

Derek Bailey: Concert in Milwaukee

Listening to Derek Bailey's stark, Milwaukee-situated melodies reminded me of how intensely practical his music is. The music's prosaic, quotidian mien evoked in me a sense of the sheer loneliness of the solo concert—travels to foreign climes, subject to the whims of all you meet, yet finding occasional oases among people, as well as (perhaps) a good place to eat and sleep.

Derek's détournement of classical technique, whether using an electric guitar that sometimes recalls the Javanese gamelan, or an acoustic guitar sound as brittle and flat as the medieval koto variant I heard Yuji Takahashi play at the National Theatre in Tokyo some years ago, sometimes references (unbelievably for some), the rhythms of the Caribbean--perhaps picked up from Rico Rodriguez, whom Derek invited to his Hackney home many years ago to reconnect with Douglas Ewart, a former pupil of Rico's from the Rasta camps in Kingston's Red Hills. But we should not be surprised; Derek was the very model of an organic intellectual, whose cosmopolitanism would be revealed only on the closest of inspection—and, I might add, without the initial cooperation of the subject.

Derek's music revels in small acts and timbral micromoments, perhaps a deeply embedded artifact of his intense fascination with the game of cricket. Recalling an American tyro's first encounters with the game, the music itself presents a flat, blank surface, a slow-motion white noise whose infinitely variegated texture is only revealed when a listener zooms in, after the fashion of a scanning tunneling microscope. At that resolution, one detects the movement of single atoms of sound in the articulation of a unique microtonal pitch space that at some moments, one is hard pressed to identify with the notion of the guitar.

Performing with (and listening to) Derek was like playing with the Etch-a-Sketch drawing toy that has been so popular for so many years. Whatever marvels one creates in a session with the device, shaking the toy back and forth erases them without trace or possibility of recovery. With each new Bailey improvisation, the seeming refusal of memory forestalled any reliance on hand-me-down expectations. The canvas is blank once more--inviting, beckoning, promising, threatening.

As instantly recognizable from the very first moment as Charlie Parker or Thelonious Monk, like Parker, Derek's music is at once predictable and unpredictable. Under the Bailey Principle of Uncertainty, listeners bump up against an epistemological glass ceiling: one knows (or believes in) what is going to happen, but one cannot know exactly when the imagined event will take place in real time. It is for this reason that listening to improvised music requires, as philosopher Arnold I. Davidson has written, "continuous awareness, attention, vigilance, and practices of self-transformation that are necessary to the creation of new forms of freedom." Remarkably, this constitutes a most excellent description of what Derek himself is pursuing, an arduous climb over mountains of doggedly asserted tone clusters, in the transcendental manner of Carl Ruggles—except that this quest is not for Ruggles' heroic timelessness, but simply for the sound that will indelibly mark the moment. In that way, the transubstantiations that Derek performs indeed points the way to those new forms of freedom.

Coming full circle, listening to the overall sweep of this CD makes available a sense of why Derek was a masterful exponent of the solo recital. Whether viewed as an innovative medium in itself or a necessary response to difficult economic times (and why not both?), the solo concert requires both an awareness of the needs of the moment (as I believe I heard Anthony Braxton say once) and a ruthless refusal to reassert those old needs in new environments. Derek constructs a concert as environment, in which the largest edifices are conceived and created on the spot, while both performers and audiences maintain an uneasy ambivalence toward history and memory in order to

remain beyond expectation.

As with most of the 20th Century's most challenging music, Derek's work asserts a radically unconventional notion of memory. Perhaps it would take a particular genius to really memorize his music note for note, cluster for cluster, in the old way; certainly I cannot do it. But that does not mean that the music of Derek Bailey is not memorable. In a sense, the joy of listening to Derek lies in the utterly human facility it reveals, by which those who encounter his sound ideal can manage to re-improvise its traces in phantasmal consciousness. In that way, Derek Bailey can play with all of us at once.

-- George E. Lewis