

*"There's no more revolution
Our fathers missed the train"*

Asked to give a musicians perspective on the proposition that Improvised music has lost it's political relevance and hence last year's audience reactions at the Moers Festival were somewhat subdued, these two lines of a song I once wrote came to mind, along with a few other ideas that I will write about now. To deal briefly with this theme we need to look at why there is no more social or musical "revolution" as we once knew it but rather only a "personal" one, and why the idea that music needs political relevance to succeed is outdated and not relevant to the real issues we musicians face.

The short history of Jazz and Improvised music also coincided with the collapse and failure of countless political projects though none of these structures, whether communism, fascism, or racial segregation were taken down directly by blue notes or scat singing. Instead "our" music has been more of an ongoing social commentary within which voices of protest could be heard loud and clear at certain times, perhaps even clear enough to set certain forces in motion. Who can underestimate the effect of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" in the psyche of a nation split down the middle at that time in American history? But times have changed since then.

The development of Jazz and Blues was closely tied to the struggle of civil rights and the freeing of the social injustices. Back then there was clearly something to protest against, to free yourself of, to escape from in the music with your listener. Even up to the 60's the enemy could still be seen though he was beginning to morph and take on elusive forms. Writing now in 2008 it is not so easy to pinpoint the foe, I would even go so far as to say the foe is not an external one but rather within ourselves in the form of ignorance, conditioning, and a whole host of inbred neurosis.



We just came out of the bloodiest century in recorded history and to be perfectly frank, it doesn't look like this next one will be much rosier. We are told that terrorism and fundamentalism are the enemy and that security is one of our prime concerns. You, dear reader, as well as anyone on this planet will to some extent believe these propositions. We live in a time where not only can politicians get away with the likes of "you are either



for us or against us" , a vast majority of us buy in to to these violations of our otherwise rich language and assimilate them into our thinking patterns. Linguistically we are more conditioned now than ever before; George Orwell would have had a field day. A political culture of lying on a grand scale has been implanted and achieved through dubious means and getting up to march on the streets will no longer change it, nor will an improvisation on a Jazz festival stage against the Iraq war.

For the world is not simply good or evil, hawks or doves, black or white, or whatever other divide they can come up with, but rather infinitely more complex and with endless shades of grey between. Another reason making it improbable to determine an external foe against which we musicians should "protest" or take a stand against. But let us backtrack a few decades to a not so distant age of innocence.

When exactly did our fathers "miss the train". What happened after the social revolutions of the 60's, the hippies and psyconauts, the 68's with their little Mao Bibles, the belated backlash against fascism and imperialism, all the sound and fury on European Festival stages? From my perspective in backwater New Zealand growing up in the 80's nothing much at all happened, and long before I came to Europe in 1992 everyone had been lulled back into their easy modus operandi and Capitalism had gently won the battle hands down. I would say this period was one of many trains that were missed. The grand "Spectacle" we now see today where ever we look in which illusion is sacred and truth profane triumphed and I don't think anyone can dispute that. I say "Capitalism" or the "Spectacle", you could choose from a host of other terms, each one making the external foe even more difficult to pinpoint. I don't see why we should fight a battle on stage already lost by our fathers when we have enough to worry about in preserving our frail culture of sound.

So now I come to the music. It has been suggested we need more voices of protest, we should take more of a stand, our saxophones should be like a cry to battle, in which all the anger of the world is contained, and that this is what would really animate our festival audiences. Well, I'm sorry but it's a bit too late now. It's all been blown and shouted out before on stage and when you play like this today, it tends to have the opposite effect. Aggressive playing is no longer a reaction against anything but rather a gratuitous flirtation with surplus testosterone. The "hard-core" improv. scenes of recent decades now seem pallid and watered-down, cute even, in their intentions, dimensions, and effects. If anything, they play into the foe's hands.



When we took down all the forms of "our" music with movements like free Jazz we were reacting against and breaking away from something. Now there are no more to break down, no more more to react against. This is why you can forget about much revolution happening in today's improvised music. At the moment there is more innovation in singer-songwriter scenes than in improv. because their forms are clearer and their message succinct. Truly revolutionary music like Parker or Coltrane took place within the forms, they stretched and twisted them to breaking point. We don't have any left to break through, so it is left for us to slowly and carefully put together some of these broken pieces and develop a new language for our own troubled times. When we try too hard to do this, when we shout out, cry out for freedom and justice (and how about democracy?) through our horns, we tend to lose the plot and have to start all over again. If this is what our listeners really want (and somehow I doubt they really do), then they should perhaps look somewhere else for the voice of protest, how about inside themselves?

We "improvisors" are constantly searching for a language in which we can speak anew, even though our forms have been ripped down (by ourselves, and that needn't be a bad thing) and our listeners lied to, softly conditioned, and coerced their whole lives by the known forces we are now expected to speak up against and the unknown ones too (which we should perhaps simply ignore?). It almost feels like making the soundtrack for a sinking Titanic, but that's fine by me because if we go down, we go down down playing.

What is valuable in improvised music is the ongoing search for new expression within this car-infested, neo-nuclear age and having you, the listener, share in our struggle which in its own modest way, is a desperate call to revolution from "within" (if that's really what you want) when all the other external attempts have failed and left us reeling.

*"There's no more revolution
Our Father missed the train
But not the end of evolution
Though we play the same old game"*

Hayden Chisholm April 2008