

contact

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MALCOLM BARRY

Would you let your daughter marry an improviser? When the dots are away the psyche will play and one certain aspect of total improvisation is that if you have ears to hear you will have a better idea of the personalities playing this type of music, having listened to their spontaneous creation/performance, than of the personalities of musicians playing a notated score having listened to *their* performance.

So to make a record of improvised music is in itself an act of personal as well as musical courage. When the music is as uncompromising as that of Company the courage is multiplied. And when the uncompromising musicians produce and market the records themselves with the aim of keeping their records available (not adopting what they see as an artificial marketing procedure of deleting and reissuing) their faith in their own path compels a certain amount of admiration.

It is significant of something in today's music that when Brian Eno produced seven records on his Obscure label there was a fair amount of critical attention, but that the achievement of saxophonist Evan Parker and guitarist Derek Bailey, in setting up Incus Records and producing 23 recordings in six years, has gone largely unnoticed. Eno started from a successful position in the commercial field and was able to negotiate distribution with a large recording organisation. Incus, founded in 1970 on the basis of self-determination for improvising musicians, is run in all aspects by Parker and Bailey only, and has had neither of Eno's advantages.

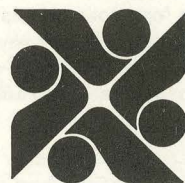
The label is one sign of the flurry of activity at the improvising (only possible?) end of what used to be called (when we had one) the avantgarde; the magazine *Musics* is another and there are many links and personalities in common. The records produced by Incus have concentrated largely on improvisation, whether solo (percussion, saxophones or guitar) or group, though there have also been big band compositions such as Barry Guy's *Ode* and Kenny Wheeler's *Song for Someone*. Given the emphasis of the record business on marketing and distribution, Parker and Bailey can be proud of their achievement.

Of particular interest are the two recent recordings by the ad hoc arrangement of musicians called Company. They represent what some of the musicians of 'the pool' were playing in May and August 1976. Only a small portion of the possibilities of the company are revealed, for this Company includes, as well as the musicians on these discs, Lol Coxhill, of Festival Hall fame (outside), Leo Smith, a phenomenal American trumpeter, Paul Rutherford, 'of

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INCUS RECORDS

INCUS RECORDS / COMPATIBLE RECORDING AND PUBLISHING LTD. is a self-managed company owned and operated by musicians. The company was founded in 1970, motivated partly by the ideology of self-determination and partly by the absence of an acceptable alternative.

The spectrum of music issued has been broad, but the musical policy of the company is centred on improvisation.

Prior to 1970 the innovative musician had a relationship with the British record industry that could only be improved on. To be offered any chance to make a record at all was already a great favour and somehow to question the economics (fees, royalties, publishing) would certainly have been deemed ungrateful. A few records were made (AMM, SME, Tony Oxley groups), but by now they are all without exception deleted and to be found only through the specialist dealers' network for second-hand records.

An important function for records of improvised music is to build up a system of documentation that can be approached chronologically by anyone sufficiently interested. When records are deleted almost as soon as they have been issued, as was the case prior to 1970 (for tax-loss reasons by the major companies or hit and run tactics by the one-man companies), this cumulative effect of long-term documentation is lost.

INCUS aims to keep records permanently available rather than adopt the artificial marketing procedure of deleting and re-issuing, although from time to time financial limitations mean that records are temporarily out of print.

Records are distributed by mail-order and through specialist wholesalers and dealers in various countries.

INCUS 1	'The Topography of the Lungs' Evan Parker – saxophones, Derek Bailey – guitar, Han Bennink – percussion.	INCUS 14	'Evan Parker and Paul Lytton at the Unity Theatre' Evan Parker – saxophones, Paul Lytton – percussion and live electronics.
INCUS 2	'Derek Bailey Solo' Derek Bailey – guitar. <i>Reprinting.</i>	INCUS 15	'Tea time' Steve Beresford – piano, John Russell – guitar, Nigel Coombes – violin, Garry Todd – saxophone, Dave Solomon – percussion.
INCUS 3/4	'Iskra 1903' Paul Rutherford – trombone, Derek Bailey – guitar, Barry Guy – bass.	INCUS 16	'London Concert' Derek Bailey – guitar, Evan Parker – saxophone.
INCUS 5	'Collective Calls (Urban) (Two Microphones)' Evan Parker – saxophones etc., Paul Lytton – percussion and electronics.	INCUS 17	'Music Improvisation Company 1968–70' Derek Bailey – guitar, Hugh Davies – live electronics and Hammond organ, Jamie Muir – percussion, Evan Parker – soprano saxophone and amplified autoharp.
INCUS 6/7	'Ode for Jazz Orchestra' Barry Guy, London Jazz Composer's Orchestra.	INCUS 18	'February Papers' Tony Oxley – percussion, with Barry Guy – bass, Ian Brighton – guitar, Philipp Wachsmann – violin, David Bourne – violin.
INCUS 8	'Tony Oxley' Percussion solos; quartet with Bailey, Parker and Rutherford; sextet with Holdsworth, Riley, Guy, Parker and Rutherford.	INCUS 19	'Saxophone Solos' Evan Parker – soprano saxophone.
INCUS 9	'Selections from live performances at Verity's place' Derek Bailey – guitar, Han Bennink – percussion.	INCUS 20	'Duo' Derek Bailey – guitar, Tristan Honsinger – cello.
INCUS 10	'Song for Someone' Kenny Wheeler compositions for big band with Oxley, Bailey, Parker, Griffiths, Osborne, Taylor.	INCUS 21	First 'COMPANY' recording. Maarten van Regteren Altena, Tristan Honsinger, Evan Parker, Derek Bailey.
INCUS 11	'Balance' Frank Perry – percussion, Philipp Wachsmann – violin, Ian Brighton – guitar, Radu Malfatti – trombone, Colin Wood – cello.	INCUS 22	'Statements V–XI' Barry Guy – solo improvisations on bass and violone.
INCUS 12	'Lot 74 – Solo Improvisations' Derek Bailey – guitar.	INCUS 23	Second 'COMPANY' recording. Evan Parker, Anthony Braxton, Derek Bailey.
INCUS 13	'Synopsis' Howard Riley – piano, Barry Guy – bass, Tony Oxley – percussion and amplified percussion.		

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whom no more...', Steve Beresford, a virtuoso on toy piano, and Han Bennink, described by John Fordham as having something of 'the precision of a jeweller and the mayhem of a demolition squad after closing time'.¹

That these records represent only a fraction of the possibilities of such a wide-ranging group is understandable. A more specific limitation concerns the nature of records of improvisation in themselves. Improvisation is about live spontaneous performance and interaction between musicians, and, in the best examples, concerns and involves an audience. Recorded improvisation cannot involve an audience, while any improvisation heard repeatedly changes in the ears of the listener into a composition: different standards apply and different strengths and weaknesses are thrust to the attention. Considered as composition, the music on these records has many interesting moments, but the necessary coherence is lacking. So the records have to be accepted as improvisations, i.e. on their own terms. It has to be remembered that different ears are needed to listen successfully to improvisation. The ears needed for these records should have the virtues of receptivity (to new sounds produced by conventional instruments and to a variety of different backgrounds coming through in the playing) and trust (that the free form elements of these 'pieces' are intended to, and may, communicate something, if only their free form elements).

The first record contains four tracks: 'No South', 'No North', 'No East' and 'No West'. Parker and Bailey are joined by Tristan Honsinger on cello and Maarten van Regteren Altena on bass; the four tracks represent ten to twelve minutes each using the four possible trio combinations. Each track is a selection from a 25-minute improvisation, the selection being made 'with the permission of the other players' by Bailey, who chose 'that part of the music which seemed to me to be most characteristic of improvisation and which best revealed the qualities which can be found only in improvisation'.

Given that it's a thin but essential line between recorded improvisation and composition, and the necessity to preserve the character of the improvisation, Bailey has done, by and large, a good job. Paradoxically, in this spontaneous and immediate music, the past history of the musical personality is very apparent, and Parker's post-'bebop and faster' blowing and Bailey's jazz and even blues orientation, with bending of intervals (particularly the minor third), contrast nicely with Honsinger's virtuosic but straight cello playing, as fast as Parker's sax but from a different world. This contrast and interaction is one of the most communicable and enjoyable parts of the record.

Other satisfying sections are those, especially on side 1, where ideas, however fragmentary, are taken up and developed, however briefly. This listener, at least, is left wanting to hear these musicians interact more positively over a greater period of time, i.e. to create something they will hang on to. The negative aspect of this comes in 'No East', a very frantic piece that leaves little breathing space: humans need to grow and so do their ideas; if they're not given enough air they won't.

Perhaps, in whetting the appetite, the record has achieved one of its purposes, but the format — equal time for all, a fine liberal idea — becomes a rigid limitation. Hoist by his own petard of permissiveness, Bailey is presenting a shop window, doubtless necessary but oddly in conflict both with the nature of improvisation and Incus's avowed aims. As a shop window, though, it's good.

Company 2 is rather different. Parker and Bailey are joined by Anthony Braxton on saxophones and clarinets. The record contains five pieces of varying length in which ideas are expanded in a variety of contexts. 'Braxton, in any other circumstances but the doggedly democratic new music, would be regarded as a "star"' writes John Fordham;² listening to his virtuoso playing on a variety of reed instruments, with Bailey on guitars and Parker on soprano and tenor saxes, one can hear why he has been described as the new Ornette Coleman.

This is not a record to win converts, however, for the ideas that are expanded are timbral and technical rather than more traditionally motivic or rhythmic. Playing techniques are pushed towards the limit. The disapprovers who find Webern 'cough and spit' music and Cecil Taylor incomprehensible are not going to find much joy here. Perhaps they aren't supposed to, for the world of improvising musicians is a shade introverted and this

readily emerges in *Company 2*. That said, Incus is a brave venture and the records of *Company* show that there is some fine music waiting to emerge from the obscurity to which it is banished by the non-attention of the media. I cannot help wondering, however, at what point somebody sympathetic to the music and the musicians, when confronted with this music, is going to ask a very important question: 'For whom?'

NOTES:

¹ John Fordham, 'Improvisation Incorporated', *Time Out*, No. 373 (May 20-26, 1977), p. 10.

² *Ibid.*