

MARGIN WALKER

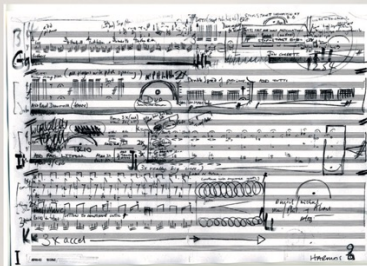
The first time I saw Barry Guy play – at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 1991 – was the first time I witnessed free improvisation unfolding in the present tense, an initiation into the intimate bond free improvisers share with their instruments that fundamentally changed the way I thought about music. Guy wasn't moving with, or in time, to the music as he played duo with Evan Parker. Rather it was his movements that created time, space and sound. Muscles flexed, fingers threw shapes, hands lurched between strings and bow. His fluid, twitching body would have likely spilt off his stool, I thought, had it not been held in place by his skin. I was impressed and entranced – and by Guy's deft handling of a subsequent improvisation workshop during which a crabby music teacher complained that he had brought his pupils along to hear Weather Report riffs not *all* this noise.

Twenty-five years on, and with his 70th birthday fast approaching, Barry Guy is still dishing it up all hot and unexpected. The sampler disc attached to this issue of *Jazzwise* gives a window into his enduring relationship with the Zurich-based Intakt label, alerting us to the scope of his recent projects. Guy's long-standing trio with pianist Marilyn Crispell and drummer Paul Lytton fuses his background in free improvisation with composed forms; another trio, *Beyond*, featuring saxophonist Jürg Wickihalder and drummer Lucas Niggli, finds Guy asserting and displacing jazz time; while with his Blue Shroud Band, his composed structures flake away to make space for improvisation and carefully placed flashbacks to the music of JS Bach and HIF Biber. On 16 April, at the Vortex, Guy will celebrate his big birthday with a similarly varied palette. Appearances from Evan Parker and Howard Riley will hat-tip affiliations that stretch back four decades, while a set from the Beyond trio will represent newer associations. The evening begins with a duo set from Guy and his wife, the Baroque violinist Maya Homburger, where they will improvise and perform music by Biber and the contemporary Hungarian composer György Kurtág.

"The aim was always to find a place where improvisation and composition could function together," Guy begins, before I've had a chance to ask a question, like any interview ought to begin by addressing this most fundamental point. "Everything I did when I was studying

double bass at the Guildhall School during the 1960s was geared towards feeling good about my instrument. Through my double-bass professor I found myself in the BBC Symphony Orchestra playing music by Olivier Messiaen at The Proms in 1970 conducted by Pierre Boulez. By then I had already been going to the Little Theatre Club in Covent Garden for a couple of years, where people like Evan Parker, John Stevens, Trevor Watts and Paul Rutherford came into my life. At Guildhall I was analysing music by Ligeti and Stockhausen and, through my friend Bernhard Living, I heard Mingus on record for the first time, which left a big impression. I was in my early twenties and my mind was open to all kinds of interesting stuff."

By the time Guy joined John Stevens'



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Spontaneous Music Ensemble in 1967, the group had already evolved away from the fluent free-jazz chatter heard on their 1966 album *Eyemark* (reissued on Emanem as *Challenge*) with numbers including '2.B.Ornette'. A distinctive, local improvised music was emerging, and I wondered how consciously Guy heard 'free improvisation' as being something apart from 'free jazz'? "That's an interesting one," he muses. Slight pause. "Even if the distinction might seem clear today, back then we were trying to work it all out. I was attracted to the SME simply because of the commitment of the musicians towards their instruments, and also their ideas of freedom. This was the starting point of *Ode*, my first large-scale piece for improvisers which led to the formation of the London Jazz Composers

Orchestra, an ensemble built largely from musicians I had met at the Little Theatre Club.

"To someone like Derek Bailey, the whole idea of reading from a part and following a conductor was taken as a provocation and the rehearsal process revealed these personal agendas. I recently heard some of the rehearsal tapes and from the various groans – and the spectacular bad language – you might have assumed a disaster was unfolding, but now I'm aware of the intensity of their concentration; their sheer determination to make it work. As with all the extended pieces I've written involving improvisers, the challenge was to create a compositional form, in this case for 10 musicians, that could also embrace spontaneity."

Guy didn't hang around long in the SME – he appears on only one recording, *Withdrawal* from 1967 – and the focus of his improvised work would soon be centred around Paul Rutherford's group ISKRA 1903, where the rubbery lash of his bass rebounding against the pounce of Derek Bailey's guitar yanked open workable space for Rutherford's bountiful brass inventions (Bailey would subsequently be replaced by violinist Philipp Wachsmann). Among the transformational players of recent

history, Scott LaFaro re-mapping the syntax of how bassists could operate inside a small group changed his view of the instrument – and when Guy wasn't listening to the Bill Evans Trio, Gary Peacock's performance on Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* left him reeling.

"I was dragged towards *Spiritual Unity*," Guy recalls. "There was this sound of Albert's saxophone which I found compelling and deeply moving – that way of hollering, like he was vocalising through the instrument, was unique. Then Gary's knack of filling the space, firing notes into the air to see where they landed, was entirely present and yet noticeably sparse. He didn't need thousands of notes; this music was like a resonating sun with Gary as a halo on top.

"What LaFaro brought to the Bill Evans group was, naturally, something quite different, although equally important to me. Scotty could sometimes sound like a violinist, and would move across the entire instrument, his pizzicato feeling effortlessly strong. The phraseology he brought to jazz, and the reactive way his interactions could change the flow and harmonic direction of the music – here was a complete idea of relaxed communication."

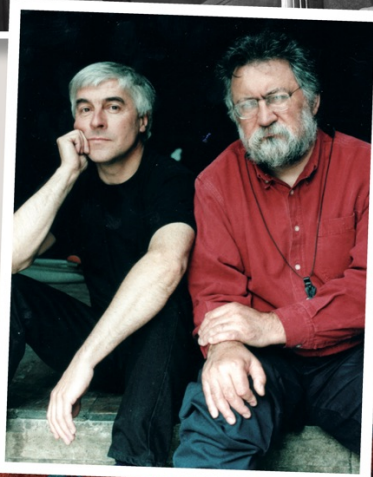
Double-bassist, **BARRY GUY** shows no sign of slowing down, his passion and imagination for free-wheeling improvisation and adventurous orchestral composition utterly undiminished as he nears the occasion of his 70th birthday. **Philip Clark** spoke to the ever-engaging musician responsible for the diffuse sounds on this month's exclusive Intakt-curated *Jazzwise* covermount CD, ahead of a celebratory performance at the Vortex this April



Listening to Guy's work with Jürg Wickihalder's Beyond, and the mechanisms embedded inside his own trio with Crispell and Lytton, it's not difficult to hear how those seeds planted in the 1960s have continued to blossom. Wickihalder's intricately plotted compositions, with their malleable fluctuations of pulse, harmony and mood, require definite jazz chops; and Guy digs deep into his roots in the bass truths of Mingus and LaFaro. With Crispell and Lytton, he re-enters a negotiation into that terrain between free improvisation and composition which he has long called his own.

"Because of clashing diaries and geographic separation, the trio with Marilyn and Paul is something wonderful that happens only infrequently," he reflects. "When we come together the music needs to slot into place very quickly – it can't develop on the road because we are never on the road. So we have to start from somewhere and the compositions I write are all through-composed but flexible, containing springboards and suggestions for improvisation. The album we've just released, *Deep Memory*, pulls together the resonances of all the previous records." A piece from the new album like 'Fallen Angel', I say, sounds like that tension between composed material and improvisation has been written directly into the piece through a simple demarcation of note-specific falling patterns that open the piece, given to bass and piano, and clearly notated, against a free flow of sweeter piano triads that follow, which are obviously improvised. "I think that's right, although the piano and double bass music that begins 'Fallen Angel' is actually indicated graphically, rather than through conventional music notation. For 'Silenced Music', a later track on the album, I was happy for Paul to decide what to do himself. I handed him the music and said 'think about it' and now he reckons this is the best piece I've written for the group. It's all a very different experience from Beyond, with its written heads and grooves. I hadn't played jazz time for years and it was good to be challenged to do so again, at this stage in my life."

The Intakt sampler also traces the trajectory of Guy's extended compositions by way of classic cuts from the London Jazz Composers Orchestra and the latter-day Barry Guy New Orchestra. His Blue Shroud Orchestra emerged as a response to a particular moment in time – US Secretary of State Colin Powell speaking in favour of the invasion of Iraq at the UN as, in the background, a blue shroud had been placed discreetly over a reproduction of Picasso's totemic anti-war



painting 'Guernica'. A soliloquy from trumpeter Percy Pursglove calls us to attention. Inside the orchestral ranks the likes of pianist Agustí Fernández, saxophonist Per Texas Johansson and drummer Ramón López work alongside two musicians more often associated with Baroque music – violinist Maya Homburger and violist Fanny Paccoud. With the music hitting peaks of emotional angst, Guy's structure dissolves into stretches of the solo violin 'Mystery Sonatas' by Biber, a mainstay of the Baroque repertoire, and the work ends with a re-working of the 'Agnus Dei' from Bach's 'B Minor Mass'.

"Look, I knew this was risky!" Guy exclaims. "I knew the sort of criticism that might follow from using this borrowed material – and I thought long and hard about it. But in this piece I had to find a spiritual essence and, I thought, 'I can't write like these guys'. The final thing you hear is music by Bach, but I agonised over how I should set that moment up – how to find a natural transition from my music which could prepare the audience for this moment of introspection. And then I knew the piece had to end. After the 'B Minor Mass', there's nowhere else to go."

We're speaking just a few weeks after the US election. With the uncertainties raised by a Trump presidency and by our own forthcoming Brexit, and the general rise of a populist far-right, we discuss whether a rebirth of the spirit of 1968 might give improvised music a shot in the arm. You don't need to read a transcription of our worries about Trump – those arguments have been well-rehearsed elsewhere – but Guy's thoughts about where improvised music can (and should) overlap with society remains fighting talk. "Improvised music," he tells me, as we're about to wind up, "remains the best model for how to communicate, of how to create something together. One practical worry surrounding Brexit is that musicians will suddenly have to fill in paperwork simply to travel elsewhere in Europe, making an exchange of information more difficult. But if you're engaged in the deep conversations of improvised music, you know how ridiculous it is to be erecting false barriers – building walls – around people. Freedom of movement is, after all, freedom of thought." ■

From top: Barry Guy, Marilyn Crispell and Paul Lytton (Photo: F. Pfeffer); Barry Guy and Evan Parker (Photo: Roberto Masotti); Beyond – Jürg Wickihalder, Guy and Lucas Niggli (Photo by Sandro Bettinaglio); Barry Guy solo (Photo: Marcel Meier); LJCO at the Schaffhausen in 2008 (Photo: F. Pfeffer)