

Derek Bailey
New Sights, Old Sounds/Solo Live

Incus 2×CD

The fact that Derek Bailey was of more than one mind about solo playing was probably why he was so great at it. On the one hand it was, as the guitarist opined to John Eyles in a 2001 interview for the All About Jazz website, a second-rate activity compared to group playing. For him, the stimulation of playing came from figuring things out, and when he first turned to solo performance in 1971 he wanted to find out what was wrong – and what was not – with his own improvising language. This first episode of solo activity, which can be heard on *Solo Guitar Volume 1* (Incus), yielded several discoveries: that intervals and timbres afforded the most freedom, because they were the most potentially disconnected elements; that without the courage to throw out ingrained habits, it was easy for solo improvisation to turn into a recitation of well-tested devices. By the time he recorded *New Sights, Old Sounds/Solo Live* in 1978, these matters had been sorted out. The title pretty much admits that while the setting was new – the set is a memento of Bailey’s first trip to Japan – his playing was not. His language by then was instantly identifiable, and Bailey understood that only his willingness to embrace whatever was variable in any setting separated him

from any old hack trotting out the audience’s favourite tunes.

But, second-rate activity or not, Bailey was an inveterate solo performer. There are 17 solo CDs either on the market or awaiting reissue, spanning the years 1966, when British free improvisation was first being formulated, to his last recordings in the mid-2000s, when motor neurone disease began to erode the dexterity that had been so essential to his guitar playing. He used solo records to demonstrate his language – in a nutshell, Count Basie guitarist Freddy Greene imagining Weberian opuses on the fly – and to enumerate his exceptions to that language. He used them to document complete concerts and send brief audio letters to his friends.

This double set – one disc from a Tokyo studio, the other from a pair of concerts, and both recorded in 1978 – holds a special place in Bailey’s discography for several reasons. First, there is its scarcity. It was originally released by concert organiser Aquirax Aida’s Morgue imprint, which folded shortly after his demise in December 1978, and spent most of the 1980s and 90s as collector’s bait. *Wire* contributor Alan Cummings located the master tapes and got them to Bailey in 2002, when it finally emerged on CD. But it has also been considered legendary for a better reason than mere scarcity. Sometimes

Bailey released sessions because they sounded good, and sometimes because they captured a special moment. This did both. The recording quality brings the listener frightfully close to the action. A minute into “Live In Nagoya, Part 2”, Bailey drops his pick. You can hear it hit the floor, and then you hear him thank an audience member who must have retrieved it for him. Intimacy has been established, and now everything in the room – the shuffling of footsteps, the shifting of uncomfortable sitters, ill-stifled coughs and the hum of passing traffic – is now part of the performance.

Crowd noise on live records can be an essential ambience, as on Ahmad Jamal’s *Live At The Pershing Lounge*, or a smokescreen of authenticity, as on the countless ersatz live rock albums where the cheers help you forget how much of the concert souvenir was recorded after the fact. But here it’s as much a part of the music as the looming feedback and slow-motion, unwound flamenco strums, sounds he alights upon simultaneously a few minutes after his plectrum made its break for freedom. Two years after these recordings, Bailey made two of his most celebrated records, the cleanly recorded and spectacularly virtuosic solo *Aida* (Incus/Dexter’s Cigar), and *Music And Dance* (Revenant), a rough document of Bailey’s encounter with both Butoh

dancer Min Tanaka and a summer downpour crashing down on a flimsy roof. Hearing this set is like hearing both of those records at once.

If, as the title suggests, this is a collection of old sounds, Bailey doesn’t sound tired of them here. He may no longer have been figuring out his language, but parts of his vocabulary sound marvellous heard in isolation. Just savour the voluptuous feedback contours he lets loose on “Live In Kalavinka”, or his unerring sense of where to place harmonics and sudden stops on “This Is The Age Of Oddities Let Loose”. If you need a single record to point to and say this is how Derek Bailey played, this’ll do the trick. With Incus Records now reactivated under the control of Bailey’s widow Karen Brookman, this new edition replicates the original’s gatefold sleeve in place of the first digital edition’s jewel box.

Which brings us to the cruel fact that he won’t play this way again. It’s ironic that music whose making asserted the validity of what one does in the moment is now a monument to a time gone. People still play guitar, they still improvise, but no one can play this way without simply sounding like Derek Bailey. So they don’t do it any more, and the moment has passed as surely as the moment when you could fill a petrol tank for ten pounds. □

The reissue of one of the most sought-after **Derek Bailey** solo sets clarifies the guitarist’s advanced vocabulary. By **Bill Meyer**



Derek Bailey in Japan, 1978