

Resist Me, Make Me Strong: On Chris Cutler

by Patrick Wright.

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What would happen if, through some irregular planetary convulsion, a fragment of an inhabited world split off, drifted away into space and survived? People used to indulge in just such speculations a quarter of a century ago, while hallucinating in front of LP covers. But the thought returns, and with unexpected gravity, in the upstairs front room of a small house in Thornton Heath, where south London thins out into dreary Surrey suburb. For just such a schism happened in rock music at about that time. A fragment broke off and it has been evolving ever since, independently and against considerable odds. If Thornton Heath is now an important point on its map, this is because Chris Cutler, drummer, lyricist, theorist and contrary entrepreneur, has recently moved in.

'I'm an optimist,' says this splendidly undefeated detachee, gazing out into the car-torn wastes of Beulah Road. Mention the rising odds against which he has persisted and he replies with a Biblical-sounding text quoted from the late cosmic jazzman, Sun Ra. 'Resist me,' he says with a defiant wave at the record industry moguls and media managers, the middle-of-the-roaders, the pundits and cashed-in pop journalists like Tony Parsons, who announced earlier in the year that the 'underground' was for failures: 'Resist me. Make me strong.'

The ground floor of Cutler's house is the newly established headquarters of his company, the ReR Megacorp. It works by wholesale distribution and mail order, and is now on the point of issuing a new catalogue, the first full-scale revision since 1991. As an introduction, Cutler hands over a compact disc called the *ReR Quarterly*, ornamented with the Megacorp's hieroglyphic logo and a picture, drawn by the cartoonist Peter Blegvad, of unexpected jewels falling from the slit belly of a fish.

The first track features zither-like plinking and a deep guttural sound from the back of a cavernous male throat. This is KoonGoorToog, from Siberia. A quartet written by Django Bates pitches a wandering bass trombone against a beeping flute and piano. Lesego Rampolokeng joins an oppositional white South African outfit called the Kalahari Surfers to sing a political allegory about an office desk. NORMA turns out to be a 'nomadic grouping' from Bologna, which produces a



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fine suite of circus music - a brassy carnival-like jaunt with yelling children, mariachi touches and snatches of sound sampled from a street where people are still holding out against cars.

The late British composer and pianist Cornelius Cardew is here, as is a collection of Swiss jokers called Les Salles Combles, who deliver a sprightly song, based on a rude French pun, superficially to do with condensed milk. The Russian group ZGA, who recorded their found or invented 'iron objects' in Riga, are answered by the Blitzoids from Illinois, who play with keys, sinks and a telephone. The whole collection is rounded off with a snatch from an improvised concert featuring Fred Frith on guitar, Chris Cutler on drums (he sounds as if he is demolishing houses, gently and at least three countries away), and an audience of Norwegians who laugh throughout.

The classic rock story tells of dramatic upward mobility. But Cutler and his associates were headed in a different direction from the outset. The journey started in 1968, when two public-school-educated students at Cambridge University, Fred Frith and Tim Hodgkinson, formed a band called Henry Cow and made their first public performance supporting Pink Floyd at the Architects' Ball in May that year.

Cutler joined later. The son of quietly communist parents, he had left school at 16 and, when *Melody Maker* eventually came along with its questionnaire, could list working as a dustman among his 'other occupations'. By then Henry Cow had established themselves as an experimental band with strong 'intellectual' credentials. Asked for their influences, the members would cite 20th-century composers like Varese and Elizabeth Lutyens alongside more predictable figures like Coltrane, Zappa and Syd Barrett.

'I think it had to do with recording technology,' says Cutler, explaining that recording liberated music from geography and social convention. Once, if you wanted to hear pygmies singing, you had to get on a plane and trek into some wilderness. If you wanted to hear an opera, you had to negotiate the equally forbidding rituals of a place like Glyndebourne. With recording, 'music of all kinds is more or less equally available,' and the members of Henry Cow had 'a voracious appetite' for sound. Henry Cow were not so much a band as 'a research project' designed to stretch instrumental playing and make rock music more interesting and expressive. They incorporated unusual instruments, and would write forbiddingly difficult pieces, learn how to play them, and then intersperse them with free improvisation.



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Cutler remembers thinking, 'It should be possible to be scored in places, like Bartok, and improvised elsewhere.' Assisted by John Peel's radio programme they had won his 'Rockortunity Knocks' competition in 1970 - Henry Cow took up residence in a flat near Ladbroke Grove, living off partners' earnings and, at low times, scavenging for leftovers from street markets. They ran their own Cabaret Voltaire concerts in Kensington Town Hall and worked on theatrical projects too. Cutler's argument with convention extended into the kitchen - 'blue rice,' as Barbara Gaskin still remembers, 'served under an orange light bulb'.

Dave Stewart, a keyboard player who knew Cutler then, remembers Henry Cow as being genuinely experimental - quite distinct from the dreaded 'progressive rock' bands of the early Seventies. Stewart reckons that the formal compositional element of the music was underestimated by music journalists, who 'seem to think music just happens out of attitude, clothes and haircuts'.

There were those in the music press who muttered deliberately thick-headed rejections. 'Whatever Henry Cow's music is,' wrote one, 'it sure ain't rock 'n' roll.' Yet for a while, in the early Seventies, there were others who thought this might be the music of the future, Richard Branson among them. Henry Cow was one of the first bands signed to Branson's independent Virgin label. As Cutler recalls, Virgin wanted a musical movement that was 'small, cheap and available', and picked up on bands that had some connection with The Soft Machine and the so-called 'Canterbury scene' of that time.

Henry Cow were never a hedonistic bunch, and they didn't settle for the stoned effects of the period. Their project was always musically driven, but they also had a strong interest in left-wing politics. Virgin stayed alongside for long enough for Henry Cow to team up with Peter Blegvad and other members of a band called Slapp Happy and to produce Desperate Straights, a set of songs in which political earnestness was redeemed by fetching apocalyptic whimsy and despair, and which, with Dagmar Krause's singing, captured the disintegrating post-oil-crisis mood of 1975. The last Virgin album, In Praise Of Learning, came a year later. Its lyrics were sombre essays on social conditions, full of alienating glass towers, semiological references and calls for class action. The cover sported a sock woven in red paint and a vehement quotation from John Grierson: 'Art is not a mirror - it is a hammer.' If the politics intensified in the last years, this was probably, as Dave Stewart suggests, a response to what convention would describe as failure: 'no full gig sheet, records not in the charts, difficulties with recording companies. . .' In that situation you either give up or you embrace



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'failure' and turn it into a virtue, attaching your music to a wider social critique and working outside the industry.

Leaving Branson to hitch his wagon to the Sex Pistols, punk and the 'new wave', they set off for Europe, eking their way through what now seems a lost golden age of local cultural subsidy. They became well known in France, where they played at regional cultural centres, which thrived until the state funding protocols were changed. Italy had been a closed country since Lou Reed had his equipment smashed by an angry public, and, with extremist terrorism, no promoters would book anyone in there. But Henry Cow went to a free festival in Rome and, being entirely self-contained, stayed around. This was the heyday of Eurocommunism, and Henry Cow went from one left-wing municipality to the next, playing to an often huge and 'totally diffuse' public in free open-air festivals which were like medieval fairs with the Internationale thrown in. Those, says Cutler, were 'the good old days in Italy', remembering how intrigued audiences were by the band's policy of 'positive discrimination', which meant that a lot of women were involved, playing but also setting up the equipment and driving the bus.

Lindsay Cooper, who had joined as a bassoonist, confirms that the touring was 'absolutely wonderful, all-embracing and extraordinary - a great thing to have done in your twenties'. The internal dynamic, however, could be painful. Permanent revolution seems to have been the idea: 'Everything must be called into question, examined, experimented with, changed.' The Seventies were full of such collective projects determined to 'prefigure' the utopian future through their internal organisation, and many of them imploded into so much argument that they became invisible from the outside, like black holes in space. As Cooper observes, talking to people who went through that experience is like meeting 'the walking wounded ... I would place Henry Cow squarely in that tradition.' Bass player John Greaves left the band in 1976 because of the 'personal' pressures entailed by this internal culture. Georgie Born, the cellist who replaced him, describes the experience as formative, but she also recalls 'very serious issues concerned with abuses of power'. She was about 20, much younger than the rest, and hardly prepared for the group dynamics of a collective that actually seemed full of informal hierarchy. As she remembers, it was Cutler who 'wielded the rod' on ideological questions. He seemed very ascetic, moralistic and authoritarian too.

'It was hard, it was Hell,' admits Cutler, 'but a lot of the time it was wonderful. We did things, and were satisfied with the results. The principle was that 'an



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unexamined life is not worth living', and we were living absolutely 160%, and examining most things most of the time. We would go on tour with wives, partners, children. It could be totally chaotic, because the social relations were quite strange.' Majority decisions were not allowed, and everything had to be argued through until there was 100% accord. Cutler recognises that this entailed all sorts of manipulations, and that the women probably 'got oppressed by the men'.

'Others experimented with drugs; we did it with radical politics,' he says. There was a Maoist period of ruthless criticism and self-criticism. There were rules banning members from drinking or taking drugs before performances, and preparatory breathing exercises were required for a while too. By the end, Cutler would be describing the band as 'a furnace which left none of us untempered', but he is convinced that it was still 'at the enlightened end of what followed from the late Sixties' and, moreover, that people 'learned from it', thereby converting the experience into a strength. Nobody involved ever tried to run another group along those lines: they 'revised their behaviour', and subsequent relations have been much better. Indeed, the members of this musical society now seem to look after each other remarkably well: without that, it is unlikely that so many of them would still be playing.

On aesthetics, Henry Cow took a strongly anti-populist line. As Robert Wyatt remembers, the position was that 'radical politics had to have a radical language'. Some on the left deplored this apparent 'elitism'. One former member of the Hackney and Islington Music Workshop remembers being horrified by the artistic pretensions of these avant-gardists with whom they nevertheless cooperated: 'We thought it was bourgeois bollocks.' Henry Cow had similar disagreements with Cornelius Cardew, the avant-garde composer who had worked with Stockhausen and then adopted a revolutionary Marxist line and taken to performing ruthlessly simplified versions of traditional Irish tunes at demonstrations. Henry Cow never accepted that to reach the workers meant reversion to the simplest musical forms. The same intransigence underlay their objection to Rock Against Racism and also Red Wedge, which tried to align rock music with the Labour Party in the Eighties. As Cutler explains, 'If you want to talk about being progressive, you can't treat people as if they are only able to respond to banalities'. There is more to music than 'getting the message across', he says, and to settle for 'progressive content in a reactionary form' marks 'a real collapse in contemporary art culture'.



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While these arguments raged, the band suffered from rising financial troubles. Their last performances in Britain were sustained by the state: an Arts Council tour, and even a modest grant, which seems to have enabled them to pay off debts and go out of business in 1978. The intended last performance at the Annual World Youth Festival in Cuba never came off, but the disbandment was turned into a statement: 'We will not settle into the role of being Henry Cow and reproducing our past to earn our pensions.' Their admirers, who ranged from Michael Moorcock to Captain Sensible, don't need reminding that the music was usually way ahead of its rhetorical trappings.

That matter of the pension may remain unresolved, but Cutler is still 'hitting things for a living' 17 years later and not just getting by either. As Robert Wyatt observes of his drumming, he will tackle 'stuff most people wouldn't know where to start on'. Dave Stewart agrees. 'Nobody else plays like that,' he says, citing Cutler's regard for the late Keith Moon and adding that 'Chris is never one to let the potential for chaos pass him by'. If he finds himself settling into 'an easy laid-back groove', he'll immediately take evasive action.

Cutler is extraordinary to watch, a remarkably expressive player who stands at a still largely uncharted distance from the thumping automatism of the average rock drummer. He produces a deft, precision-based clatter in which elaborate rhythms interlock, and unexpected incidents take place. The wider world can be grimly unyielding, but oppressive regimes are still being overthrown in Cutler's drumming, and every moment is full of possibility.

Known as Chris Cutlery by some musical friends, he achieves his virtuoso effects with 'flotsam' as well as a conventional drum kit. Influenced by John Cage, he uses diverse objects to produce 'small sounds', which he then amplifies with the help of contact microphones, telephone mouthpieces and a 'decidedly low-tech' mixing desk. He might take a violin bow to an egg-slicer or a piece of polystyrene ('a nice instrument'), or extract curious swirling sounds from an amplified collection of ping-pong balls in a frying pan. An avant-gardist who is not content merely to shock or affront, he stands back from the confrontational 'attitude' stuff he detects in a lot of Hip Hop music: 'I don't feel I'm sharing anything,' he says of listening to that music, 'just people beefing at me or trying to upset me.' Since the distant days of Henry Cow, Cutler has never found a single band that can accommodate all his musical interests. He forms improvisational duos with a whole range of collaborators, both old and new, and he likes to have a rock group on the go too. That 'whole wild conjunction of



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David Thomas's reconstituted Pere Ubu during the late Eighties, he left when the record company started neutralising the music for the sake of marketing. Like other former members of Henry Cow (Frith, Hodgkinson, Cooper) he now works a lot on the fringe of the contemporary 'classical' music world: composers especially have become much more open to innovations of the kind they have long been pioneering in the previously despised world of rock music.

As for British indifference, Cutler and his circle have overcome that with air tickets and the telephone: 'I can't think when I last played with an all-English group.' In his circle, 'it doesn't really matter where people live.' His recent engagements prove the point. He played in London not long ago, thanks largely to the London Musicians' Collective: improvisations with the American harpist Zeena Parker, and in a trio with Lutz Glandien, an East German composer, whose electronic tapes were also augmented by Michael Vogt, tuba player with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. But he also packs up his snare drum and sonorous gadgets to fly out into an extraordinary array of projects: to Bologna, where he plays with NORMA; to Paris, where he recently performed with Joseph Nadj, a Hungarian choreographer whose work is 'like Kafka done with acrobats'; to Vienna, where he joined a 40-piece choir and 20 violinists in a vast shopping mall for a performance of Jon Rose's Violin Music In The Age Of Shopping.

This network, which reaches into places the conventional music industry has never heard of, is threaded together by the ReR Megacorp, a 'public service' organisation which turned over £180,000 last year. For Robert Wyatt, the Megacorp is an example of 'idealism in the music industry' which fully justifies Cutler's considerable reputation overseas. A few timewarped onlookers may smile at the thought of this anti-capitalist radical who has become an entrepreneur, but Cutler is rightly dismissive of these half-hearted objections: 'Why not? I drive the roads. I turn on the taps. You can't be outside the system. It is perfectly legitimate to do what is necessary to protect and develop your work. And, anyway, running a business doesn't mean you have to treat people ruthlessly.

'It is a family in the Wittgensteinian sense,' says Cutler of his diffuse association of musicians. It began as a loose affiliation of experimental bands called Rock In Opposition, set up by members of Henry Cow just before they disbanded in 1978. During their travels they had met other bands that represented a genuinely European alternative to Anglo-American rock, and were pleased to join Henry Cow in this multi-lingual Salon des Refuses. They had common avant-garde



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ambitions, but their statement also welcomed the low artistic status of rock music, which made it possible to draw on skills not normally considered musical.

A precursor of the Megacorp, Recommended Records was first set up to distribute records by these groups, but Cutler started releasing his own records a year or so later, taking vinyl as close to arts and crafts as it ever went. Cutler used Nimbus, the best record presser in the country ('If you are going to make a thing, make it to last') and printed many of his LPs to play at 45 rpm, with silk-screened covers and hand-written sleeve-notes - as if William Morris had been redone by Captain Beefheart. His catalogues were full of commentary, judgment and critical reading lists: Chomsky, EP Thompson, Sinn Fein and a classic anti-imperialist text by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart named *How To Read Donald Duck*. Cutler would eventually publish his own theoretical writings on rock, but not before he had issued Fred Borage's *Rural Class Struggles In Ambridge*, a Dadaistic assault on Englishness illustrated by Tintoretto Sheepdip and adorned with the last word in publisher's blurb ('One wonders how the world can go on existing after this').

'It's all an act of faith; it's all auto-da-fe. You do the thing as best you can,' says Cutler. He can expect to sell 2,000 copies of a CD (4,000 if it takes off), but this is 'not a rational thing to do'. The Megacorp has independent collaborators elsewhere - RecRec in Switzerland, Rer Brazil, and others in Japan, Germany and the US. It remains an 'unbusiness', but while marketing criteria would never be allowed to originate a project, Cutler knows that there is no point producing just to have something sitting on a shelf: 'Of course there's an imagined public, and we do try hard to sell what we produce.

'We are not elitist,' he stresses, in the sense of craving obscurity or 'hiding in a hole in the wall.' Cutler's first rule for the alternative entrepreneur is a quote from Abbie Hoffman: 'The first duty of a revolutionary is to survive.' He may have taken risks early on, ordering records that he couldn't necessarily pay for, and borrowing £10,000 from a friend of his mother's, but 'I try never to be in more debt than I could pay off out of my own concert earnings'. He has seen too many people get in too deep and then 'an error or miscalculation of only two per cent, and you're wiped out'. He admits the Megacorp has seen 'crisis after crisis', but it has survived and, like the music, is 'still unfolding and developing'.

When it comes to artistic policy, the Megacorp is, inevitably, 'very autocratic'. 'I release what I like. That is why it was called Recommended Records.' If he is to be the alternative to a music industry dominated by marketing and publicity, he



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must stick ruthlessly to his own judgment. His project depends on people being prepared to buy things unheard: 'nobody will trust you' if you put out stuff for strategic reasons or just because the musician is your friend.

Some of Cutler's congenitally critical supporters wonder whether his aesthetic consists of more than his own 'rigid and idiosyncratic' taste elevated into a canon. They may diagnose a primordial 'folkism' in some items at the same time as they wonder about his strongly modernistic conception of rock. Geoff Travis of Rough Trade, who is generally admiring of Cutler's achievements, ventures that it is 'a neat trick to present the underground as high art'.

Yet Cutler himself makes a very different case for his list: 'I'm interested in things that extend the language of music.' His catalogues sustained a 'cultural heritage' strand through the Eighties. This featured Brecht, Weill and Eisler, and Conlon Nancarrow, the American composer who withdrew to Mexico City in 1940 after being harassed for his anti-fascist activities in the Spanish Civil War, and started writing astonishing studies for the player piano. It also included a lot from the Sixties (The Incredible String Band, Phil Ochs, Nico and even The Beach Boys) - innovations that, as Cutler explains, had been lost by the late Seventies. 'The so-called new wave, which followed on the rapid demise of punk, was starting out all over without any knowledge of what had gone before.' But the cultural-heritage series has since been discontinued. Having seen too many of the dinosaurs of 'prog rock' come out after 20 years to strut through their old repertoire again, Cutler has abandoned conservationism: 'You've got to keep moving, and find your interest in the present.' Anyway, by the late Eighties, there was more than enough new music coming in from near and far.

Long before anyone started talking about *glasnost*, Cutler had connections throughout the old Communist bloc. One underground met another, and paid common tribute to the memory of 1968, much cherished in Prague where, as Cutler recalls, 'people recognised immediately what we were doing'. Recommended Records was 'a way of collecting and disseminating material' and far-flung dissidents were soon in touch. 'I tried to reply to everyone,' says Cutler of his correspondence.

Cutler, Frith and Dagmar Krause were invited to Prague to perform as Art Bears at the 1979 Jazz Days. Here they came into contact with members of the cultural opposition, including Vaclav Havel, who was then living under house arrest. Cutler remains a regular visitor to Prague. 'Classically, most people who used to be involved in the cultural opposition are still in movements now because they



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just changed one system for another that they are still more or less in opposition to. I can get quite angry ... I know people whom Havel should bloody well help people who helped him a lot, and who are not in very good shape in the new "you've got to pay for everything" world.'

Invited to East Berlin in 1982, he attended an international music festival and gave a talk about Rock In Opposition. His audience was orientated more towards contemporary classical music, but Cutler made his way through their intellectual misgivings and was invited back to perform with Cassiber, a band in which he played with West German musicians, including the composer Heiner Goebbels, now well known on the German contemporary-music scene. So connections developed here too, and in 1988 the last Cassiber CD was recorded at the Electronic Music Studio of the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin.

The *ReR Quarterly*, which consists of a magazine as well as a CD, has expanded as the project grows. Generally avoiding reviews and interviews, Cutler prints fiction alongside closely argued discussions of contemporary music. One article will tell aspirant amateurs How To Start A Band. The next might take on Pierre Boulez, as Georgie Born did in a recent issue, or investigate the history of PA technology, revealing it to have been much advanced by Hitler's rallies. Cutler's own writings reflect his concern that 'playing skills have given way to programming'. He likes to 'hear some sort of struggle going on ... people not getting away with it'. He always hated the slick facility of jazz-rock musicians like Chick Corea, and while punk marked a genuine break with the rock industry, the 'new wave' soon reverted to the 'petit-bourgeois outlook: they still want to make it'. Heavy metal may be ignored by 'new wave art-school types' as 'the unacceptable face of the working class', but it is here that expressive virtuoso playing still flourishes.

As for politics, Cutler is still inclined to regret the concessions made by the left in the Eighties. He warms to the sound of Robert Wyatt's mid-Eighties song The Age of Self, which condemned *Marxism Today* and its former editor Martin Jacques for selling out the working class for consumerism.

Yet Cutler himself is not stuck to old certainties. Asked about the intransigent radicalism of his youth, he quotes Montesquieu: 'Just because I've been wrong in the past, doesn't mean I am obliged to carry on being wrong for the rest of my life.' Not a bad maxim that, 'except that this has never been a simple matter of right or wrong'.



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'The world changed,' he explains. 'Going to Czechoslovakia changed my opinion of what was going on in world politics.' And yet 'sometimes it is useful to have a black-and-white view of things.' How else are you to make 'any decisions at all at a time when everything is completely relativised? When you're young I think that is a good enough excuse ...' Cutler is nowadays much interested in 'cultural debris'. His lyrics have long revealed an almost archaeological interest in disconnected historical residues. Some are terse, prophetic messages which might have been scratched on stones by tenth-century millennialists. Others, including some of his best, are like refuges for battered Marxist truths. Latterly, this interest has also informed Cutler's experiments with sampling and composition. It is 'a junkyard of sound out there' and 'a very stimulating one too'.

He'll shortly release a CD featuring a piece for an ensemble called P53, commissioned and premiered at the Frankfurt Jazz Festival last year. It involves two virtuoso classical pianists who try to establish their repertoire against Cutler's drumming, Lutz Glandien's electronic noises and the unpredictable contributions of a Japanese turntable player. Debris, says Cutler of this evocative work, 'is part of our emotional climate'.

Overseas, Cutler and his Megacorp are recognised as a considerable adornment to the musical world. There is a weekly Rock In Opposition radio programme in Mexico, and persistent interest in Europe, the US, Japan and Latin America. Yet in this land of haircuts and A&R men, Cutler and his evolving endeavour remain 'more or less invisible'. He has been vociferously at odds with the music press since before the mid-Seventies, when Melody Maker described him as 'the most argumentative rock musician in the world'. But nowadays he is more disengaged. 'We don't seem to attract any critical attention,' he explains. 'We need critics like good film critics or good literary critics, who write out of some real knowledge. But they don't seem to exist in the pop music field.' And since 'ours is generally still treated as pop music, there is no point chasing the critics that do exist.' Meanwhile, his friends note that in London, at least, the nomadic phase seems to be over. Cutler has h d a whole series of temporary bivouacs in south London: rundown shops, old schools, orphanages and welfare centres that Labour councils allowed him to caretake in the vain hope that they might one day be reopened. He was living in communal households until recently, but it couldn't go on. His partner, Kersten Glandien, speaks of a time when they rented a large house in Sutton, mainly in order to get a spacious garage in which to run the Megacorp.



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So it is as a modest and quite unapologetic house-owner that Cutler now looks out over Beulah Road. It's been 'pretty awful' out there over the last two decades, but 'people do come out'. This was the lesson of the 1984 miners' strike, and also of the poll-tax riots. Even now, the energy is there, albeit 'strangely deflected' into roads protests and lying down under veal trucks. 'Something is trying to get out, which has been suppressed ever since 1968.' And in the meantime the music is still making its own way. 'I've traded money for power,' he says, 'the power to do what I want - I'm doing what I like for a living.'

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