



# VARIANT

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**Calypso:** *Linn*  
**The Lord Pretender**

**SURVIVAL RESEARCH LABORATORIES**

**Poetic Terrorism**

**Sex and Censorship USA Style**

**Improvisation: Keith Rowe** Interviewed

**Lawrence Weiner** Interviewed

**Adrian Piper**

**Reviews:** *Comics/Art & Technology/Signs of the Times/Outer Space/VIPFilm/Taylor Woodrow/Mark Pawson/Chris Jenkins/Is Modern Life Rubbish?/Small Press review*

Variant is a magazine of cross-currents in culture: art practice, media, critical ideas, imaginative and independent tendencies. We are a charitable project and publish with the assistance of grants, advertising, sales and subscriptions. Most items are commissioned, but we welcome contributions and ideas for news items, reviews, articles, interviews, and polemical writing. Guidelines for writers are available. We also welcome ideas for artists pages and for items which we can distribute within the magazine, such as stickers, prints, xerox work and other ephemera.

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# KEITH



Photo: Page

# ROWE

**A founder member of AMM, Keith Rowe's radical innovations in the field of guitar-playing over the last thirty years have had a profound, lasting but rarely acknowledged effect on many aspects of both rock and free improvisation. Playing prepared guitar laid flat on a table, augmented by transistor radio and found objects, Rowe is a virtuoso performer without peers in contemporary music-making. Now resident in France, he spoke to Ed Baxter about some aspects of his unconventional technique.**

**Are the aesthetic advances you've made mostly deliberate, or do you value accident above deliberation?**

In some respects, if you are working very fast, accident and deliberation aren't that far apart. In the AMM the actual work rate for me on guitar is sometimes very rapid. Accident and intention are almost interchangeable. There is no essential difference between them. It reminds me of something that happened once at **Cornelius Cardew's** house. We were round the table - this is about twenty or so years ago - and Cornelius's son Horace was next to a bottle of drink; and basically the bottle of drink went over on the table. Stella said, "*How did that happen?*" and Cornelius replied, "*Well, it started off as an accident but carried on as purpose*". And I tend to think of it like that in the context of AMM.

I've probably pulled away from accident in my mature years, but I don't think it's been replaced by an enormous amount of deliberation. I mean, I might have an idea about one day finding (which is the accidental bit) a piece of metal which is very floppy, for use as a guitar preparation - like a cloth almost - something I could put on top of the pick-ups and with which I could control the sound just by putting my hands on (that's the deliberation)... I've never found it. It's going to be an accident if I find it, but there's deliberation in that I've often thought, *Wouldn't it be wonderful...* At times accident and deliberation for me are not a million miles apart.

One of the things about my use of radio, is that it involves various methods of getting the sound out through the system. That is to say, with the radio you could have it come through its own speaker; or you can block off its speaker with a mini plug and route it into the amplifier. A third way is to monitor it on a single earpiece. If you put the earpiece near a magnetic pickup, the pickup will induce the sound of the radio, as the earpiece is a piece of metal oscillating. In my work I've often liked to place restrictions on my playing, or to realise a particular idea. One notion I've explored is to route all sound through the radio which normally operates independently. I get around this restriction by monitoring the radio through a mini earpiece. By placing the earpiece near a live pick-up, the radio image/sound is picked by the pickup, therefore making it a guitar sound. This system also satisfies another of the notions of restrictions - that *all* sounds must originate from strings or string-like structures. I view the long coil in the earpiece as a long string and therefore as legitimate string information. The importance of these differing systems is in their contrasting sounds and attached emotional meanings and responses.

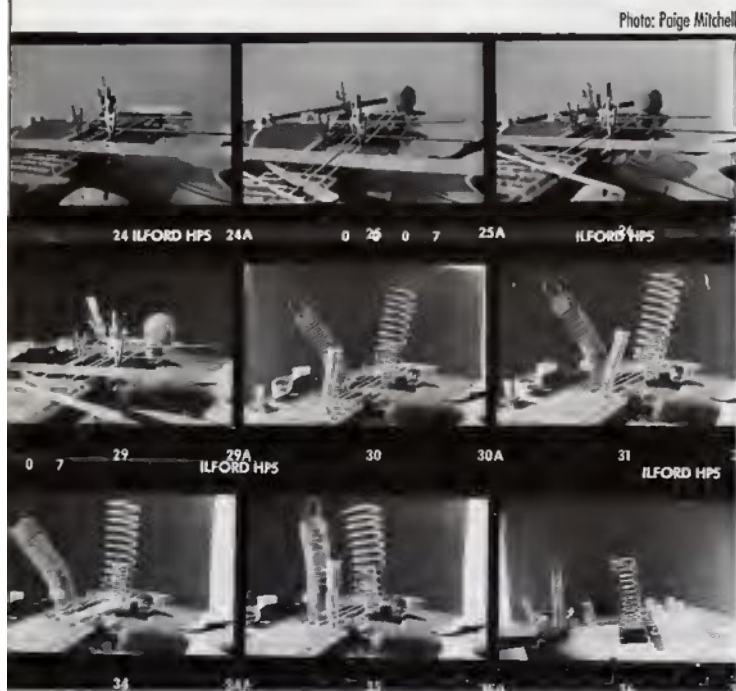
The radio can play on its own; routed into the mixer and routed out through the system - with the option of it going out through the guitar foot-pedal. Or you can have the radio on, but unheard, then hit the guitar with something, give it a blast of sound with the volume pedal - and you get an extraordinary synthesis of, say, a string quartet and the strings of the guitar coming out and going back very fast. It's very nice if you are lucky enough to get, for instance, Charles Ives's *'4th Symphony'* or something like that and have some very complicated preparation on the guitar; and you've got them both going very loud, then let the volume go... When it comes through the amplifier, you get this incredibly rich block of sound. You can shadow the Ives with your preparations. It's to do with sound image and definition quality: you get a very clear image through the direct system - when the radio is plugged into the mixer. With the earpiece over the pickup, a more ragged sound is achieved, much more distorted and embedded. There's some relationship between Rauschenberg and this technique: he'll have a silk-screened or petrol-print image, then he will scrub paint around that with the brush. The relationship between these two things - brushstrokes and high-definition image - is like that between the guitar sound 'scubbing around' the radio image.

Often, there's something happening in the music and there's this feeling - not intellectual, but emotional - that what the music *needs* now is a slightly chattery, noisy radio image. You can do it on the instrument, certainly, but the guitar might already be occupied, contributing to the overall sound. At that point, you've got a number of options: you can pre-hear the radio through an earphone, tune in to a particular sound, then let it out - choose what's there; or you can just turn in on - but then you have to be prepared to turn it off immediately, because it might not be what you want to be happening. Shortwave has a way of embedding itself *inside* the music. You can have it very low and you can bring the volume up until it just begins to bubble underneath the music that's going along, so you have to be listening quite hard to know what it is - but you *know* something's bubbling away underneath. This is particularly the case if you take the top off the image. If you want something from the outside, the FM signal provides a much sharper image - the actual information is in a sense much clearer; you get the feeling that something very much from the outside is being added on. Providing the existing music has an "open" quality, it somehow attaches itself to the music, but with a large sense of space. Longwave and mediumwave again have their own characteristics and sound quality. I use the radio as a soundsource - like cello or violin. But what is it in its history that *allows* us to use it?

I was always interested in the fact that a radio speaker itself is made of cardboard. That what you're hearing is a piece of cardboard vibrating. I recall that one of Cornelius Cardew's pieces was *'Make sounds with paper'* - there's a Christian Wolff piece like that also - and I became quite expert at getting sounds out of pieces of paper. But the ultimate was this piece of cardboard vibrating - a piece of cardboard could imitate the sound of an orchestra, the way a lithographic print could imitate a painting, as in a Rauschenberg.

Another aspect of the use of radio is that it allows the human voice to come in. There is also a way of using the radio like a musical instrument. It could be that I've found a piece of piano music on FM and **John (Tilbury)** will pick up on it and form a relationship with it. There's often





a very interesting relationship between the two - at times it's hard to figure out which is the radio and which is John. Or the reverse - John will be playing a particular phrase on the piano and if you are very very quick, you race through the dial and find something - orchestral backing perhaps, some form of commentary, or another piano anecdotal performance. When I was in Istanbul once, with the AMM, I had the radio on during a performance of 'Treatise' and there was this Turkish music on... afterwards the audience, about 2000 students, gave us a huge round of applause. A couple came up and thanked us for our "very respectful performance... bringing the Koran into our work". We didn't know what was going on! - we didn't understand the cultural information. They thought it was pre-planned, an interesting piece of synthesis.

This brings me to two things. First, there's that whole area of synchronicity. Once I was performing with a dancer, Birle Petersen, who was running round and then freezing, running round and then freezing again, like a statue... she'd keep these statue poses for a long time. I turned on the radio, and a very clear voice was talking about political statues in Leningrad, in a flat, 'Radio Moscow' tone. And it fitted beautifully. And - this is the second point - the audience thought it could only be a tape, it's got to be pre-planned. After the performance I could convince no-one that I'd just turned the radio on. Anyhow, I turned it off, but didn't shift the dial - I thought, I'm onto a good deal here! About ten or twenty minutes later the dancer was now doing exercises. I turned the radio on again, and now they were talking about workers doing exercises. I don't know what to make of that kind of thing. As a performer I don't feel I have to account for it - for that kind of synchronicity. For me there is an incredible excitement when something like that happens in a live situation. Also, sometimes you've no idea what to make of it - it's so ambiguous, you don't know how to respond.

I suppose that when I say that people couldn't believe it, partly I'm distressed that they think that's the methodology I use. In that case there's a chasm between my intention and what they think is going on, their resulting feelings about what I've done. I think it touches something central in improvising music.

For me the aesthetic difference between the use of radio and tape is enormous. I do use tapes, but they have a very specific use, almost always in connection with Cornelius Cardew, or a memorial to Cardew - that kind of area.

#### What initially prompted your decision to lay the guitar flat?

It was because I got more and more into preparations. The first non-legitimate thing I used was a piece of paper between the strings. It gave me a kind of jangly piano effect. This was the late '50s. I used to use also a half-crown, a large coin with a serrated edge, using the edge like a plectrum. I got interested in Duchamp's idea of the 'object': in 1917 Duchamp signed a porcelain urinal 'R. Mutt' and submitted it to the Independents exhibition in New York. At the time he expressed it in terms of having a 'new thought' for the object - for me he challenged the relationship between the customary modes of perception and the artistic fact as presented by the artist. I saw this as the artist putting down a marker. It was *non-negotiable*. Plus it had an ambiguity - when you were looking at the urinal, what were you seeing? When a piece of metal, say, is left vibrating between the guitar strings, what are you listening

to? The metal? My performance? The guitar?...

My reason for departure from the Westbrook Band was that, amongst other things, as one of my experiments in the context of a regular jazz group, I made a New Year's resolution not to tune the guitar. This was 1962 or '63. So it just became more and more out of tune. You can hear it on the early recordings. It's horrible! Poor Mike. He had the patience of a saint, actually. By then I was cutting up guitar parts for a score... he got pissed off eventually and I had to leave!

What provoked me partly was the provincial mentality of English jazz guitarists in the late '50s and early '60s - highly derivative of the American model, both stylistically and in its content. I was into...*doing something* - something which reflected my concerns. Traditions and solutions are not sacrosanct - they need to be questioned and revised. I wanted, to view the guitar with a spread identity to be extensively re- and de-constructed - to use timbral variety as musical organisation.

### Your technique is uncompromising. Has this proved problematic over the years?

One of the problems that surrounded the work of Jackson Pollock was the question of 'Could he draw?' I feel it's a bit like that for me playing the guitar: 'Can he *play* the guitar?' It's to do with a perception of status partly, but it takes on a more central, fundamental and critical position. One suffers the effect of working without a public, the effect of a hermetic situation. 'Can he draw?' becomes something much bigger than merely to do with the question of formal training. In our culture you can *do that* - you can piss on the instrument if you want - *if* you've learned to play it first. But you can't just piss on it straight away. You've got to acknowledge all that other stuff. And in the end it effects your whole life and career, if there's a doubt as to whether you actually learned to play it 'properly'... Knowing that you do gives the audience confidence. Take Derek (Bailey), for example - the fact that it's known he played with Anne Shelton - or was it Gracie Fields? well, whoever it was! - that knowledge gives the audience confidence to listen to him now, to take him seriously. Plus they can detect technique in his playing. You can see that he can 'play'. I think that my playing presents more difficulties. What Pollock did was to take European easel painting with its attached techniques, lay the canvas on the floor, punch holes in the bottom of tins and dribble the paint onto the canvas. It's much more difficult to see the drawing in that; with Pollock the drawing-into-painting is very hard to detect. Likewise it's difficult to see that I actually "play the guitar" - very difficult to tell that I once played a bit like Charlie Christian... It presents a challenge for the audience, particularly the first time - even in 1991, virtually thirty years since my first experiments with laying the guitar flat (first on my lap, which wasn't so problematic as Hawaiian and steel guitarists had made that acceptable, then on the floor and later on the table). By laying the guitar flat on its back I gave up the technique - the 'small brush' as it were. I chose to give up the technique. Pollock could have used a brush but instead he took advantage of gravity. I gave up the technique - partly because it was bloody uncomfortable to try to play with the traditional techniques like that! Also, on the floor it's very difficult to use the volume pedal. So I started to use the table - around the mid sixties, on the Clapham bandstand performance for instance. The preparations necessitated having the guitar flat.



AMM, Clapham Common, 1969. Photo: onon

I make no attempt to show I can 'play' - it doesn't actually worry me. To some extent the ECM record shows I can. I was just coming to the end of an interest in the use of rock and roll clichés - taken from the Green Note publication (*Teach Yourself Improvising Rock Guitar*) detailing them - and extended clichés, which I had used while playing with Trevor Watts' Amalgam. This idea of using 'independent materials', even perhaps alien inputs like the use of a rock and roll manual within the context of a jazz group, actually goes back to the Scratch Orchestra. In the Orchestra there were a lot of sub-divisions - CUM, they were communists, rock music largely, which led on to People's Liberation Music; the Slippery Merchants, who used record players and things; the Promenade Orchestra, with Christopher Hobbs... and so on. Lots of sub-groups which sometimes led an independent life, but which were at times purely a section of the Orchestra, like any other orchestra. In this context Eddie (Prevost) and I had something we called Restaurant Music. I learnt Johnny Smith's version of *'Moonlight in Vermont'* and we would do incredibly slushy versions of restaurant music. Restaurant Music was the music you might hear in a restaurant: guitar, clatter, and so on. Part of Eddie's percussion was to do the sound of the washing up. We worked Restaurant Music into the first track of the ECM disc, which is a history of the AMM, including some rock clichés and so on, a programmatic piece.

Because I had an arts training, I tend to understand and express my ideas through the language of the plastic arts - though in the late '70s I studied under the composer Michael Graubart and began to understand my work under the general heading of 'meanings': for example, designative meaning versus embodied meaning - in short the antecedent and consequent relationship. Ultimately, I think the differences in performing between the very early days and now are actually quite subtle: rather like early and late Monets. With the AMM a lot of people would perhaps agree. In fact, on one of the gigs AMM did last year, someone walked out after ten minutes - we've got it on tape - and he said, "Same old boring shit that they did in the 60s!"

### Selected Discography:

- Keith Rowe, *'A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality'* (Matchless Recordings MR19)
- AMM, *'Combine & Laminates'* (Pogus Productions P201-4)
- AMM, *'The Nameless Uncarved Block'* (Matchless Recordings MR20)
- AMM, *'AMM Music 1966'* (ReR Megacorp AMMCD)
- AMM, *'It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado'* (ECM/Japo 6031)

