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# Howard Riley and 'Non-Jazz'

## 1. JAZZ?

JAZZ, THEY SAY, is where you find it. Sometimes, however, 'they' decide on the time and place of discovery, and in so doing set highly dubious limits on various types of music. It would be unrealistic to deny that labels are needed to describe music, if only for purposes of verbal identification and communication, but when the label bulks larger than the music, such description and classification becomes redundant in terms of its original purpose and assumes a life of its own.

This has been a perennial problem of jazz. Where does it stop? It could be defined racially, in which case a large amount of this century's music that normally goes under that name would be excluded. Such identification also smacks of snobbery: implicit within it is the idea that black music has been ruthlessly exploited by commercialising whites. So, indeed, it has. Much the same, however, happens with any 'mass' form: witness the appalling state of 'folk' music today. Blacks, too, have been adept at exploiting the label of 'jazz': Duke Ellington, surely the most successful 20th century American musician, had a relationship with jazz which was, to say the least, opaque.

Jazz could, perhaps, be defined in terms of aspects of style, and this is the most widespread description. 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got swing'<sup>1</sup> is, possibly, still the criterion for the army of music lovers who believe their favourite music is jazz. Swing, however, is notoriously difficult to define, *pace* Andre Hodeir.<sup>2</sup> Improvisation is, perhaps, the next favoured means of identifying jazz. This would exclude much 'big band' jazz and, unless qualified, include much 'experimental' and even 'avantgarde' music (terms as used by Michael Nyman).<sup>3</sup> 'Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Red Hot Stompers' is a nice thought, but unlikely to be realised.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the minutiae of scale formation and characteristics (which, in the plethora of scale systems in the world, are unlikely to be unique) the one other possibility of surface-level identification of jazz rests on the instrumentation of the ensemble. But while jazz has certainly developed some unique blowing techniques, these could not collectively define the area of the music. Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* shares much of the instrumentation of one type of jazz, but bears very little relationship to jazz music, however that may eventually be defined.

Despite the difficulties of defining by style, this is the principal means used by the 'they' referred to at the beginning of this article. Astonishing though this may be, at the time of writing Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Howard Riley and Paul Rutherford are among those officially not regarded as jazz musicians by the BBC. That is, they will not be played on the radio programmes 'Jazz in Britain' or 'Jazz Club'. It would appear that they are too 'far out', and thus more suitable for the limbo of 'Music in our Time'.

While these musicians freely admit to being difficult to categorise (which might have been thought grounds for congratulation rather than penalty), they would all regard themselves as deriving most of their attitudes towards music from jazz: *their* definition of jazz seems to be aesthetic rather than racial or purely musical. Jazz is, for them, not a style but an attitude of creativity and spontaneity towards the performance, and this, because of the directions of their spontaneous and imaginative music, places these musicians beyond the boundaries of the official definition. Much heat has been generated in the last 50 years by the lack of cultural freedom in the Soviet Union. In that country, however, there is an officially defined policy which is clear in both its theoretical and practical bases.<sup>5</sup> Here there is the BBC, which, until recently, had a monopoly of the broadcast medium most suited to the propagation of music. In the name of democracy or liberalism there is no clearly defined policy, but a pragmatic bureaucracy which is not necessarily the most helpful background for musicians, especially those on the wrong side of the swing of the pendulum.

The question of definition has been laboured to this point in order to show the difficulties that such vagueness can cause: it demonstrates a perennial problem concerning definition itself and not only that of jazz. Should definition be retrospective (the art of consulting a dictionary, for example) and therefore passive (in the case of jazz this would include the racial and/or musical categories of definition), or should it be active (i.e. the 'if I say it's jazz, it's jazz' of the musician involved in the field)? The answer is, presumably, to attempt a synthesis.

Suddenly to be told 'it's not jazz', and therefore that a certain channel of exposure is closed, must have an effect on such musicians: it is not an enviable position, however resilient they may be. Resilience is a



necessary condition for any English composer/performer, and especially for those involved in jazz, however it may be defined: even those 'trad jazz' musicians unlucky enough not to have been called Ball, Bilk, Colyer, Lightfoot or Lyttleton seem to be having a lean time. Being in jazz is, therefore, a problem: coming out of it, especially when the journey comes as a surprise, must be an even greater one.

These problems have their repercussions, not only musically but also in the development of social and political attitudes. Without necessarily developing an avowed stand in the manner of Cornelius Cardew, it would be difficult for such musicians to resist conclusions as to the nature of the values of the society in which they are working. These values affect not only one channel of communication with a possible audience (radio), but also the other insituate medium, records.

The Beatles and such West Coast rock groups as Grateful Dead provided a much needed jolt to the recording industry in the 1960s. Many small studios were set up, musical and financial risks were taken, and rock went through its great creative period. The large companies, taken by surprise where they had not had the foresight to bind the musicians hand and foot, reacted to this development by agreeing to market the products of the studios and, in their own right, began to cast around for original and creative musicians. Howard Riley, for example, had two records released by CBS at about this time.

With the downturn in the economy, such frills had to be abandoned, and this group of musicians, interested in group or solo improvisation, has been forced back on its own resources. One example of this is the achievement of Incus records. Founded in 1970 by Evan Parker, Tony Oxley and Derek Bailey, by the end of 1976 it will have released 19 records of basically improvised or improvisatory music: little enough by the standards of the large companies, but remarkable for a group of people without such resources. There are other such small labels and their productions are, in many cases, well worth investigating.

It may be objected that it is hard enough for any musician to gain a hearing, and that this admittedly non-popular music should not be the subject of special pleading; there are and have been other groups of musicians in as parlous a position. While this may well be true, it is an argument to be turned on arbiters (controllers of media) rather than on fellow musicians.

Cultural decisions are an inevitable consequence of the structure of society. If a particular form of music neither makes money nor conforms to accepted patterns — if, in the case of jazz, it is 'outside the Afro-American tradition': a neat mixing of racial and musical traditions that collapses when it is considered that there cannot be many British musicians *within* such a tradition (and therefore no British jazz?) — it is incompatible with the prevailing intellectual 'hegemony'<sup>6</sup> and, consequently, will have little chance of making its way. Riley, for example, would not claim that his music is ever likely to be popular. In their continued underestimation of their audiences, however, the media rarely provide a coherent opportunity for such musicians to attract an audience, and so the extent of any popular appeal they might have is simply not known. The same is true of other 'minority' interests. While these may well be unpopular, the dictatorship of the majority ensures that the extent of their unpopularity is never known: it might be less than imagined and therefore pose a threat to the prevailing hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Access to the possibility of obtaining an audience is therefore a prominent issue with this particular group of musicians.

Without denying the difficulties of the music of, for instance, Riley (typical of this group in his untypicality and originality), it seems reasonable to expect listeners to make some effort in order to understand the aims of the musicians: enough effortless music is provided already. The difficulties of definition enable this music to be described as 'elitist' or 'specialised', whereas, in its wealth of sound, its mixture of fine technique and musical intellect at work and in its great range of possibilities, it is anything but specialised.

## 2. RILEY

Riley has worked in the London jazz field since 1967, having started his career playing in jazz clubs while still at school. He studied at the University of Wales (Bangor) and later went to Indiana University in the USA, completing his studies externally at the University of York. His academic qualifications are impressive: BA, MA, M.Mus, M.Phil. Since 1967 his work has been primarily concerned with his trio, formed with Barry Guy and Tony Oxley. The trio format and the compatibility of the musicians have enabled this group to be amongst the leaders in its particular field, concerned as these players are with group improvisation and, within that genre, with the extension of the possibilities of their respective instruments.



As if to emphasise the problematic nature of the description of their music and its transgeneric qualities, Riley, in common with other musicians involved in this area, moves easily into the 'avantgarde'. *Textures* for string quartet and *Three Fragments* for flute and piano have been performed at the Cheltenham Festival and the Purcell Room, London, respectively, while recent commissions have included two pieces for string quartet, written for the ILEA Cockpit Theatre Ensemble, and a string trio, played by the Nash Ensemble at the Greenwich Festival last June.

In the latter work, entitled *Changes*, four blocks of material are presented, viewed from different angles. Pitch and duration largely remain the same, while other features of attack and decay are altered. The processes involved seem somewhat analogous to Messiaen's expansions and contractions, although vocabulary and material are completely different. *Zeroth*, one of the quartet pieces, uses the contemporary vocabulary of sound, and shares with other new music the use of a smaller number of notes and the consequent concentration on individual note quality. The notation of Riley's compositions varies from total predetermination to the minimum of barred indication; graphics indicate improvisatory elements.

These broad characteristics — concentration on individual sound, a wide range of notation and an interest in process — extend into Riley's jazz-based work. Many of his pieces have been performed by the London Jazz Composers Orchestra, a line-up which may include cellos and synthesizer as well as the more traditional instruments. One work written for the LJCO, *Two Designs*, presents quiet, sustained material at the outset which returns, modified, at the end, although it is present to a greater or lesser degree throughout the work. It provides a background for the solo and group improvisations of the piece, sections in which the individual musician becomes of paramount importance. It is as individual musician and as member of a small group that the improviser/performer/composer comes into his own. Riley now performs both as solo pianist and as trio leader, and the contrasts of the musical personality revealed by recent recordings of him in these contexts are as interesting as the similarities.

It was, I think, Wilfrid Mellers who commented that as the works of the avantgarde became more and more organised they *sounded* more and more improvisatory. This paradox is supported by another. Contemporary composition modifies our ideas about the sound of improvisation so much that the most improvised music may sound like composition. Riley may believe that he provides merely a framework in the trio pieces, as indeed he does, and that ideas from improvisation may influence ideas in composition without the two ever merging, but the simplicity of his framework in *Mandrel*, the first track on the record *Synopsis*, ensures that the track is heard as a composition, and a well organised one.

This is both a tribute to the musicality of the players, who throughout their careers have avoided the degeneration into the nursery floor of 'free-form bore-ins', and a reflection of the nature of performance and particularly recorded performance. Recording is antagonistic to the nature of improvised music, both because of the nature of the studio which renders spontaneity unlikely, and because the improvisation frozen for posterity is no longer improvisation. One recording, however, is better than nothing, even if Cage's famous bromide on composition, performance and listening should be modified to take account of recording — and not only for improvised music: every recording of a totally-notated composition is, of course, only a version.

The simplicity of the compositional ideas of *Mandrel* (Riley usually provides a graphic/verbal/musical framework for these trios) conceals another aspect which may or may not be dangerous for the listener. Only three pitches are indicated during the course of the work, and they are notated and presented unambiguously. In the nature of things, the listener will seize on every recurrence of these pitches during the piece and possibly throughout the record. This is perhaps an excellent way of becoming acquainted with the pieces, but it would, equally, perhaps be a mistake to imagine that Riley is primarily concerned with this semitonal relationship. The shift of a semitone, however, seems to be a powerful impetus for Riley, recurring throughout *Synopsis* as it does, and it is also very prominent in the pieces on Riley's solo album *Singleness*.

For other, less motivically-minded listeners, interest in the trio's pieces might well centre on the extension of instrumental techniques and the actual wealth of sounds employed by the musicians, principally achieved by the use of electronics. Oxley and Guy have vastly extended the range of percussion and double bass respectively, Oxley in the creation of new sounds and the merging of acoustic and electronic sound, Guy in the modification of the apparently unpromising tone of the bass. Riley's interest in the use of electronics began with his wish to expose sounds from the interior of the piano, sounds too quiet for normal hearing. Even with the range of possibilities available, his use of electronics mainly *modifies* rather than creates, although the very effective *Inside* (on the album *Singleness*) is an exception.

The principal means of modification that Riley uses is the ring modulator, and this circuit, which produces the sum and difference tones of two incoming frequencies, forms the basis of a box devised by Riley and an engineer from Liverpool which is actuated by foot pedals. This differs from the conventional synthesizer in that it eliminates the need for 'patching', a laborious business which militates against ease in performance.



The interest in the act of performance, symbolised by this development, has remained paramount with Riley, the trio and this area of music. Riley, for example, provided a jazz analogue of Stockhausen's *Solo* in his 'Music in our Time' broadcast last January by means of a live reaction to his own improvisation; the result was a duo-piano piece played by one pianist. The aspect of *playing* musical instruments — that is, of using a technique that it has taken years of training to acquire (and usually years of conventional training, as in the cases of, for instance, Paul Rutherford and Barry Guy) — to produce sounds is a natural complement to being concerned with music as sound. In the 1960s Cardew was complaining of 'disastrously under-stimulated performances of contemporary music',<sup>8</sup> and this problem is still current in the avantgarde field. It achieves a solution in the area of jazz under discussion, however, and, in addition to this, Riley's clear formal structures are an excellent bonus.

As already mentioned, Riley and his colleagues would define jazz not as a style but as a creative attitude. If jazz is where you find it, it is to be searched for in the musician. The premises of jazz are creativity in the performing musician, spontaneity as a consequence of this and individuality. The received wisdom of our time, the hegemony of taste, decrees that a particular style is forced to become a restriction, so that a particular manifestation may be labelled with ease, consigned to its appropriate enclosure and, possibly, forgotten.<sup>9</sup>

Jazz as an attitude cannot so easily be described. Indeed, it is easier to point to its absence rather than to its presence. It does, however, highlight a problem of contemporary music in the areas of both jazz and 'straight' music. A complement of the under-stimulated performances of contemporary music mentioned above is a lack of emotional projection: this projection is an integral part of jazz. The introspective or even neurotic character of much avantgarde (and experimental) music, depending on obsessive repetition or some aspect of mysticism, contains, however, a wealth of ideas which are, frankly, absent from jazz. There is a dearth of ideas in jazz and consequently a dearth of individuality. Jazz stands in danger of denying its own essence. To synthesise the projection and playing aspects of jazz and the rigour of compositional thought to be found in contemporary 'straight' music seems to be the aim of Riley and his colleagues, and the greater flexibility of jazz, however ossified as a totality, ensures that jazzmen have a greater chance of succeeding in this than those whose musical experience is wholly 'straight'.

This synthesising quality is important, however, both for musicians and listeners. Those whose listening experience is confined to one field are not likely to be the most immediately sympathetic, although they probably stand in greatest need of liberation. This music can be an act of conscious emancipation from the Muzak of our Time if approached sympathetically.

This is not to say that Riley, for example, always succeeds in his aims, or that there are not dangers in the approach. There are, perhaps, too many pointers in *Mandrel* and *Sirens* from the album *Synopsis*; it's almost as though he cares too much about his audience. In *Mandrel*, within a wealth of sound and expectations that are almost entirely textural, it is a little disconcerting to hear tiny motives used almost melodically, referring back to the opening G-A flat relationship. *Sirens* depends a little predictably on the opening announcement returning at the close: ternary design is not necessarily the most appropriate format for group improvisation. Riley also employs a loose recapitulatory framework in his solo piano album, *Singleness*, but here, however, it is not as intrusive. The second side of *Synopsis* is free of these 'interpolations', and the restraint of *Ingot*, the final track, is particularly rewarding.

*Singleness* begins almost conventionally with *Imprint 8*, a heavy chordal piece recognisably related to traditional procedures. From this point the music moves away from conventions, although the two-part melody and accompaniment texture is never far away, whether in the spare-textured *Item* and *Gypsum* or in the excellent use of electronics in *Inside*. Within this two-part style, Riley's playing is very ornate, with cascades of notes decorating each verticalisation. This style of playing culminates in the Cecil Taylor-like *Glancing* and the arpeggiated opening of *Ice*, which resembles a distorted version of the opening of Bach's First Cello Suite.

The most exploratory piece in terms of sonority is the final track, *Chained Melody*, which opens with electronic imitation of chain sounds. In this the piano texture is at its most fragmented, but even here Riley glances back over his shoulder, for the piece falls into a clear ternary division. On the one hand this is solicitude for his audience, on the other it could be heard as a regrettable lapse. This unevenness is, however, a sign of strength, for Riley has obviously much creative potential to be exploited.

Riley stands as a paradigm of this group of musicians. If they were given the chance of obtaining an audience, it might be possible to speak of another 20th century musical renaissance in this country, this time in the field of jazz. Riley, however, also stands as a paradigm in his comparative neglect. Most of his performances are in Europe, and during the 1976-77 season he will be in the USA. A similar story could be told of the other musicians in this field, *pace* Incus, Canon and Obscure records. It is to be hoped that the



apparently official attitude that originality is a disqualification for access to the media will be modified.

'They' are making jazz very hard to find.

NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Attributed to Louis Armstrong.
- <sup>2</sup> Andre Hodeir, *Jazz, its evolution and essence* (London: Gollancz, 1956).
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974).
- <sup>4</sup> See *Melody Maker* (April 22, 1976) supplement on the 'avantgarde', in which Stockhausen speaks of his attitude to rock music.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism* (London: MacMillan, 1973).
- <sup>6</sup> The concept of hegemony — the intellectual and cultural complement to the Marxist theory of the State — was developed by Antonion Gramsci in his *Lettere dal carcere* ('Letters from Prison'). See, for example, Giuseppe Fiori, trans. Tom Nairn (1970), *Antonio Gramsci* (London: NLB, 1975), pp. 239-245.
- <sup>7</sup> For an example of the prevailing hegemony in music, see Hans Keller, 'Music 1975', *The New Review*, Vol.2, No. 24 (March 1976), pp. 17-53.
- <sup>8</sup> Cornelius Cardew, *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns* (London: Hinrichsen, 1962), notes to the performer.
- <sup>9</sup> C.f. the virtue of clarity demanded by both the philosophical and educational systems, which is discussed in Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. xiii.
- <sup>10</sup> In jazz the 'interpreter' is absent: the composer and performer are often bedevilled by the interpreter and his 're-creative', i.e. second-level, function.

DISCOGRAPHY

COMPOSITION		DATE OF RECORDING	
<i>Dejeuner sur l'herbe</i>	New Jazz Orchestra	Verve VLP 4236	1968
PERFORMANCE			
<i>Ode</i>	with London Jazz Composers Orchestra	Incus 6/7	1972
<i>Tony Oxley</i>	with Tony Oxley	Incus 8	1972
COMPOSITION/IMPROVISATION/PERFORMANCE			
<i>Discussions</i>	Howard Riley Trio	Opportunity 2500	1967
<i>Angle</i>	Howard Riley Trio	CBS Realm 52669	1968
<i>The Day will Come</i>	Howard Riley Trio	CBS 64077	1970
<i>Flight</i>	Howard Riley Trio	Turtle 301	1971
<i>Solo Imprints</i>	Howard Riley (solo piano)	Jaguar CS1	1972
<i>Synopsis</i>	Howard Riley Trio	Incus 13	1973
<i>Singleness</i>	Howard Riley (solo piano)	Canon 5967	1974