

Instant Composers Pool celebrate 50 spontaneous releases

FIRST THOUGHT

"It's a bird," says Han Bennink at ICP Records' Amsterdam headquarters, penning a tiny 'v' in the top left corner of another copy of the label's landmark 51st release, *Instant Composers Pool*. Neatly arranged on three desks in front of him are 40 of the 1000 LP sized box sets designed to house CD reissues of the 50 albums already released on ICP, plus extras. The drummer has hand-painted every cover himself, adding individual finishing touches – an antique stamp or a snippet of blank music paper – to each one.

"This is how it went 45 years ago," he says, referring to his cover art for ICP's very first release, *New Acoustic Swing Duo*, featuring Bennink and his ICP associate, the multi-reedist Willem Breuker, who died in 2010. For its first pressing Bennink decorated each of 500 blank sleeves with different artwork, using anything from band aids to ink stains.

ICP is both a Dutch-based improvised music collective and a record label. Co-founded in 1967 by Bennink and Misha Mengelberg, its launch signalled the new thing in European jazz, predating its German and British counterparts, FMP and Incus respectively. Starting out as a loose international collective, it soon developed into the more established ICP Orchestra, going onto collaborate with other improvisors including Dave Douglas, Peter Brötzmann and Sonic Youth.

"We've never liked the term free jazz," says Bennink, now 70. Mengelberg, aged 77, coined the phrase instant composing to better describe their mode of dadaist Improv swing. The Russian-born pianist and composer claims he was thinking of instant coffee when he came up with the description, supposedly unaware it had already appeared in the sleeve notes of a Jimmy Giuffrè album. Later on he



Han Bennink

minted the adjective spontaneous in relation to ICP's music. Rather than being strictly spontaneous, he and Bennink's Improv played around with musical phrases pulled from Mengelberg's compositions, old European songs and dances. Some titles hint at their working strategies, such as "Valse Trouvée" or "Intermezzo Between Nothing". Where British and German improvisors often chose to ignore existing forms, they set out to subvert them. In the same spirit Mengelberg also incorporated found text in his songs and poetry. "It's similar to what I'm doing in my visual art," says Bennink. "We've always liked using found objects. It all comes from art, from dada."

Bennink's habit of playing outside the drum kit, hitting everything in reach including his own body, is an extension of his art methods. "It's anything but theatre," he says. "It all depends on the audience, the acoustics, the furniture, the characteristics of the venue."

Before he and Mengelberg founded ICP, Bennink was celebrated as a tempo swing drummer in the 1950s and 60s, accompanying modern jazz artists such as Eric Dolphy on the classic album *Last Date*, with Mengelberg on piano. However, the unruly sound of Bennink's early drumming and shouting carried over into ICP. On *New Acoustic Swing Duo*, his playing resembled raw Art Blakey recordings. "When I was a kid I heard his drum solos on the American army station through my crystal radio," he says. "Can you imagine the sound?"

Although Bennink gradually departed from this role when ICP started, he has never regretted his step. □ The *Instant Composers Pool* box set is out now. The ICP Orchestra featuring Evan Parker play at London The Vortex, 28 January–2 February. icporchestra.com
Marinus de Ruiter

BEST THOUGHT

Unofficial Channels Drone Apps

Because a drone is basically an endlessly repeated or sustained set of tones, it lends itself to being produced by machines as much as by human bodies, ill suited as the latter are to long duration. The prototype of such machines was the sruti box, originally a bellows-operated harmonium-like instrument that simulates the sound of a tambura, used by Indian classical musicians for practice. This mutated in recent decades into portable but fairly hefty analogue slabs of hardware that electronically produce a drone. More recently, an iPhone/iPad app called SrutiBox has appeared, which digitally simulates the box, offering a variety of preset tuning systems as well as the means to create your own tunings and scales. It also comes with an endorsement from Pauline Oliveros.

Probably the most famous hardware drone box is the Beijing based group FM3's Buddha Machine, which offers a variety of infinitely repeating sonic loops, some of them drones, programmed into a transistor radio-shaped box that was originally designed for Chinese Buddhists as an automatic mantra reciting machine. FM3's fourth generation Machine comes out this month; and an iPhone/iPad app version allowing you to simultaneously operate six loops is available.

Indeed a variety of drone apps are available today. There's Drone FX, on which you can create highly cinematic drone sequences using a series of buttons and sliders that have a pretty steep learning curve. There's DJ/Rupture's Sufi Plug Ins, currently working with Ableton Live (but soon other music software), which features synthesizers tuned to North African and maqam (ie Persian/Iranian) scales, various drone producing functions, and Berber script. A hardware version is forthcoming too. And there's the remarkable Droneo (created by the maker of SrutiBox), which allows you to explore and create scales and tune the pitches of a drone in a pleasingly intuitive, but mathematically precise way. Droneo also features a beautiful spiralling visual representation of Harry Partch's 43 tone Just Intonation scale, which you can explore in a tactile way within a six octave range.

Aside from their use in performance and composition, these apps make it possible to experiment with particular drones as sustainable parts of an environment or ecosystem, much as musicians like La Monte Young, or more recently Catherine Christer Hennix, have done. But while the minimalist generation required complex, expensive analogue hardware systems and an esoteric technical knowledge of musical scales, Sruti Box and Droneo in particular open up the world of tuning systems to anyone with a little basic maths, exploratory fingers and the money for an iPad. □

Marcus Boon

Daniëlle van Ark