

## BENJAMIN PIEKUT (2019). *HENRY COW: THE WORLD IS A PROBLEM.*

### A Review by Lukas Proyer

The British rock band Henry Cow is a major example of how musical avant-gardism was practiced outside of European »art music« in the 1970s. Founded in 1968 at Cambridge University,<sup>1</sup> the group combined influences ranging from free jazz and free improvisation to classical composition techniques and European experimentalism with rock rhythms and rock instrumentation. Their musical design was constituted by mixtures of open improvisation and notated compositions as well as programmatic and performative concepts. Despite their attachments to different musical contexts Henry Cow consciously positioned themselves as a rock band in the then contemporary musical landscape. Yet, their story reads radically different from most rock groups of the time due to the band members' Marxist orientation and their aesthetic as well as political intentions, which resulted in a *modus operandi* that ran contrary to other bands' rock guitar heroics.

In *Henry Cow: The World is a Problem*, Benjamin Piekut has remarkably documented this story. Readers who expect a conventional band biography will be surprised, as the book aims for much more and is conceived as a »somewhat unusual, hybrid form combining collective biography and argument-driven cultural history« (xiii). Piekut's main research area is musical experimentalism and avant-gardism; he has published numerous articles on these subjects, including his first monograph *Experimentalism Otherwise*:

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1 Henry Cow's founders, pianist Tim Hodgkinson and guitarist Fred Frith, were joined by bassist John Greaves in 1969 and drummer Chris Cutler in 1971 during their formative years. The group featured several further musicians throughout the 1970s and incorporated classical instruments into their sound with bassoonist and oboist Lindsay Cooper joining in 1974 and cellist Georgina Born joining in 1976.

*The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*.<sup>2</sup> While his research is primarily located in historical musicology, he represents a perspective that should be of much interest for the field of popular music studies.

The author's study of Henry Cow is motivated by a desire to document avant-gardism that happens outside of art music institutions in the popular music sphere. While Henry Cow has mostly been associated with alternative forms of British progressive rock, Piekut places the band in relation to various forms of avant-gardism in European art music, jazz and free improvisation as well as experimental rock music. This makes for a novel approach compared to the considerable amount of literature that has been written on the—at times—rather generic category of progressive rock.<sup>3</sup>

Piekut's sustained contact with the band members proves crucial, as it led to a significant amount of interview material. He put great effort into capturing the opinions of most people directly involved in the band's 'machinery'; this includes roadies and sound engineers, who were treated equally by the musicians in Henry Cow and received the same salary from 1973 on in coherence with communist principles. Additionally, Piekut spoke with several people who worked in the music industry during this period, such as Virgin co-founder Simon Draper. Naturally, Piekut does not rely exclusively on this interview material; the band members have granted him access to their personal archives, which contain material such as unpublished private notebooks, setlists from the 1970s, and recordings of Henry Cow's band meetings. Older interviews with Henry Cow musicians referenced from other sources enable a comparison of the musicians' past perceptions with present ones. Piekut also uses journalistic music criticism to illustrate musical discourses of the 1970s as well as the reception of Henry Cow's music at the time.

The book is structured as a chronological unfolding of the band's career, starting from their beginnings at Cambridge in 1968 and ending with the group's dissolution in 1979. These eight chapters are framed by an introduction and an afterword, which contain most of Piekut's theorization, thus enabling easier access to Henry Cow's story for readers unconcerned with academic scholarship. The book closes with Piekut's theoretical concept of the

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2 Benjamin Piekut (2011). *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

3 Kevin Holm-Hudson (ed.) (2002). *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*. New York: Routledge.

Edward Lawrence Macan (1997). *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bill Martin (1998). *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock*. Chicago: Open Court.

Paul Stump (2010). *The Music's All that Matters*. Chelmsford: Harbour.

»vernacular avant-garde« in the afterword chapter. I am not sure whether this concept built the foundation for his study of Henry Cow or resulted out of this research, but in any case it provides a thorough summation of multiple leads throughout the book while also feeding contextual theorization of Henry Cow's actions and their musical environment. As such, the book simultaneously serves several purposes and might therefore attract different kinds of readers: Henry Cow fans not involved in academic scholarship, for example, might be interested in Piekut's insight into the »behind the scenes« proceedings of Henry Cow's career. On the other hand, for some academic readers Piekut's observations regarding the band's musical and political environment may be of interest. These observations occur in different chapters, analogous to the chronological story of Henry Cow's development.

The primarily biographical sections in the book are written in a fairly straightforward narrative style but told in great detail and carefully researched. While grounded in many different sources, the band's history gets foremost enabled by the volume of interview material the author has assembled. He offers extensive background stories on everyone involved in Henry Cow as well as on numerous bands with whom the rock group collaborated throughout their career.

Henry Cow's experiences with media and the recording industry is an important topic throughout the book. Their entry point into the commercial music branch through a contract with Virgin as their future record company and concert agent is a key moment within their band history, one that would shape future career decisions as well as their later highly critical interpretation of the music industry. A large part of the second chapter offers insight into Virgin's emergence as a young record company that put many experimental rock bands under contract and masked their financial motivations under a quasi-hippie ideology. By investigating how record companies such as Virgin, Polydor or Hör zu Black Label were operating and by showcasing their reasons for contracting Henry Cow and other bands related to them, Piekut convincingly exhibits how musical experimentalism was both affected and enabled by the will of record companies to invest in such projects. His observations hereby contribute to a genealogical understanding of »progressive music« in the 1970s. Piekut also sheds light on the dynamics between music journalism and record companies in the second and third chapter, as he illustrates how record companies were making efforts to control how their bands were portrayed in the media (90, 119, 125); these observations contribute much to a critical examination of music journalism as a historical source.

Furthermore, Piekut discusses the influence of music journalism on the British music scene, and in particular how members of Henry Cow perceived

the role of music journalists back in the 1970s. Their opinions on this subject highlight their fight against an image of the band produced by some writers as being inaccessible and catering only to minority tastes (141f., 225). An overlying arc in Henry Cow's story can be found in how the experiences they made with the music industry and the media ultimately led them to pursue their own independent way of self-organisation in opposition to capitalist modes of major record companies and the marketing machinery of the media. The band would take political actions in collaboration with other left-wing rock bands such as for the Music for Socialism festival (Chapter 7) and for the Rock in Opposition network (chapter 8) as a result of their self-organising efforts. The description of such a development is by no means solely due to an overly teleological writing mode, but rather to Piekut's careful description of process transformations between different stages in Henry Cow's career. The author's decision to follow a historical chronology proves useful here, as the band's continuously changing approaches to musical creativity, the music industry and political action are rendered clearly visible for the reader.

Central to this book is Piekut's interpretation of Henry Cow's working methods. The book's subtitle *The World is a Problem* refers to Henry Cow's intention not to take given circumstances for granted, but instead to treat them as problems to be investigated in the pursuit of change. Certainties are rendered into uncertainties and are investigated through actions rather than careful consideration, thereby provoking a reaction of the environment in an experimental way. Improvisation thus is a way of questioning certainties and enabling a dialogue between the musicians as well as the group and the audiences. Henry Cow's »orientation toward the world that could be described as improvisational« (26), as a way of restoring »provisionality to the world by attacking its ideological veneer of certainty« (152), is successfully illustrated in regards to Henry Cow's musical explorations, career decisions, political agencies, experimentation with music technology, and recording studio. The band's highly unusual full merger with the group Slapp Happy in 1974 »indicates how willing the musicians were to experiment. Several such moments in the band's career should be interpreted in these improvisational terms: Henry Cow embraced opportunities to disturb equilibrium so that they could find new states of temporary stability that could not have been predicted in advance« (25).

Piekut's illustrations of Henry Cow's work in the recording studio showcases different forms of experimental approaches that likewise investigate uncertainty by taking action. They also display Henry Cow's emphasis on the collective instead of the individual. For the mixing of the album *Leg End* (1973), every musician was controlling their own fader at the same time

(102f.). This is problematic from a studio engineer's perspective but might be regarded as an innovative way of investigating what would happen if circumstances were able to be continuously manipulated. It also demonstrates the group's efforts to combine musical aesthetics with their social principles. As Piekut explains:

[T]he band had construed group work in a number of ways, including open improvisation, where a musical piece could emerge through collective decision making; spontaneous work on preorganized materials, ... co-composition, as when they wrote material together for *The Bacchae* or *Desperate Straights*; technologically enhanced collective exploration ... Occasionally, this collectivism produced strategies that seem misguided in retrospect, like that of the Cows arrayed around the Manor's mixing desk, each fader drawn by its own finger. But even the strangeness of this image communicates the extent to which they struggled to discover new forms of authorship and performance within the historical and material conditions of their time (350).

The author's excavation of Henry Cow's composition and production processes might be one of the most interesting facets of the book, because it explains in detail the complex conceptual strategies behind their album recordings. It also uncovers which members took the creative lead during different recordings.

Piekut also provides musical analyses to illustrate Henry Cow's musical strategies as well as examples of tonal and rhythmic organisation, showcasing the complexity of Henry Cow's music. While music analysis is sometimes accompanied by small transcription examples of the music, the investigation of musical texts takes a smaller part in the book compared to other topics. As melodic and harmonic modes are treated with lesser importance, musical analysis does not provide much insights into how Henry Cow's tonal organisation connected to melodic and harmonic practices common in jazz or rock music. Instead, Piekut focuses on the nature of their musical concepts and frequently discusses their approaches toward open improvisation, composition, and various in-between modes. In the sixth chapter, the band's emphasis on a collective musical identity is also discussed in relation to George Lewis' theoretical model of ›afrological‹ and ›eurological‹ modes of improvisation.<sup>4</sup> Piekut analyses how Henry Cow's improvisational practices are connected to—but also differed from—broader Afro-American and European music tradi-

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4 George E. Lewis (2004). »Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives.« In: *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation and Communities in Dialogue*. Ed. by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 131-62.

tions. Aside from the preface and the afterword, the sixth chapter is thereby the only one that encompasses musicological theory to a larger extent.

In the afterword, the author's research coalesces into his theoretical concept of the vernacular avant-garde, a term that attempts to capture the uneasy space between institutionalised art music and the commercial marketplace of popular music. The afterword makes clear that one aim of Piekut's research is to blur the line between ›high art‹ institutions and the popular music sphere. In doing so, he gracefully dismantles Peter Bürger's<sup>5</sup> (and implicitly Theodor Adorno's)<sup>6</sup> dismissive theorisations of popular culture on account of their lack of empirical knowledge concerning avant-gardistic and political activities in the field of popular music (395-397). The reviewed study of Henry Cow exactly provides such empirical evidence and brings much neglected activity in popular music history into the spotlight. Yet, as Piekut's motivations and knowledge interests are rendered visible in the afterword, it might be advisable to some readers to read the last chapter in advance.

*Henry Cow: The World is a Problem* tells us a lot about the band, more than any other publication has done before (this is the first published biography of the rock group). Yet equally, Piekut manages to shed light on Henry Cow's environment and wider context. His insight into the economic, socio-political, and musical processes surrounding the band, also applies to other avant-gardist musicians from that time period; his concept of the »vernacular avant-garde« therefore convincingly concludes his study. The author is able to critically investigate a wide range of different subjects, because Henry Cow makes for an extremely interesting study subject. The group's former members have a lot to say in voiced philosophies as well as in their non-conformist musical, socio-political, and music-industrial actions. Piekut has done a remarkable job in letting their voices be heard and their actions be communicated through the narration of their story.

Benjamin Piekut (2019). *Henry Cow: The World is a Problem*. Durham: Duke University Press (512 pp., Hardback and Paperback: \$119.95; \$29.95).

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5 Peter Bürger (1984). *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

6 Piekut does not quote Adorno directly, but he writes: »Given his Adornian foundation, it is not surprising that Bürger harbors the same weaknesses as the Frankfurt school elder« (395).