

**Point of Departure (Issue 37 - December 2011)**  
**by Bill Shoemaker**

Derek Bailey: *Concert in Milwaukee*

Derek Bailey + John Butcher + Gino Robair: *Scrutables*

Iskra 1903: *Goldsmiths*

Steve Beresford and John Butcher have uncredited roles in *Gig*, a video vérité of a 1992 North London pub gig by Derek Bailey and John Stevens. The younger improvisers are in the middle of the small audience - not at the bar or the back of the room, musicians' usual perches - their backs to the camera, occasionally exchanging comments and nods. Beresford had the earlier connection to Bailey through mid-'70s editions of *Company*; Butcher played in the '90 edition of *Company* and was a member of Spontaneous Music Ensemble when Stevens died in 1994. It's therefore fitting that Beresford and Butcher would have respective shepherding roles in two long-delayed releases - *Concert in Milwaukee* and *Scrutables*.

Had Butcher waited another 20 years to issue the trio improvisations with Bailey and Gino Robair recorded in 2000, they may well have had the legend of the solo concert the guitarist issued on cassette in 1983 (initially produced for a tour of Japan, the lot was greatly diminished through shipping mishaps; the surviving 150 copies were quickly sold off). Given Beresford and Butcher's ever-widening circle of collaborators - both the saxophonist's potent, free jazz-tinged LP with the Lisbon-based Red Trio (*Empire*) and the pianist's free-wheeling improvised concert set with drummer Matt Wilson (*Snodland*) deserve close listening - their labors in producing these albums resoundingly reiterate Bailey's centrality to the history of improvised music in England.

Bailey's stature is further reinforced by the contemporaneous appearance of Iskra 1903's *Goldsmiths*, another recording with a decades-long tale of coming to light. Although an innovative tact on drummerless improvisation made the trio of Bailey, bassist Barry Guy and trombonist Paul Rutherford one of the more important units of the first generation of European free improvisers, their discography was scant and their preference for extended improvisations is only represented by the 1970, Hugh Davies-recorded ICA concert first issued in its entirety on the 2000 3-CD Emanem collection, *Chapter One*. The two roughly half-hour improvisations from this 1972 gig confirm Martin Davidson's sleeve note observation that the group had yet to reach full maturity on their earliest recordings. Davidson's characterization that the trio was "very relaxed" at *Goldsmiths* may strike some as odd, given the overarching radicalism of the trio's approach. However, comparisons between the two concerts bear Davidson out to this extent: Halfway through their four-year tenure, the trio's music is more fluid and conversational; and even when Rutherford's

multiphonics and Bailey and Guy's amplified harmonics and feedback are most clangorous, they complement the unfolding discussion rather than just stake out provocative turf. This is refined ensemble improvisation, but the idea that the long form was Iskra 1903's forte is somewhat undermined by the two short pieces of unknown origins that round out the collection (and the *Buzz Soundtrack* on Emanem as well). Everything Iskra 1903 did well - particularly the ability to establish a tone, if not a mood through accumulated textures - is present on these two short improvisations. Davidson points out that Iskra 1903 was probably Bailey's last fixed-personnel group; certainly it was the last one whose work over the course of a multi-year run had discernible, evolving threads. The vexing thing about Bailey's solo work - particularly given the volume of solo recordings and the decades it took to produce them - is that it is the very forum where, logically, such threads would most plainly proliferate (such is the case with Evan Parker's soprano solos), yet they are usually all but impossible to find.

*Concert in Milwaukee* is a particularly piquant example of Bailey's inscrutability, a quality quite different from unpredictability. There are discontinuity-yielding devices Bailey inevitably employed - a long litany including the sudden thrashing of the strings, offsetting harmonics and bilious atonality - but the frequency of their use in no way created a continuity of contrariness. Ironically, Bailey is instantaneously recognizable and there is a wealth of methods even the casual listener soon identifies as Bailey's. Still, there's an aura of suspense in every Bailey solo; what comes next is anyone's guess. Throughout the four performances - two on an acoustic guitar; two on an electric instrument - Bailey gives simple utterances a cipher-like opacity. The allure of his music is that it continually challenges the listener to give it ordinary meaning - a relationship to genre, no matter how exotic or rare; a metric of athletic virtuosity; a triangulation with arcane aesthetics and ideologies - but Bailey nearly always eludes the listener's best efforts, and does again here.

By virtue of its instrumentation mirroring that of the archetypal *Topography of the Lungs, Scrutables* is a viable measure of how the priorities of improvised music had evolved in the intervening 30 years. By 2000, improvised music was no longer a push-back against Americentric free jazz, its sovereignty having long been recognized. The role of energy had been refined; once a constant source of heat, it now provided light in a more tactical manner. And, most importantly, the advents of Bailey and his contemporaries had shaped the aesthetics of a generation of improvisers who were creating new international networks, a process exemplified by the collaborations of the saxophonist and the Bay Area-based percussionist.

By the time of this studio session, Butcher and Robair had established a working trio with the late bassist Matthew Sperry and had worked in ad hoc settings deserving of working band commitment - particularly the trio with electronicist Tim Perkis documented on Robair's compilation, *Buddy Systems*: selected duos and trios. They were touring the UK as a duo, playing Liverpool the night before their session with Bailey (try finding *Liverpool (Bluecoat)*)

*Concert*, issued by Limited Sediton in an edition of 241 CD-Rs). Therefore, the right chemistry of familiarity, anticipation and fatigue was in play, the latter being an underappreciated precursor. Throughout the album, the trio balanced otherworldly sounds and athletic movement, "Teasing Needles" being a case in point of how they accelerated iridescent washes of bowed and rubbed surfaces, pedaled harmonics and soprano multiphonics to an endorphin-producing pace. When the velocity of their exchanges is most ferocious, the trio's abilities to produce sounds well outside the normal parameters of their respective instruments make identifying individual sounds treacherously difficult.

Repeatedly, *Scrutables* leaves one with the sense that the sound of breaking glass has been replaced with the sound of splitting atoms.