

***THE LONDON MUSICIANS' COLLECTIVE. 'AN OBSTINATE CLOT OF INVENTION',
TREVOR BARRE (2020)***

London: Limbic, 233 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1-5272-6657-9, p/bk, £13.00

***PIANOS, TOYS, MUSIC AND NOISE: CONVERSATIONS WITH STEVE BERESFORD, ANDY
HAMILTON (2021)***

London: Bloomsbury, 291 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1-5013-6644-4, h/bk, £81.00

Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University

When I pitched this review to the journal's editors I did so on the basis that the London Musicians' Collective (LMC), which Steve Beresford was a founding member of, hosted many post-punk bands and events, and that there was a huge overlap between improvisation and the post-punk musical explorations of the late 70s and early 80s. I mentioned Lol Coxhill playing saxophone for The Damned on their *Music For Pleasure* album (1977), Evan Parker's multiphonic saxes played using cyclical breathing on Scott Walker's *Climate of Hunter* (1984) and Steve Beresford's playing with The Slits live and on record (1981, 1998), The Flying Lizards (1), and on various dub albums such as Prince Far-I's *Cry Tuff Dub Encounter Chapter 3* (1980) and The New Age Steppers' eponymous debut (1981), both of which were produced by Adrian Sherwood (who met Beresford through his work with The Slits). Now that the books are here and I have read them I find that I was perhaps a little optimistic with regard to these titles' engagement with post-punk.

Trevor Barre's book is a badly-designed and self-published volume. It has been 'researched' by the author, who admits in his 'Preface' that he only ever attended one LMC festival in 1995 but '[a]s some form of compensation [...] decided to attempt a history of the organisation that facilitated these festivals.' (p. 12) He goes on to add that '[i]t should be stressed that it is *a* history, as opposed to *the* history', which is fair enough but also very pertinent, as the whole book seems to rely on a few texts which are readily-available to those inclined to look. It very much feels that Barre was not only late to the party (the LMC was set up in the mid 1970s) but unable to undertake original and detailed research. In addition, his bibliography is incomplete, much of the material he quotes from remains unreferenced, there is no index, and he often resorts to lists and summary.

What it makes clear, however, is the ramshackle nature of the LMC, a collective originally housed in a cold, damp British Railway property and reliant on what seems like a very small number of their members to make anything happen, be that administration, promotion, organization or the upkeep and maintenance of the building; most, it seemed, just wanted to play their own music. It also shows that despite the venue offering, in the words of Paul Burwell, '...a space here you could do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted, to do it [sic], and for as long as you wanted to do it' (p. 98), the LMC were rooted in improvisation and experimental jazz, with many members disinterested in anything that appeared too 'mainstream'. Photographer Jan Kilby 'had the impression of some sort of clique akin to the SWP, but concerned with one of the most obscure developments of sound art.' (p. 80)

This is, of course, somewhat unfair. My own visits to the LMC in the late 70s and cusp of the 80s included not only evenings of dense, shifting improvisation-cum-noise, be that Phil Minton's vocal gymnastics or Roger Turner's solo percussion, but Keith Tippett's lyrical piano solos, Lol Coxhill's catholic saxophone sets which were as likely to engage with early 20th century song as honking and squeaking, David Toop's careful and slow textural sound explorations, and the likes of Mark Charig and Nick Evans, who I knew from their work with King Crimson.

Barre's book is, however, as much about group dynamics and dysfunction as music. It is full of lament, argument, bitching and disgruntled musicians, much of it directed against the later, more organised and successful incarnation(s) of the LMC, which received arts council funding and organised various festivals and national tours.

In a similar way, it seems to me that Hamilton's book says as much about research methodologies as his subject. Earlier this week I had my interview articles from *Punk & Post-Punk* dismissed by an academic editor as 'journalism'; despite and in addition to this I continue to pursue academic writing based upon the theory and practicalities of sampling, remix, curation and 're-presentation'. (I also teach a module about 'writing back and remixing'.) It's encouraging, therefore, to see Hamilton's conversations with Steve Beresford published by Bloomsbury.

As Hamilton makes clear, numerous meetings and conversations have been curated and shaped into thematic chapters and episodes, an approach (which maybe have been imposed by the publishers?) that is mostly successful, although here and there subjects sometimes peter out only to remerge several chapters later, or are simply abandoned in lieu of chronological movement.

Autobiography, of course, is not regarded as a good academic tool, and authors and musicians are not, of course to be trusted to interpret or critique their own texts. Here, however, Hamilton makes it work: he prods and cajoles Beresford to add detail or to comment, offers new contexts and ways of critically engaging with what is being discussed, as well as clearly relishing the stories Beresford is telling.

Beresford is obviously not one of those who disliked other types of music being presented at the LMC; his knowledge of and interest in musical types and genres appears vast, his discography and the list of those he has played with (or just knows or has seen play), even larger. Readers of *Punk and Post-Punk* may enjoy the final chapters – 'Comedy and Entertainment', 'Popular Music, Popular Culture' and 'Electronics, Sound, and Recording' – the most, but anyone interested in sound, noise, music and musicians will want to read this book. Beresford is self-deprecating, self-effacing and prone to doing the unexpected, often upsetting those he is working with: he clearly doesn't enjoy playing with, or the company of, po-faced or egotistical musicians, nor dealing with bullshit or disorganisation.

On the page, Beresford is not only surprising but also philosophical and focussed, with both Hamilton and himself steering discussion back to music not gossip or the merely biographical or anecdotal. Hamilton inserts (rather clumsily, it has to be said) brief biographies and statements by many of the musicians Beresford mentions but the book's bibliography and discography is and comprehensive, the footnotes and asides

assured, the index detailed and useful. I guess the only question is why on earth Bloomsbury aren't producing an affordable paperback edition? – but that's a discussion for another day. As it is, it's good to see this exploratory and wide-ranging book out in the world.

NOTES

(1) According to Beresford his only role in The Flying Lizards was on the band's two *Top of the Pops* performances in August 1979: 'I had nothing to do with it, except miming'. (Hamilton, p192) This is contradicted by the band's *Wikipedia* entry (accessed 10 April 2021) which notes 'the group was a loose collective of avant-garde and free improvising musicians, such as David Toop and Steve Beresford as instrumentalists', but supported by *Discogs* (accessed 10 April 2021) which has both Beresford's and Toop's names struck through in the 'members' listing.

REFERENCES

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(1069 words excluding titles, note and references)