

Henry Cow. The World is a Problem, Benjamin Piekut (2019)
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In a recent interview, Chris Cutler, the drummer and one of the main members of Henry Cow, stated that:

it would be a hard sell to pitch Henry Cow as proto-punks. While Punk rejected mainstream culture – until it became mainstream itself – Henry Cow embraced capital C culture with both hands and tried to integrate its fringes into a new mainstream. We didn't just want to speak to our peers or our own generation. We were inclusive and directed our music at anyone prepared to listen; Punk, on the other hand, was culturally very tunnel-visioned. (Foster, 2019)

So, in the light of this antagonistic remark, why review a book about Henry Cow in *Punk & Post-Punk*? A good question, and one immediately asked by the reviews editor when I put the idea to him. Firstly, the time frame is important here: Henry Cow were active during the mid 1970s when punk arrived, swiftly followed by post-punk, and would perhaps have been regarded as part of the 'enemy', the progrock monster that much punk set out to challenge and destroy. Yet as this book explains Henry Cow set themselves against much contemporary music, including said progrock.

Secondly, and more importantly, they were political in the extreme, drawing on political and social analysis to discuss their own ambition, working arrangements and songs, but also writing and composing material they regarded as politically informed. In the end they would pretty much implode from their political ambition and discourse, along with their personal social ineptitudes, with band members going on to produce much more exciting, listenable and experimental work¹ than the five studio albums and one live album Henry Cow put their name to (1973, 1974, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1979).

Piekut is an interesting critic in that he doesn't do much more than arrange and re-present information, whether music press opinion or notes by band members themselves, mostly in a highly readable manner. (There are a few tangents into academic-speak and a few episodes of musical theory, but – thankfully – not much.) In many ways this is a band biography, one that doesn't actually show the band in a good light. Henry Cow were wont to take themselves seriously, way-too-seriously, and if anything they show their inability to empathise with each other, understand opposing points-of-view, or have a good time.

Formed in Cambridge, Henry Cow were a group comprising intellectuals and classically-trained musicians, who thought long and hard (and endlessly) about the music they created, composed and performed, and the dialectic between those activities. Why shouldn't the proletariat enjoy clever music? Why couldn't people think and learn from both music and lyrics? How did improvisation fit with composed segments? (And didn't having a starting and finishing place mean it wasn't actually an improvisation, just a link passage?) Although Cutler in 2019 reflected that:

we were musicians. We were concerned with the music. But, as political people working in a highly politicized environment we could hardly – nor did we wish to – separate our musical lives from their social and political contexts. (Foster 2019)

it's clear from Piekut's book that the political and the social business of compromise, collaboration and organisation would dominate Henry Cow throughout their existence.

One early tension came from Lindsay Cooper joining. She knew more music theory and had better sight-reading skills than the others; she was also a woman in a band of boys. All of this would create problems, which – using the excuse of a lack of commitment – led to her being asked to leave (although she would later be invited back). In a similar fashion a longer-term collaboration with fellow Virgin labelmates Slapp Happy, purveyors of smartarse pop ditties, would lead to their demise and lasting resentments, following the collaborative making of two very different albums. (1975a, 1975b)

Peter Blegvad notes that 'We loved pop, but we were conflicted, we thought pop was dumb' (p171), the we here being Slapp Happy (or more specifically Anthony Moore and Blegvad). Henry Cow kept singer Dagmar Krauss and spat out Blegvad and Moore. Chris Cutler states that 'We went into that rehearsal [post *In Praise of Learning* (1975b)] with the intention of being a band. We came out of the rehearsal with two people gone, Dagmar in Henry Cow, and the merged band a thing of the past.' (p193)

This flat statement evidences the lack of responsibility Cutler and the rest of Henry Cow were willing to take. These things just happened, like it or not; and the original members did not seem to discuss their inability to take on board the more anarchic and dada-esque leanings of Blegvad and Moore, despite previously inviting them to join the band. Although Greaves says that 'for Chris to match wits... with Anthony [Moore] and Peter [Blegvad], it was a pretty high level of communication' [p180] and Cutler notes 'I don't think we believed that certain musical forms could convey particular ideologies' (Foster 2019), it was the politics and working out of them that obsessed Henry Cow.

Marriages, divorce, affairs, children, were anathema to the band, and individuals would be sacrificed (sacked or asked to leave) for the communal good, for the band to ensure survival. Cutler would scribble 'Death to the individual!' in a draft booklet prepared during the two band's collaboration, and before long Henry Cow would be writing and performing explicitly political works such as 'Living in the Heart of the Beast' and 'Beautiful as the Moon – Terrible as an Army with Banners' (1975b) and adopting Maoist politics as they played throughout Europe at gigs they had arranged themselves.

They attempted to be self-sufficient, living in a tour bus, cooking for themselves, buying and maintaining their own PA equipment and vehicles, and setting up informal relationships with the likes of the Italian Communist Party, and joining with other bands such as Stormy Six and Univers Zero to create an informal and mutually supportive organisation Rock In Opposition (RIO). The musical similarities of the RIO bands makes it clear that Henry Cow were not as unique as they liked to think: all of the bands combined elements of chamber, folk and

contemporary classical music with rock, all perhaps drawing more on mainland European music than British.

Despite great gigs, interesting music, the re-introduction of improvisation in concert, and the support networks they had created, personal tensions would continue. Georgie Born, who joined and left during the final period says:

What got to me over the years and months was this kind of absence of these very basic protocols, of kind of human interchange, which didn't seem to be very present much, ever' (p375)

A sad indictment of a band who prided themselves on doing nothing without discussing it. Yet Piekut notes that it was more than personal problems that caused Henry Cow's demise, instead suggesting that:

the post-1968 collection of social, technical and institutional arrangements that could host a Henry Cow no longer operated, or no longer operated in the same way. (p383)

Even in dissolution the band would conceptualise, with Cutler suggesting that 'the *work* of the group will go on – the group is disbanding *in order that* this work, what we have stood for, can continue', although Hodgkinson seems clearer-headed and more honest when he notes that 'I recognize simply that this time we failed.' (p385)

Although Piekut offers the reader an 'Afterword: The Vernacular Avant-Garde' (pp387-407) which tries to conceptualize both 'anti-institutional politics' and 'popular music aesthetics', it feels like an aside, and does not grapple with the basic question why Henry Cow thought their awkward and somewhat mannered music could ever be popular with audiences! Piekut could usefully have woven some of this critical material throughout the book. As it stands he notes that although Henry Cow inhabited 'bracing artistic territory' (a rather ambivalent term) 'the real "strange tension" manifested not among the Cows in their emotional exchange but in the chasm between their modes of working and their modes of living.' (p386).

Piekut's readable and informative book makes this 'strange tension' the centre of the band's erratic and intriguing development and dissolution. By adopting an inclusive and comprehensive approach to using contemporaneous band and individual material, he is able to combine the personal, group and musical into a coherent and engaging history of one of the strangest and off-the-wall bands of the late 20th century, whilst also taking time to point out that '[t]he idea of *avant-garde* describes a deeply flawed, broken space'. (p389) This book makes clear that Henry Cow never quite understood that if 'the world is a problem', they were in the world, of the world and part of the problem.

FOOTNOTES

1. I would direct reader to albums such as Dagmar Krauss' album with Kevin Coyne, *Babble* (1979), her albums with News from Babel (1984, 1985) and *Supply and Demand*, her solo album of songs by Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler (1986); Lindsay Cooper's *Rags* (1981) and *The*

Golddiggers (1983); the three Art Bears albums (1978, 1979, 1981); Tim Hodgkinson's work with The Work (e.g. 1982) and God (e.g. 1992, 1994); Fred Frith's work with Massacre (1981), Death Ambient (1995, 1999, 2007), Skeleton Crew (1984, 1986), his improvisations with Chris Cutler (e.g. 1983), and much of his solo work (e.g. 1980, 1981). Chris Cutler has recorded solo albums (2001, 2005, 2006) and worked with a number of the above bands, as well as with many others, including Pere Ubu (1988, 1989), Hail (1992) and Biota (1995); he also wrote *File Under Popular*, a book of essays (1984). For information about music by Peter Blegvad see 'Encyclopaedic Tendencies and Impossible Projects: An interview with Peter Blegvad' (Loydell, 2018).

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(1433 words excluding footnotes and bibliography)