

PAUL BLEY: Time must have a stop
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Jazz pianist Paul Bley is usually known for his spacious, restrained lyricism, honed with his formative years in the Jimmy Giuffre group and later with music composed by the women in his life, Carla Bley and Annette Peacock. In Bley's 75th year, Andy Hamilton reassesses his career, highlighting his founding role in cementing the early 60s free jazz avant garde with Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra, and his pioneering synthesizer and electronics improvisations at the dawn of the 70s.

"As time moves forward, the albums become more autobiographical, and lose a preset agenda. Now it's more a case of saying, 'This is what I was thinking of, Tuesday December 14', or whatever." This is pianist Paul Bley's unassuming introduction to his new ECM album, *Solo In Mondsee*. Released for his 75th birthday, it's his first solo piano album on the label for 35 years, since 1972's *Open, To Love*. With its cavernous space, silence and slow tempos, and emphasis on the interplay of overtones, that record was Bley's pianistic response to the period immediately preceding it, in which he had delved deeply into the far-out sonorities of the electronic synthesizer.

The idea for a solo album came from producer Manfred Eicher – this was several years before Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert* set the template for solo jazz piano. It coincided, as Bley puts it, "with a period when I was trying to be the slowest pianist in the world, which in turn was connected to the work I had just finished with my electronic period. One of the things I liked in electronics was the possibility of long sustains. I demanded, on going back to acoustic music, that the piano itself should be able to duplicate what I'd been able to get electronically."

Solo piano and electronics – these are the twin poles of Bley's later career. But his pioneering work with synthesizers in the late 60s and early 70s remains under-explored. Conceptually fascinating, and experimental in the true sense that the outcomes were not under full artistic control, it was dependent on the workings of temperamental machinery whose potentialities were only beginning to be understood. Together with his earlier 1960s recordings of free jazz, these recordings are less accessible, both physically and musically. But the wilder, more avant garde side of Bley has been neglected in favour of his more lyrical, melodic music from 1972 onwards.

It's useful to begin with a brief outline of his career. Born in Montréal in 1932, Bley began as a bop pianist. In 1950 he moved to New York to attend the Juilliard School of Music, and worked briefly with Charlie Parker, Lester Young, and Charles Mingus. In 1955 he toured with trumpeter Chet Baker, and in 1957, moving to the West Coast, he met Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, a decisive encounter in his musical development. In the same year he married composer Karen Borg, now better known as Carla Bley. Returning to New York in 1959, he recorded with Mingus, George Russell and Don Ellis, and between 1961–63 was a member of the legendary Jimmy Giuffre trio. As well performing compositions by Carla, the group moved towards an intense free improvisation.

In 1963 Bley was a member of Sonny Rollins's quartet – probably his freest – and in 1964 worked with Albert Ayler. That year he helped launch the Jazz Composers Guild, a co-operative of New York avant garde players, and recorded *Barrage* (1964) and *Closer* (1965) on the associated ESP-Disk label. *Closer*, and subsequent recordings like *Ramblin'*, *Blood and Mr Joy*, involved a freely interactive trio, with bassists Kent Carter, Mark Levinson or Gary Peacock, and drummers Barry Altschul, Paul Motian or Billy Elgart.

After divorcing Carla in 1967, Bley married composer and vocalist Annette Peacock, and created a synthesizer based group with her. Bley then led the electric jazz group Paul Bley & Scorpio, but subsequently returned to the piano, with a radical new approach – more spacious, with resonating overtones, expressing an interest in timbre above tonality. During the 1970s, with his new partner, videographer Carol Goss, Bley ran *Improvising Artists Inc*, which issued the first recordings of Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius as members of Bley's quartet. In

the 1980s he recorded again on ECM with Bill Frisell, John Surman and Paul Motian, then in 1994 in a trio with Evan Parker and Barre Phillips. The classic Bley Trio of the 1960s with Gary Peacock and Paul Motian was reunited for *Not Two, Not One* in 1998.

We begin by discussing the seminal synthesizer work that had such a powerful effect on Bley's subsequent approach to acoustic piano. In 1969, he got hold of an early synthesizer from its inventor, Bob Moog. "I was fortunate to be privy to the Karlheinz Stockhausen studio in Cologne at the time, which filled an entire room, from floor to ceiling, with modules," he explains. "Stockhausen was building electronic music one note at a time." He didn't work with him, he adds, but attended performances in his studio. "When I heard that Moog had added a keyboard, I was very intrigued as to whether his design was compatible with improvisation."

Didn't it take amazing powers of persuasion to get a synth off Bob Moog, given that he had only built three or four at that date? "No, it was not a matter of convincing him of something he didn't want to do," Bley responds. "He was only too happy to put his instrument through the test of an authentic improvising musician, to see what it could and what it couldn't do. Bob Moog loved his instruments and followed them everywhere," he adds. "Unfortunately his bad taste led him to the theremin." An example of what Bley means is the virtuoso kitsch of thereminist Clara Rockmore (reviewed in *The Wire* 280).

"It was an early time, technically, and the instrument had its limitations – it needed supplementary keyboards for harmony purposes because it was monophonic," Bley recalls. There was no instruction manual, and the instrument was incredibly temperamental, and almost impossible to tune. "I said, 'Put a sheet over this keyboard, and if anyone even coughs on it, the gig is off,'" Bley explains. He developed a proprietary interface that allowed real-time performance, and with Annette Peacock on bass and vocals, he formed *The Bley-Peacock Synthesizer Show*. After presenting the first live performance with synthesizer and voice treatment at Philharmonic Hall on 26 December 1969, he took his group to Europe. "At that time we worked with the ARP synthesizer as opposed to the Moog – 'ARP' stands for its inventor, Alan R Perlman," Bley says. "The ARP was four Moogs put in a single keyboard. This did change the timbre of the sound – you'd think that being oscillator based, they would sound alike, but in fact they were totally different – but none of the oscillators sounded as good as the original Moog."

After that troubled European tour, Bley decided that live performance didn't reward the huge efforts involved. However, the artistic fruits were considerable. Bley's experiments helped Moog develop the *Minimoog*, a more performer-friendly instrument used by Prog rockers Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman. But Bley's own efforts pushed the frontiers further. During 1969–71 he made ten synthesizer records, with Annette Peacock's voice synthesis on eight. These albums are poised interestingly – and rather uneasily – between free jazz, fusion, Prog rock and video and film sound effects. *Dual Unity and Improvisie* (1971) feature Bley on electric piano and synthesizer, Peacock on voice, bass and electronics, and Han Bennink on drums. *Improvisie* has two long pieces. The title track is elegiac, with blended acoustic and electric piano as well as synths, against Bennink's playful interactions. "Touching" is a Peacock composition that first appeared on Bley's 1965 album of that name, and she croons, drones, or emotes powerfully – occasionally too powerfully (see "MJ", on *Dual Unity*).

Synthesizer Show (1970–71) and *Paul Bley & Scorpio* (1972) have been reissued on CD as *Circles*. Annette Peacock's evocative vocal/song album *I'm The One* (1970), with its more direct funky and countercultural resonances, also features Bley's electronics and synth on two tracks. By the time of these albums, which use the ARP 2600 – a monophonic machine, only allowing the playing of a single line, without chords – Bley had taken a more assured hold of the technology. *Circles* is closer to straightahead jazz with electric keyboards, less experimental than *Dual Unity and Improvisie*. "Snakes" features really funky synth, the closing section cleverly imitating electric guitar feedback; "El Cordobes" echoes the traditional organ combo.

The compositions of Carla Bley (more rooted in earlier modes of jazz, but still very original) and Annette Peacock are vital elements in this new music. The contribution of his composer-wives deserves an article in its own right, since Bley himself is an improviser first of all. To my knowledge, all his compositions are based on standard chord sequences.

Bley insists that his own sound really only developed after he had worked with synthesizers: "Human nature is curious in that situation – when we achieve a result electronically that we're pleased with, we try to do it without the equipment, as the next step," he muses. "When I first sat at the instrument, I spent my time seeking facilities that didn't exist on the piano. One of them was infinite sustain, another was infinite speed, and another was infinite range... I was a happy camper, for a while... Today it's used for colour, it's not thought of as a solo instrument, even now."

Bley's crucial role in the development of early free jazz is at least as neglected as HIS synthesizer period. Reassessing those times, Bley places two figures at the head of his free jazz pantheon: Ornette Coleman and Jimmy Giuffre. Bley was working at the Hillcrest Club in Los Angeles in 1958, when he invited Coleman and Cherry to sit in. The effect on him was radical and life-changing: as Bley now says, "I've liked everything I've made after 1960. I hate everything I made pre-1960." In his 1999 autobiography, *Stopping Time*, he says that Coleman showed him the way out of the "bebop wilderness", replacing repeating chord patterns with a linear, non-harmonic music. For Bley, the constraints of repetitive gestures, and its reliance on song forms with built-in redundancy, fell away.

He elaborates on this dramatic change: "There was an article in *Down Beat* in something like 1954 in which I mentioned that jazz had reached a crisis, and that the AABA form had too many As, and not enough CDEFG. So I began working with groups where we would play totally free, and that led to a kind of a dead end, because 'totally free' didn't necessarily allow you to continue. A totally free piece is a totally free piece, end of concert." Coleman showed a way out of this impasse: "He suggested ABCDEFGHIJK, in which repetition was anathema... It wasn't totally free because totally free was A forever, metamorphosing. It was a form that took hold, because you could finally return to the written music, and the audience had something to hold on to."

Bley is one of the handful of pianists – others are Joachim Kuhn and Geri Allen – to have worked with Ornette successfully. Pianists can't 'comp' behind Ornette, although they can play against him. This was less of a problem for Bley, who has a horn player's attitude to harmony: "In my philosophy, a chord is composed of simultaneous lines." Another problem for pianists was that Ornette undermined the equal tempered system, playing "microtonally", as Bley puts it. Again, the pianist harmonised with him by creating space for overtones, and this became a key element in his later style. However, Bley continues to improvise on standards in his own highly individual way – polytonally, playing with the key structure, as his new ECM album shows.

The second key figure Bley worked with was West Coast reeds player Jimmy Giuffre, who created a revolutionary, quiet free jazz with his trio from 1961–63, playing mostly clarinet, with Steve Swallow on bass. Both *Emphasis & Flight*, 1961, and *Fusion And Thesis*, remixed and reissued by ECM in 1992, featured more of Carla Bley's compositions. "Although there was a lot of tonality in Carla's work, and in Steve Swallow's," Bley reveals, "it was mainly Giuffre's music, and he made a transition from tonality to post-tonality quite rapidly in the period of that band's life." The high point of the group's achievement is *Free Fall* (1962). Giuffre commented that "There's no time, there's no key, no metre... I found the right people to play with, that listen to each other and aren't greedy." As with Ornette, Bley found a deep appeal in the group's focus on melody rather than harmony: "The recent style is to play chords. But Jimmy Giuffre's philosophy is that harmony is when two contrapuntal lines meet. Harmony is accidental."

Free Fall, one of the most original yet neglected albums of the 1960s, is an uncompromising vision to be compared with its near-contemporaries *A Love Supreme*, *Out To Lunch* and *Spiritual Unity*. But this 'soft free jazz' was totally uncommercial, and in 1963, as Giuffre put it, "the doors closed". The group disbanded after playing for door money one night at a coffee

house on Bleecker Street, and making 35 cents each. Bley maintains that Giuffre was one of the most important innovators of the time, even if he's recognised only in "learned circles". If someone hasn't got his due, he comments, "That's a very attractive position to be in, because it means that people owe you. That's always better than having too much of you." When I ask if Bley has got his due, he parries the question: "Masochism is not my favourite sport."

As a key figure in the post-Ornette revolution in jazz, Bley helped found the Jazz Composers Guild, which included such luminaries as Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon, Roswell Rudd, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra and John Gilmore. The first of his two albums for ESP-Disk, *Barrage* (1964), featured Dewey Johnson (trumpet), Marshall Allen (alto sax), Eddie Gomez (bass) and Milford Graves (drums) playing a clutch of Carla Bley compositions. Bley's scintillating 'pulse no metre' free jazz features incandescent sax by Allen, a member of The Sun Ra Arkestra, and it's fascinating to hear bassist Gomez in a free context.

When I comment that this frenetic free jazz is in total contrast to his work with the Giuffre trio, Bley reminds me that he was a sideman in Giuffre's group, whereas with *Barrage* he was leader. So he was a screaming free jazzman at heart? "Yes," Bley affirms, "would you like me to scream a little?" Passing on that offer, I suggest that this is not the approach he's associated with. Bley responds that "what I'm associated with is a press agent's point of view" – though he concedes that it is also to do with what albums are currently available. But judging by his earlier putdown of garrulous virtuosos – "You should charge the musicians by the note!" – wouldn't his high energy playing on that date have been expensive? Bley laughs, and explains the context as he saw it: "It was during the height of the free jazz revolution, at which time there were poseurs, there were people who couldn't play at all – and these were people that were getting written up in magazines. Because it was so new, you couldn't distinguish between people that were going to keep playing, and people who jumped on a bandwagon for ten minutes. These were radical guys in my quintet, they were playing shapes instead of notes – I think this preceded Albert Ayler.

"It was the nature of the time to be very political, and very vocal," he continues. "But I had a very strong political antagonism too, because the music didn't seem to need talent, just attitude. My point of view, and I think it was a fairly original one, was that you can keep all the aesthetics of jazz that preceded that totally free jazz, and still have it be revolutionary. There was still room for a Ben Webster. They threw the baby out with the bathwater." That is, you could have the relaxed intensity of a Ben Webster, and still be free – more free, maybe, than high-energy stylists.

As a white player, I wonder whether he felt any friction at the JCG – wasn't there a Black Power thing? "That's a journalistic licence taken by writers who didn't have anything to say about the music specifically. It wasn't the point. A great player is identified immediately as a great player, their ethnicity is a secondary issue". Among these writers with nothing specific to say, I presume, might be Leroi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka.

Percussionist Milford Graves makes a major contribution to the success of *Barrage*, and Bley affirms that "Milford is a genius! But I had my own argument about him – I'd say 'There's no shortage of African drummers! The hills are alive with African drummers, it's jazz drummers that are in short supply, especially free jazz drummers.'" ESP albums from around 1964 are notorious for charmingly wild electronic manipulation, using spliced and reversed sounds to give already far-out music 'extra weirdness' – check out The Bob James Trio's *Explosions*. But Bley is less charitable when it comes to *Closer*, his second ESP-Disk with Steve Swallow (bass) and Barry Altschul (drums), dating from 1965. "I gave [ESP] a four-track trio tape – at the time four-track was the cutting-edge. And they 'lost' the bass player! You can hear a bass-player, very slightly. So I received acclaim for being so sparse! I've never contradicted that, because when I get acclaim, I tend to clam up... Rather than complain about how poorly ESP handled their production, I went with it, and said 'Yes, I am a minimalist!'" Was the label original and a bit competent, or just completely incompetent? "Well, when you lose a track in a trio, what do you call that?"

The album is a classic nonetheless. Carla's simple but haunting "Ida Lupino", named after the film star and director, is movingly interpreted here, and became one of the staples of his repertoire (it was reprised seven years later, on *Open, To Love*).

Bley has played with so many legendary avant gardists, it would almost be easier to list those whom he hasn't played with. One of his most notable collaborators was Albert Ayler. "Ayler was a leading figure who made it a point not to be in the Guild, but he was very sympathetic with all the players," Bley comments. "He was a very gentlemanly guy. You would think that someone who played so loud that the lights in the room turned purple would be difficult... in fact he was very sweet. But his brother [trumpeter Donald] couldn't play at all!" When I mention that some people defend Donald Ayler, Bley is emphatic: "Then we'd have to meet at dawn, with pistols... When you make a bad judgment in terms of aesthetics, you're doing damage to the whole enterprise."

As well as contributing to the philosophy of the free jazz collective, Bley also influenced Charles Mingus's concept of the jazz workshop. "That idea I took from drama workshop, which allows you to play for an audience without penalty," he explains. "When I told Mingus he could charge for people to come to the rehearsals, he loved that – he could stop the band in the middle of a gig and rehearse it there. Let the poor suckers pay for the rehearsal!" When I observe that some classical concerts are like rehearsals, because orchestras no longer have time to rehearse, Bley responds: "As Gary Peacock says, the rehearsal immediately follows the recording date!"

Even over the phone, Bley is an exceedingly lively and entertaining interviewee. He admits that he's "at least provocative" – 'cryptic, paradoxical and contradictory' might be added to that. He enjoys provoking a reaction, whether from interviewers and readers, or from fellow performers and listeners. Usually it's possible to tell when he's joking, or milking one of his favourite paradoxes, but his answers often need careful placing in context. Bley's provocativeness comes out most strongly in his views on improvising, practising and teaching. He's said that "Rehearsal will make a classical performance better, but in the jazz world it's the very first work that is the best shot at the performance." When I counter that I've heard successive takes where improvement takes place, he demurs: "For me there are no 'alternative takes', because I don't make a second take. If the first take doesn't work, I scrap it and do something else, because the premise is proved false. It's first take all the time! I get it right the first time. We've all gotten brighter since the old days."

"With the rules [about composed music] that they teach at Juilliard, where I was privileged to be a student," he continues, "if you want to do 20 more takes, you might get it a little, little better. But in improvised music you don't want it a little little better, it would be better if you could make it a little little worse – and sound raw and fresh. To take that analogy further, if you try to fail, you will succeed." Here, Bley's love of paradox takes him in the direction of a challenging but plausible 'aesthetics of imperfection'.

In a related vein, he's hostile to teaching and practising, which he regards as a syndrome: "Teaching is a false construct... It's presumptuous to think that you're going to be able to help anybody. What you wind up doing is making them double-think – so when they're deciding to do something, they have to decide whether the teacher thinks it's a good idea, and whether they think it's a good idea! Since jazz is decisions is made in micro-seconds, double-thinking is counterproductive.

"Teaching implies, 'I want you to become me'," he continues. "Geniuses come out in spite of the teaching. Look at Ornette Coleman – completely self-taught. The guy can't play seven notes in tune. I know, I've got all the tapes – we recorded for a month, six nights a week for four weeks." However, he admits that he's mainly concerned with teaching's possible harmful effects on genuinely original players. Since interviewing him, I discovered that he had a teaching job in the early 1990s at New England Conservatory of Music – he must have been "at least provocative" with his students!

Improvisors as much as classical players regard practising as vital to artistic development, but Bley will have none of this. "Practice is counter-productive," he insists. "You could absent yourself from your instrument from a decade, and come back playing as if you've practised

for a decade, because you've grown in a decade, personally. Practice is a teacher-influenced idea." He does have a piano, but doesn't play it – it's for his children when they visit: "If I need to play, I'll accept an offer to perform, which there's no shortage of." If you enjoy playing, though, I persist... "No no no, it's not our job to enjoy playing – it's the audience's job to enjoy listening... I don't 'like to do some playing', I'm saving it for when we're recording or performing live."

But as you get older, and the fingers get stiffer, don't you need to practise? "No, in jazz, stiffening the fingers is a good thing, because you'll be less glib..." I'm not sure I buy this. It might be true for players who are disposed to glibness – but the editing function has to be cerebral rather than physical, as I'm sure Bley would acknowledge. Another surprise, though with musicians it's not so uncommon, is that he doesn't listen to a lot of music himself. "We have a patina of music that adds mood and colour to the ambience in our residences, but that's not for listening purposes. That's for muffling the external noises."

Bley maintains long-time musical partnerships, especially with Charlie Haden, Paul Motian, Gary Peacock, Steve Swallow and Lee Konitz. Among this cadre, he's evolved his own rules about group improvisation. For instance, as he puts it, "If somebody is playing really well, let them earn the money, and you just listen." But when I comment on Lee Konitz's musical promiscuity – working with local players everywhere – he undermines my concerns with a vivid image: "He can't be threatened. You can't put a bad rhythm section next to Lester Young and threaten Lester Young, or Bird. These people can carry a whole band, never mind just a rhythm section. These are giants, they take them on their back and walk down the street with them!" My response, that for the listeners' sake at least, it would be better to play with a good rhythm-section, provokes one of his more outrageous one-liners. "Fuck the listeners! The listeners are privileged audience participants, with no relationship to anything except the fact that they're there for moral support."

Why play in public, then? "Exactly. People have addressed that very question – Canadian people have addressed it." (He means Glenn Gould.) What do you get from the audience, then? "Payment, preferably cash prior to performance." But then Bley mellows, adding, "We're there to serve the audience, and it's our responsibility to do the best we can, and make the event memorable. I've been privileged to attend some wonderful piano concerts, and they are etched in my memory forever." He plays concert halls rather than clubs now, except for venues like the Blue Note in New York. He used to play some bad pianos, but has a soft spot for the ones where spilt coffee had trickled down the keys and made some of the notes stick. "Any discipline that means you're going to play less notes because some of them are broken, is not a totally bad thing... But a Steinway D in Germany with the piano technician still chained to the leg of the piano is still a rare treat!"

One of Bley's most important recent partners is saxophonist Evan Parker. In 1994 he formed a trio with Parker and Barre Phillips, which recorded *Time Will Tell* and *Sankt Gerold* for ECM. When I ask about him, he calls Parker "My sweetheart!", adding, "I've grown my beard as a sign of respect to him. When I first played with him, for ECM, I felt challenged because he could play continuously." But then he realised that with two hands, he could still be standing while Evan was flagging. Perhaps because he played a kind of free jazz with Giuffrè that conforms more to some people's idea of free Improv, Bley believes that many self-proclaimed free improvisors are too quick to throw away the 'jazz' label. He's adamant that he's a jazz improviser, and he probably hears Parker, like himself, as someone who has extended their jazz roots in a new, more personal direction.

Now in his mid-seventies, Bley continues to receive invitations to perform. "The question is what not to do," he explains. "I'm the laziest guy in the world, but there is a certain responsibility to record." He now has studios both in New York City and in Stuart, Florida, where he lives over the winter. But Bley now prefers live to studio recordings: "For a good part of my life there was the tension between the two. But now I feel the edge [of live recording] is what keeps us honest."

He's done some serious marketing in his time, when he ran the IAI label with Carol Goss in the 70s, but he's now mostly left that behind. "After about 20 releases, I realised I couldn't afford myself!"

There have been two developments within the last five years, he says: "One, I don't play with other people, and two, I don't play chords... I consider myself a promiscuous player: one period with one player, and then move on." His new solo album was recorded high in the Alps – "Manfred Eicher loves to record albums there, it gives him an overview" – and it begins with Bley striking a thunderclap at the bass end of the piano. The material is mostly standards, but interpreted in that Bley sideways-on style that disguises them so effectively. "We try not to refer to the title, because the composers are world famous and rich enough." After over 100 recordings, the pianist remains identifiable by his opening notes alone, beautifully lyrical yet refreshing. □ Solo In Mondsee is now out on ECM. Paul Bley's Website is at www.improvart.com. Thanks to Julian Cowley and David Fraser