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Missing Links & Emerging Structures

Written and published by Tobias Fischer (2013) - <http://www.tokafi.com/>



News from the Shed's eponymous 1989-album is a classic of in-between-ness.

John Butcher had come up from Brighton aged one, then lived in South London until the late 70s. He'd studied physics at Surrey University, gathered first experiences with rock band Habilis, discovered jazz. At Surrey, he'd become friends with Chris Burn and the two met for regular duo improvisations, with Burn working with the inside of his piano and Butcher *"rejecting anything that sounded like a conventional note"*. The seed for his ongoing search into sound had been sown: Although he would go on, as part of Burn's Jazz Ensemble, to win the BBC's Big Band Competition, and finish his studies with a thesis about mathematical models for quarks, Butcher's real passion were the monthly rehearsals at the Workers' Music Association in Notting Hill Gate, which he would later describe as a 'musical laboratory'. And so, virtually on graduation day, he set course for a career in music.

It would take two years of extensive playing with a wide range of musicians, before he was approached by Phil Durrant and John Russell. Their trio with saxophonist Mark Pickworth had disbanded and the duo weren't so much looking for a replacement as aiming to *"establish a regular playing environment as opposed to the more ad hoc things that were happening"*. Butcher, however, made for such a perfect match that they ended that search right there. They began rehearsing each week, with the established goal of, as Russell puts it, exploring dynamics, timbre and pitch as well as *"different relationships between the instruments to see what we could get out of them."* After capturing the results on the *Conceits*-LP on self-founded label Acta, the band sought for new challenges and invited drummer Paul Lovens and trombonist Radu Malfatti to join them for a UK tour. It quickly emerged that this wasn't just a trio with guests, but a fully-fledged group capable of covering new ground. After a short span as Quaqua, the quintet named itself *News from the Shed* – and their debut album, recorded on a single day in 1989, would unlock up a space of possibilities for everyone involved.

Productive and spirited

The recording of *News from the Shed* would take place at Wood Wharf Studios in London on February 22nd, 1989. The location was mainly selected because of its renown in the field of jazz, improvisation, sonic experimentation and adventurous pop and rock – Kate Bush and the early Dire Straits would turn up regularly for rehearsals there – and the sessions turned out both productive and enjoyable, according to Russell: *"What I remember from the time spent that day is the lapping of the Thames alongside the studio, Radu's ridiculous puzzles about men falling into fields from aeroplanes, Paul Lovens' loud 'clink' on one take"*, he says then adds with a smile, *"I also remember good conversations and laughing when things went wrong!"* Although quite a few things may have gone wrong, even more went right. By the time they set out recording the album, *News from the Shed* had already been playing together for three years straight and had displayed an uncanny ability to come up with spell-binding material in their finest moments.

Things had gotten off to a good start, as Russell recounts: *"Our first date was at The Africa Centre in London. Quite a large space and not normally associated with free improvisation. However, we had a decent sized audience and, more to the point an attentive one, which showed that the group could hold people's interest and be intense without resorting to 'hitting them over the head' with the music. It had a fluidity about it where everybody brought what they could do to the situation and drew on it when it felt appropriate to do so. All the concerts opened up new areas, with the group somehow maintaining a strong thread of its own identity."*

As a result of precisely this fluidity, *News from the Shed*, despite still possessing some of the more general characteristic traits of the English improv scene of the time, sounds remarkably distinct, creating a fluid balance between individual voices and group sound: Each performer is clearly audible in the mix and capable of influencing the direction of the music. Still, within seconds of the opening of every single piece, structures start to emerge, which govern the exchanges until the next point of disturbance. And so, the homonymous title track is arranged into an ABA form, with

the B's ultra-minimal, careful and silent operations set against the A's energetic exchanges; "Reading the River" is marked by long held tones in the brass section, with Lovens's drums providing for a vague sense of pulse; "Everything stops for Tea" and closer "Pepper's Ghost", meanwhile, are exercises in reductionism and breath, tone poems of a handful of scattered, yet carefully placed, notes.

In-between-ness

With the hindsight provided by the record's 2005 re-release on CD, much has been made of the in-between-ness of *News from the Shed*, which sits at the cusp of an aesthetic shaped by the first generation of free improvisers and a variety of international directions later termed New London Silence, Reductionism (Berlin, Vienna) or Onkyo (Tokyo). As Martin Davidson of Emanem Records has pointed out, they weren't the first to tread these waters: *"There had been earlier precursors of quiet improvising. For example, in the early 1970s, Paul Rutherford's solos and the duo Spontaneous Music Ensemble (John Stevens and Trevor Watts) would often go to hardly audible sounds for a while. And from the late 1960s, AMM would often include sections of complete silence within their improvised performances."* At the time, meanwhile, what would later crystallise into clearly defined methods and techniques were still practical solutions arrived at by means of intuition, trial-and-error and a lot of conversations about music in general.

Lowercase, a term coined by Steve Roden in relation to his influential 2001 full-length *Forms of Paper*, didn't as yet officially exist as a genre, but, as Butcher insists, elements of it were already present as part of *"a way of accessing new, often hidden sounds, which then makes you work in different ways with them"*. As he remembered in the liner notes of the CD, they colored the ensemble's work to such a degree that he had to return the initial test pressing of the LP to the plant, since the crackle completely drowned out the quiet passages.

It wasn't so much a question of concepts, however, which guided this approach, but rather the composition of the group, which Butcher describes as an unusual mix of musical generations and people in transition: *"Phil, John and I had developed a very interactive, but low-key way of improvising - compared to most of what else we heard happening at the time. Paul emerged from the earlier free jazz scene, although he was also involved in more abstract improvisation. So had Radu, but, unlike Paul, he tends to reject what he has done before whenever he starts exploring a new direction. At the time he was also composing for improvisers. Not the Wandelweiser style - but more the sound worlds of the "traditional" avant garde: Lutoslawski, Berio, Nono and so forth. Radu and I would often play together in the group in comparatively simple, but compositional ways - maybe holding long tones together, aligning each other's entries and exits, more as if we were playing a composition rather than improvising - in the sense of an improviser sticking with and asserting their own voice - which was the principal modus operandi in those days. There was a tendency for Radu to take things into quieter and quieter areas and generate space, whilst Paul envisaged a much bigger dynamic range and density. I felt myself moving between these two positions."* These contrasts made him later evaluate the improvisational process in the liner notes as a *"push and pull of tensions in aspects of the group's music"*.

After I've confronted him with this quote, Malfatti doesn't quite agree with the wording. Once he's unwrapped his copy of *News from the Shed* ("*Don't you hate it when they're sealed-in and you can't open them?*", he sighs), to re-read the booklet text, he arrives at a slightly different conclusion: *"It is true that my interests had begun to shift at the time. But things didn't amount to tensions from my point of view. As John correctly pointed out, it was clear from the very outset that there could never be a full consensus. This, however, seemed to lead to mutual creative stimulation rather than tensions."* Perhaps one could say more to the point, that what makes the album stand out is how it turns the continuous process of reconciling differences in the act of performance into the actual goal of the music.

Improvisation, by its very nature, is always an emergent activity, feeding as much from complexity resulting from unpredictabilities in an interactive system as from a gradual establishment of order resulting from the experiences gained through these interactions. On *News from the Shed*, one can literally hear the moments when the group is moving from established modes into chaos again – and yet, this very chaos is not so much a cacophony of voices, but rather a beguiling galaxy of potentials waiting to be unlocked. Especially Phil Durrant's electronics, although merely discretely audible on a handful of occasions, are of seminal importance in underlining this otherworldly quality, which is why the sections charged by his subtle electric buzzes, whirs and dub-like reverb-effects, are perhaps the most stunning of the entire album. No wonder he and Butcher would continue working with electronics as Secret Measures even after both the trio with Russell and *News from the Shed* had disbanded.

A snapshot

Of course, with dozens of performances and merely a single album release, the question of how representative the material is of the group's general tendencies at the time is not an easy one to answer. *"It was a snapshot"*, Butcher admits, *"Often when you make an improvised record - you partly 'get that stuff out the way' and then move on to the next challenge. I remember well a London concert that got extra-ordinarily minimal. Richard Cook wrote: 'They moved slowly, then more slowly, then even more quietly.' It was 10 years before I played like that again in Polwechsel."* There can be no question about the ongoing relevance of the music, however. According to music writer Bill Meyer, the influence of *News from the Shed* for what was just around the corner can hardly be over-estimated: *"If you looked on a map for the place where European free improvisation branched out into more compositionally based strategies, electro-acoustic and lowercase improv, this 1989 session was the crossroads"* - a reason, certainly, why the group would later perform at a festival curated by Malfatti in Linz, where a solo-cello-composition like "Pression" by German musique-concrète-instrumentale-composer Hellmut Lachenmann preceded a group improvisation by the band.

So were *News from the Shed* really, as Meyer suggest, the missing link between the worlds of composition and improvisation, between the future and the past? *"Perhaps we were ..."*, Malfatti reflects, *"But if I remember correctly, juxtaposition was even more important to us back then. Of course, the whole thing was influenced by the fact that I felt particularly close to Lachenmann's compositions at the time and wanted to take care of this big assignment as well as possible. Performative questions are*

something entirely different, they'd lead us to the debate between composition versus improvisation which isn't easy." He ponders the question a little longer, then adds: "Actually, on a second thought, I think the term missing link isn't that far off after all."

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