

## Ezz-thetics

a column by  
Stuart Broomer

John Butcher is a musician of a special breadth and vision. Over the past thirty years, he has conducted a particularly acute investigation of tenor and soprano saxophone sonics and, more to the point, their potential for meaning on any number of levels. He has explored circular breathing, false fingerings and extraordinary control of embouchure to develop layers of densely textured, shifting sounds, often doing for long tones and layers what Evan Parker did first for simultaneous lines. Butcher has also expanded the saxophone with amplification, including feedback, and explored hyper-resonant environments, extending the range of his richly layered, meditative improvisations to include architectural, geological and spatial partners: e.g., an oya stone mine and the 380 foot high gasometer in Oberhausen, Germany (*The Geometry of Sentiment* [Emanen, 2007]); a mausoleum, a reservoir, a cave and an underground fuel storage tank (*Resonant Spaces* [Confront, 2008]).

Butcher developed his music within the context of European (often specifically English) free improvisation, from early work with John Stevens' Spontaneous Music Ensemble to relatively recent work with AMM and a host of partnerships in between, perhaps most notably Phil Durrant, Chris Burn, Rhodri Davies, Gino Robair and the groups News from the Shed, Polwechsel and A Contest of Pleasures. Four recent CDs present Butcher in diverse settings that present opportunities to interact with contrasting collaborators and sometimes distinctly different approaches to collective improvisation, at times returning the saxophone to its specific and hallowed nest in free jazz.

A few years ago, Butcher wrote a piece called "Freedom and Sound: This time it's personal" (<http://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD35/PoD35Butcher.html>) in which he objected to the use of the term "extended techniques" as if they were things to be chosen by a composer from a list rather than integral parts of an individual voice: "One wouldn't describe Jimi Hendrix's use of feedback, Son House's percussive attacks and bottleneck, or Albert Ayler's over-blowing as extended techniques. They are all an intrinsic, inseparable part of the music and a completely necessary part of the artist's sound." It's a useful list of sources – a collection of musicians of transcendent power – to keep in mind when listening to Butcher, and it emerges with particular force during some of these recordings.

In Butcher's own case, the extension of technique has become a range of sometimes unimaginable sounds and devices that are not mere sound effects but are wedded to the world, invoking the profound grind of tectonic plates, the primordial roar of great beasts, the scraped and chattered codes of insects, the secret speech of magpie and whale or wind making melody as it blows through a badly sealed window – all the intersections of elements and mechanisms. On these recent performances, there's an expanding dance between his instrument's sound reserves and more traditional musical languages. Ultimately, we listen to these recordings differently as each is shaped by different structures, different ways of conceiving improvisational relationships.

Gesture:

Butcher's duo performance with Norwegian percussionist Ståle Liavik Solberg, *So beautiful it starts to rain* (Clean Feed CF 390), might well be the most spontaneous music among these CDs. Recorded at London's Café Oto in August, 2015, it's a largely responsorial music, based in call and response, question and answer. There's a particularly open spirit of dialogue, with each afforded space to create his own music, to exchange time, to develop independently within a shared discourse rooted in gesture. Solberg has a fascination with little sounds and details, seemingly turning his cymbals into little gongs and creating sonic skeins of tapped snare and tom-tom. The spare setting dramatizes Butcher's attention to the reed, allowing the minute detail of a sound's transformation and amplification to stand out in all its remarkable detail; at other times, the percussion propels him to enter the energized forum of free jazz, lines suddenly leaping from his horn.

Other:

The earliest recording of these recent releases is *Tangle* (Fataka 14), recorded at Café Oto in February 2014, by the trio of Butcher, Thomas Lehn on analogue synthesizers and Matthew Shipp on piano. It might be described as a group operating on a principle of independent insistence. The 37-minute "Cluster" begins with Shipp declaring a series of ascending chords amidst the sound of footsteps, whether evidence of an audience or Lehn's simulation. His first determinedly electronic sound is a bit of noise that will suggest a defect in a CD or a dusty LP needle. Shipp will frequently turn to repeating patterns, usually chordal, and the combination of his formal insistence (at times it can suggest the decorous exoticism of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*) and Lehn's oscillator blasts seem to press Butcher toward a kind of liberated expressionism.

In what may be the year's most perceptive liner essay, Nate Wooley recalls a conversation once held with band-mates in which he postulated the contrasting poles of style formation, "the accretion of raw ideas and refining a very specific language." His examples of the predominance of one over the other

had been Shipp tending toward “raw accretion” and Butcher “a very specific language.” What Wooley hears here is Butcher “simply shred[ding] with a certain abandon that feels slightly unhinged at points,” and “an obvious sense of architecture in Shipp’s playing here that is shocking in its ability to structure the way we perceive the trio improvisations.” For Wooley, Lehn “can forgo the parts for the whole and create from a distant place: not transcendent or confrontational, just ... indescribable.”

What is remarkable about *Tangle* is that it isn’t exactly a “tangle”: the distinctions in the musicians’ approaches instead invite a kind of independence of listening (akin to the independence of hands and feet practiced by a trap drummer) in which we follow parts singly, in pairs and as three (or sometimes more depending on the scale of individual activity). The experience is then all the more remarkable when there is evidently intentional interaction among the parts. We’re invited to a benevolent conception of time in which it is conceived as both static and dynamic, both still and moving, like time experienced as two places at once. The final brief track is called “Tiefenschärfe” (“depth of field”), the title suggesting just how we might approach this remarkable music. Butcher’s playing at the outset is as lyrical as Stan Getz.

Genre:

While the previous CDs reflect an on-going partnership and a special event, the following CDs present Butcher playing with pre-existent groups that represent their own improvisational languages from distinct traditions.

*Trio Kimmig-Studer-Zimmerlin* is a group of virtuosic German-Swiss string players – violinist Harald Kimmig, bassist Daniel Studer and cellist Alfred Zimmerlin – who employ free improvisation to create music in a direct line of European art music, their works suggesting the high seriousness and rigorous precision of Schoenberg or Bartok conjoined to a vastly expanded rhythmic and sonic palette, whether making their strings into percussion instruments or weaving a tapestry of harmonics. At times they play at dynamic levels to challenge hearing, suggesting a distant garden’s light irrigation, articulating, perhaps, the anxious promise of silence. At times *Raw* (Leo CD LR 766), recorded in Munich in January 2015, has the emotional weight of Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*, the musicians’ focus so intense that Butcher’s long tones have passed to Zimmerlin’s cello, the thought arising of an alchemy of sound in which everything is wind, everything bowed and scraped string, as if the sounds have been aerated in a kind of organic ring-modulation. *Raw* may be the least “raw” music among Butcher’s recent recordings, possessing the structural clarity of Boulez’s Webern set for Columbia.

*Summer Skyshift* (Clean Feed CF372) documents Butcher’s 2015 meeting with Lisbon’s Red Trio at the city’s Jazz em Agosto festival. Butcher’s partnership with Red Trio was first documented on *Empire*, recorded in 2010 and released on LP by No Business. The Lisbon-based group has the instrumentation of a classic jazz piano trio and a strong connection to the free jazz continuum; however, pianist Rodrigo Pinheiro, bassist Hernani Faustino and drummer Gabriel Ferrandini combine tremendous free jazz drive with an ability to reduce the power for subtle developments of texture, whether it’s Pinheiro’s lacework keyboard flurrries, Faustino’s kalimba-like ostinatos or Ferrandini’s massed raindrop polyrhythms. In one of the music’s delicate moments, Butcher’s sound becomes so flute-like that he might be playing transverse soprano, blowing through one of the key holes.

But it’s in the free-ranging dense bustle that is this music’s lifeblood that Butcher’s extraordinary facility with multiphonics and his starkly precise articulation enter fresh territory. As a listener of a certain vintage, I once heard John Coltrane’s quintet with Pharoah Sanders when the latter was at his energized peak, finding ways to play the saxophone multiply, with simultaneous roars, wails, gasps, shrieks and intelligible lines exploding through his horn. I recall turning to see Coltrane to gauge how much was coming from his horn, only to see him striking a cowbell with a stick. The music that John Butcher plays with Red Trio approaches that divine trance. The opening piece (some forty minutes) is a multi-faceted improvisation that evolves through various stages with each member of the band assuming the lead at one time or another. It has enough energy and fury to suggest at times the billion years’ saga of life on Earth in all its multifarious forms, or, more precisely, it’s an epic of transforming energy without something so trite as a distinct subject; an incarnation of the principle of energy. On the shorter final piece, Butcher’s coiling soprano scales sing directly of Coltrane.

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