UNREPEATABLE AND IRRESISTIBLE: THE ADVENTURES OF BRITISH JAZZ

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After delighting in the intriguing and visionary atmospheres of John Surman's tentet, here we are once again immersed in the astonishing music produced by that scene - British jazz - which continues to surprise us with its remarkable quality and abundance, the product of an era that was probably unrepeatable yet remains fruitful and vital, rich in ideas and suggestions that still feel entirely relevant. This time the credit goes to the Cherry Red label, which has released a selection of no fewer than forty-eight tracks spread across three compact discs and devoted entirely to British jazz: *A New Awakening - Adventures In British Jazz 1966-1971*.

The list of names alone is striking. Alongside well-known figures such as John McLaughlin, Kenny Wheeler, Surman, Don Rendell, Ian Carr and his Nucleus, Graham Collier and Mike Westbrook, there are musicians and groups usually classified under different genres - Pentangle, If, Colosseum, Jethro Tull and Spooky Tooth, for example - which at first glance may give the impression of a heterogeneous, all-inclusive melting pot without a clear direction. In fact, the project assembled by compilation curators Colin Harper and Jon Harrington, with an introduction by Duncan Heining (author of the excellent book *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers And Free Fusioners: British Jazz 1960-1975*), biographies of the musicians involved, and notes on every track by *MOJO* journalist Lois Wilson, immediately achieves something important, undoubtedly reinforced by the careful and discerning musical selection: it frees this music from the rigid genre categories imposed by the market and music criticism from roughly the beginning of the 1970s onward, bringing it back together as one large, creative body of music closely connected to the conflicting and unconventional dynamics of British society and, more broadly, to the movements of rebellion and renewal that emerged worldwide in the second half of the 1960s.

To this, as far as the British jazz scene is concerned, we must add its profound relationship with the blues, instilled at the beginning of that decade by the intense concert activity of many American bluesmen who were then little appreciated at home. Their influence would sprout everywhere: from the groups of Alexis Korner and John Mayall to the rock of the Rolling Stones and many other bands of the so-called British Invasion, from the psychedelia of the early Pink Floyd to jazz itself. The compilation beautifully demonstrates just how deeply that African American musical form influenced a multitude of musicians. It is not only John McLaughlin's Ry Cooder-like gem *Binky's Beam* (from the 1969 masterpiece *Extrapolation*) that bears the mark and inspiration of the devil's music, but also the hypnotic blues-rock, with orchestral interludes and free-blowing horns, of *Sharing* (from *Satisfaction*, 1970) by trumpeter Mike Cotton's Satisfaction, who made two fine albums (the self-titled record and a second work, *Three Ages Of Man*, not released until 2014), as well as the driving and elaborate *Keep Off The Grass* (from *Electric City*, also 1970) by Bob Downes Open Music, the project of the brilliant flautist Bob Downes - clearly inspired by Roland Kirk - with Chris Spedding on guitar.

The blues also runs through the seductive soul-jazz pieces by saxophonist Dick Morrissey's quartet (*Storm Warning*, from the 1966 album of the same name), flautist Harold McNair (*The Hipster*, from his self-titled 1968 album), and composer-arranger John Cameron's quartet, again featuring the brilliant McNair (*Troublemaker*, from *Off Centre*, 1969). Even the legendary Mike Westbrook, with *A Greeting* (from *Celebration*, 1967, credited to The Mike Westbrook Concert Band), develops a piece with similar flavours in his own refined and sophisticated way. Naturally, the various shades of funk and rhythm and blues are taken up by Brian Auger & The Trinity and Brian Auger's Oblivion Express, respectively with a fiery reinterpretation of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* (from *Befour*, 1970) and *Dragon Song* (from *'70 Super Pop Montreux*); by the Graham Bond Organization with the irresistible *Wade In The Water* (from *Live At Klooks Kleek*, recorded in 1964), enhanced by a solemn, almost classical introduction and finale; and also by the little-known Affinity, a jazz-rock band active between 1968 and 1972. Affinity made only one official album, *Affinity*, released by Vertigo in 1970, and are represented here by *A Day In The Life (Live At Ronnie Scott's)*, included in the 2021 four-CD reissue of *Affinity*, a measured song distinguished by the sound of the Hammond organ. It is also worth noting that after Affinity came to an end, singer Linda Hoyle made a

blues-oriented album, *Pieces of Me*, involving several members of Nucleus.

The three CDs give particular prominence to classic British-style jazz-rock: naturally, the essential Nucleus with *Elastic Rock* (from the self-titled 1970 album) and *Song For The Bearded Lady* (from the follow-up *We'll Talk About It Later*, 1971), but also Trifle, led by vocalist George Bean, with psychedelic jazz-rock in which a classic horn section outlines an elaborate theme followed by Hammond and trumpet solos (*Is It Loud*, from *First Meeting*, 1971). There is also Michael Gibbs - composer, arranger, producer, trombonist and keyboardist, associated with Graham Collier and, in later years, with Jaco Pastorius, Joni Mitchell and Peter Gabriel among many others - whose *Some Echoes, Some Shadows (For John Dankworth)*, from *Mike Gibbs* (1970), develops an intricate and penetrating horn theme, preceded by an introduction marked by a dark cello and followed by a completely unexpected ending.

As mentioned above, however, the inclusion of groups such as Jethro Tull, Spooky Tooth, Pentangle and If is unusual. Yet *One For John Gee* (from their first album, *This Was*, 1968) finds Ian Anderson's Jethro Tull - at the time also featuring guitarist Mick Abrahams, who wrote the piece - tackling a blues with the feel of a spy story and, naturally, the flute prominently displayed. Pentangle, meanwhile, shine in their original mixture of folk, jazz and blues with *In Time*, from one of their masterpieces, *Sweet Child* (1968). On a similarly singular and eccentric wavelength is Herbie Hancock's famous *Watermelon Man* as reinterpreted by folk guitarist Davy Graham (from *Midnight Man*, 1966, now included in the box set *He Moved Through The Fair - The Complete 1960s Recordings*).

A genuine pearl of the compilation is the instrumental *Luger's Groove* (the B-side of a single whose A-side was *Love Really Changed Me*), an energetic and intense jazz-rock piece by Spooky Tooth, a band poised between psychedelia and the beginnings of hard rock and unfairly underrated at the time: a tight dialogue between guitar and Hammond organ, supported by an electrifying rhythm section, with piano further heightening the narrative tension. Equally exhilarating and urgent is *Those About To Die* (from *Those Who Are About To Die Salute You*, 1969) by jazz-rock-tinged prog pioneers Colosseum, while Dick Morrissey's If display all the mastery of true jazz heavyweights in *What Did I Say About The Box, Jack* (from *If*, 1970), high-level jazz-rock, and in *Seldom Seen Sam* (from *If 3*, 1971), a disorienting and ironic funk piece. Pure psychedelia, sunny and dreamlike, is Julie Driscoll's *A New Awakening*, from her masterpiece *1969*, an album released in 1971 and featuring a substantial cross-section of the British jazz scene - Keith Tippett, Elton Dean, Chris Spedding, Karl Jenkins, Marc Charig and others. Quite appropriately, it gives this compilation its title.

There remains the part most inclined toward jazz influenced by free jazz and free improvisation, which developed considerably in England from the early 1960s onward: The Trio of John Surman, Barre Phillips and Stu Martin, with the mysterious and dark *Joachim* (from *The Trio*, 1970); the quintet of John McLaughlin, John Surman, Karl Berger, Dave Holland and Stu Martin, responsible for an impressionistic piece crossed by electric currents yet permeated by a sense of softness (*Earth Bound Hearts*, from *Where Fortune Smiles*, 1971); the third stream of the New Jazz Orchestra conducted by Neil Ardley (*Angle*, from *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe*, 1969), a kind of who's who of British jazz; and the incredible *Voodoo Forest* (from *Patent Pending*, 1969) by saxophonist Johnny Almond, for many years alongside John Mayall and here, with his Music Machine, in a distinctly Floydian piece in which the bass clarinet traces dark improvised lines - another delight in the compilation. Nor could this area omit the intense and unforgettable Mike Osborne, whose passionate and moving *So It Is (Edit)*, from *Outback* (1970), fittingly closes the compilation.

Also worth mentioning, in what must necessarily remain a summary survey, are Kenny Wheeler, Manfred Mann, The Don Rendell-Ian Carr Quintet, Tubby Hayes Quartet, the ethno-jazz of the Joe Harriott Double Quintet, John Dankworth's Orchestra, the Graham Collier Sextet, Manfred Mann Chapter Three, Ray Russell Quartet, John Taylor, the beat of Jasper, Mick Weaver's Wynder K. Frogg and its harpsichord, Chris Spedding of course, the alien spiritual atmosphere of Garrick's Fairground and the Michael Garrick Septet, the Mike Taylor Trio, and the funky rhythm and blues of Georgie Fame. The final name is perhaps the musician who best symbolizes this dissolution of genres, a genuine protagonist at ease in every context: Jack Bruce, playing double bass on *Over The Cliff* (from *Things We Like*, 1970), with Jon Hiseman on drums, Dick

Heckstall-Smith on saxophone - Colosseum! - and John McLaughlin on guitar, though McLaughlin does not actually play on this track. Jazz somewhere in the orbit of Ornette Coleman, stellar double bass, and an extraordinary level of empathy and creativity.

Improvisation and Innovation

Underlying this compilation is the need to document the powerful transformation that took place in jazz - and beyond jazz - in Great Britain. From early attempts to imitate the American model, a revolution occurred in just a few years, leading British musicians to shape their own original perspective on the world of African American-derived music, beginning with the blues but interwoven with the many influences present in England during the 1960s. The common ground on which these groups and musicians meet is improvisation, expressed through different models and surging through all the tracks included in this collection. At the same time there is a search for composition, thematic development and arrangement; and proximity to the world of rock - in many cases a genuine competition with it - facilitates and inspires these different mutations. The result is a musical kaleidoscope rich enough to produce a universe that is singular and distinct from its original model. Above all, there is an openness of mind and a continuous intertwining of stories that only appear to be different, but which found their connecting thread precisely in experimentation and the impulse to improvise. One could therefore say that, on these three CDs, Alexis Korner and John Mayall, the Rolling Stones of *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, Pink Floyd of *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, or even The Who of *The Who Sell Out* would not have seemed particularly out of place - nor would the entire Canterbury school.

This desire to alter and transform American models also owes much to the Beatles of *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Although they were not accustomed to instrumental improvisation, they nonetheless had a profound influence through their innovative and experimental approach to the recording studio, which became, in every sense, a means of expanding boundaries. Despite some naivety, a few partial missteps and formulas that have inevitably been affected by the passage of time, the overall musical quality expressed in this substantial collection remains a stimulus for the present precisely because of its ability to absorb other people's models and regenerate their expressive power and forms through original approaches and methods.

It remains to be said that the British experience as a whole - from rock to folk to jazz - was extraordinarily rich. Seen, and heard, from today's perspective, it truly seems almost miraculous that in just a few years a territory hardly comparable in scale to the United States was able to produce so much music of such quality. To repeat a point already made: we should consider the different stylistic expressions produced during that period as a whole, because they were a direct expression - a cultural synthesis - of the vast movement of social, political and intellectual renewal active during the 1960s and 1970s. This is one of the great merits of *A New Awakening - Adventures In British Jazz 1966-1971*.

READING

Duncan Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioners. British Jazz 1960-1975*, Equinox Publishing Ltd., Sheffield, 2012.

English translation of the article published in *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi*.