

## **Whatever Happened To The C86 Kids? An Indie Odyssey**

Nige Tassell

Nine Eight Hbk 408 pp

I heard the term before I heard the tape. In 1989, when I first became drawn to the world of British indie bands, I picked up on C86 as a descriptive term. It denoted a rough, naive yet sweet guitar sound influenced by bands like Orange Juice and The Smiths. Discovering that the term derived from *C86*, a compilation cassette released by *NME* in 1986, I tracked down a copy for myself. To my puzzlement many of the bands on the tape, such as Bogshed and Stump, turned out to sound abrasive and Beefheart-esque: hardly C86 at all.

By way of reparation to this unfairness, *Whatever Happened To The C86 Kids?* comprises new interviews with members from all 22 bands on the compilation, now in their fifties and sixties. The book

reads like a breezy collection of magazine articles, with the author Nige Tassell letting the musicians do most of the talking. Tim Gane, then of McCarthy and later of Stereolab, explains that *C86* was “supposed to be an ephemeral thing”, pitched as a follow-up to *NME*’s eclectic 1981 compilation *C81*. As Neil Howson from Age Of Chance attests, *C81* had been “a big deal – the state of the nation musically”.

Taking the *C86* tracklisting for its structure, the book begins with Primal Scream’s sparkling “Velocity Girl” – an early B side whose prominence on *C86* helped it become their breakthrough song. Primal Scream singer Bobby Gillespie’s celebrity status today is acknowledged with an account of a Q&A event promoting his recent memoir. Tassell then visits the “Velocity Girl” tambourine player, Joogs Martin, now a Glasgow security guard, who

takes an amusingly dim view of Gillespie’s reminiscences. At the other end of the book, as with the tape, is The Wedding Present, and the story of how guitarist Pete Solowka used his heritage to take the band in a brief Ukrainian direction. This led to his own band The Ukrainians, whose 1991 song “Cherez Richku, Cherez Hai”, written in West Yorkshire, is now taught in Lviv schools. Given world events in 2022, this is a neat way to end the book on an unexpectedly topical note.

Two of the more intriguing lyricists declined to be interviewed: Malcolm Eden of McCarthy, who channelled Marxist sentiments through irony and role playing, and Cath Carroll of Miaow, whose “Sport Most Royal” imagines a love affair between Valerie Singleton and Princess Anne. Still, Tassell fills these omissions with archive quotes, such as Carroll’s delicious summary of her earlier band Gay Animals:

“We adored The Shirelles but sounded like a bad accident at a Fall rehearsal”.

Though it goes against Tassell’s brief, it would be nice to know if *C86* meant anything to subsequent generations. Stephen Pastel, of The Pastels, is one of the few to consider this, indicating the younger musicians and label owners he works with at the Glasgow record shop Monorail Music. One is in the band Sacred Paws, another runs the Night School label, which puts out albums by Molly Nilsson. Both these artists, to my ears, represent the true *C86* legacy.

A more pressing frustration, however, is the lack of an index and bibliography: basic requisites, surely, for a 400 page history book. Nevertheless, *Whatever Happened To The C86 Kids?* is a valuable preservation of faded networks and forgotten ways to belong. Dickon Edwards

## **The African Omnidvelopment Space Complex/We New Ubadah McConner**

Arteidolia Press Pbk 73 pp

“We did not only play free music – we just played,” bassist Ubadah McConner wrote of the sessions he ran for three decades at his home in Pontiac, Michigan, a few miles north of Detroit, where he was born in 1939. McConner only came to playing in the late 1960s. By then he was already 28 and had been a hardcore follower of jazz on record, in print and in person for 15 years. When he finally picked up the bass, he did so without any prior training.

McConner never appeared on a commercial recording, but according to informed people in the Detroit area, he was undoubtedly an excellent musician. Earning a living as a General Motors worker, McConner operated at such a distance from the music business that

his name is unlikely to ring bells, even for diehard free jazz enthusiasts. Fragments of his musical life are recounted in this book compiling a hundred pages handwritten in response to a request from the *Arteidolia* website. Saxophonist Patrick Brennan initiated the project and carried it to print after McConner’s death in 2021.

In an excellent afterword, Brennan outlines the questions posed by the existence of music having nothing to do with “the market” whatsoever. This when market presence, however marginal, remains the sine qua non condition for integration of the historical record. The pre-eminent jazz magazine *DownBeat* probably printed McConner’s name only once, in a small 1969 news item mentioning The First Primal Rhythm Arkestra. This big band-sized unit, which also included future leading Detroit

avant gardist Faruq Z Bey, was “regularly heard in conjunction with dramatic presentations at the [Black theatre] Concept East”. Fleeting traces of The Fireworks Art Ensemble, a trio McConner ran with his twin brother Rashid, can be found elsewhere in 1972. But one would be hard-pressed to find any mention of the book’s central focus, The African Omnidvelopment Space Complex/We New. McConner ran sessions under that name at his home from 1972–2002, with doors open to anyone willing to join, prior experience or not.

McConner doesn’t describe the music played in detail but the terms he uses are clear enough: “fire music” and “OUT”. “We never attempted to play any song,” he writes. “We just played as hard as we could, as long and as loud as we could and let the spirit take over.” The complete discarding of composed

material in favour of total improvisation remained a radical stance within avant garde jazz – to the point that it’s commonly thought of as a European development.

The book respects the way McConner wanted to tell his own story. The pages covering the jazz apprenticeship years are notable for the bassist’s precise memories of the mediums through which the music came to him, especially records.

The narration changes with the advent of free playing: some factual details, or indeed discussions of changing times and consciousnesses, are often absent. Instead, the spirit of the endeavour takes the lead. This is a brief book, but it manages to say something important through its account of a singular take on free jazz and what the music meant to some people somewhere at some point. Pierre Crépon

Ubadah McConner and Fareed McKnight

