

Pigeons

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1973, the English experimental rock band Henry Cow began playing something called “Pigeons,” but, after much sleuthing, I am still not certain what it was. I can’t say that acquiring this knowledge would change anything about my perception of the ensemble or what they were doing in this period, but historical research has its own logic, held together, in part, by particular scholarly drives: “Pigeons” piqued my curiosity, had become a curiosity by dint of my desire to know it.

This desire led me to sift through many types of material evidence, and press into service almost all of the research skills I had available. I’ll chronicle this quest in some detail here. Scholarship on the history of Western classical music has lately hosted so many quirks—historical details implicitly presented as estranging and marginal, but also as resonant and revelatory—partly because its inherited terms, shaped by the study of the canon, have been undermined by a generation of critique. My own pursuit of the quirky historical detail has taken a different path, one nonetheless produced by the same pressures. I mean to suggest that the project of critique is intertwined with the strategies of quirk historicism. From one angle, critique pushes the scholar away from the traditional objects of musicological knowledge; from another, the turn from critique harbors the risk of an indiscriminate empiricism—exemplified here in my obsessive pigeon hunt.¹

Henry Cow’s seventeen-date tour of England (in support of the German band Faust) peaked at the Rainbow Theatre in London on October 21, 1973, and they used the occasion of this performance in one of London’s biggest rock venues—at 3,500 seats—to round up their usual London collaborators and put on a special kind of show. Although it was the necessary next step in their careers as Virgin recording artists, the road had taken Henry Cow away from the London-based poets, painters, actors, performance artists, and musicians who had helped them to hone a theatrical, mixed-media rock performance style in the years before. They were eager, then, to reassemble this community of like-minded troublemakers. The

ABSTRACT The author shares his experience researching an elusive piece of music, reflecting on the possible causes of quirk historicism and the possible consequences of the postcritical turn. REPRESENTATIONS 132. Fall 2015 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 112–20. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2015.132.8.112.

challenge of coordinating the activities of fifteen actors, one poet, three artists, and thirteen guest musicians led the members of Henry Cow to create an usually large number of setlists, instructions, and plans for this single concert, and these documents, in turn, lead us back to “Pigeons.”

In Tim Hodgkinson’s notes on the song order that evening, he listed “Pidgeons” in about the middle of the set, shortly after the third text reading by D. J. Perry.² In the corresponding position in the instructions or script he created for the Cow’s musical guests, Fred Frith does not use that title, but instead specifies a more general description: “HENRY COW 3rd number—intro/rocky bits/quiet bit/guitar solo/Mingus style ending.”³ The online bootleg tape-trading community, though diligent and dedicated, comes up empty-handed for this concert; one digitized live recording floating around on the internet claims to document the event but appears mislabeled when compared to the surviving planning documents and musicians’ memories (all of which agree).

The paper trail disappears until February 1974, when Henry Cow entered Virgin’s Manor studio to record their sophomore album, *Unrest*. Always the scribbler, Hodgkinson kept detailed notes on the creative process. There we find mixing suggestions for a “Pidge” (“begin with guitar and fade backing in”) and another note to overdub one more guitar solo on “Pidgeons.”⁴ Is “Pigeons” on *Unrest*? No, or at least not by that name. And here we get our first taste of the naming problem, because “Zipperary,” “Berlinerbollen,” “Fred’s Piece,” and “Pure Bliss”—to name a few other titles from Hodgkinson’s notes—also fail to appear on the album. Henry Cow usually delayed settling on a final title for a given piece until the last minute—even if they had been performing the music in concert for months. For example, Hodgkinson only referred to “Fred’s Piece” as “Ruins” in his jottings after the band had completed *Unrest* and sent off the artwork and text for the LP. Many of the other temporary names find their final versions (and titles) on the record, but what was called “Pigeons” has no clear counterpart on the released work (judging by planned durations and instrumentation), nor does it show up on rough mixes of the multitrack masters that Hodgkinson made in the late 1980s.

Lindsay Cooper had just joined the band when they recorded *Unrest*. Having escaped the Royal Academy after one year, she had been playing with the folk-rock band Comus, as well as the free improvising dramatic troupe Ritual Theatre before joining the Cow. Cooper had skills, but the recording session proved difficult because a dentist had removed her wisdom teeth a few days before. In any case, the aftereffects of the procedure had disappeared by late April, when Henry Cow recorded a session for John Peel’s BBC radio show that began with Cooper’s cracking oboe solo. An MP3 recording of this broadcast has made it onto the Internet; and *that uploader*

titled the track “Pigeons.” The author of this bit of metadata remains unknown, but it seems likely that the digitizer copied the titles as they appeared on the tape box in the BBC archives (that is, if it was an inside job), or she or he took them from Peel’s back-announcement (if it was taped off the radio). In either case, someone from the band told someone at the studio that the first number was called “Pigeons.”⁵

About two minutes long, Cooper’s feature flutters about, unaccompanied (and not un-pigeonlike), for about forty-five seconds, when bassist John Greaves fades in a pedal of quarter notes on the low E, thumping away at about 120 beats per minute. Soon after, Frith adds a filigreed piano line that ambles, in a pensive duet with Cooper, from the top of the keyboard down to the depths, where it gathers chunka-chunka force in eighth-note quartile chords that overwhelm the oboe, which disappears. After the fog clears, Frith takes twelve beats to ascend back to the top, whereupon the band launches into “Ruins,” the eleven-minute composition (also by Frith) that was their centerpiece at the time. Listening to this transition, it becomes clear that “Pigeons” is an extended, improvised introduction to “Ruins.” Pigeons often go with ruins. But the piece does not introduce “Ruins” on *Unrest*; instead, the recorded version of the latter begins with a high F-sharp that drones away on the organ, punctuated by interjections of reeds, piano, xylophone, and triangle. This intro is different from the BBC “Pigeons,” but it shares a certain feel—the pedal tone of the bass is now an organ drone; the piano and oboe are still there, but are more “composed” sounding on *Unrest*. Could “Pigeons” have been a wild extension of the previously recorded intro to “Ruins”?

My hunt for “Pigeons” changed from an ordinary failure into a comedy of errors on a Friday night in April 2012, when I rummaged through Cooper’s closet as she rested in the room next door. My eyes fell upon a single page of staff paper, titled “Pigeons” (in Frith’s hand; see fig. 1). Drawing it out, I discovered an undated oboe part that consisted of nothing but five lines of empty bars in unusual meters, followed by nine little notes for the flute. It was no kind of answer.

I worked on this puzzle, without success, in my interviews with former Cows. Taking place at a late stage in my increasingly desperate hunt, this conversation with Cutler reads retrospectively more like an interrogation:

PIEKUT: “Pigeons.”

CUTLER: Mm-hm?

PIEKUT: “Pigeons.”

CUTLER: Yeah, I remember “Pigeons” — a Fred piece.

PIEKUT: Tell me about “Pigeons.”

CUTLER: I don’t know how it goes, because he wrote so many pieces around that time.

PIEKUT: “That time” being leading into *Unrest* [that is, 1974]?

CUTLER: Oh, no. That time being . . . Okay, I associate “Pigeons” with the late-period, we-were-already-broken-up Henry Cow [that is, 1978].⁶

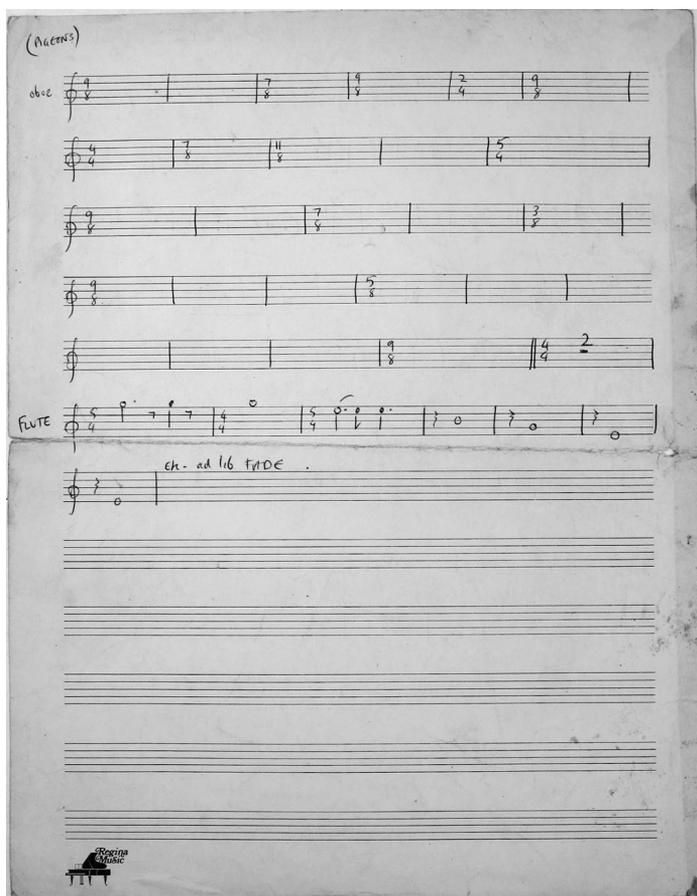


FIGURE 1. Fred Frith, “Pigeons,” oboe and flute part, date unknown. Lindsay Cooper papers, reproduced with permission of the composer and the Lindsay Cooper Estate.

Likewise, the other members of the group drew blanks.

In August 2014, however, I received a short e-mail message from Frith. Poking around in his in-laws’ attic in Stuttgart, he had turned up an unexpected treasure. He wrote, “Having started to go through the music I located I have discovered music for Pigeons (dated 1974) which appears to be various fragments and sketches labelled ‘used on Beefheart Tour’ [that is, in mid-1974]. Just fyi!” “Tim’s going to lose it when he hears about this,” I replied, “We devoted *hours* to figuring that one out. Ah, it’s a discovery that nobody else will be able to appreciate, nor should they!” After sharing the news quickly with Hodgkinson, I received the following response in short order:

“an email from fred arrived at the same time as this one of yours: i was going to write him: for god’s sake don’t tell ben, he’ll have a heart-attack. sort of: musical sleuth dies in pigeon discovery shock.”

Well, I *was* excited. The “discovery” amounted to two pages of manuscript paper, both double-sided but only one of which makes use of the verso. The first and third sides seem related—they are separated by a passage of audibly distinct material that begins on the bottom of recto 1 and continues onto the verso in red ink, while Frith has written what I take to be the “Pigeons” material in blue and black ink. That material consists—on the first page—of some chords and a bass line in mixed Frithian meters (15/8, 7/8; see a transcription in example 1), with a vocal melody sketched below. He has repeated the same chordal material on the third side of the manuscript, but with a couple of additions and refinements (see example 2). Although this music doesn’t resemble much of what I’d imagined of “Pigeons” before, it does suggest another Henry Cow song from about this time: “Beautiful as the Moon—Terrible as an Army with Banners,” by Frith with lyrics by Cutler (see example 3). The opening rhythmic profile of the first two chords matches that of a prominent section of “Banners” (in the latter’s “No Sun/No Birds” section, at 0:47 of the CD reissue of *In Praise of Learning*); the eighth-note, passing-tone stutter in measure 2 of both examples is a dead ringer for another section of “Banners,” at 4:00. And though the harmonies don’t quite match, this “Pigeons” sketch and “Banners” mix major and minor chords in similar ways, particularly in measures 3–5 of example 1, where the progression descends chromatically (BMA9 to B-flatMA9 to A[add 9]) in a manner highly suggestive of 0:28 from “Banners.” The arpeggiation of these chords in example 2, with their snaking transformations, further solidifies the resemblance. Most significant, perhaps, is the pedal tone on D, in example 2 measure 1, which creates tension in the same way as the bass pedal that forms one of the most distinctive features of “Banners”; at measure 4, the pedal shifts to A, where it finds itself as the root of a major 9 sonority at the end of the progression, analogous to the function of the bass pedal in “Banners” (a B that forms the root of a BMA9 chord at the end of the phrase). Although the other music that Frith has notated in these “Pigeons” sketches—a bass line and a vocal melody—does not show up in “Banners,” its extreme chromaticism persists in the final parts, which move in semitonal motion more often than not.

“Pigeons” has continually escaped my grasp for a number of reasons, but the most important may have to do with a category problem. My obsessive search for a single named piece has obscured the plain fact that there are only pieces, only fragments—then as now. Henry Cow habitually titled and retitled their music; they continually pulled apart written material and used it as the basis for improvisation or new written composition; they experimented

EXAMPLE 1. Transcription of Frith, “Pigeons” sketch, recto 1, dated 1974. Fred Frith personal archive, transcribed with permission of the composer.

EXAMPLE 2. Transcription of Frith, “Pigeons” sketch, recto 2, dated 1974. Fred Frith personal archive, transcribed with permission of the composer.

EXAMPLE 3. Transcription of Frith, “Beautiful as the Moon—Terrible as an Army with Banners” sketch, circa 1974. Fred Frith personal archive, transcribed with permission of the composer.

nightly with surprising juxtapositions of modules; they often wrote down just enough to get by; they combined these multifarious materials with whatever they found in the performance environment: an unusual stage set-up, a guest artist or two, or a recording apparatus. Each variable might have produced a “Pigeons” that was specific but not definitive; we encounter all music in such shifting manifestations. Hodgkinson explains,

I can imagine you could have a double-page spread with columns where, say you have a title [on one side]: “Pigeons.” In phase one “Pigeons” refers to part of this piece in which John plays one note on the bass repeatedly. In phase two this refers to a section used in sets with an oboe solo, the same bass, and a bit of free piano. In stage three, “Pigeons” is no longer referred to as “Pigeons” and is simply referred to as the introduction to “Ruins.” In stage four “Ruins” is given a new introduction, so “Pigeons” . . . the pigeons have been shot. Or even, we do another thing that involves *another* note being played repeatedly on the bass, which then becomes called “Pigeons.”⁷

Perhaps what is so compelling about “Pigeons,” beyond the thrill of the chase, is that its diaphanous status so closely mirrors the partial guises in which any piece of music can be encountered. But it is also a revelatory point from which to survey historicism and its quirks precisely because the wealth of documentation distinguishes it from other musicological quirk-work. Thanks to the willing participation of the musicians as informants and their archiving of sources, my quest for “Pigeons” involved sorting and deciphering reams of information, rather than the (perhaps) more common historian’s experience of squeezing one or two archival finds to yield a few drops of relevance. When the terrain is so bleak, the mere discovery of an obscure fact or evidence of forgotten musical practices can be elevated to the status of knowledge. But a case like this, where the researcher can exchange e-mails with his historical actors or theorize with them even as the desired object remains elusive, might clarify the distinction between mere data and historical knowledge.

Now, I am not sure that I would call “Pigeons” a historicist quirk in itself. In the first place, its quirkiness is not the consequence of an oblique or buried relation to more canonical objects of knowledge. But “Pigeons” does have in common with other quirks the problem of relative importance: the Cows do not share my obsession with it. The historical actors are bemused by, or even dismissive of, my attempts to get to the bottom of this bit of music. To be sure, even I myself don’t see clearly what has driven my relentless pursuit of this unstable object.

One answer has to do with the qualified role of traditional critique in my project. As an esoteric taste, and one of comparatively recent vintage, experimental music has not accrued the many layers of scholarly treatment that we find with earlier repertoires. There is a long-running conversation, of course, but it has not yet offered a historically robust accounting of experimental music practices across classical-, jazz-, and pop-affiliated networks. For this reason, my history of Henry Cow cannot be wholly, or even largely, defined by a critique that runs up against existing accounts, exposing their flaws and elbowing them aside. Although the excitement of denouncing other scholarship or critiquing the state of the field are important scholarly

pleasures, my interest in the group necessarily extends beyond a desire to investigate the limits of experimental music studies or to stretch musicological definitions of modernism and the avant-garde. This band—like any object of inquiry from the past—didn't make music just to provide buckshot for the musicological pigeon shoots of the twenty-first century. Absent this motivation, however, I seem to be getting sucked down pigeonholes of discovering The Truth about insignificant details, as if the energy I would have mustered to propel a devastating critique, now uncathected, simply flops around excitedly in "Pigeons"'s wake.

Rita Felski describes the "secondariness" of critique: it's always after something else.⁸ A belated form, it looks back on older scholarly texts and "corrects" them, or it returns to musical (or literary) texts to pound out a new counter-meaning. If Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial critiques of the canon have impelled a certain flight from works to quirks, those quirks just as often turn around to propel a critique of the same. But I am loath to transform Henry Cow into a critical hammer turned on something else. A promotion from secondary to primary status means that the band can lead one to new problems and fresh uncertainties rather than corrections or resolutions of old ones, but this search for an unknown unknown harbors the risk of flattening out the significance of discrete curiosities.

In place of critique (or, truthfully, in addition to it), this Henry Cow project stimulates other pleasures: building trust, weighing ethical responsibilities, discovering new analytical problems, finding a compelling narrative form for many intertwined lives, addressing a wider public of interested readers, and contributing a historical perspective to a contemporary experimental music scene that has plenty of rock in it but little documented understanding of how it got there. That sounds promising enough for me to warrant some further sleuthing in spite of the pitfalls of indiscriminate empiricism. Besides, what if a new bootleg of "Pigeons" surfaces soon?

Notes

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1. On the contemporary reconsideration of critique as the dominant paradigm in humanities scholarship, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, 2003), 123–52; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–48; "The Way We Read Now," special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009); Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History*

- 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371–91; and Rita Felski, “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (2012), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/431>.
2. Tim Hodgkinson, “Henry Cow 3” notebook [1973], Tim Hodgkinson personal archive.
 3. Setlist, Fred Frith personal archive.
 4. Tim Hodgkinson, “Henri Vache 4” notebook [1974–75], Tim Hodgkinson personal archive.
 5. This fact leads me to discount the possibility that another avian tune from *Unrest*, “Bittern Storm Over Ulm,” was in fact “Pigeons”: both titles appear in the metadata of the MP3 file.
 6. Chris Cutler, interview with the author, May 12, 2012, Croydon, UK.
 7. Tim Hodgkinson, interview with the author, March 24, 2012, Brixton, UK.
 8. Felski, “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion”; see also her forthcoming book, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015).