HIT AND RUN

John Edwards with Paul Dunmall and/or John Butcher

Sleeve notes by STEVE LAKE

The universality of free improvisation may be an established fact by now, but this particular recording couldn't have been made by musicians from anywhere but the wind-and-rain-buffeted British Isles, those mysterious lands in the North Sea liberally peopled with eccentrics and genii. The music on Hit And Run, extending specifically British traditions, stirs emotions in this expatriate's Scottish-English soul akin to homesickness and - especially when Paul Dunmall plays the bagpipes - an atavistic recognition of some older truths.

Yet at the same time, this music is very much of the moment. No one, for instance, has gone beyond John Butcher's hypermodern language of sounds rooted in the resources of the saxophone; there may not be a "beyond" to go to. Butcher has built upon the achievements of the so-called first generation of British improvisers in a very personal, poetic and persuasive way. John Edwards, whose work with Eddie Prévost's Touch trio and Evan Parker's Quartet counts amongst the most alert and original bass playing in recent improvising history, sounds equally attuned to the wildly contrasting styles of Dunmall and Butcher who, nonetheless, are key exponents of a "saxophone phenomenon" uniquely British. At the risk of sounding chauvinistic: no other country has brought forth such a plethora of independently minded saxophonists as has the British Isles in the 35 years since Evan Parker. Trevor Watts, John Surman, Mike Osborne, Alan Skidmore, Lou Gare and Lol Coxhill all hove into view almost simultaneously.

To the matter at hand: Paul Dunmall had no idea he'd be making a record with John Edwards in Berlin. He was booked to play at the Total Music Meeting with long-time associate Paul Rogers in their splendid duo which addresses diverse folk musics and free improvisation. Rogers, however, was struck down by a gallstone colic and couldn't make the gig, and Edwards, scheduled to play only with Butcher, suddenly found himself in two contexts. Such is the beauty of free playing. It is open to expediency, and the unexpected, and even the galling, can often be turned to good advantage.
The groaning pun - another Brit tradition, alas - that serves as the title of Gaulstones alludes to the fact that Rogers was immobilized in his adopted homeland of France; it was clearly Gallic gallstones that had put him out of action. Thrown together by circumstance and another bassist's misfortune, Dunmall and Edwards rise to the challenge and make extraordinary music.

I find Paul Dunmall's musical priorities and preferences easy to sympathise with, and in recent years he's become one of the players I've most enjoyed hearing, chiefly at a geographical distance and via records, in contexts from the London Jazz Composers Orchestra to Mujician, Danny Thompson's Whatever. Elton Dean's groups and duos with Paul Rogers and singer Poly Bolton, as well as Paul's own bands. Dunmall has paid keen

attention to the two most important developments in British music of the last half-century - free improvisation and the folk music revival, and united them via his passion for late Coltrane (whose own music was of course liberated through study of world music traditions, including that of India). Dunmall, who actually played with Alice Coltrane when he lived in America in the early 1970s, and is arguably better qualified than most to draw on Trane, pulls these elements together in a non-schematic and always organic sounding way. He's a powerful instinctive player, where Butcher might be more of a thinker or conceptualist (which is not to slight either of them or to imply that one approach is superior).

The first time I heard Dunmall playing bagpipes - on the album Colours Fulfilled by the group Mujician (with Keith Tippett, Paul Rogers end Tony levin) - I felt hairs rise on the back of the neck. An incredible sound.. and one I felt I'd been waiting to hear. Like the last piece in a puzzle, it seemed to make all manner of cross-connections evident - from second to second it implied colours associated with the most diverse musics. This is every bit as true of the long duet with Edwards here. Associations abound. Pibroch? Ayler? The shehnai of Ustad Bismillah Khan? The sinus tones of early electronic music? A rainbow of possibilities seems to explode when Dunmall plays the pipes. Why has this instrument been comprehensively ignored in jazz based improvisation since the days when Sonny Rollins gave Rufus Harley a solo or two? Its capacity for atonal or modal free expression is conclusively demonstrated here.

Dunmall (I've since learned) has been working on his technique on the pipes for a decade now and first began exploring them while working with Danny Thompson's folk/jazz band Whatever alongside fellow sax/Northumberland pipes man Tony Roberts. He's been through several sets since then, starting with Bulgarian pipes before moving onto the Northumberland pipes and border pipes he featured in Berlin.

John Edwards locks in with Dunmall from the first instant of their duet here and matches the overblown notes of the squeezed bag with his own grainy ponticello harmonics, adds drones of his own, or underpins the action with lurching rhythms. When Dunmall switches to lovely lyrical soprano he's ready for that too, bringing guitar like strums and fleet fingered runs into play. An exceptionally resourceful bassist, Edwards has come up fast. He didn't begin playing the bass until 1987 and the first wave of work was with groups in the slipstream of punk- and art- and noise-rock: the Pointy Birds, God, B-Shops for the Poor, the Honkies and other extravagantly named ensembles. The emphasis on texture and raw energy in that zone (as opposed to the "clever" notes and phrasing stressed by much contemporary jazz) must have been useful preparatory work for the immersion in free improvisation. He belongs now to the front rank of sound-painters.

Almost nobody writes about John Butcher without drawing in Evan Parker as a reference point and though the question of "influence" is ungainsayable, there are great differences in their application of "extended technique". Parker generally layers sound upon sound, and has almost zero interest in silence, whereas Butcher's music all seems to be weighted in the space that surrounds it: tiny sounds are pitched into the ether, multiphonic

patterns and improbable chords give way to pauses loaded with musical tension, and sprays of delicate overtones seem to fountain from silence and return to it like the failing rain. Because of Butcher's background as a researcher and lecturer in physics (speciality: charmed quarks), the phrase "tone scientist" gets banded about when he is discussed in the jazz press, yet there is nothing academically dispassionate about his playing. It is full of feeling, and you can tell that Butcher, too, is emotionally engaged in the sounds he discovers as he plays. It was this concentrated, pent-up feeling in his sound which John Stevens loved, and which made Butcher such a valuable voice in the final edition of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble.

Butcher and Edwards have some history together and have played, for instance, in a quartet with harpist Rhodri Davis and drummer Martin Blume, and in a trio with keyboardist Pat Thomas. The uncanny precision of the duets that make up the Rhymes section of this recording is attributable to the fact that these men know each others' work well but also, I think, to Butcher's sense of form. He was one of the first of the free players to insist that "improvisation and composition are not neatly separated activities" (see his liner notes to Thirteen Friendly Numbers on his own Acta label). Accordingly, John Butcher guides and subtly shapes any music he is a part of, composing spontaneously, on the hoof. In his work, focus is more important than surrendering uncritically to the flow.

Is it significant that the three participants in this recording meet as a trio only in its final five minutes? John Butcher and Paul Dunmall represent almost opposing arguments and methodologies in the music. Butcher's brow-furrowing attention to detail often casts him as essentially a miniaturist (even the lengthy improvisation "Knotted" functions as a series of tautly self-contained episodes). He's frequently working from the inside out, the specific technical considerations employed becoming the "subject" of a given improvisation. Dunmall is much more generous with his sounds - he splashes the colours on thickly - and is cheerfully open to follow wherever a big lungful, or bagful, of air may lead him - especially in the free domain, solid jazz craftsmanship serving him well in straighter modes. Paul Dunmall's playing is still clearly rooted in jazz, while Butcher has effectively abandoned the idiom - indeed scarcely played it, in its strictest definition, beyond his college years. Butcher came to free group improvisation while working through Stockhausen's more open scores and his substantial discography reflects an exclusive and unbending commitment to free improvisation and new music. Dunmall, on the other hand, has paid his dues working with Johnny "Guitar" Watson, has played rock and folk and knows his way around the standards; a recent album is called "Bebop Starburst". One area the two reedmen do have in common is electronics: both have projects that involve real-time sound-processing.

As for Hit And Run, the title track here, it's a spirited, skirling romp and a blast of healthy noise to close down the proceedings. It's well named: converge, attack and get the hell out, it seems to be saying. The meat of this recital, though, is inarguably in the duets. This is a programme of contrasts and juxtapositions. (As Paul Bley once said to an irate promoter, after a concert where he and Gary Peacock were never onstage

simultaneously, "There was nothing in the contract to say we had to play together"). The attributes of Butcher's and Dunmall's artistry are best savoured singly, while the endlessly versatile bass of mediator John Edwards provides the red thread through this album. In the end, though, we are left to celebrate - not for the first time the diversity of British improvisation.

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