Book Review

Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation

Ben Watson
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One gets the sense that Ben Watson is itching for a fight, given his writerly penchant for polemic and confrontation. Readers of *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* don't have to wade into his 400-plus page biography of the great British guitarist, however, to perceive Watson's put-up-your-dukes method of critical inquiry: The story of "Free Improvisation"? (Capital letters and all?) Is it possible for one writer to tie up decades (millennia?) of multifarious, under-documented, pan-global musical practice in one neat narrative, placing Bailey persuasively at the middle of it all? Watson's strategic title prefigures the foundation of his tough-toned argument that Bailey's particular approach to music-making is rigidly exemplary of the (non)idiom of free improvisation, that his defiantly anti-compositional, anti-repetitive music is the bastion of the perennial avant-garde capable of contesting the hegemony of capitalism and the commodification of musical culture. On this front, Watson repeatedly suggests, no musical practice comes close to Bailey's. There is no doubt that the argument stems from a deep passion and commitment to the revolutionary possibilities of music and a strong identification with his subject. Ultimately, however, it's a tough argument to swallow, one that begs too many questions about the exclusion of other histories of liberatory music-making, and one that is tripped up by wayward digressions that ultimately obscure Bailey's story in favour of the author's polemical rants and political fixations.

Watson is a journalist with a voluble distaste for academia. In his "Introduction: On Freedom," he sets out not only to describe the impetus for his project, but also to distance himself from scholarly theories of improvisation–snapshot views from the "Olympia of academia" as he puts it (7). He is cognizant that Bailey himself is suspicious of theories of improvisation, but he maintains that his book stands apart from others by avoiding "promotional falafel and the jargon of genius, and talk[ing] directly about aesthetic value, about the success and failure of the music *as music*" (8). Thus, he claims to transcend the discourses of journalistic music criticism and their collusion, tacit or explicit, with the interests of the music industry (popular or bourgeois "avant-garde"). This, Watson claims, keeps his work in line with Bailey's, and he proceeds to steadfastly refract Bailey's musical life through his own blunt, Adornoite Marxism. Given Watson's admitted disavowal of any theoretical agreement between author and his subject, this process leads one to wonder whether the point of the book, beyond "music as music," is to buttress Bailey's music with Watson's politics, or vice versa. Politics and grand methodological claims aside, a good chunk of the book, once Bailey's career trajectory becomes clearly defined, reads like a cut-and-paste of journalistic record and gig reviews, full of the heavy-handed adjectival rhetoric and arcane cultural references that weighed down Watson's 1994 critical biography of Frank Zappa as well. (Zappa appears far more than one would reasonably expect in a book about Bailey.) Whether one would consider it to be "promotional falafel" or not, the onslaught of supercharged name-dropping makes the sequential, blow-by-blow accounts of Bailey recordings and "Company" performances particularly gruelling to read.

In contrast, Watson squeezes out some genuine insight in the third and finest chapter, "Joseph Holbrooke Trio 1963-1966," a thorough investigation of the Sheffield-based band that Bailey shared with bassist Gavin Bryars and drummer Tony Oxley. Here, Watson picks up a particularly interesting thread from Bailey's own book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, discussing the group's gradual transition from jazz to free improvisation through a series of interviews with the three musicians and a few regular audience members. Like the first two chapters, which document Bailey's childhood and early working career, Watson relies on chunky quotations from under-edited interviews to tell the brunt of the story. While the early chapters get bogged down by quotation after lengthy quotation from Bailey himself (who, like his biographer, is prone to digression), the multi-voiced narrative that emerges in Chapter 3 does a superb job of fleshing out this vital, scarcely documented portion of the history of British free music. Unfortunately, Watson fails to engage with one of the more interesting aspects of the Joseph Holbrooke Trio that surfaces during the interviews, the complex approach to rhythm to which both Bryars and Oxley make reference. He proves either unwilling or ill-equipped to deliver such technical, music-as-music details that seem likely to appeal to a good chunk of the specialist audience (both musicians and non-musicians) who would read his book.

Instead, Watson emphasizes the multiple aesthetic and personality conflicts at play during Joseph Holbrooke's history. The relationship between Bailey and Bryars is something to which he pays special attention, using their divergent aesthetic/ideological positions during the 1970s as a platform for his theoretical investigation of the politics of free improvisation and of composition. Watson places the continued development of Bailey's "spiky" improvisational approach (with London colleagues like Oxley, John Stevens, Evan Parker, Paul Rutherford and more) in opposition to Bryars's affiliation with Brian Eno's Obscure label and "experimental" composition. He argues that Obscure artists like Bryars, Michael Nyman and John Adams, having subsequently been embraced by the new music mainstream that they initially sought to topple, prove that the political efficacy of composerly radicalism is easily subsumed by the imperatives of bourgeois concert traditions. In contrast, Watson maintains that the confrontational radicalism of Bailey's free improvisation remains politically taut, refusing to let its spiky sounds be tied to flabby institutions. Though the opposition of Bailey and Bryars is a superficially compelling one, Watson's analysis of the composition/improvisation "debate" that it is meant to embody exposes the problems opened up by the limited scope of his inquiry. The exploratory compositional/improvisational music and liberatory politics of the Sun Ra Arkestra or the AACM (to name but two examples that scream out for recognition) not only trouble Watson's rather reductive opposition of the politics of composition vs. improvisation, but also demand a greater role in any narrative that claims to be "The Story of Free Improvisation." Of course, AACM musicians like Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith and George Lewis are given space for their collaborations with Bailey. However, there's a centrality that Watson attributes to Bailey's role in these musical relationships that comes perilously close to the "jargon of genius" he wishes to avoid, and tends to flatten the undeniably important contributions his collaborators have made to other histories of free improvisation that are inextricably bound up with Bailey's.

Of Watson's many digressions, the one that is the most puzzling is his bellicose attack of fellow writer Jason Stanyek's analysis of a particular Evan Parker project in Chapter 5, "Company Weeks, 1977-1994." Watson comes down hard on Stanyek for claiming that improvisation provides a musical context through which cross-cultural musical communication and community become possible, referring to the precepts of his position as "liberal face-saving and feelgood ideology" (254). In true Adornoite fashion, he clings to the sense of contra-capitalist confrontation that the "avant-garde extremes" of his favourite musicians represent to him. Along these lines, Watson attempts to counter Stanyek by taking up Bailey's much-contested claim that free improvisation is not idiomatic. As such, it somehow escapes the codes of recognition as music (or in reference to specific musics) and thus opposes the mechanisms that would otherwise endeavour to package and sell it. "Bailey's 'non-idiomatic' absolutism can have no truck with Stanyek's one-world moralism," Watson writes. "Far from creating 'community,' authentic Modern Art speaks a moment of truth: controversial, nerve-wracking and critical" (254). Watson's vitriol blinds him to the possibility that such goals need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, if one can get past the heavy rhetoric in which the accounts are couched, Watson's descriptions of Bailey's Company Weeks seem to support Stanyek's argument as much as they support his own, with their multi-idiomatic, international membership and emphasis on the short-term development of communitarian rapport between musicians. Even if Watson wants to emphasize the conflictual, controversial, imperfect nature of improvised music-making, it seems short-sighted of him to assume that the pursuit of resolution is undesirable–socially, politically or aesthetically. Such "extreme" tensions, far from being necessarily calcified in some elitist avant-garde, may well point to the inevitable limits of communication between musicians, points of difference that are vital in their irreconcilability. In his attack on Stanyek, Watson confuses the facile supersession of these limits with the political responsibility of musicians who acknowledge their inevitability and who are committed to work toward musical communication in any case.

Despite Watson's admonitions, Bailey's wide-ranging, border-crossing career trajectory exemplifies a certain approach to such a potential for community-building, whether it's an explicit priority of Bailey's or not. The second half of the biography, in fact, sustains interest solely (and just barely) through profiles of collaborators–Braxton, Steve Lacy, John Zorn, Toshinori Kondo, to cite just a few–that become members of an ever-growing community that is the necessary residue of Bailey's musical life and practice. On these terms, one must take Derek Bailey's role in the history of free improvisation for what it's worth, and re-question the central position Watson grants him. There's no doubt that Bailey's history is an interesting one–not the least for the exceptional originality of his guitar playing–and one that Ben Watson will do battle to invest with the weight of his peculiar political and aesthetic fixations. Ultimately, it should go without saying, it is just one narrative strain in the story of free improvisation. In a manner similar to Bailey's musical working methods, it's a story that is more resonant when it can interact with many, many others.

Works Cited

Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. New York: Da Capo, 1992.

Watson, Ben. Frank Zappa: *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995.