

# Table of Contents

Company Work v. Patrician Raiders . . . . .	1
---	---



# Company Work v. Patrician Raiders

By Matthew Hyland

The late Derek Bailey's musical 'career' was founded on years of wage labour as a guitarist in dancehalls and nightclubs. An idea which aspirants to today's fully professional-entrepreneurial cultural sector would find barely comprehensible, suggests Matthew Hyland. For what other than individual elevation above wage-worker status defines the 'creative' life that these subvention-seekers clamour for so shrilly?

This essay was commissioned for the forthcoming book *Noise and Capitalism*, published by Arteleku Audiolab in collaboration with [Un]Common Sounds, and constitutes a digression on one theme arising in *Ben Watson's Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* (Verso, 2004). All page references are to this book unless otherwise stated

*Anyone who has experienced the music business from the musician's point of view is bound to be cynical about music, and often, in fact, about everything.*

- Derek Bailey, obituary for Motoharu Yoshizawa

Among its other achievements, Ben Watson's recent biography of Derek Bailey proves that anyone who calls a lifelong intransigent in the face of market common sense an idealist, as though declining to second-guess the fancy of imaginary customers meant being 'out of touch with the real world', 'spouts craven fund-me drivel'. [1] People who talk this way may take their own brittle go-getting bravado for 'cynicism', but the story of Bailey's working life testifies that he meant something quite different by the word.

Bailey learned his technique on the job, as a big band guitarist in the provincial dancehalls of the 1950s. (Not 'touring' like rock product, but serially resident 'in every major town in Britain'.) The bands played on revolving stages, supplying an uninterrupted swinging background to packed houses of sexually-hyped, illicitly pissed proletarian youth. Sometimes the musicians were kept in a cage, lest they become collateral damage in the general *melée*.

In the book Bailey recalls the dancehall world, (and 'the provinces' in general) with love. The musicians lived among and played to people of their own class, yet they existed as 'almost a kind of secret society... a completely integrated alternative' (p.45), with absolutely no interest in 'the audience' either as consumers to be obeyed or 'fans' to be humiliated. Both they and the dancehall crowds were there for other reasons.

In fact the musicians' indifference to the secrets of audience desire was not only reciprocated, it was something musical labourers held in common with the brawlers on the balconies, inasmuch as the latter also lived by selling their labour to owners of capital, and had no say and no interest in the final consumer's encounter with the product. *Worrying about competing in the marketplace for consumer attention is the capitalist's problem*. Like any other skilled employee, Bailey was concerned with earning a wage under acceptable conditions, which as far as he was concerned meant being far away from factory punishment. The other requirement was that while working he had to be learning from the other players, or as he put it, 'getting rid of some of my musical ignorance' (!). Watson notes that Bailey regarded 'most British "jazz" [as] a patrician raid on a form that had initially been arrived at through involvement in regular work' (p.110).

If any of this seems surprising now, perhaps it's because in the decades since Bailey took his leave of the dying dancehall scene (killed by the obligation to sound like The Record), musicians have come to behave as culture professionals, self-brokering mini-brands awaiting market breakthrough, even as they languish in perpetual shamefaced internship.

When someone says they'd rather work in a factory than play music they don't like, observed Bailey, it means they've never worked in a factory. The critique of class-privileged idealism is (literally) on the money here, but the comment also points to a significant difference between the mid-20th century and the present. When Bailey played in dancehalls and nightclubs, it just about made sense to think of factory labour and full-time waged music as alternative futures for (a minority of) working-class kids. The comparison was between two kinds of wage labour: one that's physically punishing and brutally coerced and another where the wage-earners' bodies were left unbroken and they even maintained a relative degree of freedom.[2] Today's aspirational artists, on the other hand, imagine music (and culture in general) as a meritocratic alternative to wage-labour per se: the individual body's ticket out of proletarian drudgery, to be earned by submitting the spirit to special humiliation.

When a youthful Bailey decided he had to play music full-time or not at all, he couldn't have imagined that full-time music, as distinct from unlimited-hours' investment in presentation skills-coaching and micro-entrepreneurial networking, would be all but extinct within his lifetime. His post-dancehall trajectory from jazz clubs to unsubsidised international free improvisation is not unique, but it remains a scandalous exception, an isolated anti-career describing a never-(yet)-realized social potential. In the process he frequented other exceptional cases, and thus had little reason to question the extent to which *working playing music* in the sense he meant it was still possible, or for whom.[3]

As the world of waged music disintegrated, Bailey contrived a way to leave behind its downsides (e.g. 'the unrelieved gruesome sentimentality of the stuff we were playing' (p.46)) without taking up what has become the full-time work of high-culture artists and pop-culture stars, i.e. developing and promoting a reproduction-ready identity, for recognition either by commercial creditors or public funding bodies. Thus, for decades after its disappearance from the wider social horizon, he held onto the aspect of waged playing that constituted its original attraction: an income from 'totally absorbed' full-time work on the material of music itself, without regard for the idea of an audience and its imaginary needs. The stakes in this gamble for dialectical disengagement from market command were raised to the point that Bailey of all people, recorded music's severest ontological opponent, ended up a record label owner. The existence of Incus can be seen as a sort of pre-emptive lunge at the business, allowing Bailey and other musicians to record while avoiding beholdenness to blackmailing market mediators.[4]

Watson argues forcefully that free improvisation – at least as Bailey played and theorized it – is resistant to commodification. This is true in the sense that speculators in culture and their hired experts are put off (especially given the legion of eager easier alternatives) by wilfully unrepeatably gestures and simultaneous offences against the codes of romantic rock star glamour and serious artist gravitas. The investors take this for a lack of quality control, pointless noise corrupting the customer satisfaction signal, and their aversion gives the practice the 'distinct advantage' of 'less capital and fewer careers riding on it' (p.262).

But free improvising that isn't supported financially by work the musicians do (or someone else does) elsewhere still has to 'pay for itself' by being sold. Once the music is 'inside' the commodity form (whether as a recorded product or a 'service' like a gig makes no difference) there's nothing about its aesthetic content that makes it any less formally exchangeable than a Frank Zappa ring tone or the lease on a Dalston jazz club. Hence Watson's polemic against uncritical improv-boosters who spiritualize the music, pretending its purity transcends the conditions of its manufacture and sale.

Bearing this in mind, it might be useful to modify an insurance executive's slogan about poetry and intelligence[5]: free improvisation as Bailey intends it resists commodification *almost successfully*. 'Almost' remains an upper limit as long as capital goes on being strengthened by what hasn't killed it yet.

A crucial premise of the argument about commodification, stated explicitly towards the end of the book, is that the problem with commodities isn't a moral one, it's material, or, as Watson says of artistic commodities, aesthetic. Human freedom to determine what is produced and how is distorted by dead labour's claim on the living, resulting in more and more atrophied use values along the chain of productive consumption.[6] It follows that it isn't moralizing to proclaim the aesthetic reasons for repudiating professional music, even – in fact especially – when little or nothing is left either of the proletarian music jobs Bailey remembered from his twenties or the exceptional working circumstances he bloody-mindedly secured later. To put it bluntly, a recording contract holder or a serial applicant for funding and residencies will probably spend LESS time working on music itself – or learning about it, as Bailey would insist – than a totally absorbed 'part-timer' who pays for the time through a 'normal', rigorously uncreative day (or night) job.[7] The part-timer's art is certainly more likely to be informed by an experience of alienated labour that isn't hopelessly skewed by belief in individual personality as an essential productive force. It's not a matter of standing aloof: rather, struggling in 'dead-end' employment breeds worldliness (or 'cynicism') about the commodified world, and hence intolerance of smug self-employed *willingness to compete* in it. Artists who expect to succeed within their field, by contrast, are specially 'motivated' to kid themselves that capitalism rewards creativity and hard work.

**Matthew Hyland, a refiner of symptoms and founder of the Journal of Childish Psychology [www.c8.com/wolverine/], insists that there's nothing wrong with observation that blindness wouldn't improve**

### Footnotes

[1] The author uses this phrase with reference to 'supporters of Free Improvisation who believe that "pure" music replaces the need for politics'. The analytical category is extended here to include an allied group.

[2] It should be remembered, contrary to facile accounts of 'post-fordism', that industrial manufacturing labour is more prevalent worldwide today than at any time in history.

[3] It's important to note Bailey's insistence that his own need to be 'full-time' was a personal response to concrete circumstances, not a prescription for anyone else. Also he worked with countless players whose anti-professionalism keeps them permanently 'part-time'.

[4] The chief blackmail, of course, being the alternative between conforming and simply being silenced, whether under contract restrictions on outside work, or, when the commercial sector's grip on the means of production is as tight as it was in the early 1970s, by not being 'signed' in the first place. Incus co-founder Tony Oxley points out in the book (p.71) that they started the company at a time when 'many musicians were not being recorded at all'.

[5] Wallace Stevens, 'Man Carrying Thing', *Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, 1984, p.350

[6] 'Productive consumption' is meant, of course, in the strict Marxist sense, i.e. the consumption of one commodity in the production of another. Certainly no reference is intended to the recent academic fantasy according to which all human activity, private consumption included, is somehow equally 'productive'.

[7] The attempt to claim and maintain state benefits certainly falls into this category, although the degree of creativity required to succeed rivals that which paid artists attribute to themselves.

Thanks to Ben Watson and the late Derek Bailey for producing (amongst other crucial things) the book digressed from here. BUY IT! at:

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Derek-Bailey-Story-Free-Improvisation/dp/1844670031>

Thanks also to Paul Helliwell for conversation and writing some of the questions raised way past the scope of the digression. See <http://www.metamute.org/en/First-cut-is-the-deepest> and

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Zombie-Nation>.