

= Feminist Improvising Group =

The Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) were a five- to eight @-@ piece English free improvising avant @-@ garde jazz and experimental music ensemble formed in London in 1977 by Scottish vocalist Maggie Nicols and English bassoonist / composer Lindsay Cooper . Their debut performance was at a " Music for Socialism " festival at the Almost Free Theatre in London in October 1977 , and they toured Europe several times in the late 1970s and early 1980s .

FIG were the first publicly performing women @-@ only group of improvisers and challenged the hitherto male @-@ dominated musical improvisation community . The group consisted of women from different backgrounds with different levels of musicianship , and their concerts were a combination of music and theatre that dealt with everyday women 's issues . FIG also integrated " lesbian sexuality " into their performances that , Canadian academic Julie Dawn Smith said , " queered " the improvisational space and " demanded queer listening " .

FIG were generally not well received by male improvisers , who Nicols said criticised their technical ability and their " irreverent approach to technique and tradition " . Smith noted that FIG 's performances were also criticised by some feminists for being " too virtuosic and abstract " , but they generally received positive reactions from both women and men at concerts . A review in the improvised music magazine Musics said that FIG 's debut performance " was a welcome contrast to the previous performances [of the evening] which had been singularly humourless . "

In 1983 FIG evolved into the European Women 's Improvising Group (EWIG) , bowing to pressure to tone down their name . FIG were influential on the second @-@ generation improvisation scene and spawned a number of women @-@ only improvising groups and events . FIG were also educational in that they exposed new audiences to improvisation and feminism .

= = History = =

The Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) was founded in London in 1977 by Scottish vocalist Maggie Nicols from Centipede and English bassoonist / composer Lindsay Cooper from Henry Cow . Nicols and Cooper first discussed the idea of an all @-@ women improvising group at a musician 's union meeting . Cooper said , " we agreed that improvisation had become very important and no women were doing it . And suddenly we thought , well let 's do it ! Let 's get women together and do it ourselves ! " While Nicols and Cooper had both performed frequently with men , they had little experience performing with other women , but their involvement in class politics as well as feminist and lesbian activism prompted them to pursue this project . The other members of the five @-@ piece ensemble were cellist / bassist Georgie Born , also from Henry Cow , vocalist / pianist Cathy Williams from the British duo Rag Doll , and trumpeter Corinne Liensol from British feminist rock band Jam Today . They had originally intended to call themselves the " Women 's Improvising Group " , but at their first engagement they discovered that the organisers had billed them as the " Feminist Improvising Group " . Nicols said that the " political statement of the band 's name never even came from us ! But we just thought , ' OK , they 've called us feminist , we 'll work with that ' " .

FIG 's debut performance was at a " Music for Socialism " festival at the Almost Free Theatre in London in October 1977 . Their act was a combination of music and comedy , and focused on " women 's experience " and " mundane daily things " . Nicols described it as " quite anarchic . It had elements of theatre ; we had props , we were chopping onions , I was rushing around with perfume , it was completely improvised . "

FIG became the first publicly performing women @-@ only improvising group , and they challenged the established improvising community with performances that were theatrical , with politics and farce supplementing their music . They staged parodies around the role of women in society and incorporated domestic " found objects " in their performances , including " vacuum cleaners , brooms , dustpans , pots and pans , and egg slicers " . Their performances often had some of the women cleaning the stage , while the others huddled in a group to " explore the sonic possibilities of household items . " They also broke down the barriers that traditionally existed between the performer and the audience by engaging in " antiphonal exchange [s] " with them , and promoting

the notion that " anyone can do it " . FIG redefined free improvisation by introducing " social virtuosity " , the ability to communicate with the other musicians and the audience .

In the late 1970s and early 1980s , FIG toured Europe several times , where they played at festivals at various venues , including Paris , Berlin , Rome , Copenhagen , Stockholm and Reykjavík . When Cooper and Born were performing with Henry Cow in Zürich in early 1978 , Cooper invited Swiss pianist Irène Schweizer to join FIG . English filmmaker Sally Potter , who played saxophone and sang , joined the group in April 1978 . Dutch trombonist Annemarie Roelofs , English singer Frankie Armstrong , Dutch woodwind player Angèle Veltmeijer , and French saxophonist and guitarist Françoise Dupety also played intermittently with the group . Some of FIG 's performances consisted of up to eight women .

Nicols left FIG in 1980 to form another all @-@ women group called Contradictions . In 1983 , under the helm of Schweizer , FIG evolved into The European Women 's Improvising Group (EWIG) , bowing to pressure that their name was " too political " . EWIG included Schweizer , Cooper , Roelofs , French double bassist Joëlle Léandre , and French singer Annick Nozati .

= = Analysis = =

In the 1970s there was a view that the free improvisation music space was largely the domain of male heterosexuals , and that women were marginalized . Canadian academic Julie Dawn Smith wrote in her 2004 essay , " Playing Like a Girl : The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group " , that " The opportunity for freedom in relation to sexual difference , gender , and sexuality for women improvisers was strangely absent from the discourses and practices of free jazz and free improvisation " . When the Feminist Improvising Group appeared in 1977 , they challenged the established male @-@ dominated musical improvising community . FIG were a mixture of white , black , lesbian , straight , working- and middle @-@ class women . Maggie Nicols wanted the group to be open to all women of different backgrounds and different levels of musicianship , even those who had not improvised before . She saw these differing abilities , which gave rise to unexpected results , as a strength and not a weakness . According to critic Dana Reason Myers , " The result was a music that had to be taken on its own terms , as music that decidedly and consciously included the politics of being women , musicians , improvisers , and members of a society . "

While some of the members lacked conventional musical skills , they were " politically very right " and quickly adapted to improvising . Because of the nature of free improvisation , the women were able to perform together without concerns about competency . Georgie Born said that FIG functioned very differently from a mixed group : " when you are playing with men , there is an element of competition ; they tend to feel that there is a threat from women . In an all @-@ women band we are released from that kind of pressure . " Born added that without men , women are more honest and open with each other , and are more receptive to what each member of the group is doing .

FIG integrated " lesbian sexuality " in their improvised performances : their stage acts often included " fights " and " hugs " that Smith described as " violating taboos of musical propriety and masculinist competition that prohibited musicians from touching one another " . According to Smith , " refus [ing] to ' pass ' as straight opened possibilities for the improvisation of female sexuality . In effect FIG queered space of improvisational practice . "

Smith wrote that male heterosexual improvisers typically dismissed women in audiences as not important , seeing them as " either wives , girlfriends , or groupies " . She said FIG seized this opportunity to change the relationship between improvisers and female audiences . Using their " skills of social and technical virtuosity " , FIG improvised around issues important to women , and thereby " drew women into their music who might not otherwise be concerned with the concept of free improvisation . " Smith explained that even women not familiar with the technicalities of free improvisation still related to a group of women on stage " foreground [ing] their bodies and their sounds for the pleasure of other woman " .

The Guardian described FIG 's music as often comprising " hard trombone chords , angular bursts , and restless scurrings made by every imaginable sound @-@ producing object " ; it sometimes

drifts into " blues @-@ like dirge [s] " or tangos , but is different from the " unrelieved adventures into the abstract to be heard from some male improvising groups . " American academic David G. Pier said FIG used free jazz 's " extreme timbres " to enhance their live performances , which he described as " in @-@ your @-@ face queer sexuality and feminist shock politics . "

Smith described performances by FIG as a " sonic negotiation of eroticism , resistance , liberation , joy , pleasure , power , and agency , a multilayered call and response between individual improvisers and a community of listeners " . She added that FIG were " instrumental in encouraging listeners / interpreters to negotiate the work from a queer perspective , opening a space for the listener who responds to the laughter of women with her own improvised laughter . "

= = Reception = =

Annemarie Roelofs recalled that critics of the Feminist Improvising Group were always either very positive , or very negative ; there was never any middle @-@ ground . Nicols and Roelofs said they received little support from male improvisers , who criticised their technical ability and referred to them as women , not musicians . FIG 's message that " anyone can do it " antagonised many who value " technical virtuosity " and " improvisational competence " . Nicols said they also complained about FIG 's " irreverent approach to technique and tradition " , while Smith suggested that they may have felt threatened by the " spectacle of so many unsupervised and unpredictable women on the stage " . Irène Schweizer recalled that FIG were invited to perform at the Total Music Meeting in Berlin in November 1979 because she had played at the festival before (in all @-@ men groups) . But after seeing FIG perform , the organiser asked Schweizer " how come you brought such a group , they can 't play , and they are not good enough . " Nicols said that avant @-@ garde musician Alexander von Schlippenbach also complained about FIG being there , saying that " we couldn 't play our instruments " and that he could have found " loads of men that would have played a lot better " .

Recalling FIG 's appearance at the Total Music Meeting , guitarist Eugene Chadbourne said " The lack of support for FIG must obviously extend beyond the boundaries of that group into the entire area of women musicians ... I am sure the lack of men on stage made some men feel excluded . " Schweizer believed that many male improvisers felt threatened by FIG because of their use of humour , " We were not that serious , like men , [...] they take [improvising] so seriously " . Georgie Born described FIG 's humour as " very iconoclastic and very surreal , or very silly . There were no big boys there standing judging . " On the issue of FIG being a women @-@ only group , Nicols remarked , " It 's amazing the number of men that were saying , ' Why are there no men ? ' And yet nobody had ever dreamed to think of asking why there were men only [groups] . "

Some feminist audiences were also critical of FIG , saying that they were " too virtuosic and abstract " . At a Women 's Festival at The Drill Hall in London , many women in the audience were unfamiliar with " free music " and accused FIG of being " elitist " and " inaccessible " . This was frustrating for the members of the group who expected support from such quarters .

But FIG also received positive reactions from both men and women at concerts . Nicols recalled the " dykes " in the audience who had come to see them at FIG 's first performance : they were into disco and soul and sat patiently through the other improvisers , but when FIG came on , " They laughed their heads off . " A review in the improvised music magazine Musics said that FIG 's set " was a welcome contrast to the previous performances [of the evening] which had been singularly humourless . " Lindsay Cooper recalled a comment made to her by a female artist working in film : " I don 't know what on earth you 're doing but I like it . "

= = Influence = =

The Feminist Improvising Group , and its successor , The European Women 's Improvising Group , spawned a number of women @-@ only improvising groups and events . In 1980 Contradictions was formed by Maggie Nicols , who modelled it on FIG . The founding members included Nicols , Jackie Lansley and Sylvia Hallett , with Irène Schweizer and Joëlle Léandre participating in their first

concert . Contradictions went on to become a women 's workshop run by Nicols in which " anyone could participate " . Schweizer was one of the organisers of the Canaille festivals that staged the first International Women 's Jazz Festival for Improvised Music in 1986 in Frankfurt . In the early 1990s , Nicols , Schweizer and Léandre formed the " highly theatrical and often satirical " improvising trio , Les Diaboliques , who released three albums between 1994 and 1998 .

Nicols said that FIG were " tremendously influential " on the second @-@ generation improvisation scene that developed in its wake . Léandre , after seeing FIG for the first time performing in Paris , said she had been " shocked [...] to see only women onstage " . FIG were also educational in that they exposed free improvisation to women unfamiliar with the genre , and acquainted men with feminism .

= = Discography = =

Feminist Improvising Group (1979)

Cassette tape release of extracts from live performances in Copenhagen (29 April 1978) , Stockholm (20 August 1978) and Reykjavík (18 ? 19 November 1978) .

Another Evening at Logos , 1974 / 79 / 81 (2015)

Compilation album by various artists , including FIG , who contribute one track recorded live at the IXth International Multi Media Festival in Ghent , Belgium (22 February 1979) .

= = Members = =

Maggie Nicols ? vocals

Lindsay Cooper ? bassoon , oboe , sopranino saxophone , piano

Georgie Born ? cello , bass guitar

Corinne Liensol ? trumpet

Cathy Williams ? keyboards , vocals

Irène Schweizer ? piano , drums

Sally Potter ? vocals , alto saxophone

Annemarie Roelofs ? trombone , violin

Frankie Armstrong ? vocals

Angèle Veltmeijer ? flute , tenor saxophone , soprano saxophone

Françoise Dupety ? alto saxophone , guitar

Source :