

EXHIBITION GUIDE

IVOR CUTLER

1 Oct – 4 Nov 2018

Scottish poet, songwriter and humorist Ivor Cutler (1923–2006) was a singular force in popular culture. His oeuvre encompassed absurd songs and poems, surreal performances, and illustrated publications. These abstract the banal and everyday with warmth, occasional darkness, and quiet radicalism. Self-styled as an ‘Oblique Musical Philosopher’, Cutler saw himself as having ‘...the effect of a very mild earthquake, one that nudges people into having a look around themselves, through all the rubbish that passes for convention.’

This exhibition pulls from his archive (as yet unformalised) to present original musical scores, lyrics, sketches, artworks, letters, press cuttings, and posters, gathered to celebrate Cutler’s life and work, many of which have never been previously exhibited. Particularly rarely seen are his drawings, doodles, and more formal artworks such as paintings. Some were published as cartoon strips, others accompany hand written scores of songs and poems, others are sketches of the figures and creatures that populate his absurd cosmos.

Also on view are television appearances, including a very early BBC performance of *How to Make a Friend*, (c1964). As a live performer Cutler was unmistakable for his minimal set that consisted of a largely empty stage, where he appeared, usually in plus fours and a hat, dourly sat at a wheezy harmonium. His songs, performed in a diminutive deadpan style, presented surreal but somehow truthful observations of the world, which also drew on a childhood spent in Glasgow. With titles such as *Pickle Your Knees*, *Egg Meat*, *I Believe in Bugs*, *Gravity Begins at Home*, and *Bicarbonate of Chicken*, each was written to turn the world on its axis, just a little, and let original thinking in. Various vinyl records of Cutler’s albums are available to listen to in the exhibition space including *Dandruff* (1974), *Life in a Scotch Sitting Room Vol II* (1978), and *Jammy Smears* (1976).

His performances gained him a cult following across generations, not least as part of 60s and 70s counterculture. Broadcasts on the Home Service in the 1950s lead to albums, later with Virgin Records and Rough Trade. TV appearances on the BBC caught Paul McCartney’s attention so that Cutler appeared in the Beatles’ film *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), and George Martin produced his album *Ludo* (1967). Robert Wyatt of Soft Machine invited him to play on two of his tracks on the album *Rock Bottom* (1974). New generations were introduced to his work in the 1980s on TV for the *Old Grey Whistle Test*, and on radio for John Peel and later Andy Kershaw. His songs have been covered by

numerous artists including Jim O’Rourke, Laura Marling and Franz Ferdinand. Given his musical career he was surprisingly a longstanding member of the Noise Abatement Society; he described pauses during his stage appearances as ‘free silence’.

Cutler wrote many books for children and adults, and his wish to open adults up to their childish self (as counter to intellect and convention) was bolstered by his work as a teacher, at A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School and for inner-city schools in London for 30 years.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication featuring items from the archive and an essay by writer Dan Fox. Two specially commissioned limited editions are available on the CCA website and front desk.

With thanks to Daniel and Jeremy Cutler.

