

Company Returns

Appropriately enough, it was billed as the Incus Phoenix Festival; it celebrated the continued rise of the great label, not from the flames but from its prolonged period of mourning following Derek Bailey's death. However, despite the billing, this was really the return of Company. Over two days at Café Oto in September the festival presented a feast of improvised music featuring many performers with long-established links to Incus. There was a great deal of goodwill and bonhomie in the air throughout the two days, giving it the feel of a celebration – or maybe a clan gathering.

The line-up read like a Who's Who of Company veterans: Han Bennink (1977), Steve Beresford (1977), Tony Bevan (1988), John Butcher (1990), Rhodri Davies (1999), Simon H Fell (1993), Will Gaines (1994), Thebe Lipere (1991), Oren Marshall (1992), Steve Noble (1987), Philipp Wachsmann (1982), Ashley Wales, Alex Ward (1988) – all European, joined by the sole American, guitarist Duck Baker. (Never mind, another Incus Phoenix Festival in New York -- in mid-October -- had a US-flavoured line-up of veterans including John Zorn, George Lewis, Fred Frith, Richard Teitelbaum and Susie Ibarra....)

Bailey himself would have been delighted that the Café Oto format, rather than presenting all the players together, followed that of Company events past with a series of solos, duos and trios arranged ad hoc at the start of each day. This was an unexpected (yes, and unbilled) treat, as the last Company week in London had been in the mid 90's.

In true Company fashion, until the actual day no-one knew who they would be playing with and that gave a spontaneous edge to the entire event. Oren Marshall opened proceedings with a solo tuba improvisation that set the bar very high for those who followed. His fluent playing combined with his ability to conjure an extraordinary range of pitches and tones from his instrument to redefine the tuba.

The emphasis in most of the sets was on "good old-fashioned honest improv", with players listening to each other, interacting and complementing each other's playing. Electronics were in evidence in some of the sets: Steve Beresford deployed them in addition to his excellent piano work, most notably in an engaging duo with Tony Bevan's sopranino sax; Ashley Wales' duo with Bevan's baritone sax featured his own constructed soundscapes; as ever, Rhodri Davies' harp was garnished with treatments and effects creating his distinctive soundscapes—very effective when combined with John Butcher's use of feedback soprano sax which still seems like magic to some watchers ("He wasn't blowing it, was he?")

Everywhere one looked, there were performances to savour. Particular praise must go to bassist Simon H Fell and drummer Steve Noble; as the only bassist and drummer present for the two days (except Han Bennink on day one – see below) they were called on to perform regularly and maintained an incredibly high standard throughout. Bravo.

The quality of the music across the two days was such that it seems unjust to single anyone out. Nonetheless, for their sense of showmanship and pizzazz onstage, two veteran performers stood out, one from each day. The first day belonged to Han Bennink, who appeared with Steve Beresford and John Butcher as well as giving a stunning solo performance before being joined by Thebe Lipere in an impressive duo. Despite his usual entertaining antics (very welcome - Company always had its elements of anarchic

humour) Bennink's jazz roots shone through, particularly during his solo set. Let us not forget he played with Dexter Gordon and Eric Dolphy among others. With minimal means—he only had one drum with him-- he gave a bravura display of his art, along the way alluding both to "Salt Peanuts" and to "Cherokee".

In similar style, the second day was dominated by the oldest player there, tap dancer Will Gaines. Typically, his exuberant good humour coupled with his driving energy and sense of rhythm to create a series of show-stealing performances that no-one present will ever forget. As well as dancing, Gaines regaled the audience with reminiscences of his younger days both in America and in UK, notably in clubs with a younger Bailey. Fine stuff. Thanks, praise and admiration go to Karen Brookman for bringing this event together. Here's hoping it becomes an annual event.