



derek
bailey,
improviser

Peter Riley

The musicians who work in jazz make sometimes revolutionary use of existing resources like melody, harmony, rhythm, tone and timbre, and what's more they do it on the spur of the moment. They've progressed from syncopation through improvisation on the chords of popular tunes to modal patterns and the creation of instant music with no pre-set key or rhythmic base. Today, many musicians feel that true improvisation is only possible without reference to what's gone before, and accordingly use conventional instruments to produce pure sound instead of notes of determinable pitch. Conventional form is forsaken: a performance will commence when a player feels like beginning, and end when he feels the improvisation is complete.

Western Europe, and Britain in particular, seems to have produced more than its share of such pioneers, and over the last couple of years the guitarist Derek Bailey has become one of the most celebrated.

Derek Bailey is a virtuoso of the guitar. From every technical point of view he is a complete master of the instrument, and if one were to start making comparisons of technical ability he could only be placed on a world scale. Of this there is no doubt — but although he has been playing in England quite regularly for more than ten years, it seems unlikely that the average 'guitar enthusiast' is at all familiar with his name, or indeed has heard of him at all. The reason for this is principally that he is not simply a guitarist — he is an improvising musician. Rather than spend his time presenting performances, with whatever skill, of someone else's music, he chooses to create his own music as he plays. In him the roles of performer and composer are thus inextricably embodied. But neither does he wish to improvise in order to sustain a traditional idiom, as does the rock guitarist or the jazz guitarist — the whole conception of the music must be constantly recreated as a fresh event. So the idiom in which he works is entirely modern, and like most avant-garde music neither reaches nor aspires to a large public.

It should not be thought, though, that Derek Bailey's music is some sort of instant Boulez. The development from which he springs is that of jazz, and some people still think of him as a jazz musician, though the term seems increasingly inappropriate. The emphasis is on spontaneity rather than change; on material, instrumental fervour, rather than disembodied sound-patterns. His regard for the guitar itself is an inseparable aspect of the sound he produces. He has explored every possibility that the instrument offers, every conceivable method of producing sound from the wooden box and strings. At present he plays both acoustic guitar (normally with an additional sort of drone string stretched round one of his boots), and acoustic-electric with a contact mike behind the bridge, the stereophonic amplification controlled by two foot-pedals. It is symptomatic that the immaterialised sound of the completely electric guitar is not of interest to him. The point of the electrification is usually to bring the instrument to an extreme sensitivity to the performer's slightest action. By this and other means the guitar's native limitations are completely bypassed, and it becomes capable of an immense range of sonic effects, from the utmost delicacy of pitch and timbre, to clangorous bellows and shrill screams. It still sounds like a guitar — it is just that no sound of which the guitar is capable is either prescribed or forbidden. Certain traditional 'mistakes' such as the slapping of a string against the fretboard or the vibration against a fret when a note is stopped short of it — these are just additions to the sonic repertoire. Perhaps this is why people have been known to approach him after a concert and ask if he can in fact play the guitar, or whether he is taking lessons — which is also a sad comment on the deculturalised state of some 'music lovers', and their blocked receptivity to exploratory music.

In Derek Bailey we have a creative musician in the fullest sense — every task involved in the manifestation of music is undertaken by the one man except for the spurious tasks of creating a monumental performance on paper, divorced from the united moment of playing and hearing. The following paragraphs are mostly extracts from a long conversation recorded earlier this year, designed to explore this comprehensive musicianship. They cover three main subjects: improvisation, guitar techniques and tonality.

◀ The beginning of a piece of improvisation is an extraordinarily rewarding time. I mean it's such a rewarding or a testing or a tricky time that a lot of improvisers avoid it. I avoid it sometimes — I just smash straight in or I start by testing out the acoustics or something, or seeing how responsive the instrument is. But the opening is a very important time, and it seems sad to me that people who improvise, not totally, but using tunes or themes, motifs, tone-rows or anything, very often sacrifice the beginning of the piece in order to present this thing they're working on. The opening is very important territory; I wouldn't think you'd give it up very easily. In theme-and-variation improvising it would be better to play the variations first and then the theme, except that you'd never get round to playing the theme if you did that.

To me an improvisation is not so much a separate piece, more like a segment of a continuous process. It's a self-conscious segmentation and there are things working on the front and the end of it sometimes. Actually, I'm not interested in endings at all, it seems — every time I play an ending I finish up feeling disgusted. I once made a record with Misha Mengelberg where he selected the pieces that went on the record by listening to the master-tape, and when he'd heard enough he cut it with a pair of scissors. That's a fine ending as far as I'm concerned.

Like a lot of musicians I had a look at the world of European atonal concert music and got something out of it. The sort of language that serialism threw up, which wasn't actually serial, had some uses to me from an improvisation point of view. But they have to be taken out of that context. Similarly, I've spent time playing graphic scores and suchlike, and I've found when doing these things that more and more I was led to a situation where I wanted to improvise without any hindrance from these things, or anything else. I wanted to be unencumbered by any kind of musical prop. In the end it wasn't satisfactory to me unless the whole thing was improvised, everything about it. It isn't all the time. Yet in a way it is, because the possibility is there; you don't before you start, accept that something is not alterable. Of course you'll play what you're working on — but there's nothing sacrosanct, nothing that has to be repeated deliberately.

Judging the quality of an improvisation is totally subjective — just how it leaves you feeling — if you come out of it feeling satisfied or upwards rather than dissatisfied or downwards. It's a subjective reaction, very often connected, I think, with being technically in good shape or not. It has to feel fresh. I think that maybe the only way to get freshness in music now is through improvisation. There are lots of other reasons why I'm interested in improvisation, but that business of 'music of the moment' — I think I agree with that. I don't really know exactly what it means, but I think of improvised music as the best chance to get to music. That's the conclusion I've come to anyway. I think it's like mustard: like, when you first make it, it's something completely different from what it is ten minutes later.

In total improvisation you employ the language, or rather the material, that you're currently working on. So although you've dropped all the symbolic, unifying devices, you don't have any big problems getting from point A to point B of the music, because it's the space between A and B that you're interested in — the journey if you like, rather than the points. I'm interested in a series of events that can be taken separately or put together. But the only reason one is followed by the other is, that's the succession they took in time. One was created by the other, or possibly it was psychological. But, musically, I'm not interested in that situation where you play one thing and that implies one of three or four little things you're going to play next, which is what happens if you're working tonally.

It does go disastrously wrong on occasions; and there's nothing to fall back on, that's one of the hard things about totally improvised music. I can start off, and the room, a bad set of strings, say, and my state of mind combine to produce a complete loathing in me of what I'm playing. You can work through this but it's hard work, and the worst thing is knowing it sounds gruesome and it is gruesome, and people are listening to you play this load of shit. But there's nothing to fall back on. You just have to get on with it, because if you

did have something to fall back on it'd still be there where you left it after you'd finished falling back.

I don't make any decision before I play a certain note, not about the note anyway. Sometimes I decide to start in a certain way, such as to play some semi-acoustic stuff to check out the acoustics, acoustically, and then introduce some electric to see what that's like, and then play very loud for a short while to see what the acoustics are like for the electric, because there's a great range of acoustic response. But most of these things are to avoid being faced with the start, which as I say is a beautiful time, but I'm inclined to avoid it by deciding in general terms how to start.

Guitar technique for me is — well, I think you can be physically, or digitally, fit to play the guitar and you can understand a lot about the nature of the instrument. It does lend itself, not to certain musics, but to certain musical elements which very often, I think, don't appear in the music which is played on it, strangely enough.

I have an idea about letting the instrument have its say, letting it do what it wants to do, though that sounds a bit fanciful. It's vibrating strings over a wooden box. But for example to play the way conventional jazz was played — it's got nothing to do with the guitar. That way of playing electric guitars seems to me to have very little to do with either guitars or electricity.

I like to hear all the instrument vibrating. That's partly why I use a contact mike behind the bridge. Sometimes I use it for notes below the bridge now, but originally I used it only to pick up notes at the back of the bridge. The strings vibrate quite differently there, and it does add, not to the pitch but to the tone.

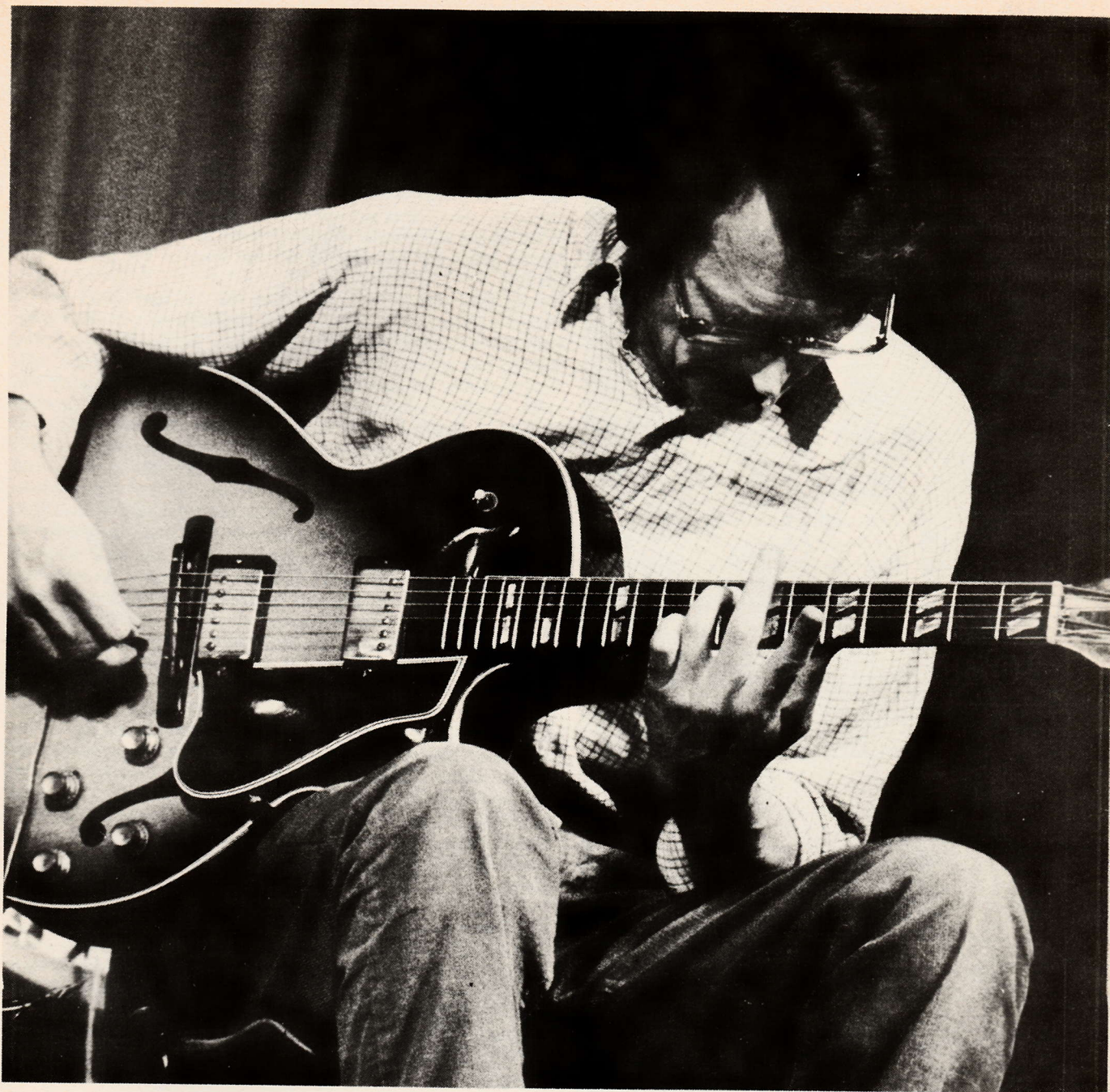
I don't use the scale as it's fretted on the guitar. I mean it's not often if I play two pitches in succession that they're produced by the same means. If I do play two identical pitches it's likely one would be stopped and the other harmonic. If a note's produced by different means it's not the same note for me — even by the same means on different strings so you get different string lengths vibrating; you've only got to listen to Charlie Christian to hear that.

The tempered scale's a sort of joke, really. I wouldn't have thought anyone's taken it seriously for fifty years. No jazz player has taken it seriously, whether he realises it or not. I'm quite interested in fractional divisions within an octave and all that, but mainly I just prefer the sound of intervals produced by different means.

There seems to be very little recognition of the fact that if someone plays the guitar in a certain way, it's probably in order to play a certain kind of music. If you wanted to play flamenco guitar it wouldn't be much use studying with a 1950s-style jazz guitarist. So techniques are connected with the music, with style. And the kind of technique I use on the guitar — well, for me it was like meeting certain musical requirements. I wanted to play a certain type of music, and with certain people perhaps, and there wasn't any way to do it playing the guitar like Charlie Christian. I think most techniques develop in a pragmatic way like that.

There's that thing in jazz about how important it is to express the idiom. And in jazz it's confused, unlike other musics; an Indian musician has no problems with the idiom — whatever he plays it comes out as Indian music, same with Flamenco — but jazz players have problems because they're more self-conscious. As improvisors, they can get led off into something else, for jazzmen are often well informed about other music. And when they do that they're not sure if it's jazz or not and to most jazzmen that's a very important question. That's why being drunk or tired or very relaxed — these psychological states might be helpful in playing jazz, as opposed to improvising. For me, I have enough problems when I'm completely clear-headed and digitally fit. Playing solo, you have to have as much help as possible.

I understand less and less why people improvise freely and use a tonal language. I found it necessary to move away from a tonal language when I started to improvise freely. For one thing, it's very difficult to find an area that hasn't been completely mined within tonality, because it is a confined area, and from an improvisation point of view that usually is the problem.



You set up so many reverberations of different kinds by improvising tonally — runs of semitones and tones and minor thirds and major thirds — constantly working on this small set of intervals, which have masses of previous connections. It's got so many associations, you're invariably going to drag the improvisation into predictable areas because of it — you're going to be taken into those areas in which tunes and so forth have been developed.

I don't like the word atonality because it's got certain very close associations: Schoenberg and that sort of early twentieth-century bang-bang music, and Webern as well (hush-hush music); I just think of it as non-tonality.

It just seems to me that tonality and atonality are to do with organising pitches. I was interested in working partly without pitch and partly with pitch that isn't organised. Or using pitch as an element, like timbre, rather than being the ultimate in the sound. Like a B flat in tonalities or atonality is a B flat and that's its function — to be a B flat. Well a B flat might be just an ingredient of a certain sound. I'm interested in combining pitches and non-pitches, like scraping the string at the same time as playing the note. That's what I use the behind-the-bridge stuff for, really, to combine with stuff in front of the bridge, just to have something else going on.

If I could explain it in a rather facile way, I think of tonality as like the globe, you know, an enclosed globe, and atonality surrounds it. Once you break out of that surround, it's non-tonality. It's a certain attitude towards the use of

pitch — a non-organised use of pitch. That might imply an indiscriminate, haphazard use of pitch — I don't mean that at all.

I think tonality is still a viable thing in song-form, actually. What I do has nothing to do with song-form. But I think songs are too strong — you can't fight song, I mean they're just tremendous music — any kind of song. It's the most communicable kind of music there is. You shouldn't mess around with songs; the sort of thing that some jazz-players have done for instance to beautiful songs is ludicrous — and for what?

The important thing for me is to be involved in what I'm doing. I do the same thing more or less every day. And sometimes I go out and do it in public. And I can do it as a continuous thing largely; I don't think of it as a continuous thing but it does seem to *be* a continuous thing. Usually some things are better and some things are worse when I do it in public; something detracts from my pleasure in it and something increases it, it depends. But the point is, if someone wants to come and listen to me working, well it doesn't actually make much difference.

Naturally it makes some difference to have 40 or 400 people in front of you. But mainly, it's just wheeling it all out into the open. I'm delighted people want to come and listen, but I feel that to offer any explanation is beside the point. Whatever I say is superfluous beside the playing. The whole meeting between the listener and me is contained in the playing as far as I'm concerned. ●