

SOME NOTES ON A RECONSTRUCTION OF FRIPP & ENO’S
‘NO PUSSYFOOTING’ AND ‘EVENING STAR’.

A CLASH OF EXPECTATIONS: THE FRIPP & ENO TOUR

Robert Fripp and Brian Eno released their experimental studio-albums No Pussyfooting and Evening Star in 1973 and 1975 respectively. Their first recording session took place in Eno’s studio in 1972, where they experimented with Eno’s tape-delay system in combination with Fripp’s guitar-playing, which resulted in the track ‘A Heavenly Music Corporation’ (side A of ‘No Pussyfooting’). However they only performed live for the first time as a duo until shortly before the release of ‘Evening Star’ in 1975. At that time both were at a turning point in their careers: Fripp had just disbanded King Crimson (for good at the time) while at the same time Eno was asked to leave Roxy Music when he got too much attention from fans and critics. They decided the time was ripe to bring their experiments to the stage.

A promotional announcement for one of the Fripp & Eno live shows in their 1975 tour describes how “both have worked, exclusively as far as performance is concerned, in the highly restricted or formalised contexts of a band. Here they will be free to experiment totally, both creating one single sound, yet each independent in their interests and function, never to clash, realising an empathy, as it were, through their respective insularity.”[1] It comes as no surprise then when Fripp points out in an interview given after their Paris concert that they “had terrible problems putting this thing together, because the management didn’t want this line-up. They did everything to prevent it working.”[2]

The eventual tour, counting seven shows with stops in Spain, France and the UK, got very mixed reactions from audience and press. After the first show in Madrid, when asked about the audience’s reaction, Fripp responded “it was disconcerting, it wasn’t bad, but I didn’t think we understood each other.”[3] This seemed to be the general consensus in the following shows as well. The French Best-magazine describes it as “a very strange tour [...] we remain puzzled”[4], while a review of the London Palladium show describes how “The audience looked confused before they even appeared on stage, and looked even more confused some two hours later when the duo made their final exit leaving a tape playing as the house lights went up”[5]. Expecting a kind

of Crimson-Roxy super-combo, a large part of the audience indeed didn’t understand what was going on on stage, some of them even accusing Fripp & Eno of trickery, using only pre-recorded tapes and no live material. On top of that, some shows were plagued by technical problems. A concert in Lyon got canceled entirely due to problems related with the venue while in Saint Étienne the P.A. broke down in the middle of their concert. Fripp & Eno reportedly left the stage when the boos and whistling became louder than the music.

However they weren’t entirely misunderstood. A review about the Olympia show in Paris confirms the general clash of expectations between audience and performers, but then goes on blaming the audience for their “incredible ignorance”, of not understanding that “what Fripp and Eno produced that evening [...] was without doubt one of the most satisfying experiences that electronic music has known how to produce”[6]. The reviewer makes an interesting comparison to the then upcoming German krautrock scene (Kraftwerk, NEU,...) as well as American minimalists Terry Riley and Steve Reich, claiming it was a pity their respective audiences “didn’t know that the posters bearing the names Fripp and Eno were declaring a music, close to that of the pioneers of underground music.” The review of the London Palladium concert also shows a better understanding of Fripp and Eno’s intentions. Appraising the music for its “formal beauty” it goes on to say “one was totally immersed in the sounds [...] there was such variety in the textures created that, depending upon the degree of individual concentration, one could focus on one of any of the levels of sound patterns.”[7]

This 1975 tour turned out to be the only occasion to see Fripp and Eno perform live. Of all seven live shows only the Olympia concert in Paris was properly documented, luckily enough it was one of the better concerts of the tour. The tapes were recently remastered and released by DGM as a live-album, giving a deep insight in what Fripp and Eno sounded like when performing live. More so than the two studio albums they recorded, this bootleg album shows how far Fripp and Eno were willing to go in their experiments. Not only in terms of sound, but also visually, as Al Okada describes in the liner notes for this live album: “Adding to the events unorthodoxy was the absence of all conventional stage lighting. The sole illumination was provided by Malcolm

LeGrice’s colour saturated and looped short film ‘Berlin Horse’ projected behind two the two shadowy figures on stage [...]. The result was an unprecedented live-performance format, years ahead of its time.”[8]

No [More] Pussyfooting: A reconstruction of ‘No Pussyfooting’ and ‘Evening Star’

Even before hearing the music, the title ‘An Index of Metals’ on the B-side of Evening Star drew my attention to the music of Fripp and Eno. It has the same title as Fausto Romitelli’s video-opera, an incredible work that I came to know and admire deeply short after its premiere with Ictus in 2004. Although both pieces are very different from each other, it was no coincidence: Romitelli knew the music of Fripp and Eno and ‘borrowed’ the title of the obscure B-side on ‘Evening Star’. In a sort of ‘reversed loop’, I then discovered Fripp and Eno through Romitelli.

There is another ‘Ictus’ link. At about the same time I got to know the two Fripp and Eno albums, I joined Ictus for a performance of Terry Riley’s ‘A Rainbow in Curved Air’, in a live-arrangement by Jean-Luc Plouvier. This experience showed me it is ok (and fun!) to make live-arrangements of legendary studio-albums. This particular album by Riley was also a major influence for Brian Eno’s experiments with tape-recorders in the early seventies.

The tape-delay system Eno used for ‘No Pussyfooting’ and ‘Evening Star’ is basically a very primitive looping/delay setup originally developed in the early sixties by Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros at the San Francisco Tape Music Center. A basic set-up requires two reel-to-reel tape recorders. The tape runs from the left reel of tape recorder 1 to the right reel of tape recorder 2. Tape recorder 1 records the sound coming in and tape recorder 2 plays it back with a delay based on the distance between the two tape recorders. The tape runs back to the first recorder and then repeats the same process, creating a continuous tape-delay which allows for any sound to be repeated into infinity, or at



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least until the tape runs out. Now commonly known as “frippertronics” after Robert Fripp appropriated this setup in the late seventies, I personally prefer Terry Riley’s more poetical term “time-lag-accumulator”.

My intention, not unsimilar to the current trend of historically informed performance practice in early and classical music, was to come as close as possible to Fripp & Eno’s original setup using two Revox A77 tape-recorders. This reconstruction can be made fairly easily using digital technology instead and it would be a lot more practical, but I found out it loses a lot of its musical and dramatical potential when performed live this way.[9] There is of course the unique, warm and ‘grainy’ sound of analog tape delay, but working with magnetic tape also has a certain resistance to it, an unpredictableness which adds a musical tension. Finally, also from a dramaturgical point of view there is an advantage in using these analog machines: they show a clear visual representation of the musical process whereas digital technology tends to hide it.

I decided to limit my arrangement to two tracks of the two albums Fripp and Eno recorded: ‘The Heavenly Music Corporation’ (Side A of ‘No Pussyfooting’) and ‘An Index of Metals’ (side B of ‘Evening Star’). Both taking up an entire side of an LP, these tracks

solely make use of the guitar in combination with Eno’s tape-delay system[10]. My role when reconstructing these pieces for live performance is that of an interpreter of the music of Fripp & Eno. I therefore made a very literal transcription of both pieces based on the original studio album and then looked for solutions to make these transcriptions work in a live situation.

It is very interesting to listen to the live-album of Fripp & Eno’s 1975 Olympia concert and compare it to the studio albums. Most of the concert is improvised apart from some pre-recorded tapes that Eno used. They clearly never intended to play the pieces as recorded, but used it as basic material for further exploration. As an interpreter of Fripp & Eno’s music I used the studio albums as main reference, and intended to come as close to it as possible in a live situation. Nevertheless every live performance sounds different given the unpredictableness of an analog tape delay setup and ever changing interpretational choices. This seemed to comply with the abstract nature of the pieces. In the end it shouldn’t become too technical, it is about bringing these gems of experimental repertoire back to the stage.

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[1] Source unknown, retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-06-07-RoyalTunbridgeWells.htm>
[2] Alessandrini, P. (1975, July). Fripp & Eno: Tea For Two. Rock et Folk. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-05-28-RockFolkParisReview.htm>
[3] Abad, J.J. (1975, June). Fripp & Eno: Première in Madrid. Vibraciones, Issue 9. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-05-21-VibracionesReview.htm>
[4] Picart, H. & Lebrun, C. (1975, July). Fripp & Eno: Le refus des conventions. Best, Issue 84. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-05-28-BestParisReview.htm>
[5] Jones, A. (1975, June, 14). Fripp & Eno: Formal Beauty. Melody Maker. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-06-08-Palladium-Review.htm>
[6] Alessandrini, P. (1975, July). Fripp & Eno: Tea For Two. Rock et Folk. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-05-28-RockFolkParisReview.htm>
[7] Jones, A. (1975, June, 14). Fripp & Eno: Formal Beauty. Melody Maker. Retrieved from: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~frippertronics/Fripp-Eno-1975-06-08-Palladium-Review.htm>
[8] Okada, A. (2016) [Liner Notes]. In Fripp & Eno: Live in Paris 28.05.1975
[9] Using software like Ableton Live for example, which is specifically designed for looping.
[10] In the other tracks Eno also plays synthesizer and piano.