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By Ben Watson

Ben Watson scratches deep into David Toop's candy-coated history of 20th century music, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory*

For several years, David Toop wrote a column for *The Wire* magazine, and he writes like a columnist: casual, personable, rambling. His previous book, *Ocean of Sound*, was about Ambient, and bannered a pop/avant pantheon on the back (Sun Ra, Brian Eno, Kraftwerk, Lee Perry, Kate Bush, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Aphex Twin, Brian Wilson). This one doesn't say who's onboard, but promises to answer deeper questions: 'Is it possible to grow electronic sounds?' and 'Can the resonance of a room be played like an instrument?'. On the back, there's praise for *Ocean of Sound* from the broadsheets. The quotes have the sound of relief about them: at last, they imply, someone's explained what all that avant-garde/experimental/incomprehensible stuff is about. 'Dive into it too recklessly,' warns *The Independent* on Sunday, 'and there is a slight risk of drowning, but let it lie around the house a while and it will seep into your brain by osmosis'. In this sense, Toop's lightweight methodology is unimpeachable. Any criticism will sound churlish, protectionist, elitist.

Toop pulls the right levers: the rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari, the joy of Zen gardens, Apple logos shining from laptops. Here the history of 20th century music is a treasure chest, a horde of wonders. The avant-garde, so long a byword for aural pain and laughable irrelevance, is suddenly sexy. Chapter headings are theory driven rather than fan oriented: 'space and memory', 'sampling the world', 'growth and complexity', 'to play', 'machines and bodies'. However, Toop is no theorist, and skips among other people's ideas like a child on a pebble beach: small objects of fascination are quickly dropped for others. He begins with John Cage's experience in an anechoic chamber – he heard the sound of his own body – and free associates from there to various sound installations, concerts and books. Emails from friends are recycled, the kind of stuff we expect from tourists: 'I like to see changing view of landscape through a window of a train or an airplane. Especially, the view from airplane is wonderful.' (Yoshio Machida)

Something vanishes with tourism: a place's politics and social tensions. Likewise, the real structuring problems of modern music are blithely ignored. After 20 pages, Toop's chatty positivism becomes cloying, as if he's simply too blissed-out to do any research, think something through, stick to a subject. Everything is reduced to chats with Eno on the mobile, an email from Björk, contemplating blackbirds in his Japanese garden.

Rather than simply complacent, Toop's politics are left-liberal. He registers skepticism about the exaggerated mysticism of some musicians, notes when 'marxists' make protests, feels discomfort when ethnic musicians perform in western concert spaces, suddenly explodes with indignation that Van Morrison is honoured above the lead singer from the O'Jays. Yet when he quotes Iain Sinclair from *Lights Out for the Territory* (lines about the 'money lake' of the City), one is startled by the anger, cuttingness and reality of Sinclair's words. Obviously, tour guides aren't supposed to be polemical, but Toop's cosiness becomes suffocating, as if the whole world only exists to be reproduced sonically in a safe domestic haven (also, where's lust and desire? *Haunted Weather* must be the most sexless book on music ever written).

Well, nothing wrong with Mantovani and Nat King Cole and cocoa and slippers. They have their functions. What is weird is the artists Toop chooses to paint his cosy world picture. A page count reveals the hierarchy beneath Toop's rhizomatic sprawl: John Cage (27); Toru Takemitsu (20); Derek Bailey, John Stevens (16); Christian Marclay (12); Brian Eno (9); AMM, Eddie Prévoist, Morton

Feldman, R. Murray Schafer, John Zorn (7); Masaki Kobayashi, Evan Parker, Marcel Duchamp (6). Toop himself is a high flyer: Thames Festival and Whitney Biennale commissions, Millennium Dome think tanks, curating Sonic Boom at the Hayward (sponsored by Ford). He tracks the technological cutting edge: USA, UK and Japan are the obvious sites. So no surprise that Cage and Takemitsu, the USA and Japan's most famous 20th century composers, top the list. But who represents the UK? Derek Bailey and John Stevens? You can hear the cry 'But who the fuck are they?' ringing down the corridors of Broadcasting House. The unique British class system – a moronic ruling class with no culture except memories of Empire and Elgar, and a working class with an exceptional input on global rock and pop – leaves its quaint imprint.

Stevens and Bailey, working class and proud of it, are the founders of Free Improvisation – a name for site-specific, real-time music making which bucked every tenet of art-world postmodernism in the '80s and '90s. Just when concepts of simulacrum, computerisation and commercial collusion swept the art schools, Free Improvisation vaunted craftsmanship and actuality – plus extraordinary disdain for commercial or institutional recognition. Free improvisers like Bailey and Stevens developed new, highly idiosyncratic languages on their instruments. Bailey used electricity, Stevens didn't: neither cared what instrument their collaborators played (trombone or broken hi-fi set, sampler or naked voice) as long as they could control their sound, keep it lively, responsive, interesting. Modernist 'difficulty' migrated from the salons of Vienna to upstairs rooms in city pubs. While Minimalism and 'accessibility' swept the board in the academy, musicians outside made a virtue of the opposite: collective interaction, contingency, virtuosity, the unrepeatable.

The fact that Free Improvisation - that most prickly and demanding of musical activities - should figure in Toop's book is partly to do with his background. A refugee from Hornsey Art College, collecting glasses at the Roundhouse, he and Paul Burwell needed a gig. In 1971, Stevens gave them one at the legendary Little Theatre Club in Garrick Yard. Toop admits that as an improvising guitarist he was no contender, but he loved the experimental, untheorised, practical approach. Toop also loved pop, and looked longingly at the exposure and sales granted to pop acts. Having written a book on Rap, in the '90s Toop was intrigued by Ambient and laptop musics (what Bailey disparagingly calls 'lounge electronica') which appear to be giving Improvisation a new lease of life. He admits that a gig he was involved in at the Spitz, which sought to combine veteran improvisers and the new experimenters, was a fiasco. Following Cage, Toop naturalises sound ('wake up and listen to the breeze in the leaves ...'), indulging precisely the species of asocial and unhistorical fetishism criticised by Adorno. Therefore he cannot achieve the socialist explanation of the Spitz fiasco: Free Improvisation is a revolt against pre-recorded sound management, and off-the-peg laptop software ('triggering samples') is a managerial tool.

Although Derek Bailey and John Stevens feature in *Haunted Weather* as if they're national figureheads like Cage and Takemitsu, Toop can't explain why they've worked all their lives beneath the radar of establishment recognition. Maybe it's because they play music rather than 'compose' it, and in so doing rediscovered – in a practical way – Adorno's thesis: that far from guaranteeing a shared vocabulary, a 'community of sound', bourgeois musical parameters (the tempered system, imposed abstract tempo, depersonalised musicianship) are obstacles to musical communication. The players' modernism of Bailey and Stevens – from quite an unexpected angle – confirms Adorno's musical Marxism.

Technological fetishism is a ready means for recuperation of avant-gardes. Cubists and Futurists are equated with designers of Art Deco lamps and wind-up gramophones. Ignoring the fact that samplers and software encode and impose the parameters of Western music, the 20th century musical avant-garde is narrated as a dialogue with the machine. This is music understood like the history of automobile manufacture (remember who sponsored Sonic Boom?), a gradual 'ascent' to the prone

posture of the 'comfortable' consumer (as Devo would put it). Toop's techno-fetishism prevents him understanding the real history of the 20th century: a struggle between the collective possibilities brought about by socialised production and the ideology of the family and nation state. The sound of this struggle is far more interesting than that of mere technological advance.

The surprise is that Toop remains aware enough of objective musical values to move on from Ambient and pay attention to Free Improvisation, for which consumer gadgetry (unless obsolescent, dirt cheap and therefore surreal) is anathema. As usual, the bland, blind sublimity of 'curatorship' – that weasel word for buying in the labour of others – is haunted by the social actuality of production. Toop's book will appeal to working musicians much less than listeners. a

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