

The Multiple Politics of Henry Cow

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(in interview with BENJAMIN PIEKUT)

THE BAND HENRY COW WAS FORMED IN MAY 1968 by two Cambridge University undergraduates. Core members in the group's early years were guitarist Fred Frith, saxophonist and keyboard player Tim Hodgkinson, percussionist Chris Cutler, and bassist John Greaves. The group was later joined by oboist and bassoonist Lindsay Cooper, vocalist Dagmar Krause, and Georgina Born on bass guitar and occasionally cello. Henry Cow's music ranged widely across different styles: precise, electrified chamber music; jazzy solos with accompaniment; wild group improvisations; live electronic music and studio experimentation; rhythmically propulsive rock; art and cabaret songs; and multi-sectional suites comprising several or all of these styles. They were among the most explicitly political musical acts of their era, aligning with leftist organizations in the UK and Europe. The group disbanded in 1978.

This is an edited version of the interview that took place as a keynote presentation at the Red Strains conference.¹ All explanatory footnotes are by Benjamin Piekut.

BP: Do you recall that there was a distinct onset of political concerns in the band, or did your investments in the left develop more organically as a group?

CC: Organically – as a group. We'd all grown up in the sixties at a time of extraordinary innovation and turmoil – in literature, theatre, the visual arts, music – and like many of our peers we were chronically optimistic and thought we could change the world. We shared an unconsciously absorbed, broadly left-orientated, understanding of the world, informed – at first or

¹ Thanks to David Marquiss for his original transcription of this interview.

second hand – by Marx and the New Left, and fuelled by the iniquities of the war in Vietnam, apartheid, interventionism in South America, nuclear proliferation . . . the daily diet of a world gone wrong. For tools, Marx's was the best account we had: rigorous, theoretically grounded, built from the bottom up. So I'd say our broadly political orientation came inbuilt. The more overt politics for which we were later known developed slowly and in direct response to our marginalized circumstances, growing as we struggled with one another, with the indifference of the music industry and the press, and as we were forced to find practical ways to survive and protect our work. Adversity obliged us to articulate what exactly we thought we were doing and why we should continue to do it.

You can read this evolution from our first three LPs. *Leg end* was the first – its decidedly frivolous title derived from the cover: a colourful sock woven from pliable strips of half dry paint. The music was intricate, a little quirky, and revealed our influences: Soft Machine, Zappa, Coltrane, Mingus, the London improvisers and a handful of contemporary composers. It was essentially a light-hearted, if dense, collection of individual pieces, distinguished by a clean, transparent sound. If there was any thread running through it, it was Dadaistic. When the band first moved to London in 1971, we had assumed – correctly – that no one would want to book us, so we'd set up our own concert series under the name 'Cabaret Voltaire', inviting other experimental performers from various fields to join us. Both the artwork and presentation for this series were strongly influenced by its historic namesake. So, if we had an ethos at the time, it was a doctrine of sympathies. We felt that we were a part of a vanguard in a culture still for the most part unformed, a culture growing out of rock that integrated electric instruments, extended compositional forms, additive rhythms, non-generic compositional techniques and free improvisation, a field that seemed wide open, and that no one from the socially legitimate world of art music was much interested in, making it all ours.

We had fished for a record deal because that's what bands did then. Virgin took us on and released our first LP, but after less than a year, we were coping badly. We had conformity problems, the Virgin agency couldn't find us adequate work, reviewers were saying we were 'difficult', and now we were being pressed for a second album that we just weren't ready to deliver. On top of all that, Lindsay Cooper had just joined and we'd had almost no writing and rehearsal time. We decided to gamble. We thought we could fill a record by recording what we *had* written and generate the rest on the spot. Not as improvisations – we'd already done that – but as collective studio compositions. We began by improvising to tape, selecting and editing promising

sections, then writing or improvising extra parts on top, guided throughout by listening and adjudication. At the end we had a connected set of compositions that were not the fruit of any individual imagination but collectively constructed: compositions made of performances, discussion, experiment, and razor-blades. It was stressful, but also exciting – and it drew us together, not least because it obliged us to articulate the results we wanted to achieve and explain to one another *why* we supported the choices we made and *how* we determined what constituted failure or success. The talk went on after the day's work was done, as we considered our future: what to do with it, how to protect it. Should we forget the record company, booking agency, music press and just go back to relying on ourselves? Our eventual decision – to become no-sayers and form our own survival unit – was understood in broadly political terms, and we shaped our future strategies and arguments accordingly. But the album we produced – *Unrest* (1974) – was dark, moody and expressionistic, and not obviously political at all.

By the time we'd reached the third record in 1975, singer Dagmar Krause had joined us, and the texts we wrote for her were unequivocally political. Its title, taken from Brecht, was *In Praise of Learning*; across the back we had printed Grierson's aphorism 'Art is not a mirror, it's a hammer'. From the outside it was pretty clear we were in the message business. From the inside it was not so simple; I don't think we ever reached any universal political consensus. We just argued the hell out of individual problems and agreed dedicated strategies (or public statements, or specific actions) on a case-by-case basis. So to answer your question – I'd say we came to our political positions by way of a collective imperative to protect and survive in an environment in which we had very little support from the mainstream structures. These structures weren't working for us, and our options seemed to be: find out what would please the apparatus and adjust our work accordingly, or take our chances and go our own sweet way. At this stage the decision wasn't hard. And reverting to self-sufficiency put us firmly back in control.

BP: In your book *File Under Popular*,² you wrote of Henry Cow's attraction to the social values that you thought were inherent in rock. You wrote, 'We aim[ed] to discover this deep core, and to liberate it.' Could you say more about this 'deep core' of rock?

CC: I think we thought of rock as a universal vehicle, the music of its time. Recently minted, it had only come into focus in the early 1960s. Leading up

² Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (London: November Books, 1985); see, in particular, 'Progressive Music in the UK', 103–40.

to it there had been rockabilly, Presley, pop, doo-wop, R & B – a *smorgasbord* of forms coming out of black music mixed with southern country – and for complicated reasons this black-white hybrid had spoken to us; we had taken it to heart – and we set about chasing down its antecedents. Not just as consumers. We were picking up instruments and learning how to play them. I don't think it would be controversial to say that the history of Western popular music – certainly in the second half of the twentieth century – was intimately bound up with the exploration of what electrification made possible in music. And *we* were doing the exploring, uncovering new sonorities and unexplored hybrid forms; proposing combinations and techniques nobody had so far attempted and with nobody to correct or coerce us. Rock was abject for mainstream culture. There could be no 'right' way for a music so generally reviled, and this made us, in our own eyes, rebels as well as pioneers. In spite – or perhaps because – of the Damoclean bomb hanging over our heads, we really did believe that what we did would matter, that it would make a difference, that it would be *important*.

A second critical attribute of rock – as we understood it – was its rootedness in recording. Gramophone records mediate a species of virtual locality; recorded sound opens onto a kind of sonic *aleph*, a universal omnipresence that is constantly expanding and increasingly easy to access. So instead of learning locally through proximity and contact, we learned through absence – by ear – listening and copying. The anonymity, accessibility, ubiquity, and uniformity of records seemed to level their contents, making them indiscriminately available for inclusion in the musical vocabularies we were compiling. Because that's what distinguished the most interesting bands at this time: the way they evolved unique, polyglot, musical languages out of eclectic listening – ours more polyglot than most.

Add to this, group dynamics, a close community of people learning together, borrowing from one another, a bit of competitive nudging, youth – and you have a highly productive environment. And Henry Cow, unlike most of its rock contemporaries, was also seriously committed to so-called free improvisation, which is to say the spontaneous and collective production of *form*, as well as content. At least 35 per cent of any Henry Cow concert was improvised this way, and that called for profoundly *social* skills, and trust. In our case it meant evolving, and giving way to, a kind of group mind, since, to be genuinely spontaneous – to escape ownership – such improvisation has to be *emergent*; it can't be driven. Otherwise one ceases to play and starts merely to play along. Somehow all of this fell under the rubric 'rock' for us: this combination of instruments, generic eclecticism, outsider status, a collective approach to music-making, amplification, and black blues roots.

BP: The qualities of rock commonly thought to be ‘liberatory’ – a certain kind of anti-virtuosity, the do-it-yourself ethos, the directness and (perhaps) simplicity – are not the first things that come to mind when one hears Henry Cow. For example, later in the band’s career, you often performed *Erk Gah*, a fully notated work by Tim Hodgkinson that lasted over fifteen minutes and was composed using serial techniques. How did you understand the relationship between this kind of challenging and complex music and the more popular forms on which it was based? A different version of the same question would be: if Adorno had attended a Henry Cow concert, what would you say to him afterwards?

CC: What would I say to Adorno . . . ? I don’t think any of us would have got along very well with Adorno. We were dogmatic, but he was way more dogmatic than us. Of course, we loved jazz and popular music, which seemed to *belong* to us. We certainly didn’t recognize them simply as crudely instrumental monsters deployed to line pockets and glorify stupidity. I think we’d have said such oversimplification dishonours difference; it leaves one blind to the germ of the future. And, in any case, it’s a tactical error to project greater powers onto a perceived adversary than that adversary possesses. So we rather understood popular music as a site of struggle. We saw collective and creative value in it – as an activity, a language, a medium of exchange – and our idea was to broaden, sharpen, and make it more flexible. We weren’t pretending to be in the Mississippi Delta, and we didn’t want to play the *ersatz* pop we associated with product, but we did recognize innovation, craft and independence in a lot of the music our generation had invented, and we wanted to contribute to it.

Above all we wanted to introduce elements from other disciplines into its vocabulary. Record shops still classified LPs as ‘file under popular’, ‘file under jazz’, ‘file under classical’, but we thought there were other ways to listen – and other ways to put music together. More interesting ways. And since none of the genres we’d inherited offered us any sets of rules we wanted to obey, we set them all aside and approached everything as – at some level – compatible, to see where that led. Jazz, contemporary music, electronics, ethnic and folk materials, composition, improvisation, melody, noise – it was all grist to our mill. And since our personal inclinations were toward what was novel and complex, our music quickly became unusual and complicated – though we tried not to make it alienating. In fact, we worked hard to make it *pleasurable*. Aristotle suggests that what gives pleasure is learning; seeing a mimetic representation of the world as it is, or is said to be, or *could* be. That’s what appealed to us: what *could* be.

Critics, however, insisted we were difficult rather than stimulating, and

that an audience not composed of elective listeners would feel baffled and excluded. In fact, we did quite often – in Italy at least – play to families, children, grandparents, a more or less random sampling of citizens who had turned out, not for us, but for a day of food, wine, sun and whatever entertainment was laid on by the Partito Comunista Italiano and other left parties at the many annual fairs they organized throughout the summer. The majority of these audiences didn't seem to find us particularly alienating. There was plenty else to do but mostly they stayed to listen, and reacted positively, sometimes very positively. So, I guess, one way or another, there would have been plenty to talk to Adorno about – including hospitality, but I think Benjamin is the one we would have wanted to meet.

BP: It seems to me that in the story of this band we find one of the central problems confronting the left in the second half of the twentieth century, namely the replacement of what was thought to be a single struggle with a field of different struggles that align themselves along different axes – of gender, race, nation, sexuality. In the liner notes to the Henry Cow 40th-Anniversary box set, Nick Hobbs – who was, for a time, the band's administrator – made reference to something called 'an independent women's group' inside Henry Cow. This topic surely deserves a discussion of its own, but I'm interested right now in asking about the 'independent men's group' inside of Henry Cow. How do you think the band performed or resisted certain models of masculinity in rock culture at that time? I'll give you just one quick example of what I'm getting at. A few days ago, Tim Hodgkinson told me a story: Lindsay Cooper arrived late to a rehearsal. According to Tim, she was often late, so he said, 'Lindsay, I wish you could be more considerate of your comrades. It's really disrespectful to do that – can't you just get it together and come on time?', to which she responded by bursting into tears; she had had a bad day. Tim told me, 'I was *incapable* of doing what I should've done – just going over and giving her a hug. That was just not my upbringing. In a public school, we just didn't do that.' In retrospect, he sees that model of masculinity structuring the kind of relationships he had with other band members.

CC: [*long pause*] I'm sure we meant well. At the beginning, as a band, we were all male. That's just a fact. It was the 1970s and we had all grown up in the 1950s in a world shaped by our parents with their understandings formed in the 1930s. We had lived, in our teens, through vast social and intellectual upheavals that had questioned pretty much everything about the world we grew up in – this was the time of feminism, anti-psychiatry, black power, sexual liberation, you know the list – and we were all still working

through the impact of these changes on our own consciousnesses. I remember, when we invited Lindsay Cooper to join us, we were actively looking for women – as well as for more interesting instrumental resources. And Lindsay, equally a product of her time, was certainly someone who fought her corner and was anybody's equal. In the end you'd need to ask Georgina how it was to be in this band and not be male because, obviously, that's something I could never have experienced. Band life was seldom smooth, but the roughnesses didn't easily divide across gender lines. The fact that for a while in the later days there was a separate women's group is, given the conditions, not so unexpected; it's something a lot of intelligent feminists tried in the late 1970s as a way of working through global, as well as immediate, existential and political problems. As for the men in the band, we were certainly aware of our reconstitution as 'men' – and whatever it was that 'men' did, we tried hard not to do. By 1976 Henry Cow was three women and three men on stage, and we had a gender-mixed road crew: women drove, carried equipment and mixed the sound. But whether you can make a collective work by *willing* it to work is another question. Our attempt was serious nonetheless.

Maybe here is the place to say that everyone in the band – that is, players and crew – had a constitutionally equal say in everything to do with our daily existence, and received equal pay (such as it was). We ran the band through distributed responsibilities and minuted weekly meetings at which all decisions were made and all current tasks apportioned. The group only accepted unanimous decisions – to make certain that no simple majority could ever prevail. This could be painful and horribly time-consuming but, in my experience at least, once entrenched positions had been abandoned there would always eventually be some new proposal that found universal favour – and it would always be better than any of the abandoned variations.³ Even now, thirty-three years after our disbandment, all income received – from record sales for instance – is divided amongst all of the people who were ever in the group, musicians, administrators and road crew alike.

BP: Let's talk about rock culture more generally at that time. Was the gender parity of Henry Cow and its crew a spectacle for audience members, other bands, or the crews of other bands?

CC: Yes, we know, anecdotally, that people were surprised. I remember when we arrived in Sicily, very late, for a concert and were all lugging huge speaker

³ There exists considerable disagreement on this point. In my preliminary conversations with other members of the group, ideas about 'consensus' and 'unanimity' have been highly contested.

cabinets onto the stage, the local males made a dangerous nuisance of themselves trying to relieve the women of the heavier gear. Our constitution was unusual in Europe. A lot of people remarked on it at the time, and I am still sometimes approached at concerts by people who tell me how inspired they were by that. I don't think we often thought about it ourselves. Henry Cow was quite a closed community and did whatever was necessary to function, so our lives seemed quite normal and logical to us. But of course we knew it was vanishingly rare to see women driving, lugging equipment, engineering and telling the local PA guys what to do – this last especially problematic, since in those days men in charge of equipment were usually pretty reluctant to take instruction from women.

BP: The band forged a lasting connection with the Communist Party in Italy (PCI), beginning in 1975, nearly at the height of the PCI's electoral gains of the 1970s. Can you tell us a little more about that?

CC: This was a time when almost no non-Italian bands could play in Italy. This situation was the unintended consequence of an accumulation of riots and disruptions that culminated at a Led Zeppelin concert in 1971, after which Italy was effectively closed to outside bands for the next six years.⁴ In the middle of this Henry Cow turned up with Robert Wyatt and Gong for a big – and carefully alternative – free festival in Rome's Piazza Navona, organized by the underground magazines *Stampa Alternativa* and *Muzak*. It was billed as a 'Free concert for the opening of a national campaign for the decriminalization of marijuana and against hard drugs', so it came pre-inoculated against rioting. Because we were self-sufficient, and more or less permanently on tour, we travelled with our own lorry and a bus with beds and cooking facilities. So, after the concert we were able to park up in the Piazza Farnese to take a few days off in Rome. To the bus, on the second day, came some people who said, 'We are from the Partito Comunista Italiano – what are you doing tomorrow? Would you like to go and play in Pavia for the *Festa de l'Unità*?' We said yes. We went there, and played, and were immediately offered another festival in another city a couple of days later, and then another, and then another. After a while we were approached by the left-libertarian Partito Radicale, and so it went for the next four weeks. By the end of the month we had become *persona grata* in Italy, and had

⁴ The Led Zeppelin concert is described in detail in Keith Shadwick, *Led Zeppelin: The Story of a Band and their Music, 1968–80* (New York: Hal Leonard, 2005), 150. According to Franco Fabbri, there was a de facto restriction on foreign rock and pop stars in Italy from 1971 until about 1979, with a few exceptions; email communication with Ben Piekut, 17 December 2011.

open invitations to play there, underwritten by the left parties, whenever we wanted. So far as the parties were concerned, we were comrades. They cared not at all that our music was supposed to be strange and difficult; we were comrades, that was good enough. We must have played at scores of *Feste de l'Unità* over the next few years. On our second visit to Italy we joined the Milan-based cooperative *l'Orchestra Cooperativa*, entering their networks and becoming, essentially, honorary Italians.⁵

BP: Can you tell me more about the group's engagement with communist ideas or Marxist theory?

CC: I think some of us probably read some Gramsci at one time . . . But if there was anybody, it was Mao Tse Tung. At this time, in Europe for our generation, Mao was the man to quote. You know, we had no idea what was happening in China, but we had read the words. We had warmed to ideas like 'criticism and self-criticism', and 'all pessimism is unfounded'. I remember Dagmar wore a blue Mao jacket for years. However, that was an imputable ground; we didn't conduct any of our internal affairs in sectarian terms – which is why we took such issue with Cornelius Cardew when he decided to pursue the hard line in People's Liberation Music. Fur flew at the 1977 Music For Socialism event after their performance; critical essays were subsequently exchanged. We thought PLM was not doing the progressive cause any favours by pretending the world was other than it was. It seemed ridiculous to stand up in front of audiences as if they were a bunch of strikers who needed to be inspired to action by hearing some 'songs of struggle'. And the music was – mostly – so banal.

BP: I want to ask you about race. We're familiar with the ambivalent way that race appears in the discourse of punk: it might be aligned with white supremacy of the National Front on one hand, or with progressive, cross-racial affiliation (in the case of punk participation in Rock Against Racism) on the other. The place of race in the discourse of whatever scene it is that Henry Cow was a part of is less clear to me. For example, you've said 'we didn't want to be white people imitating black Americans'. In retrospect,

⁵ *l'Orchestra Cooperativa* was founded in 1975 by musicians and musical activists who objected to their treatment at the hands of the music industry as well as the leftist institutions that employed them to play at festivals, demonstrations, and other political events. Their activities included concert promotion, record distribution, music education, and research and publication; see Franco Fabbri, 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the 1970s: *l'Orchestra Co-operative, 1974–1983*', *Popular Music*, 26/3 (2007), 409–27.

do you think you were searching for a kind of white rock identity that wasn't compromised by that kind of cultural exchange?

CC: White identity? I don't think so. We were white of course; were born and grew up white. But if we didn't play reggae, it wasn't because we were looking for whiteness. Personally, I like reggae, I like to *listen* to reggae, but it isn't rooted in a culture I understand. It took its shape in another time and place and answers to life conditions and expressive needs very different from those that formed me. So I have to meet it as a tourist, not a natural-born citizen. To say that is not to say that I am looking for an *uncompromised* identity – on the contrary, everything I've been saying assigns a high value to the 'compromises' or cross-pollinations that make cultures evolve and flourish. Reggae is a Jamaican polyglot of local and international influences, as was jazz, the blues, soul music, *The Rite of Spring*, salsa, *Rhapsody in Blue* – every innovative music in the twentieth century. None was a copy and all were organic products of absorption, amalgamation and openness to other cultures. As was our own music: what was original in Henry Cow was largely what was adopted, internalized and adapted. We improvised, but we didn't improvise 'jazz'; we used blues and soul materials, but we didn't play blues or soul; we composed music of dense, scored complexity but didn't try to ape the clichés of contemporary music. Our music was hybrid and highly polyglot, so there was no thought on our part of purity, or whiteness.

These questions and problems were, so far as our work was concerned, pretty exclusively regarded as *musical* ones. However political we were in the way we organized ourselves, or in the way we thought about or discussed what we did as actors, when it came to the music – and the music is essentially what we were – musical considerations trumped all others, and these were open to all influences, from any source. In that respect, whiteness and blackness just weren't meaningful categories for us. And in some sense, in the world of acousmatic listening, arguably they do not meaningfully exist at all.⁶

BP: The ending of Henry Cow, insofar as there is an ending, was less a conclusion than a new beginning. In 1978 you brought a number of bands to London for a festival called Rock in Opposition. Could you tell us a little bit about why you organized it, whom you brought, and then what happened afterwards?

⁶ As theorized by electronic music pioneer Pierre Schaeffer, acousmatic listening is a kind of audition that takes place without seeing the sources of those sounds.

CC: Once we'd broken with Virgin Records we spent most of our time on the mainland of Europe. And that's where we found musicians with whom we felt some kind of affinity. These were bands coming up with original propositions rather than aping commercial orthodoxies. And they, like us, were outsiders. If they had record labels, they were their own. They sang in their own languages – which might not seem like much now, but was very unusual when most European bands – like Abba – sang in English. Some of the groups, Samla Mamma Manna and Stormy Six, for instance, made elements of national folk music an integral part of their musical language – though greatly transformed – while Univers Zero identified themselves with particular contemporary Belgian composers. As far as most of the world was concerned, however, these bands didn't exist; they weren't part of the official story told by a handful of Anglo-American record companies and a compliant music press. They didn't even cross European borders. We, on the other hand, as Brits, were treated as representatives of 'real' rock and had the keys to the continent. So it fell to us to try to gather the pieces together. Our first idea was to bring everyone to London and set up a large, visible event to attract the press and public – to say *here we are*. It was only after this festival that all the participants proposed we constitute Rock in Opposition [RIO] as a permanent organization. Then there were meetings, discussion papers and decisions made about what it would take for a band to be invited to join. Three new bands were inducted. There were, I think, four more festivals, one in each of our home countries; we also cooperated on mutual record distribution and arranged tours for one another.

Henry Cow had announced its intention to disband two months before setting the festival up. Our last concert was scheduled for July, so our involvement ceased after the second meeting, which took place in Switzerland in the late autumn of 1978. Recommended Records grew directly out of the RIO programme.⁷ After about a year and a half, as a formal organization, RIO quietly faded away, but the principle and the category and many of the networks stayed in place, and are still in place today.

⁷ Recommended is an independent distribution service set up by Nick Hobbs and Cutler to provide a central platform for innovative and experimental music.