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...echoes long ago¹

Focusing on guitarist/composer Jimi Hendrix and composer/improviser Cornelius Cardew, the essay considers parts or aspects of artists' work that are impossible to know, either because of an unfulfilled potential resulting from their early demise or because of modes of production and categorisation that prevent or obscure a more complete reception of their work. Taking common speculation about the possible trajectories of such artists as a starting point, I go on to consider how only a small part of their creative process can ever be known and how we may tend to either compensate for this by partaking in a mythologising process through engagement with a recorded oeuvre or, perhaps more creatively, by marking their memory in a participatory way in works that have been left behind to grow with the passage of time.

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Why do we speculate about what influential artists might have done had they lived longer or in another time? What makes us dwell on their achievements and think about what might have been? How does listening to and contemplating the music of the early deceased somehow instil a feeling of regretful but life-affirming poignancy, tempting speculation as to what their next steps might have been? These are questions I will consider in examining the desire to know how music that was never made might have sounded, and by considering how we bond with the memory of prematurely deceased cultural figures of importance. I have chosen to focus my thoughts on guitarist/composer Jimi Hendrix and composer/pianist Cornelius Cardew. There will be little discussion of what these men *might* have done had they lived, as this would merely add to the mass of speculation that has already accumulated elsewhere. Instead I shall try to uncover some of the reasons and needs for such speculation.

Of course, pondering the unrealised trajectory of important artists is nothing new and, in its early stages, such musing could be seen simply as an aspect of mourning, as Matthew Gale points out in his book on Arshile Gorky:

‘In his essay ‘The Life and Death of an Artist’, John Berger remarked on how paintings change when an artist’s life comes to an end, concluding: “After his death they become final and definitive; they no longer chart his progress, they gather together to form his destination”. This switch is all the more abrupt if that death is premature. Works that appeared to mark out the artist’s prime suddenly become ‘late’. They tempt the observer to make sense of them as a conclusion, just as they also tempt projections of the trajectory cut short. These are, in some sense, a manifestation of mourning and the prelude to mythologizing. For some there is also a need to seek signs of premonition.’ (Gale, 2006, p. 87)

For fans and devotees, such projections might give solace in providing an opportunity for selectively appraising an artist’s work and optimistically extrapolating past achievements to reflect their own preferred estimation of future possibilities. Such potentialities are usually thought of in situational or theoretical terms; the kinds of musing that prompt remarks such as ‘Imagine if that recording session had ever happened with (*insert musician A*) and (*insert musician B*)!’ But there are also the frequent instances of composers and songwriters following and borrowing from past figures who have become associated with specific technical or theoretical innovations, thereby becoming ‘branded’ at the expense of their more complete and considered appraisal as artists; their lives reduced to a particular facet of their work that comes to serve as an indispensable technique or method for others to use or build upon. Frequently, composers conceive ideas that they consider to be logical progressions of these models’ styles or techniques. Viewed positively, this could be seen as a generative aspect of influence whereby an artist’s innovations become part of a shared technical resource which itself generates its own momentum. The influence of the dead artist is thereby reflected in a broad body of work as a force for future development. A negative position, however, would suggest that the more positive influence that such artists should exert, as thoughtful and resourceful individuals who had considered all possibilities and were driven by integrity and personal judgement, is sidelined in the interest of propagating codes that have become attached to their names.

Classical music offers numerous examples of living composers undertaking to complete the unfinished works of the deceased, usually in an honest attempt to honour the dead composer's intentions by imagining how he might have proceeded. Anthony Payne's completion of Elgar's *Third Symphony*², Rimsky-Korsakov's arrangement and completion of certain works of Modest Mussorgsky and Friedrich Cerha's completion of Berg's opera *Lulu*³ are just three instances of this. In the rock and rock-related fields, the mass production of recordings as artefacts in their own right has similarly led to the posthumous mixing and editing of material, with Hendrix's own later work having been subjected to a variety of studio interpretations ranging from strictly commercially driven rough cuts such as those on *Loose Ends*⁴, to releases such as *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*⁵ that attempted to realise how he would have wanted the finished product to sound. However, mixing, overdubbing and editing were key elements of the creative process for Hendrix who displayed an often obsessive concern for detail, and it is highly unlikely that the posthumously mixed and released material sounds anything like it would have done had Hendrix been involved in the production. Indeed, given his reputed indecisiveness and changeability when it came to recording, not only can such releases merely reflect inspired guesswork on the part of their producers; they also prompt speculation as to the myriad possibilities that Hendrix himself might have considered and discarded in regard to his recorded output in general, making us aware that we have witnessed just a small part of his imaginative gift. Of course, any commitment to recorded content or written music by any composer can be considered as a momentary decision that has entailed all kinds of prior imaginative editing and exclusion and, more than likely, will often prompt re-consideration and sometimes regret after the event. This suggests that, even accounting for changing styles and modes of reception, recordings and performances can only ever offer an approximate reflection of the composer's conception.

For the non-playing devotee, though, musing over what might have been has to suffice and the 'never knowing' must surely add a regretful tinge to the evocation through listening and imagining of the dead poet's spirit. With the assistance of a recorded oeuvre, the necromancy of invoking the spirit of the dead artist becomes complete in the course of such speculation. Jimi Hendrix's music was both empowering and influential, features that I expect will continue to be felt through his

recordings for generations to come. However, the evocation of his spirit is limited to the playing of these recordings and, although cover versions and tribute bands may appear, nobody would seriously attempt to reproduce in performance and lifestyle all those aspects that made him such a unique individual. Hendrix stood for individualism and free expression, and speculation as to what he might have done had he lived longer has obviously to confine itself to the realms of fantasy.

Hendrix died on 18 September 1970 and the indecent flurry of record company activity that ensued, designed to capitalise fully on the public's belated and predictably morbid fascination, while purporting to promote the legacy of a genius, has been well documented. In retrospect, this made his manager Mike Jeffery's alleged statement that the guitarist was worth more to him dead than alive all the more ominous. Hendrix was an important figure who managed to transcend his blues/rhythm 'n' blues heritage to invent a thoroughly personal contemporary form that embraced every extant technological means for its effective execution, and although this probably could not have been realised without careful (and manipulative) management, he nevertheless heralded a new approach to the electric guitar, and could be said to have nurtured its unique identity whilst unwittingly fulfilling Segovia's wish, apart from re-naming it, for the instrument's total disassociation from its classical forebear. Hendrix was important enough as an artist, in other words, to have attracted the kind of speculation that continues even now as to how or if his writing and playing would have developed, and which direction it might have taken, and prospective projects (such as the one with Miles Davis) merely fuelled dreams and conjecture about what can never be known.

Despite strong musical credentials, Hendrix's rise in popularity was also helped by an intensely physical approach to playing his instrument, something that was quickly taken up by other guitarists in the hard rock/blues field. The activity of 'air guitar playing' seems to have been a response by fans to this physical approach, and was a form of creative mimicry which enabled fans to demonstrate their commitment to the music of guitar-led bands by emulating and building upon their dramatic physical gestures, an essentially mute activity which, in a kind of music-drenched self-absorption, nevertheless served simultaneously as both self-expression and homage. Such mimicry enables the re-living of the creative moment and is also something that

can be enacted both on a physical or strictly mental plane. For those who saw him perform, either live or on video, listening to Jimi Hendrix recordings is often accompanied by an inseparable visual image lent by the physicality of the performance. This physicality and the drama of the performance are, I believe, equally conveyed to those who have no particular visual reference point (such as videoed live performance) to attach to, but who are nevertheless open to the music. This is really like bringing the performer back to life and introduces all sorts of interesting questions as to the nature of memory and its paradoxical blending of reality and insubstantiality. The air guitarist becomes Hendrix in his or her (but usually his) own mind, and it is perhaps an advantage that the non-musician has over musicians in being unhampered by a developed playing technique, something that is frequently an obstacle to empathic appreciation for instrumentalists.

Hendrix emerged as a pop star at a time when certain performers were beginning to demand respect for their artistic endeavours and to be taken seriously as musicians. Meanwhile, the music industry continued to crave sensation and gimmickry as essential selling points for what had hitherto been a predominantly singles-orientated market. However, the long-playing record was now becoming the defining medium of this new creative force and, whilst Hendrix met the demand for sensation with his appearance and unique performances, he was very much part of that group of blues-orientated musicians that had passed through the pop machine with strong musical credentials, and who formed the bedrock of the nascent progressive rock movement. Whilst he rose to fame as a pop star, he died very much a musician in his own right, respected by fans and musicians alike.

The speculation as to his future activities was therefore based on possibilities for his musical development, and was of a kind not usually accorded to pop stars such as Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson, talented 'entertainers' as these men might have been. For whilst he had roots in a particular show business tradition that had successfully marketed the talents of artists such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry, there was a side to Hendrix that craved and aspired to the serious poetic and artistic status accorded to such artists as Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. This aspiration, which may well have been ongoing at the time of his death, was the principle reason why people have continued to wonder what might have happened next. It is interesting that

such speculation is rarely negative, seldom venturing to entertain the notion of a drift into obscurity or withdrawal, a phenomenon that has since been witnessed to a greater or lesser extent in the cases of Hendrix contemporaries such as Peter Green, Jimmy Page and Syd Barrett. It is generally preferable to imagine the artist on a trajectory of continual creative growth and to ignore the possibility that the very nature of their demise might have indicated any kind of fatigue or artistic bankruptcy.

The phenomenon of sound recording, then, has become a means whereby dead artists can continue to live in the minds of listeners, creating the illusion of immortality by allowing the re-living of music which, in reality, is merely a snapshot or documented phase of a musical life. For the listener, too, this doubtless contributes to the preferred denial of the tragedy of existence and promotes the kind of speculation that frequently imposes one's own critical will upon the artist through the individual's assertion of what it is they would like the artist to have done. This could also, of course, be seen as an extension of the kind of commercial manipulation which had so depressed Hendrix towards the end of his life. The devotee, as consumer, will always want more of the same, but different, material from their hero, and any new releases, mixes or live cuts are quickly appropriated as part of this demand. But there is surely also an element of romance involved here, especially where artists that have achieved much in a short time are concerned.

‘Tyrell: The light that burns twice as bright burns for half as long -
and you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy.’⁶

Unlike photography, where we are in no doubt that the images represented are not actually the objects themselves, recorded music has an uncanny way of convincing us that what we hear *is* the actual music rather than a representation of it. This deception allows us all the more easily to bring to life deceased heroes and to indulge in personalised rituals of reverence that seem to feed a mythologizing process in which the artist becomes a timeless metaphor for immortality and a focus for an essential need to forget our own mortality. Doubtless, the market recognizes the need for heroes, especially ones that serve an anti-establishment or renegade function, and

listeners can be relied upon to indulge in the projection of their own fantasies and aspirations by purchasing and listening to their recordings in the relative safety of clubs or their own homes.

Cornelius Cardew emerged as the enfant terrible of the British musical avant-garde of the 1960s. A former assistant to Stockhausen who passed through the Royal Academy of Music with distinction as a composer, his own musical trajectory was informed by a very different background to that of Hendrix. A product of the establishment he sought to displace through radical activism, his political orientation and musical activity had been rich in diversity and content, and provided much scope for speculation. Many of his followers and advocates have continued to wonder how his art and politics would have developed following his untimely death at the age of 45 in 1981. Although Hendrix was a fine composer, his written material was very much an extension of a tradition that prioritised the song form and allowed the individual extensive freedom in developing material both vocally and instrumentally through improvisation. He revolutionized the way a guitar could be approached as a sound device but maintained a strong attachment to a jazz-blues tradition whose core concern was the expression of the individual. Cardew's contribution was of a quieter kind whereby a concern for social change prompted him to consider the prospect of music becoming available to all as an activity of social importance and solidarity. Hendrix's achievement could be seen as one that spoke of individual freedom, Cardew's one that spoke of social involvement, both utopian in their own way.

And whereas speculation is all that remains for imagining what Hendrix might have done as an individual, such speculation somehow becomes less important with Cardew, considering that he left us 'living' works intended to change and develop according to when and by whom they were played. While recordings remain to remind us of Hendrix and stimulate the air guitar playing of those who would aspire to be him, Cardew left us with tangible means of communal expression and truly active participation. He wrote this in his preface to a set of four of his indeterminate pieces *Introduction to Four Works*:

'The best guarantee for survival would be a completely self-contained, closed logical system for each piece. Such systems might be rediscovered even after

a lapse of thousands of years in a state of preservation comparable to that of Egyptian mummies. But however beautifully preserved they would nevertheless be dead, their language and meaning forgotten. So these little systems – these pieces – are not self-contained; like seeds, they depend on the surrounding soil for nourishment, they are irremovably embedded in their environment, which is the musical situation today. And the mechanism of growth is built into them; the numbers in Solo with Accompaniment refer to qualities that can change with the changeable climate of music thinking, and obviously objects as yet uninvented can change the shape of Memories of You.’ (Prevost, 2006, p. 76)

Cardew has left us with a double impossibility therefore. First, we will never know in which direction his artistic trajectory would have moved although, referring back to Berger’s remark quoted at the outset, it could be argued that Cardew’s short life had, to some extent, already taken in its early, middle and late periods. However this seems less important when considering the second rather fascinating impossibility of knowing how his indeterminate works might sound in the future as musical thinking and approaches to performance continue to evolve. Given the diverse nature of his previous musical activity, it is perhaps almost impossible to imagine his future work in the same way that one might attempt to ‘hear’ what Hendrix might have done by further extending the blues/rock tradition. This is because Cardew was thinking very much outside the confines of any developed tradition in attempting to strip musical practice of the elitist mantle it had come to assume over the centuries in western academies. And the second is, of course, an unknown that is shared by all improvised and indeterminate pieces. Cardew’s realization of this undoubtedly lay behind his remark that such works ‘*are irremovably embedded in their environment*’.

Cardew, of course, was less concerned with a listening experience that was linked to the mass-production of an individual’s work. He was more concerned with the listening linked to musical activity itself. Both Cardew and Hendrix could be seen to serve a particular community which has honoured their memory, respectively, by enacting the spirit of the one by means of attention to the recorded moment, and by celebrating the other’s utopian ideal of a music for all, by keeping his music alive and vital, nourished by the time, mood and place in which it is performed. Cardew had

misgivings about the possibility for recording to approximate anything other than sonic events, while Hendrix has left recordings (and transcriptions of his work) as the only means by which listeners and future generations can imagine him. Both approaches, I would argue, leave some work on the part of the listener to make the impossible possible, and both could therefore be seen to be inspirational in their different ways. For Hendrix, whose musical education had been principally aural and intuitive, the studio was an indispensable tool for realizing his compositions: tape was his manuscript paper. Cardew, on the other hand, from a background where musical ideas were mainly conveyed on paper (as conventional notation or otherwise), had difficulty in understanding recording as anything other than a rather inadequate means of documentation, failing as it did to capture more ambient aspects of a given performance. Of course, this was true if the studio was considered merely as a means to document performances but one has also to bear in mind its potential to ‘make’ music in the Schaefferian sense, a potential that Hendrix was very quick to grasp.

In present times, where nostalgia has become yet another commodity to be sold to those who remember, and the use of plundered material has acquired general legitimacy in artistic circles, we might perhaps ask whether the resonance during their own lives of artists such as Hendrix and Cardew was something uniquely of its time or whether it has some kind of transferable quality that makes it permanently relevant. It is impossible for me to know how a twenty-year-old hears Hendrix today, but intuition suggests that s/he hears him in a very different way to me, simply because we have different social and historical perspectives. The fact that I have lived through the period of the music’s conception gives me a different (though not superior) idea of it. This impossibility of knowing the work as conceived applies to all eras and musical styles. Cardew’s work, also designed for its time, but with an awareness of its temporal trajectory⁷, can similarly prompt questions of authenticity whose relevance will depend upon individual views as to whether his work is genuinely emancipatory, free of time and place, or should be viewed as part of an experimental canon attenuated to the broader body of western art music.

The impossibilities suggested in the foregoing essay are diverse but essentially hinge either on (i) perception and the central impossibility of any music to ever remain the same, either as an object in itself or in the minds of listeners, or (ii) on people’s need

for signs and gestures auguring an unknown future. Music, however it might be captured or performed, will never cease to grow and evolve in time, simply because its listeners will never cease to change as time moves on. Similarly, our need for heroes and prophets is not likely to go away as long as we feel a need to know what might lie around the corner and to extrapolate from past events.

Notes

- [1] Jimi Hendrix, 'Up from the Skies' from the LP *Axis Bold as Love*, Track Records 612 003, 1967.
- [2] See Edward Elgar: *Symphony No. 3* arranged and edited by Anthony Payne, Boosey and Hawkes, 1998.
- [3] See Cerha, Friedrich, *Arbeitsbericht zur Herstellung des 3. Akts der Oper Lulu von Alban Berg*, Universal Edition, 1979.
- [4] Jimi Hendrix, *Loose Ends*, Polydor 2310-301, 1973.
- [5] Jimi Hendrix, *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*, MCA 11599, 1997.
- [6] From the film *Blade Runner*, produced by Michael Deeley, directed by Ridley Scott, screenplay by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples based on a novel by Philip Dick, 1982, Warner Bros.
- [7] Cardew wrote 'Written compositions are fired off into the future' (1971, p. xvii).

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