

FREE JAZZ - AT WHAT EXPENSE

by
Didrik Ingvaldsen
© 2002

I

«.. I think that jazz, from the time it first began, was always concerned with degrees of freedom. The way Louis Armstrong played was «more free» than earlier players. Roy Eldridge was «more free» than his predecessors, Dizzy Gillespie was another stage and (Don) Cherry was another. And you have to keep it going otherwise you lose that freedom. And then the music is finished. It's a matter of life and death. The only criterion is: «Is this stuff alive or is it dead?» said Steve Lacy interviewed by Derek Bailey.

Freedom makes room for the player to find his own voice, thereby improvising in a more personal way. This will lead to development, not only personally, but for jazz as an art form.

There is the constant subject of freedom. The freedom to not to do what has been done before. The freedom to think, freedom to speak and freedom to act. As a result one may become paralysed by all the possibilities generated: The result of that may be loosing the freedom all together. Freedom is a relative term; what is free for one person may not be free for another. This creates many possibilities and makes room for contradiction. As Derek Bailey says in his book about improvisation, «Opinions about free music range from the view that free playing is the simplest thing in the world requiring no explanation, to the view that it is complicated beyond discussion.» This creates many points of discussion, and I will have a look at possibilities, limitations, contradictions and paradoxes in the processes and products of free improvisation.

Considering our external and internal limitations and possibilities improvisation and creation

originate in the heart and mind, and materialise through the body in the form of sounds. Concerning internal limitations and possibilities, every improviser has a stored memory of musical history which is one of the main sources for improvisation. This stored memory is made of traditional idioms, such as samples from different musics. When ideally used in a non-idiomatic way, free improvisation is not idiomatic. Theoretically this makes sense, but very few people have stored the entire possibilities of any combination of sounds, timbres, tonality, atonality or rhythms. Therefore, in so-called free improvisation, it is as easy to fall into a pattern as in other styles of jazz and music in general. When free improvisation is performed in a way that excludes the use of melody, harmony and metric rhythm, it has created a certain style which is likely to be called idiomatic. (I will come back to this when talking about the instrument as an external possibility or limitation. However, in this essay I choose to deal with the term free improvisation, in the ideal meaning, as it is timeless and not idiomatic.)

An advantage and challenge in free improvisation is the capacity to remember previous musical experiences, recalling them and making the decision to use them instantaneously as they are remembered. Also using these memories as quick reactions to someone else's statement, thereby creating dialogue. However as much as using stored musical memory can be useful, it can also create limitations.

New York trombonist Steve Swell puts it like this: «To be totally free is to be totally original, which can be seen as an impossible task, but on the other hand it is already done since we are all born with different identities. So concentrating on one's uniqueness in all areas of life; physically, spiritually and intellectually will guarantee you putting something together musically that is a little different to the next person.» One can also add emotionally and politically to this, since free improvisation is a great vehicle for any personal expressions.

A technique used for connecting to the musical individuality is the «stream of consciousness» which makes use of the thoughts, feelings, associations and images originating in ones consciousness. Materialised, this technique is often heard as a stream of tones, all over the

register of the instrument, and it is difficult to recognise definite pitches or rhythms. Playing like this creates a lot of energy, and sometimes it is paradoxical: like getting into a state of trance or of losing sense of time.

Concerning external limitations and possibilities: The physical ability to perform various ideas is a matter of mastering one's instrument. Musicians brought up in the tradition of western notated music have normally obtained what we can call technical fluency. In order to accomplish this there is a long way of systematic, methodical and disciplined practice that both physically and mentally creates certain codes when approaching the instrument. I have seen numerous skilled musicians being more creative and playful on an instrument they have never touched before than on the instrument they have played and practised for many years. Even the famous jazz improviser Steve Lacy said, «He, (Don Cherry), used to come over to my house in '59 and '60, around that time, and he used to tell me, «Well, let's play». So I said «OK. What shall we play?». And there it was. The dilemma. The problem. It was a terrible moment. I didn't know what to do. And it took me about five years to work myself out of that. To break through that wall. It took a few years to get to the point where I could just play» I presume that Lacy is here talking about playing the saxophone, an instrument he mastered.

Free improvisation has also forced musicians to develop new techniques on their instruments. When melody, harmony and metric rhythm were almost abandoned, the different instrument's availability to produce sounds was explored. As a result we know the piano technique of Cecil Taylor, the saxophone technique of John Gilmore or Coltrane, the expanding of the drum kit such as Tony Oxley's and also more peculiar experiments such as the German Ali Haurand who used a vibrator on the strings of his bass. The methodology used to teach instrumental techniques for playing western classical music is not sufficient when it comes to using the same instruments for free improvisation. This problem is most typical for classical instruments such as violin, trumpet and piano.

Another external limitation or possibility is the composition. A composition interrupts the creation with rules, organisation and preconstructed ideas. Thinking of that a composition does not exist if it is not played or imagined, revalidates it from being a fixed representation of an ideal performance or as Evan Parker says: «...since it (the notation) concerns itself with the description rather than the emotions themselves it would be more appropriate to consider score-making as an esoteric branch of the literary arts with its own criteria rather than as anything to do with music.» The composition is not music before it is played or improvised.

What is missing or hard to recall from an improviser's musical memory can possibly be traced in the composition. In this way the composition represents a resource which you can choose to use or not. Creation is choosing. When improvising in the bebop idiom, many musicians chose not to stay with the melody or playing on the extension of the chords or even on substitute chords. In wanting to control sounds, rhythm, emotions and time composers put up a framework of ideas. For a free improviser that might be seen as a limitation, but for a composer a musician is a tool to realise her idea. The word composing can also be the meaning of putting together the right people which is an important part of whether your composition will work or not. As John Zorn says, «You need people who are aggressive, you need people who are going to be docile, you need people with a sense of humour, you need people who are ass wholes, you need a wide variety to really get the piece going....»

Working with an idea whether this idea is proclaimed or not is one of the basics of improvisation. Free improvisers work through communication with each other's ideas as they appear. Ajay Heble says it like this: «....musicians in the ensemble are forced, as in (Ornette Coleman's) Free Jazz , to respond without any predetermined framework to guide them.»

II

I would like to start this second part with a quote from Miles Davis: «When they make records with all the mistakes in, as well as the rest, then they'll really make jazz records. If the mistakes

aren't there, too, it ain't none of you.» As a part of my research I made interviews with some colleagues who are all prominent free improvisers with several released recordings. In fact they have an average of 50 recordings each. The musicians are trombonists Steve Swell and Bob Hovey, working on the New York scene, Danish guitarist Pierre Dørge, the drummer Terje Isungset and saxophonist Frode Gjerstad, both Norwegian improvisers.

This is the statement and question that I presented:

Free improvising musicians do record very much, and try to release most of what is recorded. Considering that a recording is not a true picture of the music played; The acoustics in the studio or stage differ from where you happen to hear the recording. The sound of the instruments changes in the recording process. It is impossible to reproduce the communication between audience and musicians. Something spontaneous and sudden is remade, and also possibly edited and manipulated to something fixed that can be reproduced over and over again. Free improvisation strives to be something that happens here and now. It is supposed to be fresh and spontaneous. Why is it so important to record and release this music?

Steve Swell says: «If a concert is completely improvised and comes off great, which is really subjective, then it is to the benefit of other musicians to hear how the musicians playing made their musical choices so they can enhance their skills and it is equally enjoyable for your day-to-day music fan to hear the same things and, hopefully, be surprised and brought to another state of consciousness, expanding the aural experience. To be able to hear past, present or future practitioners of the art of improvising is also invaluable so as not to lose this ability or to back track to a lesser standard.»

Bob Hovey improvises on the question and gives this: "The «Blanc Screen Process» is a live performance of free improvised music presented as follows: The performers are presented in a stage setting consisting of armchairs, couches, coffee table, complete with beverages and other «comforts of home» in a relaxed and comfortable setting. They perform music as it would be

performed in a living room setting. Instead of witnessing this the viewing public sees merely a blank screen; a curtain hung in front of the band. The listeners are then able to witness and experience the music of the improvisers as if they were part of a natural and normal meeting of the players and not in a concert setting. The music is allowed to develop and evolve undisturbed by artificial trappings of formal concert settings."

In addition to this, I am quoting the interviewers: «Recordings are important for the performers as business cards, for documenting your life, for educating yourself and others and to show development. People everywhere have access to your music. Since a record can be played again and again it is a greater challenge to be able to make something that can stand the test of time. I am editing my recordings to get down to the stuff that really works.» The paradox in this last statement is that an untouched recording won't stand the test of time, while a made up, manipulated and edited will. Robert Walser says this about an artist who most certainly will stand the test of time: «Ideally, he, (Miles Davis), would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style.»

If every concert is played and recorded from a perfectionist point of view, it could mean to stop taking risks. This can result in safer playing with more focus on the product than on the actual process. Which will again make it more difficult to explore unknown territory, and finally possibly lead to stagnation. First counting for the musician, and then for the hindrance of developing the music.

About taking risks Evan Parker says:

«Risk One: Never get out there; can't find the wilderness. The Risk of Stagnation.

Risk two: Never come back; lost in the wilderness. The Risk of Insanity.

Risk three: Go full circle (and take audience with). The risk of Completion.»

Improvisation is a problem not to be solved. It is an ongoing process of pulls, hold backs,

stops, let goes, changes of direction and so on. John Corbett says: «Improvisation involves the permanent play of threshold and transgression.»

By altering the music on a recording, one steps into an area where the musician or producer becomes some kind of make-up artist. In trying to hide the flaws a different picture is created from what was there originally. Free improvisation is a great way or method to keep jazz music alive since it's main focus should be on the process and not on the product.

On commenting on Bob Hovey's idea about «the blank screen»: This is a «who is fooling who» setup supposed to be an honest try to play a concert without the nearness and feeling of an audience. However, the musicians know there is an audience, so the screen will only work as a filter both ways for the interaction between the musicians and the audience. None of them seeing each other, but knowing they are there, creates another kind of tension and makes the communication even subtler. When I, as a kid, got my first camera, I was obsessed by the idea of taking pictures of people not knowing that they were photographed. This was to get their true expressions. Somehow it reminds me of the idea of the «blank screen» situation, by playing honestly, and not act up for the audience. Most musicians, however, find it stimulating to act up in front of an audience, and give their best performances live on stage.

Another aspect of recordings is the legacy that is left behind. Producing and releasing a big amount of different recordings will be noticed and whether it is conscious or not, it is a step towards a consisting of oneself as an artist. (As in canonising.)

Recordings from concerts are by many listeners preferred to studio recordings. The authenticity of a live recording seems to be more likely than of a studio recording. Two of my interview objects say that manipulating and editing live recordings, "for only to use the music that is good," is a common thing to do. This is to adapt the concert to another medium. Pierre Dørge says: «I prefer the live music - the interaction - the social situation with people gathering around the process of creating music here and now» Something which is impossible when

listening to a recording. As Jed Rasula says in the article *The Media of Memory*: «Recordings have the status of an impressive testimony that is, regrettably for the historian, a secondary substitute for the living presence of actual performance.»

Recorded jazz is the history of recorded jazz and the technical development of its medium. It is parallel and additional to live performance.

One should look at recordings as a possibility rather than a limitation. Not in the way of making a live recording more coherent or better than it actually is, but by experimenting with modern technology to develop the music and its medium. This is in the nature of what jazz is all about. Jazz as an ever changing, including, developing, personal, communicating, interacting, cerebral and emotional music which through a method of free improvisation shall never stop developing. One example is Don Cherry who went on developing jazz by turning to musical cultures of the third world. He expanded his musical knowledge and then created more possibilities and fewer limitations for his free improvisations. Programmed at a concert in Berlin in 1968 between the orchestras of Maynard Ferguson and Count Basie he managed, as Ekkehard Jost writes, «to demolish everything the Berlin audience was accustomed to thinking about the big band institution.» He was showing the way for new free improvisation by bringing third world traditional music and its instruments into jazz. In a sophisticated way he took jazz back to its roots, yet keeping the standard of doing so on a new level.

Looking at possibilities, limitations, contradictions and paradoxes in the processes and products of free improvisation have left me with more questions than answers. It is a true individual process, but its synergetic effects must make it political, social and cultural important. It has been part of music for forty years or so. It is the constant changing of codes, the constant balance between order and disorder, the search for new ways without getting lost or without coming back to where you started. It is the joy of not knowing what is going to happen next. Drummer Gerry Hemmingway puts it like this: «I feel the process of investigating, evaluating

and restructuring our patterns of creativity is significant in aiding the larger cause of moving music forward as an art form.»

Bibliography

Bailey, Derek: **Improvisation, Its Nature and Practise in Music.**
(Da Capo Press 1992)

Corbett, John: **Extended Play, Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein.**
(Duke University Press, Durham and London 1994)

Part One, Dancing in Your Head:

- Brothers from Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee «Scratch» Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton
- Ex Uno Plura: Milford Graves, Evan Parker, and the Schizoanalysis of Musical Performance

Part Two: An Ear to the Ground:

- Hal Russel: The Fires that Burn in Hal
- Franz Kogelmann: Meister of Melancholy
- Barry Guy/London Jazz Composers Orchestra: LCJO 2U
- Fred Anderson/Von Freeman: On the Radical Lounge Tip
- Sun Ra: Eulogy and Light

Part Three: Music Like Dirt:

- John Cage: The Conversation Game
- Evan Parker: Saxophone Botany
- Anthony Braxton: From Planet to Planet
- Derek Bailey: Free Retirement plan
- Peter Brötzmann: Machine Gun Etiquette
- Sun Ra: Gravity and Levity

Davis, Francis: **Bebop and Nothingness.** (Schirmer Books 1996)

- Jazz rep, Continued (Charles Mingus's Epitaph)
- Anthony Braxton, All American
- Color, Rhythm, Design (Muhai Richard Abrams)
- White Anglo-Saxon Pythagorean (Roswell Rudd)
- Out There (Charles Gayle)
- Sun Ra, Himself
- Dog Wild (Lester Bowie)
- Bagels and Dreadlocks (Don Byron)
- «Zorn» for «Anger» (John Zorn)

Dybo, Tor: **Jan Garbarek - Det Åpne Roms Estetikk.** (Pax Forlag A/S, Oslo 1996)

pp. 40 - 43, chapter 3 & 4, pp. 78 - 101, 131 - 135,

Gabbard, Krin: Jazz among the Discourses,

(Duke University Press, Durham and London 1995)

- Krin Gabbard, Introduction: The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences
- Jed Rasula, The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History
- Robert Walser, «Out of Notes»: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis
- Ronald M. Radano, Critical Alchemy: Anthony Braxton and the Imagined Tradition
- John Corbett, Ephemera Underscored: Writing around Free Improvisation
- Eric Lott, Double V, Double Time: Bebop's Politics of Style

Gabbard, Krin: Representing Jazz, (Duke University Press, Durham and London 1995)

- Krin Gabbard, Introduction: Writing the Other History
- Leland H. Chambers, Improvising and Mythmaking in Eudora Welty's «Powerhouse»
- Christopher Harlos, Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics

Heble, Ajay: Landing On the Wrong Note. (Routledge, New York and London, 2000)

Jost, Ekkehard: Free Jazz. (First Da Capo Press paperback edition 1994)

Zorn, John: Arcana, Musicians on Music, (Granary Books/Hips Road 2000)

- Chapter 2; Gerry Hemingway: Awake at the wheel
- Chapter 5; George Lewis: Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir
- Chapter 8; Myra Melford: Aural Architecture: The Confluence of Freedom
- Chapter 16; Marilyn Crispell: Elements of Improvisation