

Unholy Ghosts — conspiracy theories and Albert Ayler

Foreword

Had my blindness not occurred I would probably have included a version of the following account in my recently published memoir: *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*. Although dire, my sight-impairment is now relatively stable. I feared losing it completely. Hence, a certain rush to finalise the manuscript. However, in relation to the following text, this enforced hiatus has gifted unanticipated material, which illuminates, and gives a further twist, to the underlying sub-text, i.e. an examination of how conspiracy myths take hold.

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Conspiracy theories are all the rage. But, they are nothing new. Like gossip they have flourished for as long as human-kind could converse. In more relaxed times they seemed harmless enough — and, quite entertaining. Bill Bryson's book *Shakespeare* is one such diverting and informative source, for it offers a bewilderingly comprehensive list of candidates — as 'a better class of person' — to have written Shakespeare's plays; from nobility to some of the better educated new men of the age, like some of his playwright contemporaries.¹ As Bryson's acute (and at times bemused) observations reveal, people clutch at comical straws in their search for a more comforting social or cultural explanation of their preferred world.

It is just that, at the moment, conspiracy theories feed into a particularly sensitive aggregation of social unease. But, even in the small world of improvised music there has always been a penchant for uncommon or outlandish explanations. This, of course, may be a reflection of a particular mindset required of the enquiring, or experimental, disposition of such music-makers.

I noted a taste for this phenomenon among some of my musical colleagues. One particular example, which I freely admit, I found enthralling, was introduced to me by Evan Parker. He has, over the years, persuaded me to read various strange books. One such was called *The Jew of Linz*.² This book, written by an Australian philosophy academic, reviews a series of intriguing

¹ Bill Bryson, *Shakespeare*, Harper Press, 2007

² Kimberley Cornish, *The Jew of Linz*, Arrow Books (New edition, 1999).

circumstances. These lead to a number of tantalising conclusions. One identifies the Cambridge spy ring-master, of the Burgess and McClean affair, and ultimately the mysterious and elusive (or was it illusory?) 'fifth man'. The suggestion fingers (of all people) Ludwig Wittgenstein. Who could resist?

Maybe, by now, the tendency for controversial explanations has developed poisonous pangs of hunger. Induced, perhaps, by the tape worms of political disillusion, social discontent and personal disappointment. I bring this up because years ago there was an event in London which raised a tenacious conspiracy theory. I thought it was a reasonable explanation of self-evident witnessed facts. I was there. I believed a particular interpretation of events, and I intensified 'its reality' (as did others) by often airing my conclusions.

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Within the annals of the particular, and perhaps exceptional, British Jazz experience, is a telling tale with a peculiar psychological back-story. The situation is an historic concert given by The Albert Ayler Quintet at The London School of Economics during November 1966.

At the time of this major event the local avant-gardists, and for those generally interested in jazz, had gotten used to a fairly regular televisual diet of jazz. The newly arrived BBC2's Jazz 625 line now extended to the outside broadcast series of 'Jazz Goes to College' — and, the last of this projected series was due to be the Ayler concert. The main lecture hall was cleared, ready for a more fractious debate than usual, with Albert and Donald Ayler, Donald (trumpet), Michel Samson (violin), William Folwell (double bass) and Beaver Harris (drums).

I, together with many of my contemporaries, was in eager attendance, which included a notable refugee from a Ronnie Scott Club residency: Rashaan Roland Kirk. We waited, if fidgeting, patiently. The stage lights were bright, the BBC cameras in place. All looked set to go. And, although late to start, we were not disappointed. Our febrile suspense was rewarded. A raucous, joyous noise of dissent showered a mainly young white audience. We knew what we were hoping for, and we got it in buckets! Afterwards, the buzzing crowd dispersed but the euphoria was only heightened by knowing there was a repeat performance to come. Waves through the ether would penetrate to those who had been unable to be there in person. There was the added joy that the Ayler message would be spread wider. Except, it didn't.

We now know that the change from the regular bi-weekly Jazz 625 programme to this new format, 'Jazz Goes to College', which looked so promisingly progressive, was beset by background conservative grumblings. BBC policy regarding culture was now the remit of a BBC2 controller who disparagingly observed that: "Jazz is a weak, derivative music."³

Of course, this debate within the BBC was not known to the jazz community or an interested public, and has only subsequently entered the semi-public domain via John Jeremy's excellent monograph: 'Jazz 625: A History, a Detective Story, an Appreciation'.⁴ This document only became available to me during the autumn of 2020, although, I was aware of some of John Jeremy's conclusions through the intercession of a young film-maker and musician, Stewart Morgan. He had been in touch with Mr Jeremy during his own research for his film-making degree.

But during the late 1960s, the musicians and anticipatory audience for the televisual representation of Ayler's Quintet was eagerly awaited. When it failed to materialise there was general consternation, and then a flood of possible reasons circulated. Chief among these, or at least the version I found myself most attached to, was that a high-ranking BBC executive had happened upon the editing process, disliked what he was seeing and hearing, and ordered the tapes destroyed. End of story (one which in 2020 continues to resonate). But, it began (justifiable as it happens) to perpetuate, and strengthen, a view of the BBC's crass vandalism. Whatever the case, the said BBC official's view of 'jazz as a weak, derivative music' had percolated down to those who supported jazz within the BBC's cultural priorities.

³ Attributed to BBCTV Controller, Aubrey Singer, during the early 1970s. [Source:unpublished but circulated jazz monograph, 'Jazz 625' A History; a Detective Story; an Appreciation' by John Jeremy.]

⁴ Here is Stewart Morgan's precis of John Jeremy's credentials: John Jeremy (b.1939) is a film editor and documentary filmmaker who was active in Britain and Ireland for over 40 years. Starting out as an assistant film editor in the late 1950s John worked as film editor under directors such as John Krish and Sidney J. Furie through the 1960s. His debut as director was the landmark short documentary Blues Like Showers of Rain (1969), followed by Jazz Is Our Religion (1972) and then Born To Swing (1974). He is one of a minority of filmmakers to work successfully across cinema and television in both documentary and fiction. His many acclaimed TV credits as director include Billie Holiday: The Long Night of Lady Day (BBC2 Arena), Ben Webster: The Brute and the Beautiful (Channel 4), Swing Under the Swastika: The Story of Jazz in Nazi Germany (Yorkshire TV), A Left Hand Like God: the History of Boogie-Woogie (ITV Southbank Show), and Django Legacy (Channel 4). Since his retirement John has been developing educational projects based upon his unique library of African history and culture, and has acted as mentor to student filmmakers.

Thus, a theory of cultural conspiracy easily took root. Nurtured and confirmed by the eventual demise of further serious regular jazz presentations on BBC television.

The irony of this tale is that, although suspicion of the BBC's cultural dissing of jazz was confirmed, there arose a new element of the story in late November, 2020. For while developing this tale, I ran a draft by an old friend who I knew would be interested in this subject. Little did I (or he) realise that he was, in fact, a player in this whole episode.

In November 1966, Richard Williams — now widely known and respected for his music and sport commentaries — was a junior reporter on the Nottingham Evening Post. He remembers meeting an Arts Assistant of the BBC at a parents' social function and, being a jazz-lover and an attendee of the Ayler concert, he enquired about its scheduled broadcast (which seemed to have been delayed). Richard was to hear, in the words of his interlocutor, that the programme had been "wiped". Alarmed, the young news-hound naturally also saw a scoop. He advised the *Melody Maker* and the subsequent story fed into, and re-enforced, the already swirling suspicion of the BBC's lack of commitment to more progressive programming.

However, the central occasion, i.e. the Ayler concert at the LSE, and its 'wiping' by reactionary elements within the BBC, was not quite the conclusive proof it seemed.

True: a BBC outside broadcast unit was situated in the street outside of the LSE. Manned cameras were in place. A director of production was in evidence. Those in attendance (Richard Williams, John Jeremy and myself included) heard and saw the concert. What more evidence is required?

However, John Jeremy suggests a stream of reasons — ranging from musician intransigence/resistance, (probably occasioned by their late arrival due to traffic delays, not to mention tiredness and hunger); a certain lack of confidence to ditch usual rehearsal protocols (necessitated by the group's late arrival); and a reluctance or inability to shoot in a more spontaneous and creative way than hitherto.

And, being present during the preconcert preparations, as were sundry photographers and others who, as John Jeremy puts it, "had blagged their way" into this controversial concert. It was during this pre-concert period that John Jeremy recalls seeing a certain amount of indecision and mayhem.

The suggested upshot was, however, that no material for the concert was ever recorded in the first place. A malign coalition of crossed trajectories combined to deny a positive objective.

John Jeremy offers a minor, if telling, postscript which encapsulates the general, perhaps instinctive, BBC responses. Older readers might recall that a principal national cultural event was a BBC Radio Sunday regular programme called 'Family Favourites'. It was a popular hangover from the post-war effort of reconciling families who had members still serving in the military abroad, mostly in Germany. It was generally a sentimental linkup with birthday wishes and the like exchanged by radio comperes — one based in Germany, the other in London. The music followed the sentiment. However, the programme clearly followed a loose format where the comperes drew letters from a pile and played whatever was requested. Here I will quote the final part of John Jeremy's account:

"Jean Metcalf, who handled the British end of the link up and who seemed like a nice 'gel' from Surrey, or perhaps Sussex, but certainly not Essex, had pulled a request out of the bag which required her to lower the needle on a track by Albert Ayler. After the abrasive assault had run for what she deemed to be its allotted span, but in any case well before its final revolution, she faded it smartly, to announce crisply: "That's enough of that!"."

Of course, we can appreciate that Albert's bunch and Sunday lunch in leafy English suburbia is not likely to be a digestible combination. But the episode encapsulates a cultural divide, and illustrates the 'establishment's' instinctive knee-jerk responses. All these things feed into the deeper, perhaps subconscious, determination to maintain a certain hegemonic socio-political control. And, once noticed, it feeds both a deliberative sensibility as well as a conspiracy theory. Such responses are as old as the hills.

But one problem remains. How do we square the alleged 'wiping' of the programme, as explained to Richard William? This is where, I suspect, we must speculate on the important shared meaning of words and context. In Richard's mind, as well as my own, I understood 'wiping' as in the erasure of recording tape. Richard's memory of this event is also influenced by his own experience as host presenter of 'The Old Grey Whistle Test' in which many (now famous) rock bands were to suffer the fate of being 'wiped' by the BBC who used the tapes for following programmes.

However, if we believe, and take John Jeremy's professionally informed narrative into account, the 'wiping' could be interpreted differently. He remembers the senior BBC executive in attendance motioning to Terry Henebery (the director) to abort the process. He recalls seeing "the time-honoured gesture of the extended forefinger drawn across the wind-pipe". Of course, 'wiping' could also mean that the project was removed ('wiped') from the programme schedule.

It is from John Jeremy's wider account of the cultural debates occurring within the BBC — emanating from the BBC2 controller's dismissive belief that 'jazz is a weak, derivative music' — that should inform a more important conclusion. The Albert Ayler concert is but an episode in a disturbingly odd catalogue of naivety, possibly amateur, as well as arrogant and ignorant destructive decisions. The BBC was out-of-its-depth. Or, more worryingly, the British cultural establishment was returning to a more comfortable position, holding on firmly to mores and tropes of its main sonic preoccupation. That is, of course, exemplified by classical music.

There are too many 'derivative' examples existing within the preferred 'classical' genre to mention. But, anything that suggests a deviation from its inherent qualities — a bundle of preferences that abjures and flinches from 'uncertain outcomes' — is best avoided. It is, though, taking on those blind corners of potential that has given improvised music so many of its significant moments.

It all comes down to what kind of a world we want to secure and maintain. In my polemical memoir I refer readers to the current Chinese relationship with Western classical music.⁵ Therein I ask, why is the hugely centrally controlled culture — of the weird communist/capitalist complex that is the modern Chinese polity — so favourably disposed to a so obviously 'Western' cultural phenomena? My suggestion is that it matches the same establishment desires of certainty and social control that it now also represents in its founding culture. Whatever else we can take from this tale, and from the fuller analysis of the BBC's attitudes (especially towards jazz, as John Jeremy's monograph illustrates), it surely lays the ghost of the BBC's supposed left-leaning bias toward progressive features in our culture.

But, to return to a concern of Bill Bryson — the identity of the man who wrote Shakespeare's plays. Bill's list of candidates is incomplete. My own favourite (unworthy perhaps to be included in Bryson's research) is the claim that it

⁵ *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*, Copula, 2020.

was not Shakespeare who wrote Shakespeare's plays, but a man with the same name!

'True' facts, as we have learnt in recent times, are often hard to secure. We all need to be on our guard.

January 2012

Afterword

My account, early in the above text, referring to Evan Parker's interest in anomalous narratives (which is a polite way of referring to 'conspiracy theories') was meant as an affectionate reminiscence. Evan's cast of mind, as for so many creative people, is an intriguing window into his psyche and artistic practice. I have (there above) acknowledged my curiosity about some of the situations Evan brought to my attention. To which, another example, other than the one given above (regarding Ludwig Wittgenstein), was his view (derived from a book he recommended I read) that the multinational company IBM was complicit in the Nazi holocaust.

However, as many of Evan's associates and admirers will have noticed, this quirky interest has developed into a (sometimes aggressive) obsession. This is especially so in relation to his view of the 'evil intentions' he attributes to advocates of the European Union, and his suspicions about covid-19. Believing the pandemic to be none-existent — or if it is, to be man-made — and, further, that the vaccination programme is a means to introduce a social control mechanism within populations via some kind of nano-technology. I have to admit that I have no complete knowledge to dilute nor dispel this complicated mix of scenarios. I think, however, that what Evan fears is improbable. More dangerous, it seems to me, is the unqualified assertiveness of these claims — proffered in (dare I say it?) a venomous manner. Without proofs — other than echo chamber groupthink — he offers little evidence to explore any possible refutation. Any counter argument, which begs for verifiable information, is rather truculently rejected, and characterised a somehow ignorant and unreasonable disbelief. Evan is certain, and will brook no counter-argument, or offer any sustainable proof. Meanwhile, his assertions imply that hundreds of thousands of people (scientists and health workers among them) are somehow complicit in a widespread conspiracy. One in which (as far as I can tell) no one has yet stepped out to blow the whistle on. To ask for sub-

stantial evidence is, therefore, to display our foolishness in his fervent proselytising eyes.

Rather like the earlier reasoning, about the Wittgenstein and IBM cases, these situations are offered in a raw (and indigestible) ideological form in that, ultimately, they portray asocial and ahistorical situations. They lack credible context. For, despite the ongoing fears many may have about the dehumanising potential of modern technology, it is hard to be completely convinced, for example, that using 'punch-cards' was a defining example of evil intent. People always look for the most efficient means to achieve their ends. Chains are useful tools for mooring large ships; just as much as they are ubiquitously available to manacle slaves. The evil is in the human intent. IBM was an office-efficiency company, operating world-wide, even before the Second World War. It would be an odd situation (unsocial and unhistorical) if any large bureaucracy (even one infected with Nazism) did not to apply efficiency measures to its work. IBM's punch-cards (to record the details of victims) could no more be thought of as responsible for the deaths of innocent victims, than the manufacturers of high security fencing that was used to confine the victims of murderous Nazi racial policies. Wilful blindness to social evils by statesmen, corporations, the media, and other large 'human' institutions, cannot be confined to IBM!

My own conclusion is, that 'if' Evan is correct in his accusations (and, I admit that I cannot disprove them!), then we are all in a very dark place. On the other hand, 'if' Evan is wrong then a deep gloom settles upon him, and spreads over all those who have previously regarded him with admiration and affection.

Eddie Prévost
June 2021

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