

Memoire 2 Missiles

I've only had glasses and missiles thrown at me whilst onstage on three occasions. The last time was at a well-known festival dedicated to improvised music in Austria, which just shows you that even in the guaranteed correct location, people can take a dislike to your music. But in that event, it was just one beer glass that landed at my feet, so not a bad count, one disgruntled punter out of four hundred.

Previously (in the early 1980s), I took my improvised violin music to places that I thought would be accommodating if not enthusiastic. Anyway, they were paying. 'They' in this particular case was the Students' Union Entertainment Committee for Sydney University. Smart bunch, I considered, the intellectual elite, should be able to handle some contemporary music.

I set up in the lunch time cafeteria (an outside forecourt) and started in. Within a few minutes the students were unsettled and yelling out for me to stop. They threw plastic bottles and the odd piece of plastic cutlery, a paper napkin dart flew past my nose. I was booked to play an hour, so I put my head down, blocked out the complaints, and carried on. Many students left. With ten minutes to go, a young woman stood before me with tears in her eyes pleading with me to stop - I have a migraine, it's my period, my boyfriend left me last week, I have my finals next week - is what I can remember from her desperate speech. Sorry lady, I'm contracted for another few minutes. She stormed off. With two minutes to go, I reckoned I was home and dry, then someone pulled out the plug of my amplifier, I continued acoustic to the appointed hour in front of no one. I did get paid.

It was improvising guitarist Eugene Chadbourne that pointed out to me that the great quality of Country & Western music is that you can do anything to or with it, since its simplicity gives it a certain indestructible quality. We were touring as a duo in the USA, I had been reminiscing to him about my time some years earlier, when I earned part of my living playing in a straight ahead C & W band. Indeed, some of the fiddle tunes I played then bore extremely close resemblance to the unaccompanied violin partitas of J. S. Bach - both forms of dance music. My confusion remains as to why C & W (even with the most redneck lyrics) continues to be so popular in Aboriginal communities. But before I digress into a sub-genre of musicology, I will return to the point of this memoire: missile-throwing as an everyday phenomenon in live music.

It was in the sugar cane cutting district of Queensland that our C & W band (the name must remain anonymous, as members are living) played the Proserpine Ex-servicemen's Club. We set up, and the local cane cutters and their wives and children slowly took their seats. Sometime between the opening song and the end of the first set, the women and children had simply disappeared, leaving a cohort of repressed and hardened looking males who were speedily getting 'Fridayed' - blind drunk. Now, in the film Blues Brothers, there is a chicken wire fence separating the band from the audience. We had no such defence, and while there was not quite the avalanche of bottles hurled as in the film, the aggression was palpable. There were a few bouncers who kept the lid on the proceedings as random fists flew amongst the punters. We never left the stage in fear of damage to our gear (we toured with the band's own PA), and no one appeared to require an ambulance. The threat of raw violence remained strangely stable at about 75% volume and possibility, and stayed that way through all four sets. The police were never called. At 10 pm on the dot, as if by psychic signal, the cane cutters demonstratively put on their hats, gathered their wounds and pride, and silently staggered out the door and home to their wives and children.

In the penultimate gig I played with this band, there were no further bottles, but the police did arrive, and much to my amazement (but not any of the other band members who kept playing, eyes and hats straight ahead, as if nothing were happening), the bass player was hauled off the stage and taken away by the two uniforms. I found out in the interval that the bass player had got one of the drummer's underage sisters pregnant and the local law had been called in to 'fix him up'. I was asked to move from violin to bass for the rest of the night. I should point out that the bass player lived with the drummer's family in a four-room house at the end of a very rural valley - there were many sisters. Despite this abrupt filmic end to the band, I really had enjoyed their camaraderie. The bass player and drummer worked in the local abattoir, the singer worked in the

local police department, the lead guitarist (great pedal steel player too) helped his dad, who was the local grave digger. (I only saw Dad play with us at the first gig before he was retired; halfway through the first set, I realised his guitar was not plugged in). With such 'local' credentials, I was certainly the odd one out. One night they all turned up at The Basement Jazz Club in Sydney where I was putting on a night of free improvisation; they wanted to check out my other life. Sitting there in the front row in their hats, beer in hand, they were likely the most open members of the audience present.