



INNER COMPASS

Solo works of John Butcher 1991-2013

Written and published by Tobias Fischer (2013)

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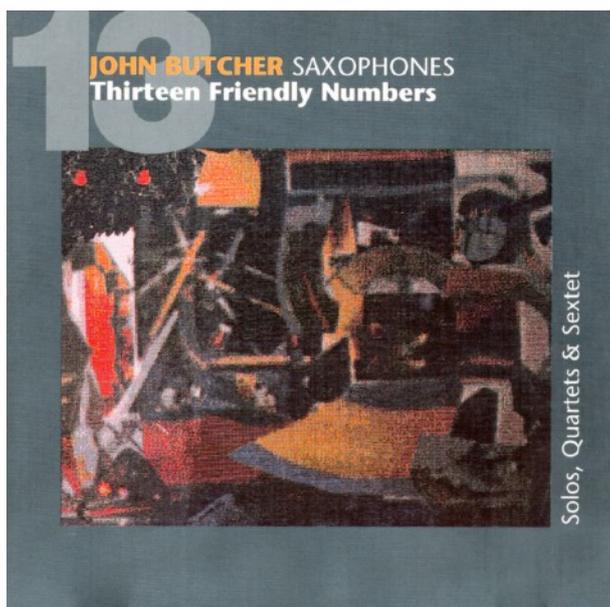
Musical careers rarely follow the perfect and regular incisions of historians and calendars. And yet, for John Butcher, the mid 1990s really did mark the beginning of a new phase. Some of his London-based creative partnerships were fading away, as the Russell/Durrant/Butcher trio and his membership in the Chris Burn's Ensemble came to an end. At the same time, different, equally promising collaborations emerged. The new decade saw him turn towards groundbreaking electronic experiments with Austrian ensemble Polwechsel and deep explorations of brass and air in *The Contest of Pleasures*. He was also forging bonds with Gino Robair, John Edwards, Rhodri Davies, Andy Moor and Christof Kurzmann, all of which would last until the present day.

All around him, too, the music scene was changing. Independent labels were gaining both in significance and confidence and what was formerly considered underground music was bubbling to the surface of the general public's attention. Synthesizers, samplers and PCs were becoming increasingly affordable, leading to an explosive growth in bedroom producers and a short phase in which, as music journalist and writer Simon Reynolds put it, the musical world seemed to completely shed its skin every six months. Even more importantly, perhaps, the CD had broken through as the main physical carrier, its comparatively affordable production costs allowing even uncompromisingly experimental acts to publish and distribute their music on their own terms - quite aptly, *News from the Shed's* eponymous album from 1989 would turn out to be the last vinyl release for Butcher for twenty-two years. Although the industry was thriving, stability had become a relative term and he made full use of the zeitgeist by diving headlong into the pool of potentials opening up in front of him.

Moving uphill: The 80s

The 80s had not been a bad period for Butcher by any means. Obviously, it had been the decade of Thatcher and Reagan, a time marked by a climate, as he puts it, "especially hostile to non-mainstream, and non-moneymaking, creativity". But in his personal life, things were clearly moving uphill. He had completed his Ph.D and was now free to pursue a career in the arts without any external distractions. He was surrounded by people with a similar interest in DIY aesthetics, a pure passion for music and a complete disregard for medial or public attention. And there were always plenty of exciting instrumentalists to engage and exchange ideas with. You were thus, in his own words, able to "just get on with your own work."

At the end of 1986, Butcher received a letter from the socialist DDR by one Jimi Metag. Metag had founded a jazz workshop in the tiny town of Peitz, just thirteen kilometres outside of Cottbus, and started organising small gigs without state support and outside of official cultural policy. Some of his bigger outdoor events would come to be feted as the 'Montreaux of the East' or 'Woodstock near the carp pond'. Writing in pencil on tissue-thin airmail paper, he now invited Butcher on a tour with West German drummer Willi Kellers (who would shortly after record with seminal free improvisation imprint FMP), double bassist Christoph Winkel (from an important circle of musicians based in Weimar) and Mancunian trombonist Alan Tomlinson. Butcher had never met any of these performers in person and, save Tomlinson, never even heard of them either. And yet, he jumped at the opportunity. A couple of months later, a plane ticket and a letter for the East German border guards arrived and he embarked on a trip, which, compared to his London appearances, would draw remarkably sizeable audiences. It was right in the middle of this phase of busy group activity that Butcher released his first solo CD, *13 Friendly Numbers*, an album which he would later refer to as "a stimulation, a test, and a bit scary". Fear is not a word you'd typically associate with Butcher. In this case, however, there was every reason to feel a little queasy.



Personal and timeless: 13 Friendly Numbers

1991. A year which, with the release of Massive Attack's *Blue Lines* or Nirvana's *Nevermind*, was all about big, universal statements. *13 Friendly Numbers* was none of that. Contrarily, it was personal and timeless. And yet, it had something contemporary about it as well, marking the moment that free improvisation gained fresh momentum and the instant the London community found surprising points of contact with similar scenes which had gradually developed in mainland Europe and across the Atlantic. The early years of the 90s would turn out to be vital in this regard by putting a wealth of soon-to-be-influential

musicians in touch with this radical and radically different music and intoxicating them with its virus.

Guitarist Andy Moor, for example, had left Edinburgh at the turn of the decade to move to Amsterdam and join pioneering local formation The Ex. Introduced to the improv community by the band's Terrie Hessels, he was stunned to find a big, vivid scene of jazz and non jazz improvisers. Han Bennink, Ab Baars and Wolter Wierbos on the one hand and John Butcher and Derek Bailey on the other would turn into his first personal heroes. Butcher in particular felt like a revelation to Moor: "The sounds he was getting out of his instrument on *13 Friendly Numbers* were sounds I'd never heard before coming from a saxophone. I found it really brave that a musician could release a CD like this."

Around the same time, young recording engineer Steve Lowe of London's Gateway Studios was taking his first, uneasy steps into free improvisation, listening to The Chris Burn Ensemble's *Cultural Baggage* and thinking to himself: "Why aren't they playing in time? Where have the chords and melody gone?" He could see a room full of instruments he recognised, but the sound coming out of the speakers was outright shocking. The shock hadn't yet subsided when he met Evan Parker and spent three days over the New Year of 1991 recording some of the world's greatest improv musicians for the *Spirits Rejoice* CD. It was then and there that the cookie crumbled. When Butcher, who had coincidentally been involved in the making of *Cultural Baggage*, came knocking on Lowe's door to ask for his help in recording *13 Friendly Numbers*, his ears had become acclimatised.

Today, an album like this could easily be published early in an artist's career. In 1992, of course, as Butcher puts it, "it was difficult and expensive to release things, hard to believe now, which made you treat it as something special". And so his studio debut as a soloist only arrived a full eight years after his first LP (Fonetiks with Chris Burn) and a host of group efforts.

Perhaps it is this remarkably long phase of refining his musical language which makes *13 Friendly Numbers* seem so remarkably self-assured and potent. Everything's there: Moments of tender lyricism (*Notelet*) and ghostly fields of drone (*Tolv two elf katere ten (it can't be)*), to-the-point minimalism (*Uncommon Currency*) and expansive sonic territories (*Buccinator's Outing*), all but inaudible breaths and furious blasts created by means of multitracking different parts in the studio in real-time – when, as on *Bells an Clappers*, Butcher concentrates four tenor lines into a roaring sheet of noise, you can almost feel a juggernaut driving through the room. It is not the only moment that the music takes on mimetic qualities. On *The Brittle Chance*, Butcher forces his lines through a string of timbral transformations, ultimately arriving at bird song. But imitation is hardly an overarching theme here. Rather, an inseparable connection between thematic material and technical aspects is manifesting itself on the album, as well as their gradual conflation with each other. "Gigs were where all of these ideas started off", according to Butcher, while the studio situation allowed him to whistle them down to their essence. If *13 Friendly Numbers* is today still considered a classic of not just his own discography, but as "a landmark record for improvised saxophone" in general (John Eyles, BBC Review), then this is because it is both a collection of individual, precisely realised ideas as well as a coherent album which can be enjoyed from beginning to end.

13 Friendly Numbers had been a daring project not just for Lowe, but for Butcher as well. Although playing a handful of unaccompanied gigs each year had become almost customary for him since the mid-80s, he hadn't actually been preparing for a solo CD. Rather, the idea had formed slowly and gradually. While working with Chris Burn, he had toyed with the idea of writing pieces for multiple saxophones, which eventually led to the concept of multitracking himself in the studio. First sketches for these pieces had been committed to his brother's 4-track cassette machine at home and deemed promising. At the same time, the desire of working on something more personal had become stronger. And yet, the album was not the result of a single outburst of energy. Instead, Butcher would visit Gateway Studios a full five times in

1991 to record his pure solo tracks and Pathway Studios four times for the multitracks, recording one or two hours in between regular sessions to cut down on costs and recording direct to 4-track tape, re-using it if the results were unsatisfactory.

Lowe tried his best to follow Butcher's explorations, as he was moving around the room, using the pads of the sax to create percussive sounds, working with multiphonics or difference tones or placing the bell of the instrument against his inner thigh to mute it. Using a single 'Coles Ribbon mic' for the main sound, and two U87s to capture the harmonics and ambient sound, Lowe had to put down the studio carpet to try and control the length of the reverb tail, as it was a little too long for what Butcher wanted. Dynamics were essential for the recordings to capture the full spectrum of timbres and techniques on display and Lowe ultimately decided to record the mics 'flat' and without equalising or compression, treating this, effectively, like a session of classical music and waiting for Butcher to create the dramaturgy, peaks and troughs of the music. The result was direct, powerful and on many occasions unsettling in a strangely inspiring way: "Some of these multiphonics and difference sounds can drive the inner ear mad ... When John first did that, It felt like I had an insect crawling about in my ear." He laughs: "My ear drums would beat in opposite directions, ha! He's the only sax player that I ever heard do that!"

The outside world's reaction was equally caught between utter amazement and shocked bewilderment. In a now infamous review, an American reviewer described the music as "Butcher, plays for a while, then makes a mistake. Sometimes he repeats it, and then plays some more until he makes another mistake". For Andy Moor, meanwhile, *13 Friendly Numbers* seemed like music from another planet. Hessels had bought the CD and to Moor, it was the very first time a work of improvised music was accessible and listenable away from the live experience: "John's 13 Friendly numbers, I could listen to it at home. Especially while working, cooking or painting. Each track was an amazing self contained and crafted song with a clear story and a concise and clear build up in tension and form ... Till then I had only released records with a band, so the idea of putting something like that out was remarkable for me."

Time seems to have solidified that impression and softened the revolutionary impact of the work. When Moor re-released the album on his own Unsounds imprint in 2004, the reviews seemed a lot more welcoming and open, suddenly recognising dashes of Eric Dolphy in its melodic lines where formerly critics had only perceived noise; clearly shaped arrangements where there seemed to have been nothing but formless experimentation. The album was even awarded an entry in Penguin's Guide to Jazz. And although sales of the original CD were slow, Butcher did notice that it seemed to have found its listeners in the right places. Suddenly, invitations for performances in mainland Europe were increasing considerably.

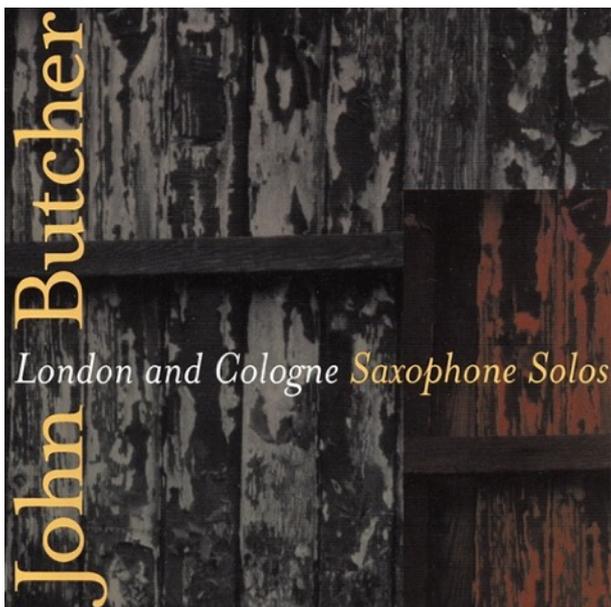
An end to comparisons

13 Friendly Numbers also contributed a lot to ending the comparisons of Butcher to Evan Parker. Admittedly, the link had been an easy one to draw for journalists. After all, Parker, too, had made his name as a fearless experimenter and dauntless sonic explorer. He had taken the saxophone to previously unimaginable places and turned into a pivotal point for the entire English improvisation scene. By the time of Butcher's first LP, Parker already had a lengthy discography to his credit. And when Butcher released his debut as a solo artist, Parker's *Saxophone Solos* and *Monoceros* had long been hailed as groundbreaking. Butcher did acknowledge the impact of Parker in a cover story interview for *Jazz Review* in 2004, claiming that "it is an inescapable influence, partly through the consistency of his approach, and the dedication, regardless of the content of the music. It permeates the scene. I'd been fiddling around trying to get the saxophone to do something else before I was really aware of Evan, and the first time I heard him it was very clear that he had really worked to take certain things to a very inspiring level of control." It wasn't until 1986, meanwhile, that he first got to play with Parker in a band put together by John Russell, followed by a short stint under the name as *Soprano Compass* for two performances in Rome – where they played solos, duos and quartets and stayed in the city for five days. And yet, the parallels were superficial at best.

With *13 Friendly Numbers*, this became obvious, as a new generation of listeners discovered Butcher without the overburdening presence of Parker and were receptive to his own contributions and inventions.

As Andy Moor recalls: "For me Butcher and Parker have more differences than similarities and it's the differences that I am more interested in. Technically they are both amazing players, but they are searching for very different things and in very different ways ... John is incredibly elastic and flexible in his approach. He takes very sudden strange corners, changes direction, but can also stay on one sound for a very long time, slowly developing it. I can't pinpoint where his music comes from, it's certainly not jazz. It feels like it has some kind of connection with his past immersion in sub-atomic physics, but I wouldn't be able to say how or in what way exactly. He's doing many things at once - research into some very minute microscopic sounds that he can create with his instrument, but also massive full bodied drones, strange melodies. He's searching like hell, but always making beautiful music while doing it - a rare thing indeed. When you see John play, you immediately sense this guy will probably do this for the rest of his life ... his commitment is total. If you watch his face while he is playing, it's astounding, his level of concentration is written on every muscle in every expression. I think he goes out of his way out there when he plays, but he keeps his feet firmly on the ground. His sound fills the room ... he senses the space and the resonance in the space very quickly and you can hear him and follow him working on this."

After Butcher's first solo statement, more and more were becoming aware of this total commitment – and with it, the comparisons slowly started to fade away.



Global perspectives: London and Cologne & Fixations

As the 90s moved towards the new millennium, it was no longer just Europe which was opening up to him. Audiences in the USA, too, were discovering their taste for Butcher's music. Contrary to what one might have expected, interest didn't come from New York, Chicago or any of the major musical centres of the country. In fact here, expectations of a saxophonist were still very much dictated by jazz, whereas Butcher, as Moor had astutely perceived, was trying his utmost to distance himself from the shadows of the genre.

Instead, it was in the Bay Area, where Butcher would discover a fertile ground and receptive ears for his music, as well as a pool of performers with strikingly similar concepts and aesthetics. Gino Robair was one of them. He had heard Butcher's *Cultural Baggage* album and been excited by its approach. When Butcher was invited over to San Francisco by Bill Hsu, Hsu also suggested the release of a new album on Robair's Rastascan imprint. This would lead to the publication of *London and Cologne*, the beginning of a life-long friendship and a mutually influential creative partnership. What Robair appreciated in Butcher's take on the saxophone was that it precisely reflected his own philosophy with regards to the drums: A tendency to overcome traditional perspectives and the conventional idea of a drummer as a propellant and a mere rhythmical backing for a melodic solo instrument. It was a seemingly bizarre realisation about such an accomplished musician - "He didn't play like a saxophonist!" - which was so particularly appealing to him. At the same time, as *Fixations* would prove, Butcher had undergone an incisive transition in his perspective on music since his first solo statement.

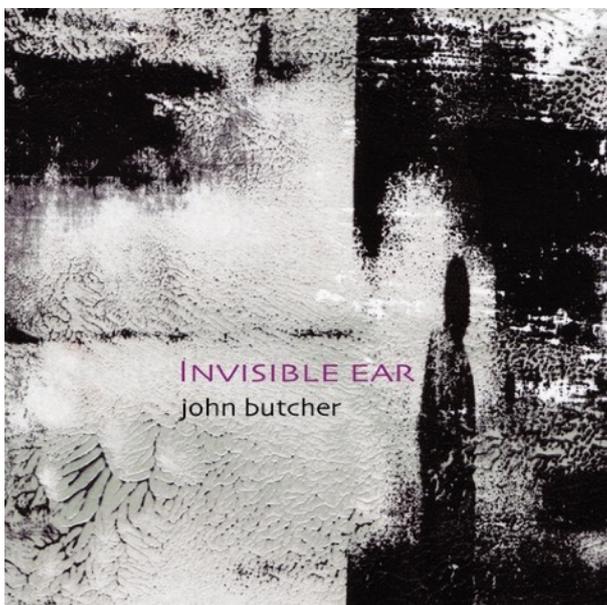
Butcher has claimed that *13 Friendly Numbers* and *Invisible Ear* were the only two solo albums he really ever explicitly set out to make, the others being "by-products of performance situations". And yet, in many respects, *Fixations* seems like a perfect continuation of its predecessors. Just like *13 Friendly Numbers*, it is a highly varied and multi-faceted album serving as a condensed compendium of various aspects of Butcher's oeuvre: His search for new sounds; his work with space; his quest for a delicate balance between beauty and exploration. Only this time, rather than carefully mapping out these explorations in the studio beforehand, the record captures him in a wide range of live settings, ranging from gigs at a book store to the large space of a former Crocker Bank, from a four-track improvised suite at a festival to a performance in front of an audience of artists and philosophers ("There was certainly more discussion and questioning afterwards."). These different settings award each track its own distinct color and you can clearly hear Butcher working with and sometimes against the inherent characteristics of the room or performance situation. In all cases, meanwhile, his aversion against the term 'extended technique' is becoming increasingly easy to understand. On some occasions, a lyrical motive is organically transformed by the gradual infiltration of overblown notes. On others, it is

precisely the 'extensions' which lend a 'musical' feel and poignant hooks to a piece. The realm of what is generally referred to as 'melody' and that of timbral, rhythmical or harmonic techniques are all part of the same continuum here, of a single, unified, personal space. Or, as Butcher explained in a 2008 interview with *The Wire*: "You wouldn't describe aboriginal music or Jimi Hendrix as using extended techniques. It's the music – the way people play instruments is an integral part of achieving their musical aims."

Many commentators have described the road from *13 Friendly Numbers* to *Fixations* as "a progress from a purely scientific approach to a more emotional stance" (Paulo Scaruffi). To deduct from this that the latter is anything less searching and questioning than its predecessor would be a fallacy, however. Contrarily, there are perhaps more previously unvisited spaces, progressive approaches and surprising cross-references than ever before.

On opener *Woodland Drift*, the melody takes on the silhouette of a Webern theme ("The clarity, economy and integration of the instruments - moving between instruments in a single phrase - was part of Webern's appeal."). Two-part *The Train and the Gate*, sees him performing at the Gare Bruxelles- Chapelle, a renovated, disused railway station. And on closer *Clarence*, his high-frequency flageolets over a rhythmical airwave have a ghostly, almost disembodied quality to them. In many ways, the different recording situations reflected on *Fixations* are a precursor to his interest in space, as documented on later releases like *The Geometry of Sentiment* and *Resonant Spaces*. It would be overstating things to say that he had fallen out of love with the concepts of Cage and the composer's notion of just allowing sounds to be themselves. And yet, as Butcher realised, they could no longer be separated and had to be put to work. "I realised that what made improvisation come alive for me was hearing the human being on the other end of the instrument, which is largely incompatible with Cage's later professed desire to remove his own personality from his music." Undeniably, the work had opened up a new chapter and set in motion a process of continuous transformation and change.

Alien frequencies: Invisible Ear



It is one of the intriguing discontinuities of Butcher's discography how recognisable *Fixations* feels compared to *13 Friendly Numbers* – and how completely alien it sounds when placed next to Butcher's next solo effort, *Invisible Ear*, only released a mere two years later. Part of this may be down to the album constituting a natural counter-reaction to its predecessor, to the desire of engaging in more compositional approaches after the pure improv stance of *Fixations*. And yet, there is more to the story than that. If *Fixations* feels like the personal diary of an artist operating in a realm of his own, *Invisible Ear* is a statement

about how much Butcher was listening to what was happening around him, incorporating ideas and concepts of his band efforts into his solo playing and putting his finger to the pulse of the times. One part of it was the emergence of an aesthetic of quietude, slow movements and isolated sounds in Berlin, Tokyo and Vienna, which would leave its mark on the entire improv scene. Semi-seriously referred to by Noël Akchoté, in onomatopoeic terminology, as the "shhhfllllfffwsshhhpfft school of improvisation" it would lead many to reconsider the once self-evident modes of interaction within a group.

Whereas, to some, these were fascinating, game-changing developments, Butcher wasn't entirely positive about the consequences. While he, in an essay for the book *Reduktion*, admitted to having enjoyed many performances of the music, he also considered it as an issue that this new approach of projecting single tones into the space resulted in a music in which the performers were frequently operating with too many unspoken, but ultimately agreed-upon rules for them to truly break new ground. On *Invisible Ear*, nonetheless, goals like transparency and attention to detail became more important than ever, resulting in a sound that was at once dynamic and tranquil, deep and direct.

The other decisive influence was the advent of electronics. Of course, Butcher had been no stranger to them before beginning to work with *Polwechsel*. In fact, in his early phase, his ideal had been to replicate the radical cutting techniques of experimental electro-acoustics and transfer them to his personal domain. Later, in some of his solo performances, he had simply inserted a mic into his sax bell and connected it to an amp to create volatile feedback mechanisms. It was a risky *modus operandi* and one which he had taken great care not to allow to turn into a circus act. Now, however, his perspective on electronics was changing: "I'd used it a bit on Fonetiks with Chris Burn in '84 - but found it didn't sit very well with acoustic instruments and it felt too inflexible for responding to my partners at the time. It cropped up solo now and then like on *13 Friendly Numbers* and some concerts. Working with small amplified sounds came in again through playing in the electro-manipulation duo with Phil Durrant - where, because of the signal processing, small sounds were suddenly on the same footing as more conventional saxophone volumes. And, also, this music tended to evolve more slowly. The qualities of slower evolution and low volumes must be what led me to work with more of this in *Polwechsel* - although it has to be said that most of *Polwechsel 2* and *3* is acoustic playing (plus electric guitar) with merely some file playback. More generally, taking my sounds into the world of loudspeakers makes more of a point of contact with electronics players. It's a different quality of sound."

Effectively, one could say that in many cases his techniques were direct responses to electronics. And nowhere was this more apparent than on *Invisible Ear*. *Swan Style* was a response to signal generators, Butcher working with lip sounds whilst inhaling and amplifying them with the body of the sax. *Cup Anatomicals* referenced filtering, saliva sounds being filtered by the acoustic sax body through fingerings. And the otherworldly airstreams of *Dark Field* are derived from extremely quiet tones, with which, as Butcher puts it, "you notice the air more - and start to notice the pitch of the air sounds." As more and more electronic producers were discovering the beauty

of software mistakes and glitches, Butcher was doing the same in the realm of hardware. "The sounds are a bit like the 'unwanted' ones a conventional player half hears when playing quietly. You have to be right next to the instrument", he tells me, then sighs: "Unfortunately - I've got to say that some of these have become an annoying cliché with some players in recent years." At the time of the album's release, however, they still sounded excitingly fresh.

In his review of *Invisible Ear*, Stuart Broomer claimed that some pieces resembled "nothing so much as a bank of oscillators", while Joe Panzner discovered "a new facet of the saxophonist's work found somewhere between the lab coat tweaking of his Polwechsel work and the marine biology of Erstwhile's *Wrapped Islands*". Panzner's evaluation that the record extends "equal nods to science and poetry" was particularly astute, confirming *Invisible Ear* as completing the gradual process of transformation started over the course of the 90s.

In many respects, the album fulfilled a mission. Contrary to many of his colleagues, who seemed to regard the solo setting as the most important territory, as a special occasion and the ideal opportunity to leave their mark, Butcher would increasingly come to regard them as fleeting moments which only on later reflection and in rare cases contained the potential to reveal something substantial about him as a performer or music in general. Even his much-acclaimed *Resonant Spaces* CD happened more by accident than as the result of meticulous planning and only after a musician friend had been so enthusiastic that Butcher felt compelled to release it.

Increasingly, his approach to solo playing became similar to that of his ensemble playing: A sometimes complex and sometimes straight-forward, but always challenging encounter with the moment, the performance space, the audience, his instrument and last but not least himself. As Andy Moor puts it: "John is one of the few improvisers I know who can do both solo and group improvisations equally well. In a group situation, he listens and he makes other musicians sound good, he leaves space and takes risks and his timing is pretty amazing. He is trying to make brilliant music whether it's solo or in a group and he succeeds again and again."

Butcher's solos are the result of his history, but he doesn't plan them out beforehand, rejecting the notion that they might be more composed than his group endeavours. Where do they come from, I want to know after a recent performance at the Issue Project Room: "I can get nervous the day before a solo concert - but, these days, not often when I'm actually doing it. Usually it's harder work when there's no audience - I need to feel the "real-time" nature of the flow of the music, which an audience forces on you. The Issue Project Room was a private afternoon recording on the last day of an exhausting USA visit, and I arrived without an idea in my head. You have to trust intuition in those situations. I still find it rather mysterious - where the drive comes from, even when you don't start out feeling much like playing."

JOHN BUTCHER
Bell Trove Spools



Distinct identities: Trace, Winter Gardens, Bell Trove Spools

It seemed only logical, therefore, that *Invisible Ear* would be followed by a long silence in terms of solo releases. If one discounts the location-oriented, aforementioned offerings *The Geometry of Sentiment* and *Resonant Spaces*, it would take eight years before he returned with a trio of new solo publications: *Trace*, a tape released on cassette label The Tapeworm, *Winter Gardens*, a vinyl LP on Kukuruku and *Bell Trove Spools* on the Northern Spy imprint. All of these again feature material culled from live performances, all of them operate within the same

parameters defined by previous solo efforts. And yet, all have their distinct identity. *Trace* contains the modestly titled *More of an urge than an idea*, a nineteen minute field sparsely filled with glassy overtones, tender saxophone tones and cool piano notes – a beguiling oddity in Butcher's oeuvre. *Winter Gardens*, meanwhile, feels less like covering new ground, but rather like an extremely concentrated effort of perfecting existing ideas and concepts, like a compression of his entire work into a single, condensed point. The album is split between a London and a Milwaukee performance, between a soprano and a tenor side as well as between two acoustic pieces and two tracks making use of amplification. On the latter, Butcher is flirting with disaster, playful nudging the border between feedback and full-blown distortion, between focused sound and formless noise. There is a rhythmical impulse here, which occasionally takes on almost groovy qualities, as though these patterns were leading up to a traditional jazz workout – only to recede into silence again. On the former, far longer acoustic improvisations, recorded so up-close and clear that you can actually hear him breathing, Butcher is demonstrating his personal concept of virtuosity, based not so much on speed or volume (although there are quite a few dizzyingly fast, spectacularly loud passages to be found here), but on the perpetuation of a flow of creation, one inventive approach taking turns with the next, sonic shapes and sounds appearing and disappearing like fireworks against a perfectly black sky. A winter garden is a place of contemplation and inner stillness and appropriately, the record feels like a short moment of rest in a discography otherwise mainly built on continuous re-invention.

Bell Trove Spools, which features the aforementioned Issue Project Room session next to one in Richmond Hall, Houston, Texas, sounds like the congenial follow-up. It is a good example of where Butcher's solo recordings could be headed for in the future, a perfect blend between spontaneity and planning, between experience and progressive momentum, between relying on his own devices and operating within a closely-knit team. Although he did indeed arrive at Issue Project Room without concrete musical concepts in his mind, Butcher had already been in touch with composer and recording engineer Philip White about recording an album here. As White recalls: "At that time I was Technical Director at ISSUE. We were in the process

of moving to ISSUE's new space, which is an amazing jewel box theatre designed by McKim, Mead and White. The space was built as a chamber music hall with arched roof and all. John came and played a show at our old warehouse space and during drinks afterward, both Okkyung Lee and I basically said "you have to record there." The room is absolutely beautiful for solo performers or chamber groups. I later did some sound treatment in there to make it more flexible, but at the end of the day, anything over 105dB starts to sound like mush because of the reverberation." Although he had broken his hand the night before and Butcher eventually assisted in setting things up, the resulting album perfectly achieves White's main objective – matching the live sound in this unusual space with the sounds he heard on his headphone monitors. Using an AKG 414 close up on the sax and a pair of Neumann KM-184's in the room, the set-up closely resembles the one used by Steve Lowe a quarter century earlier in Gateway Studios. As a result, the album feels equally fresh and classic, a bridge between a proud past and a future which still promises to hold plenty of surprises.

What binds all of these releases together is something hardly a single commentator has picked up on, a reference which permeates all releases and awards them a coherent quality: Butcher's listening roots in the blues. Sometimes, as on the barely two and a half minutes short "A controversial fix for ..." on Invisible Ear, this reference is clearly present. At other times, it is a mere backthought. And yet, hidden or outspoken, it is always present in some form: "If there is a language - it is just that", he says, "I didn't want to only present sounds - I wanted to say something with them." He adds, only half jokingly: "Unfashionable, I know." And yet, the way of the serious artist has never been about fashions anyway, but about trusting in oneself and following a personal, inner compass.

By Tobias Fischer (2013)