

Collider

- Or, whose drum is it, anyway?

A further loose-leaf chapter to my on-going testament: *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*¹

Drum — a percussion instrument sounded by being struck with sticks or the hands. **Kit** — set of articles or equipment needed for a specific purpose.

Like other musicians during the pandemic I looked to past events as much as hoped-for future activity. This drum solo CD is one such retrospection.

In these covid-19 days we are, perhaps, more susceptible to biological metaphors, and, especially (now in this moment of writing), as we make our way through the Greek alphabet to distinguish between viral variants. Mutation, though, is now more generally understood as an endemic, life-changing process. In this respect it lends itself as a useful framework to assess cultural change. For 'culture' (the features by which we appreciate and calibrate our physical, social and political being) undoubtedly shifts shape. Consciousness, just like universal biological processes, is in a constant state of flux albeit that there are periods which

1. Edwin Prévost, *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*, Copula, 2020. Further chapters can be downloaded from matchlessrecordings.com

2 have at least appeared to have achieved equilibrium, and possibly stasis. Periodization is a means of understanding our history. But, as Karl Marx and Edmund Burke (from their diverse perspectives) remarked, our *modus vivendi* is challenged, constrained and structured by our historical moment. This is so of the aesthetic environment for the music represented by the CD accompanying these notes.

There is not a great number of recordings by drummers playing solo, this exception is unlikely to become a beacon for others. It may be described as serving a thin niche market.

Some earlier historical notes are in order: As a juvenile I was attracted to the 'what if' I detected in jazz. This was an innocent perception of the tropes of modernism, with which I

would later become more familiar. Thereafter (while in my early 20s), many of my contemporaries were energetically making a new popular music. As some may be aware, AMM—which is the ensemble I am most closely associated with—shared early concerts during the mid-1960s with The Pink Floyd. But this casual association deflected neither ensemble from its chosen trajectory. AMM's experimentalism was curiously inflexible, and, our dress sense more ex-army surplus than Carnaby Street.

My own journey led from an initial (and remaining) admiration for the drumming of Max Roach, Elvin Jones and Art Blakey. But those particular forms of expression seemed inappropriate to our time and place. AMM moved progressively away from the forward thrust of jazz to a more Zen-like condition.

Except in a few circumstances, the driving impetus, characteristic of drumming, was contained in favour of tonal atmosphere, and occasional thunderous eruptions. AMM's discography is sufficient to identify the evolution of this characteristic.² However, I have never wavered in my admiration for the creativity which I see as central to the African-American search for agency and social dignity. And, given that most of my adult life has been tethered to how British elites protect and advance their own privileges, at the expense of the rest, it should not surprise anyone that there is resistance. So, when I acknowledge admiration for jazz, I do not necessarily see its history and practices as a definitive model. Each part of humanity has to deal

2. AMM's *Industria* is, perhaps, the apotheosis of my percussive (non-drumming) adaptability. Although, *Generative Themes* and the Great Hall concert, featured on *Laminal*, display substantial drumming. These are on CDs released by Matchless Recordings.

with its own specific conditions. It is, though, instructive to consider some of the detail and outcome of the ex-slave American experience. And, although the white European record is significantly different, it did not escape the noted African-American musician and scholar, George E. Lewis, that:

“The degree to which European free-jazz musicians, with few or no African-Americans around, still experience the reception of their art through the modalities of race.”³

So, it seems likely that the social and aesthetic concerns of various peoples around the world are much more entwined than one might ordinarily suppose.

3. George E. Lewis, review of 'Northern Sun, Southern Moon', by Mike Heffley, *Current Musicology*, No 78 (Fall 2004)



The three tracks which make up this solo CD are a case in point. The drummer heroes of my youth have been absorbed. Their output is foundational in its inspiration. But aesthetic and social concerns are specific to my time and place. Although, if George E. Lewis is correct, parallels exist, and these cannot be ignored. It is something worthy of interrogation.

In terms of instrumental resources, Sonny Rollins' *The Bridge* and the album *Supersession* are similar: saxophone, electric guitar, double bass and drums. However, there can be no confusion about the respective music. The linkage between them is diverse, and divergent. The Rollins album is, unarguably, an apotheosis of modern jazz. While *Supersession* is a non-swinging example of

modernist propulsion. However, perhaps even unconsciously, both formations, in sharing the same instrumental resources, indicate some kind of continuity, or shared history. This shared or similar experience—although situationally different—has its roots in adaptive practice.

George E. Lewis is a uniquely qualified analyst of American jazz, as a trombonist and as an experimental music practitioner. He is, of course, also a notable music academic. His remark above has numerous implications. First, if not foremost, is that the free-jazz genre (and presumably the wider reaches of jazz) is a cultural practice that US musicians have developed and bequeathed to all humankind. That he perceives that even (white) European free-jazz musicians also have to run the gauntlet of a

quasi-racial profiling, and attendant negative consequences, is equally perceptible, if (for white musicians) more problematic.

6 Hopefully, all musicians and listeners, especially those who honour and respect the jazz traditions, ought to be conscious of the history of ex-slave American citizens. The experience of the African-American population lends itself most forcefully to the general concept of adaptivity and, therein, the different responses that African slaves had to their respective enforced work and living environments. For example, slaves in South America (i.e. the Spanish and Portuguese speaking imperialist world) were encouraged, by the Roman Catholic Church, to embrace a marriage relationship. While the North American plantations (mainly Anglo-Protestant formations) tended

to discourage close social ties among its slave population. Often cruelly separating families, as part of the discipline of enforced obedience for those in servitude. There were, of course, other examples of different coercive enculturations. The trajectory of French enslavement of Africans in Haiti took on a different hue, and owed its later transformation, in part, to the French Revolution.⁴

Circumstances alter cases. As Christopher Small noted, the peoples of Africa had a unique adaptive capacity. He refers to situations that required alienation strategies. He describes this attribute as syncretic. That is: an ability to accommodate, and at times even absorb, alien cultural features, while making them serve ends other than what may have been intended by the slave

4. The American historian Eugene Genovese is a valuable source of information and analysis.

owners, or proselytising Christians.⁵ Sometimes, these strategies echo ironically down the ages. Recall that some black Americans, during the 1960s civil rights moments, rejected the names forced upon their ancestors by slave-owners. Most famously, Cassius Clay became better known as the world heavy-weight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Some jazz musicians followed this rejection of white cultural supremacy.⁶ This reveals the adaptive necessity required for some kind of cultural as well as social equanimity. It also marks out the space in which to foment and maintain some kind of personal agency. Just how is a human being supposed to retain dignity when somebody else has the whip-hand?

5. Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, Calder, 1994.
6. Irony also lays in the ancestry of names allied to Islam. They recall the earlier Arab imperial conquest of West Africa, and the forced adoption of Islamic cultural tropes — which also bent to tribal West African orientations.

I want to pause here to explain more fully what I think adaptive practice entails.

Organisms respond to conditions. And, providing they have the appropriate genetic material (some of which seems to exist in a dormant state), then a survival strategy can be initiated. In other words, unless the subject (say, in this case 'a species') achieves command over conditions, those conditions will command the subject.

Adaptivity in the cultural domain has a similar dynamic. The so called forward thrust of modernist progress is likewise futuristic. But, its response is just as embedded in existing and past conditions (as both Burke and Marx suggest) as any biological situation. Arguably, the creative leap of modernist art is dependent upon cultural unease, and in some cases

might even appear to be pathological. What then, is the psycho-social status of a postmodernist response? How does 'it' adapt? In architecture we have noted that design solutions have often arisen from emulating models from the past. This seems to be a kind of archaeological discovery, relying on historically observed solutions, with the accompanying aesthetic response requiring a combination of familiarity and novelty. Perhaps this is the (fashionable?) appeal of juxtaposition. Similarly, references within modern music sometimes recall earlier (often) pre-classical forms. This is an adaptive response to 'the perceived' ideological fragility (or redundancy) of modernism. Pastiche of Baroque compositions are offered as tropes for originality. Mediating the sounds through electronic technology is seemingly enough to make it palatable for current taste.

Meanwhile, in popular culture we can perceive a riot of adaptive responses, especially in street derived music like hip-hop and rap. Here mutation is in a constant state of excitement, with no prospect of a settled condition. And, this permanent revolutionary atmosphere appears to be a necessary condition. Some examples do escape local environments, flourishing (albeit temporarily) in a commercially profitable niche moment, but, there seems to be a constant urge towards a new variant. Street culture, in order to maintain its integrity (like any threatened species), requires relentless self invention.

To a lesser extent, I see this as mirrored in other informal musics. The personality, and quirkiness, of a jazz artist is an indicator. Although, jazz has become, in recent decades, increasingly formalised, there are now subtle, insidious prescribed,



approaches on offer. Jazz has become more codified, and commodified: even if clothed within an artificial narrative of modernity.

So, the adaptive options may deceptively be presented as: postmodern, which appears to require driving up a blind-alley, whilst needing a rear-view mirror. Or, the adaptive mechanism is driven by a super-heated transformation of street-life expression. Escaping poverty and oppression through the illusory pacifying snares of commodification. Here, an energetic individual (the heroic example) can escape, but the 'hood remains in more or less the same broken situation.

Perhaps, this CD narrative is not the place to retell the saga of jazz, or any music of the common wo/man. There

is sufficient material available. We should, though, focus on the wider social and aesthetic mutations that have occurred regularly within jazz, in which the European uptake of this alternative musical form, in its many guises, has developed its own unique strains.

As a drummer, it is not surprising that I view the creation of the 'regular' drum kit with interest.⁷ Accounts of the early days, when New Orleans was the focal location for jazz, lead one to realise that although there was quite a sophisticated Creole culture, with its university and chamber orchestras, there was also the low-brow life of a burgeoning black working-class. Their entertainment, their culture, drew more from the rural, folk-like

7. Regular drum kit as eg: bass drum, mounted tom-tom, floor tom-tom, snare drum, various cymbals and a hi-hat.

spiritual roots; remnants of slave life.⁸ So many of the material means to enable musical expression, came from what was readily and cheaply available. The case of New Orleans was helped by the detritus left by French military presence: a cache of redundant band instruments. Drums, of course, would have been used variously in this historical military band context, in which bass drum, side drum (i.e. with snares), and the clashing of cymbals by hand, would have been undertaken by separate personnel. The genius of the drum kit, is of course, the bigamous marriage of its parts into a single instrument. From a European perspective, and rooted in my own experience, I can only recount an equivalent adaptive example in British Skiffle of the 1950s. A generation arising in the (Second World) war-torn fabric, and economic

8. John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880*, University of Chicago Press, 1973

austerity of working-class life, began to assert itself musically, and, in the process, take the materials of everyday usage to make instruments. Empty redundant tea chests (large square ply-wood boxes which had been used for the import of loose leaf tea) to which a broom handle and string was attached, served as thumping basses. While the ubiquitous (bane of working-class housewives, soon to be rejected) washboards could, with the aid of metal thimbles, make for a sweeping racket to percussive effect.⁹ These accompanied cheap acoustic guitars. Concurrently, US imports of rock 'n' roll records began to take a hold of youth culture. Seized by a confident generation of British kids who made 'their' adaptations, and brashly sent them back across the Atlantic.

9. It is difficult to recall, but even as a boy (unencumbered with domestic responsibilities) I sensed the onerous dread of Monday 'wash day' for working class households. The washing machine, and tumble dryers, helped to loosen the shackles of everyday drudgery.



Home-made was soon over-taken by the new electric guitars, and purpose-made drum kits, attractively portrayed by US culture, and made more accessible as the economy boomed.

This 'make-do' initiative survives within the curiosity for the detritus of modern life. It is a continuing characteristic of experimental musicians, who create the new improvising ethic outside of European 'official' musical culture.¹⁰

This background, together with what followed in my own musical and intellectual life, informs my approach to 'the drum kit', to be heard on the accompanying CD. Except that now, the original use and audio meaning of its parts has been subsumed, and developed

10. Although, I note that many of the 'effects' achieved with imaginative re-use have been superseded by a seemingly endless range of bespoke electronic foot-pedal devices.

within an extended aesthetic, of sound and physical techniques, that would have been unfamiliar to (especially military) earlier drumming practitioners. Although, in my case, I feel echoes of some of those original utilities can still be heard. What is different, though, is the aesthetic objective. For what encased my output on that day in 2012, was playing with the tonal qualities to be derived (screwed out of) the materials at hand. And, the desire to push myself beyond the normal competence of technique. By this, I mean I wanted to experience what happens when my thinking can no longer accompany, or effectively direct (keep up with), my sonic output. This surely has some redolence with the earlier Futurist obsession with speed—resulting in a cultural collision. It is perhaps, one of the madneses of art itself.

‘Individualism’, in recent times, has become a foundational trope of the neoliberal. Are we then, drawn to the conclusion that the unique qualities we cherish in so many of our jazz stars, is the result of some kind of artistic solipsism? This, we should contest. Just as we must question how much Sonny Rollins or John Coltrane owe their self-defining artistry solely to their own efforts, I do not believe such a suggestion is tenable. Just as I cannot accept the attendant theme that ‘there is no such thing as society’ even if this idea was moderated to link ‘individuals and ‘families’. What, though, is a family? Obviously, such a formation often has a biological basis, and shared nurturing experiences. The strength of such complexes can vary, depending upon geographical location, and on

wider cultural associations, or the lack thereof. When is a family not a family? Clearly, it is much more than shared DNA— and, given that humans share 98.8% of their DNA with chimpanzees, who is your uncle? Society is the wider rings that make up humanity. And, like distant cousins, we have ‘relative’ strengths of familial feeling depending upon how much we share our cultural values.

As a white man, I have not felt the collaring of explicit racial slurs, and social contempt that I know has been metered out to fellow citizens who are not white. I have, though, felt subtle insidious insults directed at ‘awkward’ insiders, of which (I suppose) I am one. This has occurred when making a music that refused to accept the tenacious tenets of conservatism, i.e. clothed in the comfort blanket of normality.

Or, the regressive fetishism of the commodity. I think we can begin to see that such a condition moves us away from ‘modalities of race’ towards a more insidious complex ‘modality of class’.

So, in a positive response to George E. Lewis’s astute observation, I suggest that Western European free-jazz musicians may well have been measured negatively by the modalities of race. But, this is a veiled crypto-populist critique. A reverse version of the ‘coco-nut’ caricature: in this case, a social resentment within white culture of white people acting ‘black’. But beyond this, lurks a festering fear of egalitarianism, social harmony, and distributive justice. All features that lurk within Western Imperialist fantasies, and currently part of the neoliberal hegemony, which promotes divisive populist politics

to maintain undemocratic and undeserved entitlement.

Jazz is an alienation strategy which has sadly, often compromised its powerful socialising and agency capacities, through its engagement with capitalist culture. Too much of its great art-making potential has been boxed-up for Christmas.¹¹ Despite various progressive political narratives that have been associated with particular moments within jazz, the music itself has remained encased within the ‘modalities’ of classical music (*sol-fa* even-temperament, etc). In this sense, jazz enjoys a sub-genral status in relation to Western classical music (irony intended). Only the freer edges of the music have pushed the barriers in

¹¹. Perhaps, in our postmodern culture, agency is confused as, or consciously replaced by, ‘leverage’ in the market place.

order to escape the confines and the tropes of capitalist culture.

16 So, to return to the emulative cogency of playing in a recognisably free jazz mode, some sixty years after its generally accepted moment of inception. Any note for note copy would, of course, be merely crude nostalgic plagiarism. Nevertheless, there may be underlying cultural priorities worthy of rescue and further promulgation.

I would argue, from a very personal position, that much of the European 'free' music that arose in the 1960s, owed its impetus to the example of American free jazz. However, although there were cases of close emulation, there were also creative responses which did not follow the sound-world (say) of Ornette

Coleman. One such, as I have argued above, was *Supersession* which took the format, but superimposed a more modernist programme. Instead of applying the jaunty heads and mocking atonal asides—(arguably) a sardonic riposte to which the more cerebral complexities of modern jazz had moved—*Supersession* extracted all references to the American jazz model.¹² My guess is that each of the protagonists within *Supersession* would offer a different analysis of the aesthetic priorities that drove its unique musical character. It has an ultra-democratic impetus.¹³ Each voice demands validity. Yet, the very act of performing together at a pre-arranged event, suggests some kind of accommodation with each of the associated parts. And it is (arguably)

12. This might appear to argue for a cultural cleansing: like removing barnacles from the hull of a ship to get more speed. But, of course, I doubt that that much separation, or autonomy was desired, expected or achieved.

13. *Supersession* was Evan Parker, Keith Rowe, Barry Guy and Eddie Prevost. The CD *Supersession* is available from Matchless Recordings.

the unrehearsed spontaneous confluence of elemental parts that offers the listener intriguing insights.

But, is it jazz? And, does it matter if it is not? This may depend upon what you consider jazz to be. If you think—as I do now—that jazz has become a leisure music for the Western middle classes, then the alternative responses do matter. In the 1970s when *Supersession* first began to perform (and of course, it was not alone in this respect), then it was claiming aesthetic agency without deferring to the hardening hegemony of jazz (i.e. 'it must be done this way!'). This was a self-defining cultural principle. The music, however, also displayed its own cultural autonomy. 'New music' of the time deferred mainly to Boulez, Cage, Stockhausen et al. These were, in effect, new system builders. The new non-jazz

improvisers were not unaware of, or immune to, the effects of the new experimental, electronic and system modes. However, *Supersession's* momentum was not pattern based. It grew out of the inner dialogue of the event, rather than following any exterior programme. In this, I think, it allied itself to the thrusting projection recognisable in many jazz performances. But, bow to tonic sol fa and orthodox rhythm? It did not.

If 'progressive culture' has been wiped off the map, where can one find cultural bearings to resist the vicious vicissitudes visited upon us by neoliberalism?

It may not have escaped readers notice that, during the same period of the so-called 'neoliberal era', jazz returned to the high-point of

bebop as its founding-reference. A cache of music which had perhaps replaced Hayden's string quartets as the background music for whatever now passes as a cocktail party for the contemporary bourgeoisie. Certainly, it became the 'go to' music of the Western professional classes. Whole books would be devoted to significant exemplars, like Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* or John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Given such a cultural/market push, it should surprise no-one that newly emerging jazz musicians would find a postmodern response as the only viable market position to adopt. We return to alienation. We note the history and social trajectory of the inventors of jazz. With few choices available, the black enslaved, and post-slave social discriminated-against communities of the early modern North American experience, made do with what they could recall

from their pre-slave condition, and what could be fashioned from the meagre resources available. That is, what they could get away with within the confining culture of the plantation, and the later socio-economic situations of an uncaring capitalism. This is what Christopher Small identified—perhaps somewhat technically, but accurately as syncretism.

This essay, though, begs the question: is Britain in 2022 so culturally enthralled, or in thrall, to an inescapable condition of commodification? If so, like the West Africans who were sold into slavery: how do we get out of here?

In his 2021 Reith Lectures, Stuart Russell explored the development of Artificial Intelligence. He recognised

the danger of AI usurping human control, and the possible autonomy of the automata. He was (perhaps overly) optimistic enough to think that some kind of human control was possible. But, AI is hardly the first human system to have 'escaped' and plagued humanity. Capitalism, and its more recent incarnation, neoliberalism, offers a warning.

Many creative people of a progressive persuasion have despaired of jazz as a movement for change. Some have removed themselves from its ambit. And, the market has persuaded customers the postmodern promise of instantaneous satisfaction.

Many years ago, at the end of a concert, I was confronted by someone from the audience. He was

indignant. He noted (reluctantly) that I could play the drums (...a bit!). But, he was clearly annoyed about the way I played. I was caught off-guard by this encounter, and the only response I made was that it my prerogative to play any way I saw fit. This was not enough. I had obviously overstepped some cultural convention. Although written-small, this is the situation creative artists regularly face. A face-off of expectations—which were clearly rooted in cultural and artistic norms, and any creative attempt to voice a different aesthetic priority. This particular case is curious because it seemed reasonable to expect cultural sympathy, given that it was a concert billed as free-jazz and hosted by London's Institute of Contemporary Art.

More recently, and during the same year of this recorded drum solo concert, I played at Cafe OTO with Marilyn Crispell and Harrison Smith.¹⁴ And it was reported that people were wondering ‘why I was not playing at Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Cub’. Really it is simple: I do not read the ‘modern jazz drumming play-book’. Listeners will no doubt judge my drumming credentials for themselves. However, I am under no illusions about what ‘regular’ jazz musicians want from their drummer. I do not offer what they want, and it is not the way I wish to play. Maybe my drumming is as discursive, unruly and ill-disciplined as this essay is turning out to be!

So, as if to ward-off a similar response to my drum solo concert album, I will warn those who

might come to it expecting a postmodern pastiche of the jazz drumming greats. Yet, I would argue forcefully that Max Roach, Elvin Jone and maybe even Shelly Manne, legitimately foreshadow this performance. Their example—as well as the similarity of the drum kits used—is the basic historical and syncretic signal. The drum is a resource that is part of the emotional detritus of my life. As a child it was the only (musical?) instrument to which I had access—becoming part of the 19th Bermondsey Boy Scout troop band—just as discarded French military band instruments were available to early jazz musicians of New Orleans. One could argue that modernism itself is never free of the past. It is, of course, dependent upon it for any focus on the future. As ever, it is ‘the use’ to which such material is put and applied that counts. Trumpets made in France

intended to stir militarism were later resurrected to focus the grief of black New Orleans funeral rites. Or, to herald relief at the end of an arduous period of work—relaxation at weekend.

In my own mind, these practices reveal the realignment of purpose. An adaptive means which perceives existing conditions but refuses to apply conventional or conservative applications. In this way I insist that I have a right, and maybe a cultural responsibility; applying different criteria to actions on a material complex that has an historical essence I wish to supersede. Drumming to a different beat. Just whose drum is it, anyway?

Eddie Prévost, March 2022

14. A CD of the concert featuring Marilyn Crispell, Harrison Smith and Eddie Prévost is available from Matchless Recordings: *ConcertoTO* mrcd104.

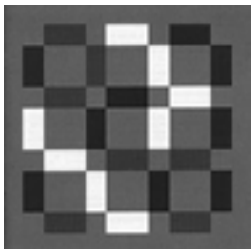
There are three other Eddie Prévost solo percussion CDs in the Matchless catalogue. All different. There is also a vinyl LP called Matching Mix. This features Eddie playing various kinds of percussion at a number of locations (including a duet with a large oak tree) near his home in Essex. In 2019. This is published by earshots.org.

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MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES

Eddie Prévost percussion
Recorded on the 16th of July, 2001 at Gateway Studios,
Kingston, England.
MRCD48



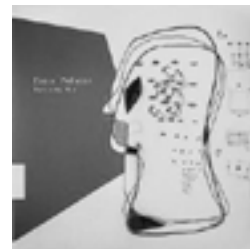
ENTELECHY

Eddie Prévost tam-tam.
Recorded at the Electronic Music Studios of Goldsmiths'
College, London on the 24th of September and the 3rd of
December, 2006.
MRCD67



LOCI OF CHANGE

recorded at Gateway Studio, Kingston, England on 10th
September 1996.
MRCD32



MATCHING MIX

Solo percussion pieces recorded in a single day around
Matching Tye, Essex, October 2018.
Available from Earshots <https://earshots.org/>

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