



UPLOAD: 19 February 2020

Brian Olewnick, Keith Rowe. 500 pp. (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2018, £24.99. ISBN: 978-1-57687-864-4).

THIS IS an invaluable guide—and the first full-length study—to the life and career of one of Britain’s most important innovators in the field of free improvisation. Brian Olewnick has clearly studied his subject in great depth over a long period of time. Many of the quotes in the book are taken directly from conversations or interviews with Keith Rowe and this helps to give his book a great sense of authority and authenticity. Rowe’s music obviously carries the main thrust of the book, but the events of his life are not neglected, and there is useful contextual information about his influences and, not surprisingly, his political leanings. Rowe’s history is also the history of AMM, the improvisation group he helped to found in 1965 and which, like most bands, has had a chequered history of arguments, fallings-out and reconciliations. All of this is covered in great detail. Olewnick traces Rowe’s development from his modest beginnings in Plymouth, his attendance at the town’s College of Arts and Crafts, his labouring as a dockworker, and eventual membership in the Mike Westbrook band. Olewnick never lets us forget that Rowe’s primary artistic stimuli were always visual rather than musical, to the extent that Rowe came to see the guitar rather as an artist sees a canvas—something on which an event can take place. “Westbrook would give me scores and I would cut out images from magazines and fruit pie packets and glue those onto the score and solo from the fruit pie packets”. It seems inevitable that Rowe would move from holding the guitar in the conventional manner to laying it horizontally (the better to insert preparations between the strings) and finally to developing a de-constructed instrument consisting of wire strings strung over a large metal plate with electronic devices attached.

The chapters describing the formation of AMM (its acronym remains a secret among the group’s members) with Eddie (Edwin) Prévost and Lou Gare, and later Laurence Sheaff, are covered in detail. The introduction into the mix of the classically-trained Cornelius Cardew was an event of great importance, and Olewnick devotes much necessary space to its ramifications and effect upon the music-making of the group. The impact of the influence of China and Chinese communism in the late 60’s was enormous, and the pages of the book devoted to it are among the most successful—certainly Olewnick produces a more readable account than that of John Tilbury in his monumental biography of Cardew. The account of the winding-down and restarting of AMM through the following years makes fascinating reading—Rowe’s performances with People’s Liberation Music in 1974–6, the duo version of AMM with Prévost, the recordings with Trevor Watts’ Amalgam in 1979, the introduction of classical pianist John Tilbury into AMM in 1982 and later the cellist Rohan de Sarom in 1987, and Rowe’s first solo album in 1990. Later chapters take us up to 2016 and the massive four-hour solo recording *The Room Extended*.

Writing about free improvisation in performance or recording is a notoriously slippery exercise. The author has no score to refer to, no *a priori* instructions (at least in the case of AMM), nothing to hang on to but the sounds themselves, produced by a number of individuals who naturally have their own personalities, but which merge into one collective experience which is above and beyond the sum

total of the sounds produced. The author who wishes to convey to the reader the nature of a free improvisation, without recourse to recorded examples, must rely on his or her powers of description (academic analysis is unnecessary and in any case nearly impossible), and the results must necessarily be subjective. Olewnick tries very hard; in writing about jazz it is tempting for the author to exercise his or her verbal dexterity to match the musical dexterity of the performer, and Olewnick is no slouch in these matters. But in the end the sheer effort of trying to make one's way through the thickets of an AMM gig makes life quite difficult for the reader and the text sometimes borders on parody ("Electronics, probably Rowe's guitar in one form or another, enter even later, providing an edgier ground that serves to make the upper level sweetness all the more piquant, ending the date in marvelous fashion, between unease and bliss"). I have chosen a particularly egregious example, but the fact is that there are many passages similar to this, and the result can be that one simply speed-reads through the descriptions in order to arrive at a hard fact.

More objectivity in general would have been welcome; there is little here about the technological innovations that Rowe introduced, the innovations which set him apart from the other great pioneer in the field of free improvisation on electric guitar, Fred Frith. I remember that at the end of any AMM gig the stage would gradually fill with young men (they were always men) who made a bee-line for Rowe's table, where they would examine the equipment to learn what brand of contact mics he had used and where he had placed them and how he had attached them.* Olewnick is disappointingly silent on this aspect of his subject's work; there is probably a whole PhD thesis in here for someone bold enough to attempt it.

The book contains three appendices, an index (which is unfortunately limited to names) and a very full discography, but, frustratingly, no bibliography. Some articles quoted in the text are referenced on the appropriate page of the book but often ambiguously ("Schonfield, 2005" could be an article, a review, a letter, or an email). The production of the book has clearly been on the cheap side, with poor photographic reproduction (though with a magnificent colour photo on the cover). For all these shortcomings this is, as I wrote at the outset, an invaluable book. Any further writings on Rowe must rely heavily on Olewnick's research and dedication and I recommend it wholeheartedly.

*I was a member of AMM from 1968 to 1971. I can therefore clear up one point of confusion in Olewnick's narrative; he opines that I was a performer in Prevost's *Silver Pyramid* in June 1966, but at that time I was a fifteen-year old schoolboy—I did not meet Cardew until September the following year.