
John Butcher



By JOHN EYLES
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17,211 Views

In the Building a Jazz Library article on Evan Parker, it says that seasoned Parker followers would describe him as the finest improvising saxophonist of his generation.

Curiously, many of those same people would use exactly that phrase about John Butcher. The simple explanation for this apparent contradiction is that we are talking about two generations; Parker (born 1944) is a member of the "first generation of free improvisation" (along with Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, John Stevens, Paul Rutherford, Barry Guy...) whereas Butcher (born 1954) is from the second generation (along with the similarly-aged Chris Burn, Phil Durrant, John Russell, Alan Wilkinson...) This is well illustrated by their discographies; Parker's first recording, *Challenge* (Eyemark), was released in 1966, while Butcher's first, *Fonetiks* (Bead)—a duo with Burn—came out in 1984. One reason for Butcher's first disc being released when he was slightly older is that after he had graduated with a B.Sc. in Physics from Surrey University he then studied for and obtained a doctorate in Theoretical Physics, before focussing on music.

Although they are easy to tell apart, Butcher and Parker have a number of things in common; they both play tenor or soprano saxophone; they are the only saxophonists to have performed at Company Week, been a member of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and the London Improvisers Orchestra, *and* been a guest player with AMM.

In addition, each of them (alone or with others) has been responsible for setting up two independent record labels to release their music, in Parker's case Incus (1970 to 1985) and Psi (2001 onwards), in Butcher's case Acta (1988 to 2001) and Weight of Wax (2004 onwards). Just as Parker's *Building a Jazz Library* list featured a high proportion of releases from his labels, so Butcher's contains more Acta and Weight of Wax recordings than would happen by chance.

As always, recordings by Butcher that have featured in other Building a Jazz Library lists have not been listed again here.



John Butcher, Phil Durrant, Paul Lovens, Radu Malfatti, John Russell

News from the Shed

(Acta, 1989; Emanem, 2005)

The trio of Butcher with guitarist John Russell and violinist Phil Durrant began playing together in 1984 and recorded several albums together, including *Conceits*, the inaugural release on their Acta label. In 1986, they invited the slightly-older, German duo of drummer Paul Lovens and trombonist Radu Malfatti to join them on an eight-date tour of England. The resulting quintet gelled well, so the guests did not sound bolted on; the group News from the Shed was born, and continued to play concerts until 1994. This studio-recorded album dates from 1989 and is regarded as one of the finest examples of group free improvisation. The Emanem CD reissue added four unreleased tracks to the ten originally released as an Acta LP. Like a couple of other tracks, those four were so noticeably sparse that this album came to be regarded as an influential precursor of electro-acoustic improvisation (or eai)—not the last time that Butcher would be ahead of his time!

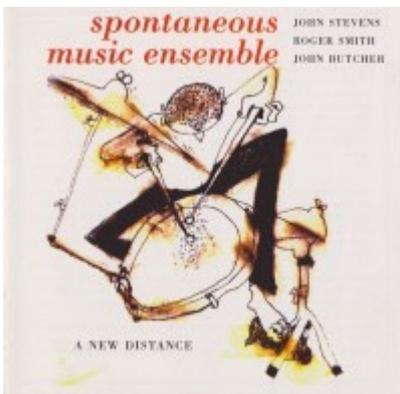


John Butcher

Thirteen Friendly Numbers

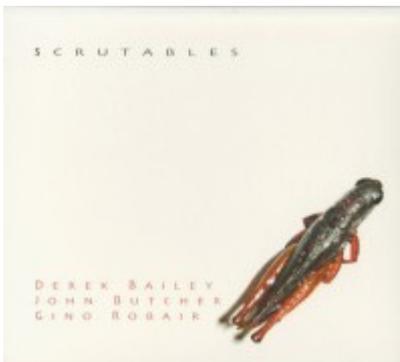
(Acta, 1992; Unsounds, 2004)

Any representative collection of Butcher recordings needs at least one of his solo albums, and there are plenty to choose from (about a dozen as of 2018). This album, studio-recorded in London, between March and December 1991, is one of the best places to begin, not least because Butcher was very adventurous when recording it. Unusually for a solo saxophone recording, the Acta CD cover promised "solos, quartets & sextet"; nine of the thirteen tracks were solo on tenor or soprano while the remaining four were multitracked, with four tenors, two sopranos plus two tenors, six sopranos, and a baritone plus a tenor plus two sopranos—all constructed by Butcher playing along with himself. None of that was done as a novelty; the resulting music is remarkably coherent, disciplined and engaging.



Spontaneous Music Ensemble
A New Distance
(Acta, 1995; Emanem, 2005)

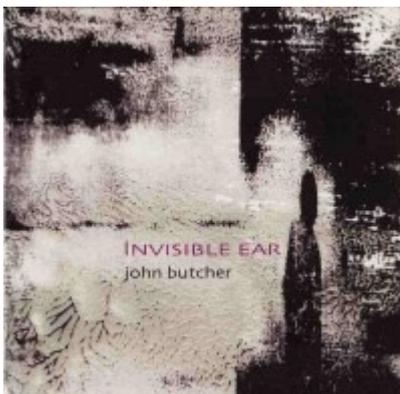
Butcher first appeared with Spontaneous Music Ensemble in November 1992, and by 1994 SME consisted of John Stevens on drums and mini-trumpet, Roger Smith on Spanish guitar and Butcher on saxophones, the line-up mainly heard on *A New Distance*. Butcher's restraint and subtlety made him an ideal foil for the other two, making this version of SME the best for two decades, with the potential to be the best ever. Tragically, that was not to be; Stevens died of a heart attack in September 1994, aged 54, thus making this the very last SME album.



Derek Bailey / John Butcher / Gino Robair
Scrutables
(Weight of Wax, 2011)

Scrutables was recorded at Moat Studios, London, in March 2000. It features Butcher in a trio with two players who figure large in his career, Derek Bailey on guitar and Gino Robair on energised surfaces. Bailey and Butcher had history dating back to 1990, when Butcher first played in Company, including the fine album *Trio Playing* (Incus, 1995). Butcher

and Robair had played together as a duo since the mid-1990s, an association that has been active ever since. Prior to this recording the three had no experience together, but the trio was a success. No-one remains in the spotlight for very long; there are frequent prolonged passages where all three are in full flow simultaneously, creating edge-of-the-seat thrilling music.



John Butcher
Invisible Ear
(Fringes, 2003; Weight of Wax, 2010)

No apologies for including a second solo album, as *Invisible Ear* is easily on a par with *13 Friendly Number*. A decade after that album, Butcher had moved on from its innovations and new techniques, experimenting with close miking and feedback saxophone. At times it is difficult to tell how many players are in action or if they are actually playing

saxophones, as a sustained high frequency note on soprano sax can sound electronic; Butcher said this album reflected his experience of working more

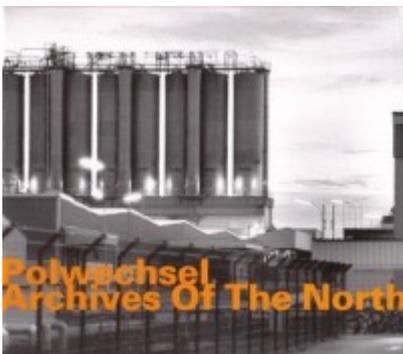
closely with computer and electronics musicians. *Invisible Ear* is one of his more remarkable sets of explorations.



John Butcher & Eddie Prévost
Interworks
(Matchless, 2005)

Running through Butcher's discography is a strand of duos with drummers, including such illustrious names as Gerry Hemingway, Paal Nilssen-Love, Steve Noble, Robair, Mark Sanders, Ståle Liavik Solberg and Dylan van der Schyff. One of the best is this 2005 duo with AMM drummer Eddie Prévost, released on the drummer's own label. As the YouTube clip below shows, Butcher and Prévost are highly compatible improvisers who are well attuned to each other's playing styles and instincts.

Although this album was their first recording together, it was not the last. After Keith Rowe's (temporary) departure from AMM in 2004, the group's second release was *Trinity* (Matchless, 2008), a trio of Prévost and John Tilbury with Butcher guesting, which led to speculation that the saxophonist would be joining AMM. Although Butcher also appeared on the group's *Sounding Music* (Matchless, 2010), such speculation came to nothing. In 2011, Butcher and Prévost recorded a trio session with bassist Guillaume Viltard, as part of the drummer's "Meetings with Remarkable Saxophonists" series. And, in 2018, Matchless released a second impressive Prévost-Butcher duo album, *Visionary Fantasies*.

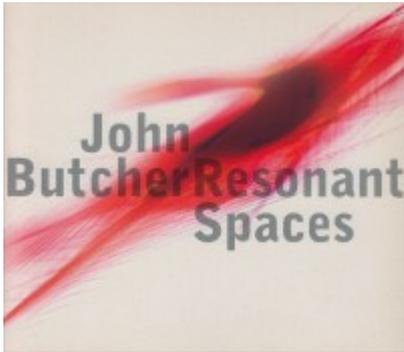


Polwechsel
Archives of the North
(HatOLOGY, 2006)

In 1998, Butcher became a member of the Austrian quartet Polwechsel, replacing his erstwhile band mate trombonist Radu Malfatti. That Butcher was recruited to the group is testament to the growing esteem he enjoyed in continental Europe and beyond. Three albums later, guitarist Burkhard Stangl left, in 2008, to be replaced by the percussionists Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr, alongside Butcher, cellist Michael Moser and bassist Werner Dafeldecker, giving the line-up which recorded this album.

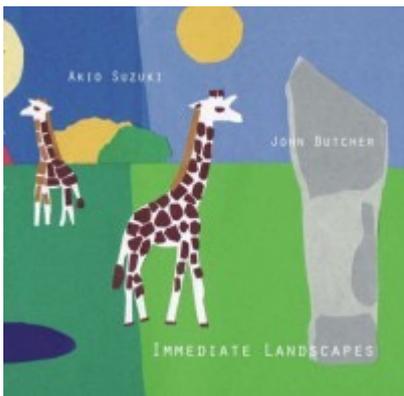
Polwechsel's music straddled the composition-improvisation divide, with Moser and Dafeldecker being the main composers. Butcher always sounded at home in

the group, fitting in perfectly with their distinctive, restrained eai. After recording his fifth album with Polwechsel—Field (hatOLOGY, 2009), which included guest John Tilbury on piano (another AMM connection)—Butcher himself departed in 2009.



John Butcher
Resonant Spaces
(Confront, 2008; Blume, 2017)

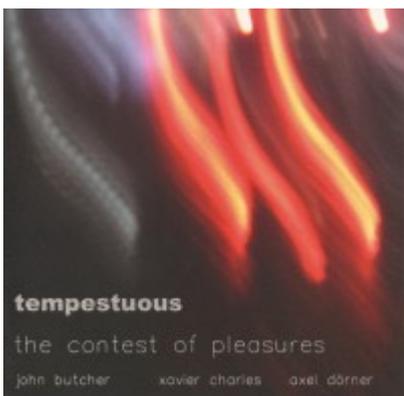
In 2004, for the first release on his own Weight of Wax label, Butcher released *Cavern with Nightlife* which mainly featured 2002 recordings of him playing solo in the highly resonant Oya Stone Museum in Utsunomiya City, Japan. As a result of that, he and Japanese sound artist and instrument builder Akio Suzuki were invited to tour Scotland in 2006, playing and recording at various resonant sites such as a reservoir, a mausoleum, an ice house and an oil tank; the tour was featured in the August 2006 issue of *The Wire*. The resulting recordings were on two albums, issued years apart. The first, *Resonant Spaces*, focussed on Butcher alone, and was issued on CD in 2008 by Confront, on vinyl in 2017 by Blume.



Akio Suzuki, John Butcher
Immediate Landscapes (Ftarrri, 2017)

The five previously unissued tracks on this second album gave equal prominence to Akio Suzuki and his interactions with Butcher. Alongside Butcher's saxophones, the sound artist employs a large array of sound resources, including pebbles, sponge, brass plate, noise whistle and far more, all contributing to soundscapes that are rich and varied.

When the resonances of the spaces are factored in, there are multiple possibilities— Butcher interacting with Suzuki, with Suzuki's echo and with his own echo, plus Suzuki doing likewise, creating greater complexity and fascination. These two should be considered as complementary companion albums, best heard together.



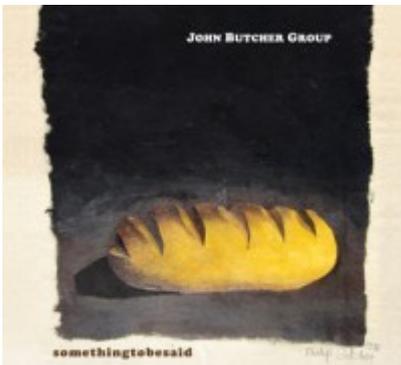
The Contest of Pleasures
Tempestuous
(Another Timbre, 2007)

The Contest of Pleasures is another prestigious and long-lasting group featuring Butcher with continental European musicians, namely French clarinetist Xavier Charles and German trumpeter Axel Dorner. The three originally came together in 2000, recording the album entitled *The Contest of Pleasures* (Potlatch, 2001) which was credited to the three group members. By the time their second album, the studio-recorded *Albi Days* (Potlatch, 2006), was released, the

trio was actually known as The Contest of Pleasures.

(Incidentally, this phenomenon of groups being named after their first album also happened to Butcher with *News from the Shed* and, later, *Way Out Northwest*; it happened to Evan Parker too, with *Foxes Fox*.)

Tempestuous was the trio's third album. It was recorded between 11pm and midnight in an atmospheric, wind-buffed, old church building, at the 2006 Huddersfield Festival. According to Simon Reynell, when he heard the music, he thought it was fantastic and asked Butcher if anyone planned to release it. When the answer was 'no,' Reynell saw his chance; he founded Another Timbre and this was its first album release, at 01. The combination of saxophone, clarinet and trumpet without a rhythm section is not commonplace, but it is highly successful in this group, with the three exploring the limits of what their instruments can do and fitting the results together in an integrated whole which sounds perfectly natural.

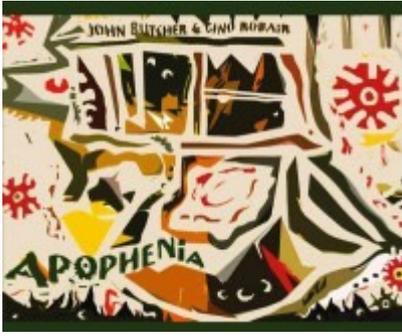


John Butcher Group *somethingtobesaid* (Weight of Wax, 2009)

Another Huddersfield Festival—2008 this time—saw the premier of a composition commissioned by the festival, another landmark for Butcher. To perform and record "Somethingtobesaid," Butcher put together an eclectic octet which mixed long-term colleagues, like Chris Burn on piano, John Edwards on bass and Gino Robair on percussion, with newer associates, such as turntablist

dieb13, Thomas Lehn on analogue synthesiser, Adam Linson on bass & electronics and Australia's Clare Cooper on harp or guzheng.

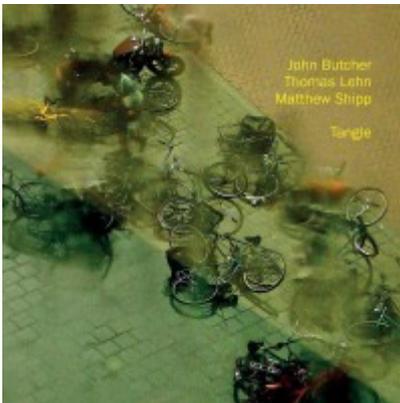
The hour-long piece plays continuously—only being indexed into nine tracks for reasons of convenience—and deftly manages to avoid overcrowding or cluttering the soundscape by featuring a frequently-changing subset of the eight players. Imaginative combinations of instruments, and subtle changes in tempo and volume keep the music sounding fresh and engaging. The recording was the second release on Butcher's *Weight of Wax* label, coming some five years after *Cavern with Nightlife*. The label clearly opts for quality over quantity, as suggested by its catalogue numbers—this one is WOW 02.



John Butcher / Gino Robair
Apophenia
(Rastacan, 2011)

While it is unusual for Butcher to play or record just once with an individual or group, there are several who have played with him regularly over a long period of time. Gino Robair is one such, having appeared on at least a dozen albums with Butcher. *Apophenia* is a good place to hear the two together as a duo. A high-quality radio recording, originating from KFJC, California, in October 2009, it is relatively brief at twenty-eight minutes but its four tracks capture every nuance of each player. The album's credits (Butcher: saxophones with motors; Robair: energised surfaces) give a clue to their experimentation and use of extended techniques, sometimes producing sounds not immediately identifiable as sax or drums. Nevertheless, it seems best not to question the source of each individual sound but to savour the wholesound collage that they create.

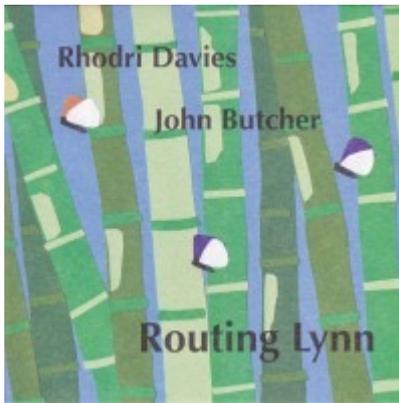
Tangentially connected to this album, by more than its name, is the trio of Butcher and Robair plus John Edwards on bass, known as The Apophonics, which has released two albums, notably *On Air* (Weight of Wax, 2013).



John Butcher, Thomas Lehn, Matthew Shipp

Tangle (Fataka, 2016)

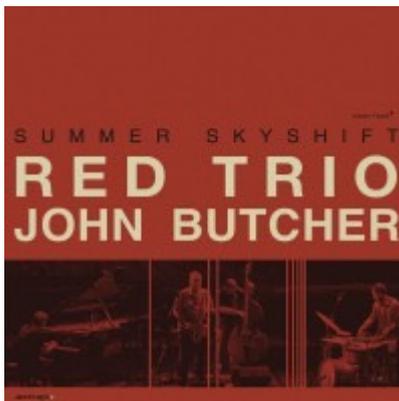
Three years prior to this release, Fataka had issued *Exta*, a 2012 studio recording of a trio consisting of Butcher, Thomas Lehn on synth and John Tilbury on piano, making it a fascinating comparison piece to this trio of Butcher and Lehn with the very different pianist Matthew Shipp. *Tangle* was recorded during Shipp's brief residency at Café Oto in February 2014. At a previous Shipp residency at Oto, in 2010, he and Butcher had played as a duo for the first time, as heard on *At Oto* (Fataka, 2012). Lehn and Shipp seem to have had no previous contact prior to this 2014 date, though. Nonetheless, the music is a model of trio improvisation in which all three seem constantly aware of the others' playing, so that each contribution from any of the three has an obvious effect. Changes of mood or tempo do not happen at the behest of any one player but evolve organically from the playing of all three.



Rhodri Davies, John Butcher
Routing Lynn
(Ftarri, 2014)

Butcher's long association with harpist Rhodri Davies dates back to the late nineties and is one of the more important and fruitful of his career, not least because Davies has an exploratory, experimental nature similar to Butcher's own. The two first recorded together as a duo in 2000, the results featuring on *Vortices and Angels* (Emanem, 2001). They were also in a quartet with pianist-percussionist Chris Burn and bassist John Edwards that recorded *The First Two Gigs* (Emanem, 2001). Ever since, albums featuring the two have followed regularly, including those by another group of variable size, *Common Objects*, which also includes Lee Patterson on amplified devices and processes, Rhodri's sister Angharad Davies on violin, Lina Lapelyte on violin and Pat Thomas on electronics.

Although any album featuring the two is wholeheartedly recommended, the experimental nature of *Routing Lynn* makes it a bit special and singles it out, despite its running time of thirty-five minutes. In January 2014, the pair visited Routing Lynn, in Northumberland, an area of ancient rock carvings, a particular fascination of Davies.¹ In this natural setting, they were recorded playing together by sound recordist Chris Watson. Two months later, at a festival in Gateshead, they performed along with an edited and mixed quadraphonic version of that recording. That festival performance is this album's sole track. The pair's instrumental sounds blend with the natural sounds (water rushing, birds warbling...) of *Routing Lynn*, easily transporting listeners to another place. Sheer magic.



RED Trio + John Butcher
Summer Skyshift
(Clean Feed, 2016)

When Butcher studio-recorded the limited-edition vinyl album *Empire* (No Business, 2011) with the Portuguese RED Trio, it did not feel like a partnership of equals, and some questioned the billing of "RED Trio + John Butcher" rather than vice versa. Despite such details, when they played together the four musicians sounded like a quartet not a trio plus a guest. All three trio members improvised simultaneously, complementing and mirroring each other to create an ever-shifting tapestry of sound, a set-up into which Butcher fitted easily, sounding as if he has been playing with them for years.

Fast forward five years to the unlimited CD *Summer Skyshift*, recorded at the 2015 Jazz em Agosto Festival in Lisbon. The billing remained unchanged but no one questioned it as RED trio had become better known in the years after *Empire*.

The combination of the live setting and the effect of the trio—pianist Rodrigo Pinheiro being particularly active—produced a barnstorming performance from Butcher. On the spectrum ranging from restrained and exploratory to unbridled and free-blowing, this is Butcher at his fieriest.



Keiji Haino, John Butcher *Light Never Bright Enough* (Otoruku, 2017)

While the above selections provide an overview and introduction to Butcher's recordings, with a busy concert schedule and an average of five new album releases each year, he goes from strength to strength. A large part of his appeal is that he shows no signs of resting on his laurels, ceasing to innovate or make new connections. That is exemplified by this duo recording with renowned Japanese guitarist and vocalist Keiji Haino. It dates from

Haino's July 2016 residency at Café Oto, after the pair had played together in Hong Kong shortly before, having previously met some years before when Butcher opened for Haino's group Fushitsusha, at St. John's church, Hackney. Across five varied and contrasting tracks, the two manage to negotiate and arrive at common ground that does not require either of them to abandon or compromise their individual style.