happens, once that shift occurs and everything clicks into place, it's amazing – but it may take a slightly uncomfortable half-hour or more for that to happen.

Yesterday's performance, as I experienced it, fell into something like three sections, one for each hour. The first contained more 'ensemble' playing – overlapping drones in concord and gentle discord, the preponderance of stringed instruments giving something of the feel of La Monte Young's early Trio for Strings. The second saw the piece start to unravel, to spread and splay out, to become more sparse – and at the same time, the audience began to grow more fidgety, people moving about and leaving or arriving, the ritual of creaking wooden floorboards and the shuffling retrieval of bags from under seats coming to take on the feel, almost, of a kind of slow-motion dance, an integral part of the piece. Ross Lambert's uncorking of the lid of his thermos flask, and subsequent pouring of small portions of steaming coffee, seemed deliberate, even staged, as if the music was there to accompany a kind of updated, low-key tea ceremony. In some ways this was welcome, imbuing the audience with a sense of participation, heightening the sense of occasion and the social/ ritualistic function of the music; but it was also the section I enjoyed the least, finding it hard to get into the lengthening silences, irritation at the way these silences were filled with the distant echo of voices and various other creaks and thuds, visual disjunct between the sounds I was hearing and the garish, Pop-Arty exhibition pieces on the walls and floor (a pink canvas with silver lettering that read 'my subconscious drove me'; a giant free-standing cut-out decorated with the Stars and Stripes), and, most importantly (perhaps leading to all of the above), physical discomfort from sitting for hours in a hard plastic chair as the room got steadily colder. This stage is probably inevitable when one is faced with a concert 'marathon' (I've no idea how audience and performers coped with the 12-hour Wandelweiser show up in Glasgow last month<sup>1</sup>) – and it was, arguably, the necessary preamble to the final section on the night, filled with long, long silences in which the audience finally breathed in unison with the performers, even the traffic outside dying away to just a murmur. Eyes closed; bass plucks giving a body to various drones, only to echo out again, leaving the initial sound modified, yet the same; guitar strings maintaining and sustaining their sounds as they were struck with a

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1 See <http://www.thewatchful.com/?p=4504>.

vibrating HB pencil; a cello tone held for a beautiful age, harmonics ringing and singing and mourning and keening; Jamie Coleman's trumpet now muted, lending a plaintive jazz inflection (through single notes and timbre rather than through any specifically jazz phrases); rougher violin bow scrape; spoken words, sounded single and separate, sometimes coalescing into a story or poem, or a suggestion of such – names – hints at phrases – 'historicism', 'angel', 'Louis' – often audible only as acoustic presence, as a half-heard signifier without the signified; vocalicity as only semi-linguistic expression, semantic in a *musical* sense.

Applause followed quickly on the end of the piece, and everyone had to hurry out of the building (some people probably wanted to get away as soon as they could in any case); one almost felt that it would have been more appropriate simply to end in silence and drift away more quietly, rather than snapping out of that mood which the room had shared during that final hour or so. I've no idea how the event would come out on a recording (I noticed a Zoom tucked away behind a chair, so presumably some sort of permanent document does exist); to be honest, I probably wouldn't have much patience listening back on a home stereo, but it felt important to make the step up from the hour-long live Wandelweiser performances I'd heard previously, to one of three times the length.



That's the main body of the report out of the way, I suppose, but there are still a few more questions, raised by the concert, which I'd like to consider before concluding. In his liner notes to the CD release of 'Mind is Moving I' (as played by Pisaro himself on guitar), Jürg Frey notes that, apart from the 'regular' guitar notes themselves, "in this music other things quite simply turn up: like the occasional whistling or soft scraping of the strings; not effects, but pure matters of course. Perhaps there is here the faintest reminiscence of the image of a folk singer, who whistles along with his guitar playing, and uses the noises to clarify the rhythm." For me, that kind of idiomatic register wasn't really present in the

realisation of the work that I heard yesterday, and what struck me about the whistling was the fact that it was part of the written score: the notation of accident, or, if not precisely of accident, of material that might normally be considered 'incidental' to the 'proper musical substance', the 'meat' of a piece. One might say that there are two levels to the score: first, the notated material, which, though it will vary according to the musicians' control in playing – for example, how well they can sustain a held forty-second tone on trumpet – remains broadly the same, set up, as it is, within certain, fairly strict parameters; and secondly, the material that arises from the physical circumstances of the performance location. This latter element may only emerge at certain, relatively brief moments (and can be edited out entirely during studio recordings); nonetheless, it can prove important. During yesterday's performance, for example, there were plenty of low volume sections in which the score actually took a back seat to the environment accidentals around it. Some of the very quiet sounds that peppered the near-silent portions of the collective realisation (short, *pp* or *ppp* single notes) were barely louder than the 'incidental' sounds which invariably fill such silences in live performances of Wandelweiser material (muffled traffic roar, people's chairs and clothes creaking and rustling, their stomachs rumbling, their throats clearing), and one might argue that the (notated) whistling had, at times, less of a presence than audience member Eddie Prévost's rhythmic rubbing-together of his hands to keep them warm. Prévost is, of course, a musician, and perhaps this hand-rubbing (which occurred several times throughout the concert) was a kind of cheeky musical contribution, smuggled into the space on the sly. After all, the lesson we've learned from Cage's 4'33" is that all the material, sonic and otherwise, that is present within the performing space, is part of that particular interpretation of the piece. Of course, there are 'undesirables' which one might want to filter out (the excessive coughing that marks concerts of classical music during any moment of quiet, for example) – and yet, perhaps, the attitude towards this has remained somewhat uncritical. For every moment of coincidental magic (rain on a resonant roof, a strategically-placed police siren) there are numerous other longueurs, in which the typical sounds of an urban environment come to seem clichés of the music, despite the fact that they all come from 'outside' the control of the performers.

Frey, once more, seems to disagree: "Many pieces created today are written for specific places or opportunities (whether for the concert hall or a special performance), and then fulfill the function intended for them in that place. However, in a piece like *mind is moving* (I) the prevailing impression is that the piece itself must first create the site where it can sound[...]The piece[...]creates, all by itself, over the course of its long resounding, its own site: a place where it can Jive." Maybe this is true when referring to a recording, but it hardly seems realistic when one considers the typical circumstances of a live performance – and, indeed, even the circumstances of listening back to a recording (where does one listen? in a comfortable arm-chair with noise-reducing headphones? on a walkman in a crowded street? in the background while surfing the internet?). There is no such thing as the 'pure' work, only something that exists in the world, which it modifies and is modified by. Perhaps, then, it would make more sense to come to a synthesis of the two positions: what occurs is not exactly the creation of a new site (a bloody-minded imposition on a previously-existing space), nor is it a situation in which the music is placed helplessly at the whims of environmental accident. Instead, it is a play, a dialogue, an argument or collaboration between



the space and the music that takes place within it. And while I'm a little uncomfortable with the way in which experimental work like this gets sequestered away into the pristine, cloistered space of the white-walled art-gallery and arts venue, I must admit that the Nunnery proved very much conducive to such spatial exploration.



**WANDELWEISER AND FLUXUS: CONCEPT AS SCORE**  
**Holywell Music Room, Oxford, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2011**



***Angharad Davies (violin) Rhodri Davies (electronic harp, nutcracker, paper)***  
***Tim Parkinson (piano) / The SET Ensemble: Dominic Lash (bass,***  
***nutcracker, paper), David Stent (electric guitar, paper), Bruno Guastalla***  
***(cello, nutcracker, paper), Paul Whitty (accordion, nutcracker, paper),***  
***Patrick Farmer (drum, acoustic guitar, nutcracker),***  
***Sarah Hughes (autoharp, nutcracker)***

After attending this gig, I was away for a few days; perhaps beneficial on this occasion, as it allowed my thoughts to settle, even if I might have lost some of the more specific details of my immediate impressions. The slight time lag also enabled to research some of the conceptual pieces that were performed on the night, tracking down the instructions/scores (although, in the end, most of the 'information' needed came across in the performances – it's not as if there was some magical 'key' that allows one to unlock the puzzling 'mystery' of the pieces, and they seem fairly transparent/accessible in any case). And finally, those extra few days allowed me to read Richard Pinnell's review of the gig (posted at 'The Watchful Ear').<sup>2</sup> As with his review<sup>3</sup> of the Michael Pisaro 'Mind is Moving' event, we both appeared to have noticed similar details and moments in the music, so it might seem rather pointless for me to go over the same ground. In fact, though, I'd like to draw out elements of Richard's analysis into some broader argumentative threads which will, hopefully, prove useful ground for debate.<sup>4</sup>

That will take us down some side-tracks, however, so I'll begin by examining the concert itself. Part of a three-day festival organized by the Sonic Art Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University, it paired Fluxus scores from the 60s with modern-day conceptual pieces by composers associated with the Wandelweiser group. This marked only the second time that the full version of the SET Ensemble had performed in a public location, having previously concentrated on private house concerts; on this occasion their ranks were further swelled by the addition of Rhodri and Angharad Davies and Tim Parkinson. Consequently, there was a fairly sizeable ensemble on stage (as well as the smaller configurations within this); nonetheless, things remained quiet throughout, and the 'loudest' part of the evening – a composition for violin and piano by Tim Parkinson – occupied nothing more than the decibel levels of an average classical concert.

There's a particular kind of tension about enforcing restraint within larger groups, and, at times, one senses that a kind of competition is taking place, to see not who can play hardest, fastest, longest, loudest, but who can play least, quietest, last. This became particularly apparent in the more conceptual pieces; the first item on the programme, a new composition by Radu Malfatti, focused more on a collective ensemble sound, taking full advantage of the range of instrumental textures available. Strings merged with e-bowed guitar and electronic harp, Tim Parkinson's strummed strings down at the lower end of the piano adding an undulating, palpable background shimmer that was almost as much sensed at the edge of perception as heard outright. Given the title ('Heikou'), I thought we might have some arrangement that reflected the structure of haiku poetry; as it was, the relation of title to composition remained more cryptic, drones alternating with silences in four barely movements differentiated by little other than the musicians turning the pages in their scores. It was a nice-sounding piece, if conceptually rather too well-worn to make much of an impression; nonetheless, it functioned well as an introduction, establishing a particular atmosphere and necessitating a particular mode of listening.

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2 <http://www.thewatchfulear.com/?p=4698>

3 <http://www.thewatchfulear.com/?p=4678>

4 Since this review was written, there has, indeed, been some exchange in the comments sections of Richard's site, and of the blog on which this review was originally posted (<http://streamsofexpression.blogspot.com>).

Following this came the first of the evening's Fluxus performances, Bengt af Klintberg's 'Orange Event Number 24'. Less reverential, more consciously absurd than the Malfatti, it nonetheless took place within the same aesthetic, perhaps due to the score's focus on silence: "Stay for a long time in a room in which there is silence. Breathe silently, move silently if you choose. At a time that you choose yourself, crack a nut." In this realization, the performers moved off the stage to come and sit amongst and near the audience. Having taken up various individual positions (Whitty standing in the passage between main floor and doorway; Lash and Hughes on opposite sides of the stage; Davies higher up in the hall; etc), they then remained in poses of concentration and stillness, each eventually taking up the nutcracker they had placed beside them and fulfilling the score's instructions. Here we saw the competitive aspect for the first time: who would be the last to 'crack', who could remain the longest time without making a sound? One sensed also that this was a kind of social experiment, testing the politeness of the audience (a prominent cough at the start of the Malfatti had been loudly shhh'd), as well as the tendency for serious contemplation to descend into giggles and absurdity. It's that fine line, between the respectful and the ridiculous, that perhaps differentiates Wandelweiser from Fluxus, which has room for the former, but tends towards the latter (and towards the one-liner) – thus, it felt more appropriate to sneak a smile and a side-ways glance during this, and the following George Brecht piece, than it did during the Wandelweiser works. Nonetheless, the room did not descend into giggles, and the silence was maintained, as it turned out, for a further ten minutes, as Rhodri Davies and Lash took to the stage to perform Sarah Hughes' 'for Rilke'. Lash's impressive ability to stand stock-still while holding his bass has been refined through the several SET Ensemble performances of the last year or so; Davies was similarly immobile for the most part, although he did occasionally glance across at his duo partner, as if questioning who should make the first sonic move. Eventually, he let slip a single e-bowed tone, sustained and rising in volume (but not too much) for several minutes; Lash, meanwhile, plucked a smaller sound from his bass that echoed in the naturally reverberant, high-ceiling'd acoustic of the Holywell before vanishing again, as if enveloped by the higher-pitched drone. I guess there's a certain fragility to these kind of conceptual pieces that depends very much on the particular circumstances of the performance; nonetheless, and though I'm not sure for precisely what reasons, this one came off well.

One other segment before the interval; this being in some ways, and despite appearances, the most conventionally 'musical' item of the night, as well as one of the most visually arresting and jokily amusing. George Brecht's 'for a drummer (fluxusversion 2)' reads: "Drum with sticks over a leaking feather pillow, making the feathers escape the pillow." Patrick Farmer placed a small table in the middle of the floor; on the table was the pillow, and in the pillow were two vertical rips, out of which peaked handfuls of feathers. The setup was completed by the pair of drumsticks in Farmer's hands, with which he proceeded to unleash a virtuoso drumming display, keeping up fast rhythms while also striving to strike the pillow at points which would cause the maximum possible number of feathers to escape onto the floor. The sonic qualities of a pillow are, as one might expect, rather muffled and dead, but the feathers billowed out nicely, and one got enough of a sense of the kind of patterns that were being played for satisfactory listening. This was a piece that didn't outstay its welcome; soon the pillow was emptied, falling upended on the floor to reveal the copy of The Guardian newspaper which

had been protecting the wooden table underneath. Upon reflection, it had been a well-balanced first half, offsetting the seriousness of the Malfatti and Hughes with the more playful elements of the 60s Fluxus scores – and the Brecht was a nicely ‘upbeat’ way to finish it.

In total, this was a fairly lengthy concert – a good 90 minutes, at least; not too much of a surprise, then, to see the auditorium empty by more than half during the intermission. Tim Parkinson’s piece for violin and piano, played by the composer and his wife, Angharad Davies, seemed less broadly conceptual, more thoroughly through-composed, than anything else we’d heard on the evening; presumably, however, it was based on some kind of specific (mathematical?) system. Figures that sounded something like scales and exercises were played in unison and alternation by both instruments, with lengthier solo episodes for violin taking on a slightly more expansive melodic edge. On the whole, the music was played with a rather dry quality that seemed to amount to a deliberate avoidance of emotional connotations, even if its tonality was more conventional than the post-12-tone language of much modern classical music. A few minutes of this were attractive enough, but as similar patterns and figures kept recurring, it felt as if space was being filled without much new being said; for me, the piece could have done with being half the length, and it lacked the improvisational edge of the more open conceptual pieces with which it shared the programme. During Ben Patterson’s ‘Paper Piece’, I benefited from being able to peek at the score as it was being performed; thus, a random spectacle of grave-looking men tearing up strips of paper one by one was transformed into an interplay between system and interpretation, and a study of group dynamics. Each of the five performers is given a specific number of pieces of newspaper, tissue paper, card, etc; they then select items from a list of different ways of tearing and manipulating the paper, mark these on their sheets, and then go through the list at their individual chosen pace. The consequence of this freedom was that, while four of the musicians finished at roughly the same time, Bruno Guastalla suddenly found himself alone, with half his pile to complete. He continued, however, at the same pace, apparently unworried by suddenly being the centre of attention, which made for a rather dignified ending. Hard to judge the piece in terms of its sonic quality, though this was probably as wide a variety of sounds as is possible to get from sheets of paper; nonetheless, if one took it on terms of spectacle and ‘performance’ as a general category, it was, again, a nicely-done piece.

The final item on the programme: Stephan Thut’s ‘many 1-4’. I believe this is a variation on an earlier text score, entitled ‘some’: the musicians can choose any two combinations of ‘x’ and ‘y’, where x=sound and y=noise, playing these at ‘some’ point over an unspecified period. The SET ensemble took this to mean very long silences, pin-pricked with tiny sounds (although there were some more sustained moments, such as Paul Whitty’s held accordion note and Angharad Davies’ slow sliding of her violin bow along the wooden surface of her instrument).

I’m not going to comment on the work as such, which was, as it turns out, rather overshadowed by the environmental sounds that took place behind/within/alongside it; instead, it’s here that I’d like to take up a point made by Richard Pinnell in relation to this particular realization of the piece. In particular, I’d like to address the contrast he draws between beautiful, minimal

sounds and silence, and the crass, noisy, brutal world outside.

“It wasn’t that external sounds were present as much as precisely which external sounds. It seemed as if this little group of musicians, and the few of us watching were a little bubble of calm and consideration in a world full of ugly, vociferous crudeness. It wasn’t too difficult to bring myself to bear on the contributions of the musicians and try and zone out the intrusions, but for a while at least this fifteen minute or so experience seemed to sum up so much of what I feel about modern life.”

This notion of art as cocoon or contrast to the nasty outside world is one I have some problems with, for I believe that art is more implicated and caught within the webs and structures of that world than is often acknowledged; indeed, one might ask what, precisely, it is that this world is ‘outside’ (outside us in our little nooks and crannies and cubby-holes?), and argue that there is no world ‘outside’ that world in which music, and art, is created, in which we have our social being – art does not have access to ‘eternal’ truths in some supernatural, a-social sense (though of course it does have changing meanings over time).

After the student protests of late 2010, I mulled over some ideas about how art might tie in with the spirit of resistance and excitement that briefly flared during those months (and which is currently flaring, far more brightly, in Egypt and across the Arab world), concluding that one might view the separate studio and performance spaces in which 'avant-garde art' happens as laboratories, sites for experiment in which new modes and ways of being and relating and creating and making and sharing can be explored, can be tested out, away from the strictures and routines of the world of work and routine and the triumph of neo-liberalism. In that sense, my view would seem to tie in with Richard's; at the same time (and I think this ties in with some of the points I was beginning to articulate in my previous post on the Pisaro gig), I'm a little worried by the way in which critics and fans of the Wandelweiser group, and related tendencies in free improvisation/composition, seem at times to espouse something approaching dangerously close to an ivory-tower aesthetic in some of their statements. I half-wonder if this is because much of the impetus behind Wandelweiser et al comes from the classical world, rather than the jazz lineage of, for want of a better term, European Free Improvisation. Of course, the historical lineage is not that simple, as I've argued before; furthermore, Wandelweiser is still quite a small movement, relatively speaking, both in terms of widespread critical attention and in terms of size of venues, audiences, numbers of record-buyers, etc. Nonetheless, free improv, with its background in the back-rooms of pubs, its working-class, entertainment-industry-schooled pioneers (Derek Bailey), and its connections to African-American musical traditions and all the political and racial connotations that brings, seems to me to have a 'grit' to it that the newer, post-Cageian, silence-focused musics do not. At times they can seem almost prissy, which is certainly not the case with Cage's own work: think of the uproarious Musicircus, or the connections to Fluxus and its anarchic political visions, or the babble and chatter of the radio music. (For that reason, bringing together Wandelweiser and Fluxus and showing what they have in common, as the concert under consideration did, was a particularly valuable manoeuvre. And yet, and yet...)

I admire the way that much recent criticism (Richard's in particular)

exhibits a determination to be honest about the role played by one's personal preferences in making critical judgments. This does not mean a simple 'I like record X because it like sine tones, and I don't like record Y because I don't like free jazz'; instead, an attempt is made to grasp and understand one's preferences, even as one does not simply pretend they do not exist and play some role in one's listening. Neither does one pretend to a standard of objectivity which is actually just personal preference smuggled in under an ideological or taste-making guise (I'm thinking here of the sort of borderline racist jazz criticism analyzed by LeRoi Jones in 'Jazz and the White Critic'). At the same time, there is a danger that such honesty can at times shade over into ideological judgments which might do with some further examination. While the inclusion of silence would seem to follow from Cage's 4'33", along with the attendant focus on environmental, 'accidental' and found sounds as a valid and valuable part of the musical experience (which renders 4'33" as much a piece of 'noise music' as a 'silent piece'), it seems that a grammar, or vocabulary has developed in the past fifteen years or so, as to precisely which extraneous sounds are allowed in silences. Permitted human sounds, or sounds associated with human activity are sirens, the muffled rumble of urban traffic, creaking chairs, the occasional sounds of movement to let us know that the audience is still alive and breathing; permitted natural sounds are things like rain or hail or wind. This is a space oddly poised between being a separated, sealed-off, isolation chamber in which beautiful sounds and silences can unfold in peace, and being somewhere in which the door is left half open to let certain 'ambient' sounds trickle in, something of the 'outside world' to emerge (though nothing to frighten the horses).

Silence, as much as it exists at all (remember Cage's visit to the anechoic chamber? ("until I die there will be sounds")), and as it is used in music, contains a dialectic. It at once forces a focus on specific, physical details of being human - breathing, bodily rhythm - and demands a reduction, or exclusion, of the more social and noisier elements of living. It is a shared experience for the devoted few, creating, to some extent, a communal space in which relations that are social as much as musical can be explored and created, but also excluding those people who lack the 'sophistication' to appreciate the virtues of quiet, sustained drones and ten-minute motionless pauses. There is always a danger point in artistic, cultural, political movements, in which the initial rush of creation and discovery and innovation risks stalling, going no further, becoming just as entrenched as that which it sought to replace; and thus, though I enjoyed Thursday's concert, finding it valuable, and inspiring, and exciting in many respects, I also find myself wary of certain aspects of Wandelweiser that I feel may be too easily overlooked in the almost overwhelmingly positive coverage that this music has been receiving. Returning to Richard's point, I would have to admit that I, too, would have preferred the final piece if it had not been accompanied throughout by drunken pub sing-alongs. But at the same time I find myself thinking of music as a valuably social, communal thing in which collective singing, familiar melody, the sense of camaraderie and shared experience, are an essential and vital part of folk traditions; yes, of course, that feeling can be co-opted by undesirable elements, and yes, manufactured pop songs might not be quite the same thing as the oral inheritance of anonymous ballads and tales, but I'm pretty sure we weren't listening to an EDL or BNP rally next-door - it was just a pub sing-along. In any case, how were the 'singers' to know that a roomful of 30 people or so were busily trying to listen to long silences, just across the road? Such a question may

seem trivial; yet it forces us to ask one that's far more difficult: namely, 'just where exactly is it that this music is situated?', and that's a hard nut to crack.



## **Some Final News**

Some readers may remember an interview with Hugh Hopper from an early edition of eartrip; and that his passing was sadly noted in a subsequent issue. It therefore feels only right to draw attention to the following project:

### **Hopper, Hugh - The Gift of Purpose SKU Cuneiform 3334**

"I got a message a few months ago from Hugh Hopper's wife Christine. She reported that since Hugh's passing, she's been struggling with finances. Of course she's also struggling emotionally, as she misses him terribly, but the gist of her message was a call for financial help. She recalled that Hugh told her that if she ran into trouble, to ask their friends for help. So she did. In response, John Roulat, Steve Feigenbaum, and I decided to produce a limited edition benefit CD, 'The Gift Of Purpose'. The CD features a live concert by Bone (Didkovsky/Hopper/Roulat) that was beautifully recorded at Orion Sound in Baltimore. There is also a bonus track by myself, John, Colin Marston (Behold.... the Arctopus, Dysrhythmia, Krallice), and Daevid Allen (Gong, Soft Machine, etc). Daevid contributed some very moving vocals which pay tribute to Hugh. John, Steve, and I are splitting the manufacturing costs and donating the gross income to Christine. Steve has already wired her some money in advance. "The Gift of Purpose" is a Cuneiform Record, in digipak format, with cover design by Bill Ellsworth. So it looks and sounds very, very good! For those of you new to Bone, we were a trio that was initiated when Hugh contacted me some years ago suggesting we collaborate on a record. Our record "Uses Wrist Grab" came out on Cuneiform a few years back, and we figured we were done. However, we were sort of drafted into doing live performance by Bruce Gallanter of Downtown Music

Gallery, who invited us to perform at a festival he'd organized. Once we discovered we could pull off this material live, we did a handful of gigs, including the one on this record. We're very proud of the performance we unleashed in Baltimore, and thrilled that we can make it available to all of Hugh's friends through this benefit CD! I hope you will support this project by purchasing a copy of The Gift of Purpose."-Nick Didkovsky

This CD is only being sold by people who have agreed to pay the Hopper family the full selling price of \$15.00 each copy. That means that right now, you can buy it from Downtown Music Gallery in New York City and Wayside Music only. Every cent of your \$15.00 goes to Hugh's family.

It pained me greatly to learn that after 40 years of giving such great music to the world (and definitely being one of the coolest people in the world), that Hugh's family would find themselves in such circumstances and I am doing everything I can to help. If Hugh's lifetime in music means something to you, I hope you will consider helping too.

The CD can be purchased from: [http://waysidemusic.com/Music-Products/Hopper—Hugh---The-Gift-of-Purpose\\_Cuneiform-spc-3334.aspx](http://waysidemusic.com/Music-Products/Hopper—Hugh---The-Gift-of-Purpose_Cuneiform-spc-3334.aspx)

## List of Contributors

**Lutz Eitel** is a freelance writer, editor and translator based in Leipzig, Germany. He works mostly on the contemporary art beat (building temples to capitalism at slave wages!) and blogs on <http://tonotfallasleep.blogspot.com>.

**David Grundy**, the editor of this magazine, is a recent graduate of Cambridge University. He is involved in free improvisation in Bristol, Cheltenham, & Oxford.

**Ted Harms** plays acoustic/upright bass. He is the co-founder of the Kitchener-Waterloo Improvisers Collective (KWIC) with Kathryn Ladano and the founder of the VOC Silent Film Harmonic.

**Alexander Kindness** is a member of I-C-E (the Improvising Clarinet Ensemble) and the trio Kindness/ May/ Lash (with percussionist Paul May and bassist Dominic Lash).

**Graham MacKeachan** is based on the edge of London. He was involved with the Bristol Improvisers Collective and the LMC, and still plays with the trio Ghosts Before Breakfast.

**Mark Whiteford** has been involved in free-improvisation since the 1980s with the Bristol Improvisers Collective and subsequently with Zariba. His super-8 film/performance project 'Act of Love' was recently revived in Brighton.



