

BOOK REVIEW

Benjamin Piekut. *Henry Cow: The World Is a Problem.*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2019

ISBN 9781478004059 (Hbk)/9781478004660 (Pbk)/9781478005513 (eBook). 512pp., 63 ills

George Henderson. *Blind Joe Death's America: John Fahey, the Blues, and Writing White Discontent.*

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021

ISBN 9781469660776 (Hbk)/9781469660783 (Pbk)/9781469660790 (eBook). 236pp., 3 ills

Reviewed by Maurice Windleburn

In the last decade or so there has been an increase in musicological studies on the liminal space between art music and popular styles. A foremost scholar in this field (if it can be called that) is Benjamin Piekut, who wrote his first book, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits* (University of California Press, 2011) as a series of interrelated case studies. For his second book, Piekut focuses instead on a single band, Henry Cow, who sit neatly in the twilight zone between high and low art. Appropriately, this book is equally accessible to general readers and critically minded musicologists alike: its highly readable narrative avoids jargon and unnecessary citation. Divided into eight chapters (plus an introduction and afterword), *Henry Cow* traces the band's story from its genesis in 1968 to its dissolution ten years later.

Although it is not always made explicit, the presence of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) throughout Piekut's book is palpable. Refusing to present Henry Cow as a standalone entity divorced from its environment, Piekut gives ample room to each individual musician in the group, as well as the roadies, spouses, and technicians who accompanied them on tour. The importance of other bands that Henry Cow associated with, including Faust, Magma, and Slapp Happy, is more than mentioned, and institutions ranging from Virgin Records to the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Italian Communist Party are shown to have either a liberating or restrictive effect on the Cows (as Piekut regularly calls them). It would not be

ANT if there were no mention of technology and its role in conditioning cultural production, and this too Piekut provides. In many respects, no other methodology would do for a study of Henry Cow, who were as interested in the social and political ramifications of their work as they were in the 'strictly musical' product, advocating for a communal mode of musicking that incorporated Maoist self-critique, Marxist dialectics, and radical feminism. The band actively rejected bourgeois individualism and a mythologised image of self-sustained 'rock gods' (and it is perhaps for this reason that no trade book has been written on them); what is more, a key advocate for ANT in musicology, Georgina Born, was a member.

Aside from its ANT underpinning, Piekut's book also relies heavily on archival research, ethnographic interviews, and musical press reception. There are even attempts at music analysis, although they offer the book's weakest parts, generally amounting to simple 'wordings' of what is heard on record. Conversely, the most interesting sections discuss Henry Cow's politicised aesthetics: whether this was Tim Hodgkinson's 'politics of reverb' (his belief that reverb was nothing but a pompous, phony, and ultimately bourgeois attempt to eradicate differences); the band's communist principle that all instruments should be equally present in the mix; their rejection of sonata form, for its false resolution of opposites, and cyclic forms, for representing hopeless social stasis and apolitical acceptance; or the ongoing debate (much influenced by Adorno and Brecht) as to whether a progressive avant-garde aesthetic should be favoured over clearly communicative political messages. Piekut notes how, 'if the general pattern in rock equated paying attention to one's audience with abandoning one's artistic independence, then the Cows appeared not to choose either' (p. 208), but at the same time Piekut shows that these two forces, of aesthetic avant-gardism and egalitarian populism, were kept in a constant dialectical tension, never artificially resolved.

Although Piekut's book is recommended for both fans and musicologists, its afterword seems specifically directed towards the latter. Here, Piekut sketches a new concept: the 'vernacular avant-garde'. In doing so, he consecrates a disciplinary space for the study of music that uses recording technologies and mass-distribution networks but is in political and aesthetic tension with their controlling institutions (namely, record companies).¹ By coining this term, Piekut will hopefully encourage a third-way between the equally unconvincing Frankfurt School-led argument, that popular styles are nothing but a by-product of capitalist alienation, and the revisionist suggestion of certain New Musicologists and popular music scholars, that avant-gardism is only ever an elitist back-turn on the people. The afterword is admittedly a little brief, raising many questions and pleas for elaboration, but I suspect that in addition to being *Henry Cow's* afterword it might be the prolegomena for Piekut's next book.

The subject of George Henderson's monograph, *Blind Joe Death's America*, is the 'American primitivist' guitarist John Fahey—a perfect exemplar of the vernacular avant-garde. This book is the first academic text dedicated to Fahey, but rather than focus on his music Henderson concentrates primarily on Fahey's written texts: the liner notes, essays, short-form fictions, Master's dissertation (Fahey wrote the first ethnographic biography on Blues singer Charley Patton), and memoir that Fahey wrote throughout his life. Henderson sophisticatedly grapples

¹ Those interested in Piekut's concept but unable to obtain his book can read an interesting interview online: Tamara Levitz and Benjamin Piekut, 'The Vernacular Avant-garde: A Speculation,' *ASAP Journal*, asapjournal.com/the-vernacular-avant-garde-a-speculation-tamara-levitz-and-benjamin-piekut.

with ideas from a number of fields, including countercultural studies, musicology, literary theory, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, existentialism, and (his own field of expertise) human geography. Through close readings of Fahey's texts, Henderson attempts to untangle the ambiguous, even paradoxical, relationships that the guitarist often had with his social, cultural, and political milieus.

Of these ambiguities, one of the most interesting is Fahey's vehement dislike for the 1960s folk revival, particularly its obsession with authenticity. This was despite the fact that Fahey's career largely operated from within this very movement: he played Folk music (albeit, of a particularly experimental type) at the same venues and to the same audiences as the artists he criticised. Henderson convincingly reads Fahey's stance as an attempt to obtain some kind of higher-order authenticity; that is, by criticising the folk revival as a folk artist, Fahey positioned himself as the exception to his own critique, and hence as the genuine article. Similarly, Fahey often ridiculed the romanticism that white musicians and ethnomusicologists built around the Blues. This is particularly evident in Fahey's liner notes, where he parodies the ethnological narratives found on Blues and Folk records of the period. Yet as Henderson once again makes clear, Fahey himself was a collector of Blues records, and he often placed the genre in a privileged sphere of authenticity. Additionally, Fahey owed his parodic writing style to first-hand experience in ethnological study, obtained while completing a Master's degree in folklore at UCLA.

What makes Fahey a particularly interesting case for Henderson (and not just a simple hypocrite in these matters) is the guitarist's notably self-aware and at times self-critical writing style. Consequently, Henderson undertakes a rather complex interpretative task, positioning Fahey in relation to the debates of his time, while also remaining attentive to Fahey's self-aware style *and* turning a critical eye towards the reasons behind it. Unfortunately, Henderson does not always live up to his task, and I often became lost as to what exactly his own position or point was. This obfuscation is compounded by the author's over-reliance on rhetorical questions, sometimes piled up into whole paragraphs, for which no direct answers are given. This confusion takes on a particularly ironic edge by the book's end, when Henderson bemoans, 'if only Fahey would lay these ideas out straightforwardly, we might get to his thesis straightaway' (p. 150)—and so, the bull mocks the goat for his horns.

Another unfortunate aspect of *Blind Joe Death's America* is Henderson's over-reliance on a moralising hermeneutics of suspicion. For instance, analysing the essay 'Communism,' included in Fahey's memoir—which focuses on the stifling ennui of post-War American adolescence—Henderson notes how, 'amid all the constructed forms of social difference Fahey attends to—between children and parents, homes and school, teachers and students, adults and youth, boys and girls—there is no mention that they are all on one side of the "color line"' (p. 69). Henderson then uses this gap to make statements regarding Fahey's intent, claiming that this 'avoidance of race relations ... exerts a great deal of control over where its critique is willing to go and where it is not, as if there is a time when race matters and a time when it doesn't and John Fahey knows the difference' (p. 69).

The issue with interpretations like these (and there are many throughout Henderson's book) is that they involve a stipulation of intent for, and a subsequent moral judgement of, a deceased figure based not on what they said but on what they failed to say. In such instances, Henderson does not interpret a text, but a gap in a text: he points towards a void, stipulates

that an intention exists there, and pushes the burden of disproof onto those who might wonder what he is talking about. Yet (as Bertrand Russell argued regarding astronomic teapots and God) the individual making such a claim should provide evidence for it. If Henderson believes that Fahey did not mention the colour line in his essay for the specific reason that he ‘knew when race matters and when it didn’t,’ then at least some proof that this is the reason (as opposed to another equally viable possibility) should be given.

Of course, Henderson may claim that he has a moral and political responsibility to hunt down Fahey’s shortcomings, whether they be blatantly intended, or hidden and revealed only by the critic’s touch. Recent ‘postcritical’ thought, however, has brought the political affectability of this mindset into doubt. As literary theorist Rita Felski states, a suspicious hermeneutics, like Henderson’s, ‘offers no special guarantee of intellectual insight, political virtue, or ideological purity.’² Even more importantly, it rarely offers a way out of the political failures unearthed in a text. Interestingly, Piekut stumbles across the shortcomings of such a critique in his book. When discussing how Henry Cow’s use of open improvisation, both in their music and in everyday life, implemented a disidentification and reconstruction of the self, he fairly notes that the opportunity to do so may have relied on the band’s ‘whiteness’ and the privileged position that this entails; yet having acknowledged this, Piekut admits he is ‘unsure where else such an analysis might take us’ (p. 257). Indeed, most criticisms of this sort do nothing but leave those critiqued in a double bind.

Felski highlights how suspicious critics, ‘like the detective, must tell a persuasive story ... track down agents engaged in wrongdoing, and parcel out blame,’ their ‘*explanations*’ of literature and art are also tacit *accusations*, driven by a desire to identify fault’;³ it is this ‘presumption of guilt that allows absences or omissions to be transformed into suspicious evasions,’ but really ‘the critic does not uncover guilt so much as generate it out of the axioms of her own interpretative practice.’⁴ Suspicious hermeneuts are not only comparable to detectives who investigate the cause of a death, however; they are also akin to necromancers, who raise the dead. Suspicious scholars like Henderson seem to agree with Roland Barthes’s ‘death of the author’ thesis—that an author’s texts and stated intentions are no longer gospel—but they also want an author who is ‘alive’ enough that some moral or political intention can be attributed to them. The studied author becomes (in a hermeneutic sense, following Barthes), half-dead, undead, a zombie: their intentions matter, but not those we might obtain from close philological study.⁵ Rather, it is the hidden intentions that a suspicious scholar unearths via critique (or puts in the studied author’s mouth via voodoo).⁶ It is strange that scholars like Henderson, with

² Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 51.

³ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 87.

⁴ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 96.

⁵ Suspicious scholars are perhaps also themselves undead, with Mark Fisher describing them and their ilk as vampires, who convert ‘the suffering of particular groups—the more “marginal” the better—into academic capital’; see ‘Exiting the Vampire Castle,’ *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater, 2018), 765.

⁶ Seán Burke has noted how the death of the author often results in a replacement of the author; that is, the intentions of the author studied are swapped for the intentions of the author doing the studying (the scholar, critic, or theorist); see *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

all their moralising talk of silenced voices, or voices that remain suspiciously silent on topical issues, rarely ask whether they have the right to enact this critical thaumaturgy—whether they should speak so surely for the intentions of the most silent of all: the truly dead.

About the Author

Maurice Windleburn holds a PhD in musicology from the University of Melbourne. His work has been published in *Organised Sound*, *Tempo*, *Musurgia*, *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, *The Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, and *SoundEffects*. He is currently preparing a book on John Zorn for publication with Routledge.