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# Lindsay Cooper gave rock bassoon a humane voice

By Matthew Guerrieri | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 13, 2014

A year ago this week, British musician and activist Lindsay Cooper died from complications of multiple sclerosis. To label Cooper's career unlikely says more about our own prejudices than about Cooper herself. She was a woman in the then-overwhelmingly male world of rock; her favored instrument — the bassoon — was hardly standard equipment for the genre. But Cooper became an essential figure in avant-garde, politically-conscious rock.

Born in London, Cooper's musical education was classical, conservatories and orchestras. But after a post-graduate sojourn in New York City, she immersed herself in the art-rock community centered in Canterbury, England, cultivating a style of elaborate arrangements, extended improvisation, and complex harmonies. Cooper eventually joined one of the scene's most important bands, the defiantly experimental, Marxist-tinged Henry Cow. The group asked her to leave at one point — only to invite her to rejoin the following year — but Cooper became “the emotional linchpin of the group,” according to a bandmate; the second half of Henry Cow's final studio album, 1978's “Western Culture,” featured Cooper's compositions.



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**British musician Lindsay Cooper, who died last year, brought the unlikely instrument the bassoon into the world of rock music.**

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Cooper's curiosity led her in multiple directions. She composed for film and television, in particular a series of projects with director Sally Potter: Cooper expanded her score to the experimental documentary "The Song of the Shirt" into her first solo album, "Rags." Compulsively collaborative, she cofounded one group after another, including the Feminist Improvising Group and News from Babel, while lending her talents to numerous others. She kept her MS diagnosis secret for years, continuing to perform until the late '90s, when the disease's progress finally forced her retirement.

Discovering Cooper's work is like stumbling into an alternate timeline where nobody ever figured out how to commodify music. A plenitude of styles filters through, the music not so much refusing to be pinned down as wondering why it should ever want to. The agitated mechanisms and Victorian postcards of "Rags" is far from the cabaret-to-free-jazz range of "Oh Moscow," a 1987 song cycle to texts by Potter. Yet it all feels of a piece, honoring a single, consistent impulse.

The impulse was both fierce and compassionate. Cooper's leftist politics were intense and sincere. But the music is rarely confrontational, instead generously inspired and often disarmingly lyrical. Cooper — who, according to Potter, often said that she chose the bassoon because it was the closest sound to the voice — made inescapably human art. Her music was less about slogans than empathetic solidarity with the people compelled to chant them.

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