

REVIEW | Henry Cow: The World is a Problem

Benjamin Piekut

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Henry Cow was formed at Cambridge University at the end of the 1960s, with a core of Fred Frith (brother of Simon Frith), Chris Cutler and Tim Hodgkinson alongside a number of other musicians including co-founder John Greaves, Geoff Leigh, Lindsay Cooper, Dagmar Krause and Georgina Born – several of whom have gone on to be active within academia. The band released four albums on Virgin Records between 1973 and 1975, with two further albums following in 1976 and 1979. It may be described as a politically and compositionally progressive rock band, though its music fits uneasily within the mediated history of progressive rock – one which typically preferences the commercially successful bands of the era such as Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Yes and Genesis. During the 1970s, these latter bands graduated to stadium-level gigs with gargantuan stage shows, while Henry Cow performed in the lower echelons of the touring circuit in the UK and Europe, with particularly strong followings in Italy (where they played multiple events for Partito Radicale and the Italian Communist Party) and in France. Commercial success may have been limited in comparison to the bands listed above, but the compositional, ideological and performance approach of the band has still been influential: for instance, there are sub-genre formations referred to as chamber rock, avant-prog and RIO (Rock In Opposition), which directly relate to the band, its offshoots, and like-minded contemporaries in Europe.

Benjamin Piekut's book is therefore a highly welcome addition to an expanding sub-field of progressive rock studies, not only for its focus on an influential band that has hitherto been largely side tracked in the academic and popular literature on progressive rock, but also in terms of his approach and ideas. The book as a whole falls into two main parts: a "collective biography" (xiii) of over three hundred pages, bookended by an academic commentary in the Introduction and Afterword.

As Piekut notes, such a structure may be unsatisfactory to academics seeking a more detailed literature review, but he has an eye to two markets simultaneously – the academic and the “die-hard fan” (2). The biography presents a chronological account that makes use of an extensive range of research materials including personal interviews and private records of band and crew members alongside documentary evidence from magazine articles and interviews published in the 1970s and early 1980s. Piekut has also listened in detail to the extant recorded and bootlegged music currently available to gain an impressive understanding of the musical development of the band over time – one most clearly seen in their live performances. This was not a band writing music solely for itself (the commonly held belief of progressive rock as art for art’s sake), but a group of musicians responding in an ongoing fashion to the development of their own personal political beliefs, as well to changing circumstances and audiences: necessity as the mother of invention. The band sought to create both new forms of rock music – they always saw themselves as a rock band rather than an avant-garde group (207) – and to do so within a Marxist-informed democratic collective. Piekut makes clear how the politics of the band affected the musical and interpersonal dynamics of the group, and refers to these tensions as exhibiting “contraviviality” (283): a “distributed autism” in which the energies of the band were directed toward the development of the music, to argumentation about the music, and to future paths forward, rather than to each other as individuals. As a result, their “art of living” (386) became increasingly problematic, though Piekut argues that this led to some highly inventive performances.

His narrative approach occasionally lapses into somewhat extensive sidebars, for instance about Virgin Records label-mates Faust (81–91), or into broader theoretical musings, such as George E. Lewis’ distinction between Eurological and Afrological improvisation (249–258), but is generally engaging, detailed and compellingly structured. Interpersonal relationships, conversations, beliefs and arguments are managed in a sensitive manner, and while it is certain that not all members of the band would agree with Piekut’s handling of the band’s history, he offers a seemingly well-balanced account that is supported by the documentary and interview material presented. Some members’ voices are heard more loudly than others, but this is an artefact of the research process, since some members appear to have been more open in their sharing of personal records and memories than others. In any case, to construct an account of events which occurred over forty years ago, and in a milieu that was not otherwise well documented, is a significant achievement.

In contrast to the biographical element, the Introduction and Afterword are highly academic in tone. The introduction places the band in its broader historical context well, and makes an explicit connection between the attitude of Henry Cow and that of the Krautrock bands of Germany – bands that focused on collective improvisation, and on avoiding pop culture’s fascination with individual genius and musicianship (20). Piekut is particularly good in his analysis of the improvisatory aspects of Henry Cow’s work, though more could have been said about how they produced the kind of highly complex scores that were rarely if ever seen in Krautrock. This is touched upon in the book with regard to individual members bringing largely complete compositions to the group (though this undermines the collective practice that they sought), and in relation to the knitting together of “Fred frags” (57) – short musical elements provided by Fred Frith which could be recombined in set lists; however, more could have been said about how the band negotiated this aspect of their practice.

The Afterword is notable for the introduction of the term “vernacular avant-garde”, even though this is, as the author says, a rather vague concept at present in terms of its application and definition (388). I would have liked a deeper engagement with the idea, rather than the somewhat freeform, almost improvised discussion that is offered. Nevertheless, some important points are worth noting. The vernacular avant-garde is suggested as a term to encompass avant-garde music that is created within the so-called low arts (e.g. rock music), and beyond both the mainstream music industry and the university/conservatoire academic sphere. It is defined through recordings rather than notation and could be described as amateur attempts to recreate and develop the sounds and musics heard on previously available recordings. This is a form of folk practice common within rock music more generally, and also chimes well with Chris Cutler’s own (1991) discussions about progression within music. For Piekut, the popularity of the LP format in the late 1960s “dramatically transformed the meaning of training itself by digging a route to professionalization that tunnelled under academe” (402). This is an observation that is important for all academics investigating the origins of progressive rock at that time.

Piekut’s book offers an invaluable resource for fans of Henry Cow and for those interested in the development of progressive rock during the 1970s. It gives a fascinating insight into band dynamics and approaches to music making, and casts light on a largely unexamined part of progressive rock history. As he notes himself, it may not fully meet the needs of an academic audience looking for extended theoretical discussion, yet it is nevertheless an important addition to a growing field of study.

References

Cutler, C., 1991. *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music*, 2nd ed. London: ReR Megacorp & New York: Semiotext(e)/Autonomedia.