

THE GENEALOGY OF A NOTE

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On Wednesday the 19th of June 2019 I made a musical decision. It was during a gig with the Rachel Musson Ensemble, at Cafe Oto, playing Rachel's piece 'I Went This Way'. Although the decision was highly contingent and while it was not directly inspired by the text Rachel had written for the piece - or any of the texts I had been reading at the time - it is with the help of those texts, and others, that I hope now to remake that decision and make sense of the hard to grasp liminality of that improvised moment:

It was a moment of loud intensity, populated with percussive shouts. I reached for a note. It was not a note with pitch but a physical gesture, an embodied thought. My throat strained, anticipating that the affordances of the wood (a slightly too old Rico La Voz reed), the metal (a King Zephyr alto, from 1940s Ohio), and the ebonite (originally a rousseau mouthpiece, filed into a new shape by its previous owner) would strain too and working together, the physical gesture would become sonic.

I was 18 years old again and in our student halls Olly Chalk excitedly sat me down. He opened his laptop and clicked on an album, it was Booker Little, Out Front. He started playing the track 'Moods In Free Time' and impatiently skipped to about three minutes in. Eric Dolphy was blowing over the timpani rolls of Max Roach. The sound from Olly's speakers hit me hard, my mirror neurons fired and I silently strained my throat as I imagined Dolphy had in 1961.



In Cafe Oto the pitch was different, the timbre and the rhythm too. But the physical gesture was there. Later that evening, after the gig, Sara Farmer referred to the sonic gesture as “mooring”. “I mean it in a good way” she quickly clarified. But I had understood. I didn’t completely relate to the cow analogy but there was something about the slight strain in her throat as she said “mooring” that told me the physical gesture had been heard.

It was my decision to play those notes in that moment, but it was not mine alone. In fact it was a strangely crowded moment. Eric Dolphy was there, Olly Chalk was there, Sara Farmer and her cow were there. And through my thinking about that moment Karen Barad was there too. And Judith Butler and Rachel Musson. And Hegel might even have been lurking in the corner, although that might just have been Slavoj Zizek in disguise. And by articulating my thinking about the moment you were there too. So for helping to make that decision make sense, thank you.

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Image credit: Mayastar