

Bill Bruford: A Different Drummer

By Pam Lambert. *Wall Street Journal*. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Aug 5, 1987. pg. 1

New York -- "I'm not really a blood-and-guts drummer," says Bill Bruford between bites of coffee-shop carrot cake. "There's nothing wrong with power, and there's nothing wrong with aggression from the bandstand, but I think what is attractive is control."

Over two decades and 30 albums, control has been a hallmark of the style that's made the British drummer one of the world's most respected. But through the years his career has also been a search for control of another sort -- control of his talent and the way it would be employed.

This quest, coupled with an insatiable appetite for exploration, has taken Bruford from mammoth arenas and the biggest of rock bands, Yes and Genesis, to jazz gigs in the most intimate of clubs. He's gone from testing the possibilities of electronic percussion with the experimental ensemble King Crimson to recording as half of an acoustic duo. And as the possibilities for a drummer within rock have shrunk -- the 4/4 beat rules the airwaves and most drumming on pop records is done by machines -- Bruford has been turning more and more to jazz.

"I consider myself fortunate that I was trying to start a career at a time when you could really be quite musical; it was like a little cottage industry," says the 38-year-old Bruford. He's talking about the halcyon days just after Sgt. Pepper came out, when he and the rest of Yes challenged notions of pop songwriting with intricate, extended arrangements and odd meters on such art-rock albums as "Fragile" and "Close to the Edge."

"Today," he says, "the rock record is a kind of sonic marketing exercise that is very, very clever but doesn't really involve us players. It has more to do with consultants and record-company bosses.

"The one thing that is still left, really, is a reactive kind of music. What a computer can't do is react spontaneously to something that it's just heard, which is what a jazz musician can do. It's not possible in pop. The nature of pop is the song, and songs need a fairly smooth carpet on which to sit."

So Bruford is now leading an electronic, improvisational British jazz quartet called Earthworks. (Any suggestion of groundbreaking is strictly intentional.) For the past few weeks the group has been on a hectic, low-budget U.S. club tour to promote its self-titled debut album (Editions EG). The release ("recorded in the time it took King Crimson to set up their gear") has been received warmly on both sides of the Atlantic.

Bruford recognizes that his course goes against the flow -- from big bucks to trying to break even, from rock to jazz (any movement is usually in the opposite direction, as jazz players chase the rock dollar). But he's been a different drummer throughout his career. Just deciding to be a drummer was a fairly offbeat career goal in Britain, which he describes as "one of the world's most determinedly unrhythmic nations." As a 14-year-old at boarding school in his native Kent, he recalls the head of the music department tut-tutting, "What a pity you're not going to play a real instrument."

A few years later, in 1968, Bruford and a bunch of musicians he met through an ad in Melody Maker formed a band. Its name was Yes. "The only rule," Bruford says, "was if we sounded like anybody else it was no good."

Yes didn't, and neither did its drummer. In contrast to the group's grandiose vocal and keyboard harmonies, his syncopated parts were spare, minimalist. Yet they commanded attention. Unlike most pop drummers, Bruford was rarely playing beat. He also had an individual sound, particularly a distinctive ringing snare (he fell into it because of a weak left-stick grip, which led him to hit the drum near the rim to be better heard). Bruford's parts were independent, yet integral.

After six albums, Bruford left Yes for King Crimson, the innovative unit led by guitarist/theoretician Robert Fripp. "Yes was all sunny and light, vocal harmony and very pleasant, but for a drummer it was like supporting a singer," Bruford explains, "whereas King Crimson was the minor-key group, the one that had the ability to extend, to improvise -- the band where the men were really men."

When Fripp disbanded King Crimson three years later, the drummer signed on with Genesis. But Bruford quickly discovered he wasn't a "pay-and-play musician," someone content just to execute what others had written. Within a year he formed his own progressive band, called Bruford, which recorded three albums primarily of his music. Even so, Bruford was a team player. During a typical concert by the ensemble, he took only a single, eight-bar solo.

In 1981, Fripp regrouped King Crimson to explore the new technology of the day, guitar synthesizers and electronic percussion. The latter allowed a percussionist to produce programmed tuned pitches. This was a breakthrough. It enabled a drummer to play melodic and harmonic lines -- and to play a full role in the musical enterprise, something Bruford had strived to do throughout his career.

Exciting as this was conceptually, technically the infant electronic drum kit was "a brute." The instrument wouldn't hold its pitch. And in concert, the lighting triggered tremendous buzzes from it. As a result, when Fripp dissolved King Crimson again in 1984, Bruford took a sabbatical from electronics and formed an acoustic duo with keyboard player Patrick Moraz. "I wanted to remember what I enjoyed about drumming in the first place and wait for the technology to catch up."

By last year, he thought it had. Bruford was excited by the capabilities of the new Simmons drums: When the player strikes one of 12 hexagonally shaped pads he can trigger any sound stored on programmable memory chips in the instrument's "brain" (hand or foot switches control which effect is called up). The sounds triggered can be anything from textured polytonal chords to shattering glass.

Bruford was also excited by the explosive British jazz scene, which he calls "punk with notes." He says young musicians who a decade ago might have turned toward punk are instead, with equal rebelliousness, blowing jazz. Their sound is raw, personal -- everything the slick corporate pop being fabricated by British studio wizards like Trevor Horn is not.

From these young Turks, Bruford recruited acoustic bass player Mick Hutton, saxophonist Iain Ballamy, and keyboard and brass player Django Bates. The latter two came from the irreverent jazz orchestra Loose Tubes, which Bruford calls "the Sex Pistols of big bands."

The result is Earthworks. As evident on the group's impressive debut, it mixes up styles, moods and meters as effortlessly as it ignores musical boundaries. There's everything from a film-noir ballad to hard-blowing bop, from mysterious synthesizer-processed burbles to naked sax. And through it all, making like Max Roach here, painting electronic colors there, is Bill Bruford. In control.