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# First Cut is the Deepest

By Paul Helliwell

Free improvisation guitarist and theorist Derek Bailey could be described as the Samuel Beckett of post-war music. Bailey moved nohow-onward by means of a continually repeated negation of the familiar, eschewing the idiomatic for the (almost) uncommodifiably new. Ben Watson's biography of Bailey, published earlier this year, celebrates the life and unfinishable works of an avant garde anti-artist. But, asks Paul Helliwell, do Bailey and Watson throw too much musical baby out with the tonal bathwater? And where does the increasingly venerable practice of free improvisation stand in relation to modernism's dialectic of the new today?

*Form deforms*

– Witold Gombrowicz

*We have to give the truth to this man, he's a serious journalist and biographer*

– Derek Bailey on Ben Watson

The best argument Derek Bailey knew against Improvisation, based on his experiences playing guitar for wrestling matches, was a huge wrestler upset with the way he'd just played 'Enter the Gladiators'. Like this example, and like free improvisation itself, by far the best bits of Ben Watson's *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, are conversations. These conversations Watson recorded himself with many of the key players in the scene; the book is Watson's conversation with these recordings. There is a happy danger the book could come to resemble the ideal improv situation where even the players are unsure who played what – where the conversation 'comes alive'.

Improvisers, both musical and theatrical, make of the present moment an inverse black hole, a magician's top hat, out of which, seemingly from nothing and faster than thought, can be pulled new and marvellous things. Facing each other, the musicians pull things from their top hats, like an expanded game of scissors, paper, stone. We laugh and gasp in recognition as the recently new things are reincorporated into new contexts. Yet, to make these moments possible, a strict co-operation must be maintained. There is no time for reflection and censorship, the content must be left to look after itself. Later, the practice of this creation is generalised into an ideology that the content, the 'finished product', be a matter of indifference.

[IMAGE]

Image: Derek Bailey and the story of Free Improvisation

For listeners, music is a flash art – one that happens in the present moment as we hear it and understand its structure – and Improvisers wish its creation to be likewise. Other than Derek Bailey, few have written on musical improvisation as a practice. His book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, reveals how much improvisation goes on within forms of music we already know, ones that obey genre rules of musical signification (idiomatic music – flamenco, jazz, church organ playing) and thus render non-idiomatic or free improvisation familiar. Bailey argues that for playing 'free' to be successful, the process of improvisation must exclude these idiomatic elements, genre conventions. Arising from practice, this is a modernist argument on music's need to pursue its own formal autonomy.

One difficulty for Ben Watson's book lies in the limitations of free improvisation and of conversation. Neither copes well with the introduction of predetermined material. Watson says, 'Bailey's position is ultimately compatible with my own Musical Marxism but I don't expect him to say so' and gives his

reasons:

Theory and abstraction are immediately suspicious to Bailey, they freeze the moment, generalise the instant, abuse the actuality, bully the musician.

Watson even reflects this himself: 'generalities rarely provide answers (rather they stifle examination of particulars by reference to ideology).' Bailey wants to leave the moment gritty and unassimilable – for this grit makes the pearl – What does Watson want?

These mirrored caveats are in fact a sales pitch, but also, to mix metaphors, a punch Watson pulls. Out of respect for the structure of conversation/ free improv itself, Watson doesn't bring theory – specifically that of Theodor Adorno – to the table like he promises in the text and in the bibliography. Perhaps I am taxing him with what was never his intention, or perhaps there were forces beyond his control. Watson writes as if torn between the improvising community, his own (somewhat equivocal) commitment to Adorno and his duties as a biographer. He writes, he tells us, imagining free improvisers looking over his shoulder.

As the translator of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* explains:

Every translation must fit one world inside another, but not every work to be translated has been shaped by emphatic opposition to the world into which it must be fitted.

This is the orientation of the free improvisers (to the act of improvising itself not the recording) and of Adorno (to the work and not to the reader), and both can be seen as a resistance to commodity status. This task is Watson's also, to fit the free improvisational moment into a biography, into record appreciation, and to re-orient it towards his readers – in particular the free-improvising community, whose story he tells.

Gavin Bryars is an interesting voice within this book. This is not, as Watson argues, despite his defection from Free Improvisation to Composition but because of it. Watson's question, 'It's as if you and Derek worked out your musical philosophies by contradicting each other', briefly holds out the possibility of a Schoenberg/ Stravinsky face off in the manner of Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music*. But it is not to be, Watson has used this tactic before and anyway, for Watson's assumed audience of pro-Bailey free improvisers, Bryars is persona non grata. Instead, Watson takes repeated stabs at Bryars for accepting commissions as if Adorno had not noted that subsidy and patronage are a feature of everything labelled esoteric under commodity culture, as if 'earning it's own living' proved anything aesthetically, as if improv had never received Arts Council grants. Tellingly, Bryars' response to this is to continue to insist on the contradictions between Improvisation and Composition, refusing to be summed up as the anti-Bailey and thus blocked (very Bailey). He plays scissors to Watson's paper.

Watson is loyal to Bailey, but once we've moved on from Bailey's early years, from the jobbing danceband musician, from the glory days of the Joseph Holbrooke Trio (founded by Bailey with bassist Bryars and drummer Tony Oxley), the story is over. Even Bailey is ambivalent about the improv 'scene' and its continued survival. Watson consistently fails to interrogate practices within this story of free improvisation that contradict Bailey's vision. Improv's bruising encounters with dada/fluxus/performance art that disrupt the (for Bailey) necessary co-operation between players, the practice of improvising to recordings of other improvisers, the 'contribution' of 'bargers-in', and lastly the status of recordings themselves are all passed over. As a paid 'reviewer of records' and yet despiser of commodities, this last one at least should interest Watson. But these are merely listed: gigs you should've been at; CDs you should own (and simultaneously should not, or maybe could on auratic vinyl); and, as if performances were not commodities, yearly shareholders reports from

Company Week, the annual London improv event Bailey helped run.

The most organised contradiction is mentioned obliquely, namely the 31st March 1984 Association of Improvised Music (AIM) Forum, *Improvisation: History, Directions and Practice*. At this event, practising improvisers Eddie Prévost and Andy Hamilton held that habits and conventions attending the performance become idiom (just as Adorno argues that form is sedimented content). More seriously, for Prévost, Bailey's *Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music* had erroneously tried to make non-idiomatic improvisation an 'agreed objective'. This is the ideological fault line of the scene, and Watson knows it, having been 'the subject of a furious public dressing down' by Evan Parker (uninterviewed – the commissar vanishes) for criticising the use of tonal material in an improvisation. With a charming rhetorical flourish, Watson affects to be so disgusted by these refusals to accept free improvisation's modernist agenda (this Stravinskyite 'self-conscious revocation of musical knowledge' as Adorno might say) that he is unable to review the Company Week featuring these key AIM musicians – many of whom have now gone on to become the mainstream of free improvisation.

[IMAGE]

Image: Derek Bailey

To fit the worlds of free improvisation and book publishing inside each other Watson has relied on a readymade structure of biography, and in particular Frank Kofsky's *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, but in its re-issued and zombieified form: *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*. As with improvisation, the first cut is the deepest. Just compare these titles and Watson's title, they're a fair summary of what lies within and the historical tendency to atomisation. In the later book, the chapter on the economic injustices of the jazz industry has been hived off into a separate (and thinner) book *Black Music, White Business*, and replaced by the (personality) cult of John Coltrane. As Kofsky, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Francis Newton (E.J. Hobsbawm) noted, other than Bill Evans (and perhaps Bix Beiderbecke), innovation in Jazz is down to black people, but the business and critical apparatus of it remained in the hands of whites. Kofsky uses Marx and Engels' dictum that, under capitalism, ideologically all things appear 'upside down as in a camera obscura' to explain the inversion of the role of Black musicians within Jazz – both critically and economically. Indeed Pathfinder Press have taken this to heart and bound my copy of *Black Nationalism* upside down within its cover.

Let us take this insight further and apply it to free improvisation – let us invert that moment.

The moment of free improvisation is precisely and only free because the rest of time and volition is in chains. The autonomy of free improv is created by the exclusion of idiomatic music, conventional moments of musical signification, theory, levels of language other than musical ones. A lot of baby has been thrown out with the bathwater to make these moments possible – and if Adorno is correct, like the 1910 revolutionary art movements, free improvisers are experiencing not new freedoms but more things 'constantly pulled into the vortex of the newly taboo'. In this light, the Association of Improvised Music's objections to Bailey's exclusion of the idiomatic become an understandable (if futile), defence of the scene.

Yet, according to Christophe Mencke, in his *The Sovereignty of Art*, these discourses smuggle within them Adorno's antinomy of aesthetic semblance: not only does 'form deform', suicide by music's own laws of development, by its autonomy – but also music has a real social effect deriving from its truth value – it is sovereign.

There is a duality to the modern view of aesthetic experience (and thus to modern views on music). On the one hand it is one discourse among many, adhering to its own internal logic, possessing no negating or affirming powers over non-aesthetic experience (and vice versa) – autonomy; on the other, it exceeds the bounds of its discourse, it is granted not just a relative validity within its own discourse but an absolute one – it becomes ‘the vehicle for an experientially enacted critique of reason’ – sovereignty. On the face of it both cannot hold simultaneously, yet Adorno links these by the Kantian concept of antinomy, arguing that for a full understanding both must be present and neither must be sacrificed to the other.

Once upon a time, music was held to be autonomous, its own discourse within the field of reason governed by its own laws and not determined by some other realm, economics for instance. However, these laws gradually ruled more and more things taboo until what was easy and natural had to be abandoned and replaced with what was difficult and unpleasant. This trajectory can be found in Adorno’s *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Witold Gombrowicz’s *Diaries* and Leroi Jones’ *Blues People*. It cost classical music in Europe not just its audience but also its social effect, this music ceased to be at the heart of the culture, just as BeBop did.

However, it is also claimed that music and art are sovereign, that they can exceed the bounds that reason sets them, they can be transcendent, and make the infinite present. Music says ‘we’, even when it is irredeemably difficult and unpopular, due to its cultic origin, as does art. This is the revolutionary potential of art and music, not as propaganda or recruiting sergeant but as offering a vision of a re-centred totality. Yet this has become a difficult claim to make.

[IMAGE]

Image: Derek Bailey - Improvisation

The problem for people engaged in making radical claims for music is that autonomy and sovereignty are now seen as opposites that annihilate rather than as an antinomy, and that the critical terms themselves have fallen into disuse and are viewed only as nostalgia. The intellectual position of the arts (and in particular music) has fallen; nowadays we are merely on our knees before them as irrationality, without any understanding of how we got there.

What can be done when almost everything has been pulled into the void? Derek Bailey was a fan of Sam Beckett, as was Adorno who wished to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory* to him. Adorno’s discussion of Beckett and of the new sees him as the key to (then – 1969) contemporary anti-art in ‘culling aesthetic meaning from the radical negation of aesthetic meaning’, making an art ‘trying to pull itself free from its own concept as from a shackle.’ Content becomes opaque, becomes a critique of the omnipotence of reason, interpretation must be refused. This fits in all too well with Bailey’s resistant reticence on free improvisation (stone to scissors), but also leads to a monolithic inability to move beyond it.

If music is no longer its own realm or ‘secret regent’ of this one, one consequence is that, as Jacques Attali predicted in *Noise*, it must be made to do work, or pressed into service: as Ben Watson says, ‘Free music is the song of the New International’.

There is in Adorno’s writings a tendency to make aesthetic negativity into social critique (and this is why we like him, despite his writing like ‘a coroner performing an autopsy’). When reading Watson’s ‘Music, Violence, Truth’, an account of the debates surrounding radical music post 9/11, we see how heteronymously overburdened aesthetic negativity has become. For Watson ‘The crucial point is that art is an attempt to tell the truth about the world, not simply to provide baubles for those in the comfort zone of privilege.’ Surely art must be capable of doing other things as well. Indeed this pamphlet gives us a vision of this radical art in the fleshy golem that Ben Watson rhetorically constructs out of just the right proportions of Coltrane, Hendrix, Tony Oxley and Cecil Taylor – a piece of paper on the truth

value of art in its mouth (Emeth). Yet to construct this Frankenstein requires violence, witness, 'Varese brought the noise of sirens and bombs into music in the 1920s, a response to the terrors of World War 1.' This distorts Varese's real and formal motivation – the need for new musical instruments.

Watson ostentatiously celebrates the contradictory, unfinished nature of his text, pleading the pressure of biography but knowing that he smuggles his musical marxism within it. His method is more Benjamin than Adorno, he needs this conversation between his marxism and his music to come alive. However, in the absence of dialectic to do some housekeeping, the real contradictions get lost in the clutter of allegedly auratic stockpiled free improv commodities.

The very productivity of improvisation is a problem. The early theatrical improvisers, in particular Keith Johnstone, emphasised its pedagogic value in awakening children's imaginations that had been blunted by education. Yet when they set up performing ensembles they chose ambivalent names such as Theatre Machine. Improvisation leads to an embarrassment of riches, and both derive from its automatism. Critically, for the logic of capitalism, what it generates are new things. If capitalism has already appropriated the irrationality of music, it has also appropriated this productivity: *Kid A*, *Big Brother*, *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned* and indeed jazz itself. Maybe Adorno is just clearer about this than we permit ourselves to be.

Watson is right, in his introduction and text, to attempt to forestall the 'gruesomely predictable' objections repeated here, and yet these cracks reach the surface because they arise from contradictions between free improvisation itself and the world as a whole. If Watson does not cast a string of pearls out of this grit with a single blow of his magic hammer it is because the material doesn't play that way. Difficulty is so valuable it must sometimes be smuggled.

How does modern aesthetic reflection deal with this situation? Dan Fox's excellent appreciation of Derek Bailey in *frieze* magazine (March 2006) notes the 'romantic excitement' generated about free improvisation's 'uncommodifiability', but he prefers to view it as functioning as a 'kind of relational aesthetics for music'. Freed from notions of the antinomy of autonomy and sovereignty, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics itself functions by a panglossian inversion of Gombrowicz's notion of interpersonal form – 'for Gombrowicz, our "form" is merely a relational property, linking us with those who reify us by the way they see us, to borrow a Sartrean terminology...' Yet, for Gombrowicz this 'form deforms', the form imposed on us by others has to be struggled against. His *Diaries* and his appreciation of Sandaeur, the critic who defended his reputation in Poland, testify to this at length. For Bourriaud the interpersonal form is the substrate of art. Like AIM's admission of tonal material and idiomatic improvisation, this is a strategy for continuing the game, but with no autonomy to move it forward, there's no development. 'The new is no longer a criterion...' My editor asks me how different is this from Beckett's 'nothing new'? I don't know, yet. The one may simply be the critical apparatus for the other.

The theatrical improvisers teach us that by reincorporation, by 'tying up loose ends', the story is brought to a close. One ending suggests itself: 'Derek Bailey is dead and the story of free improvisation is over', but this does not do justice to the energies emerging from the improvisational moment. Instead I return to our huge upset wrestler. He removes his top hat (didn't I mention that?), and pulls from it... a marvellous thing... something gritty... it is a copy of *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* by Ben Watson.

Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, Verso, 2004

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