

The Saxophone and the Art of Hamster Strangling

Tim Hill

I remember buying a record in a friend's shop. Seeing what I was buying the friend swore and cackled:

"You don't want to buy that rubbish, it sounds like a hamster being strangled".

The record was Anthony Braxton's Solo Saxophone 1978, an aural dictionary of contemporary saxophone techniques and one of my favourite albums, (although sadly now wandering in the "who the f... did I lend that to?" nether regions of lost records).

So why do people dedicate large parts of their lives to recreating the sounds of a rodent massacre?

My ears were changed at seventeen by the purchase of a smelly, thick covered, second hand copy of Ornette Coleman 'Live in Europe'. I had been reading Leroy Jones/ Imanu Ameer Bakaru's 'Black Music' and the ideas of 60's radical musicians offered strange liberating ideas to a white seventeen-year-old clergyman's son. Coleman's music was my first encounter with these new sounds and it was at first too much for my innocent ears. But one track, the 'ballad' Sadness, was compelling. The sound of Coleman's alto entranced me; it was a new voice, full of contradiction and opened a New World, out of the confines of the Baptist chapel, to a place where secular and spiritual intertwined.

Searching record shops became a rich evocative experience, a new mythology opened up, I had little real notion then of contemporary black American or British culture and figures like Coltrane, Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor resonated like prophets. The heavy record sleeves with their weird liner notes and titles became icons, the music revealed, bemused, captivated and frightened me. The glorious culmination was Albert Ayler. I never heard Albert live, but once, waiting for Sun Ra to begin playing, the DJ played an Ayler track in the middle of a morass of 'acid jazz' (sic), suddenly there really was music of hallucinatory vision, summoning angels and harried by demons.

From hearing Ornette I became fascinated by the sonic possibilities of the Saxophone, by that "column of air" surrounded by steel, reaching back down into the diaphragm of the player.

In the late 70's the first great wave of British radical music was still strong and, inspired by the American 'new wave', I avidly sought out people like John Stevens, Barry Guy and Trevor Watts, the Brotherhood of Breath et al. From there was opened up by sounds beyond jazz by musicians like Roger Turner and Derek Bailey. Their new music offered aesthetic, political and spiritual freedoms, and, still an adolescent, liking music most people heard as complete madness granted a different and perhaps a little snobbish sense of rebellion.

In the political ferment of the late 70's, some believed the 'revolution' was nigh, that the bastards almost had their backs to the wall, radical groups urged us to vote for Thatcher to speed the momentum of Capitalism's 'last days' and anarchists and socialists squared up in the local pub. Britain seemed cracking apart. The first wave of punk hadn't attracted me, too old for the Sex Pistols even at 18, but the music that punk let out of the bag did: Pere Ubu, The Fall, This Heat. Their grimy aural apocalypse complemented the freedoms of improvised music. The key was in the energy of both musics, liberating, destructive or both, in the strange soundworlds that energy could open up, in the epiphanies of hearing things with total freshness, the "nowness" of improvised music at its best, a primal playground complemented by stumbling across the ganja fuelled church of dub.

I got hold of a saxophone. From a nice and tidy, although at the time seemingly irrelevant, background of clarinet grades and chapel choirs, I now screamed and raged in sprawling ensembles with names like the A1 vegetables. Groups that lurched together mixtures of noise, funk and punk. Spawned in the same pools as the Pop Group et al. I also met Mike Cooper; blues musician turned free improviser, and with him and a box of toys and bits of tubing explored a world of improvisation, drum machines and effects. Cooper also opened my ears to the next major sound breakthrough in improvised music, the manic, percussive, fast-changing New York school; in particular John Zorn and Eugene Chadbourne's early game pieces.

In the late seventies and early eighties many towns had improvising groups, the Oxford improvisers C o-Op was my other playground, especially playing with percussionist Matt Lewis, now working with the wild life his drumming imitated, and Pat Thomas, pianist and electronics wizard extraordinaire.

These early influences culminated in two mid eighties groups, Beating Time and Mayhem, groups like so many others of the time confined to a graveyard of boxes of old cassettes, groups attempting to combine punk energy, tape loops, 'scratching', free improvisation etc. The bands featured Cooper, Thomas and tenor saxophonist Geoff Hawkins". Geoff had that 'sound', a humanity and intent to explore, I later learnt Geoff was at the gig my first Ornette album had been recorded at.

Ornettes sound revealed the vitality and importance of non-classical music. Much of my creative life has been spent outdoors, performing personal ceremonies and parties, at festivals and public places, creating a band and theatre that draws on street musics and the history of outdoor ritual and celebration, where, again, the sacred and profane engender and become indistinguishable. My other musical head plays and researches early English woodwinds, and I discovered a vernacular and in part improvised tradition of music for both church and dancing in the village bands of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The sound of Ornettes alto had led me through the cracks in

my culture into alternative possibilities, into the past, into “ancient and future sounds”.

Tim Hills current groups include Pandaemonium: street band and performance group, a trio with Steve Noble and Roberto Bellatella and Mandragora, an electric quintet including Pat Thomas and Geoff Hawkins. Current projects include sound/performance piece based on the book ‘Christina the Astonishing’ by poets Lesley Saunders and Jane Draycott. He can often be seen in scruffy hats and ill fitting wigs, blowing down odd looking chair legs with The Mellstock Band in film and TV period dramas.
