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When Jerry Garcia Met Derek Bailey

HENRY KAISER

I met the English improvising guitarist Derek Bailey soon after buying my first guitar. When I brought that black Fender Telecaster back to my college dorm room on November 1, 1971, I grabbed a guitar slide and just made abstract guitar sounds along with several favorite LPs of the moment. What's strange indeed is that I have recorded or performed with almost all the musicians I played along with that evening: Sonny Sharrock, Evan Parker, Han Bennink, John "Drumbo" French, Phil Lesh, Bob Weir, Bill Kreutzmann, Mickey Hart, Tom Constanten, Sylvestre Randafison, Jerry Garcia, and Derek Bailey. They were all musical inspirations to me, of one sort or another, but Bailey and Garcia I considered, and still consider, my two greatest guitar heroes.

Twenty years later, I managed to bring my heroes together for an interview for a BBC television series produced by the late Jeremy Marre, called *On the Edge: Improvisation in Music*. This meeting, however, was not the result of serendipity. I met Garcia shortly after I recorded a non-imitative version of "Dark Star" in 1987. We became friends and I would often meet with him backstage at Dead shows to talk about books, films, and diving. I had the opportunity to record with Garcia for Bob Bralove's *Second Sight* album in 1995. I knew Jeremy Marre as the British filmmaker responsible for television series on world music *Beats of the Heart* (1977–1983), as well what I considered the best documentary ever made about Malagasy music, *The Left Handed Man of Madagascar* (1990). When Bailey told me that he had been approached by Marre to make a television documentary series about Improvisation (with a capital I), based on Bailey's 1980 book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice*

in Music, I was immediately recruited to help with some US production work. Since I had been a television director since the late 1970s, Marre knew that I could be very helpful with the American shoot. Bringing Bailey and Garcia together to talk about improvisation and music, in front of a camera for a documentary series that would reach hundreds of thousands of viewers, felt like a dream come true for me. Yet it also felt appropriate, a part of my job—the same job definition I had heard Jerry articulate: “I serve *The Music*.” When he said that, I understood that there was a certain emphasis he intended to convey: he meant “The Music,” with a capital T and a capital M.

One thing that had always bothered about Bailey’s book was his choice of Steve Howe from Yes as the representative rock guitarist. I told Derek that Howe had been the wrong person to interview, given that he barely improvised. So for Marre’s show I insisted that they talk to Garcia as their rock improvisation icon. My argument was that Garcia was not only singular as a premier rock guitarist but also the one who had spent the most time free improvising in front of more people than any other guitarist. They agreed, and a quick call the Dead’s publicist Dennis McNally arranged the shoot, which took place in Garcia’s home in San Rafael in early 1990. Bailey asked the questions, which he and Marre prepared. I made sure to bring a guitar for Derek so that my two heroes could play together.

The shoot went smoothly and quickly, thanks to a highly professional crew who made it seem more like a friendly visit than a formal interview. The questions (often edited out of the final show cut) were thoughtful, intelligent, and informed. This was very different from most interviews for Garcia, since the only topic was improvisation. My only regret is that I didn’t have the opportunity to ask Marre for a copy of the raw footage, around an hour of wide-ranging discussion that ended with Bailey and Garcia improvising together on acoustic guitars. Sadly, it was their only meeting, and the record of that musical collaboration is long lost. While we do not have that today, what was included in the show’s final cut has many gems. The original four-part documentary is available on YouTube; I encourage viewing the whole thing as dessert after reading the interview transcript published here.

Bailey continued to be a personal inspiration and supportive friend until his death in 2005, and I am proud to have recorded several albums playing with him. I have all of the 150-plus albums he recorded and I still listen to them often. My love for the Dead has also not waned over the years: I have several hundred Grateful Dead discs and listen to one or two almost every week.

I believe that both Bailey and Garcia worked very hard to serve The Music. Each did so in their own passionate ways for the musics that they themselves played as well as the other musicians, past and present, who they cared about. For Bailey, that meant encouraging the free improvisation scene, not only in London, but in many other experimental improv communities throughout the world. Direct contact with him, chiefly through the mail (in those pre-Internet days), was a special way that many young improvisors received encouragement and access to the myriad depths of Bailey's knowledge of improvisation.

I, too, am very much a beneficiary of both Garcia's and Bailey's teaching and example, and I have always strived to serve The Music over the past forty-plus years. I treasure my times with both of these musicians and I am pleased to have been able to bring them together, if only briefly. As musicologist Melvin Backstrom points out in this volume, that encounter produced some of Garcia's most thoughtful, articulate thoughts on the art of improvisation. Perhaps the full interview session will surface one day, but until then, what we have is remarkable.

HENRY KAISER is an improvising guitarist, filmmaker, and research diver. He has appeared on more than 300 albums in a wide range of musical genres and was nominated for an Academy Award for the documentary he made with Werner Herzog, *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007). He is also a diver in the US Antarctic program with thirteen deployments to date, all under the twenty foot thick ice of the Ross Sea.