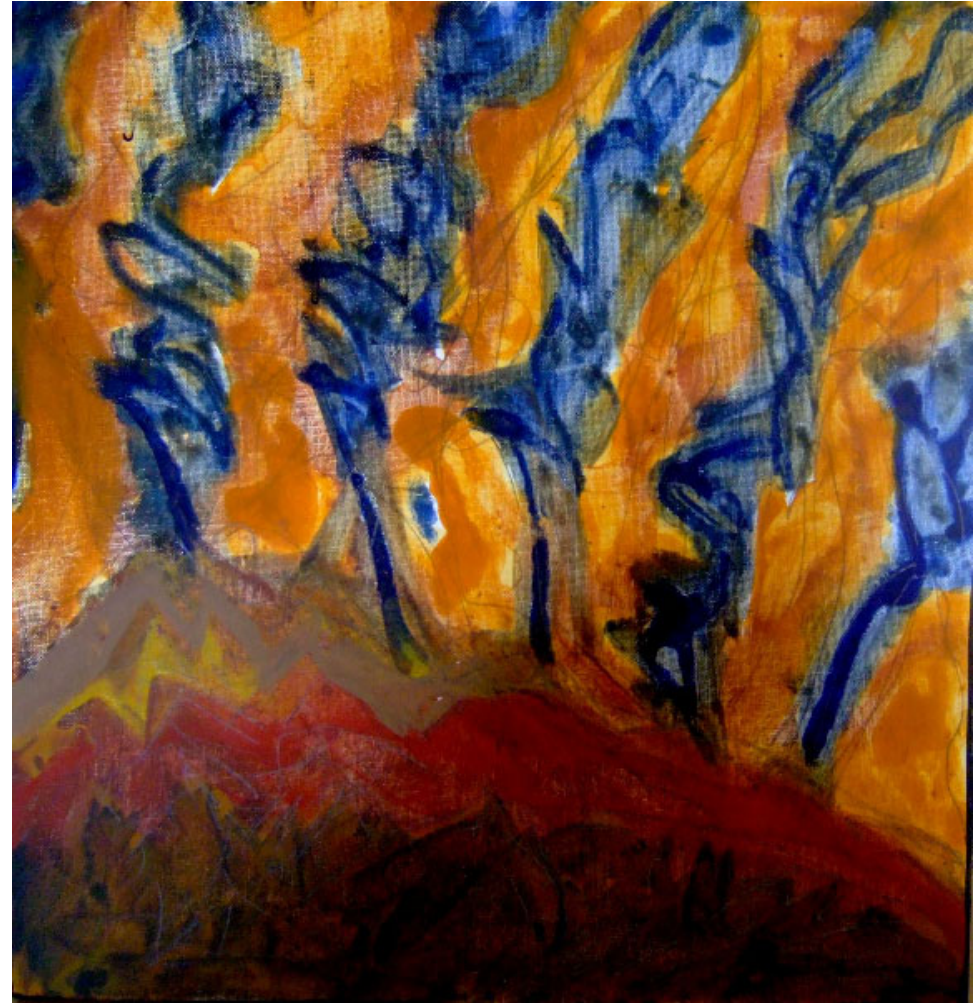




nine muses books



MUSIC AS ADVENTURE

The Collected Writings of Wally Shoup

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Dedicated to Davey Williams and LaDonna Smith,
who showed the value of artistic commitment
and to Shirley Wong, who believed in mine.

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Introduction

I've spent the better part of my life playing improvised music, thinking about it, writing about it. It's something I discovered later in life, and it changed everything. And I do mean everything. Through improvisation, I discovered my own creativity. I learned where my true identity lay and what it meant to be a free person.

Early on, I learned that freedom, particularly the freedom to create, wasn't my birthright. I grew up, like most Americans, assuming that I already knew what freedom was ("It's a Free Country, Boy"), but I didn't. I just thought I did. It's part of the Big Con to have people thinking that way. I had confused the freedom to consume with freedom *per se*.

The question I finally had to face: who was I other than the sum total of my consumption choices? Meaning, the records I bought, the movies I saw, the books I read, the clothes I wore, the drugs I took – these and all the other things I was taking *in*. I *had* to find out, because I felt trapped and stymied. More and more consumption wasn't going to do it. I had trapped myself, like many, in a small, self-defined world, convinced that my taste, my choices were unique and liberating.

What did it mean to be really free and how could I express that? So, I took up improvising, as a way to test the waters – to see if I had anything creative *within* me – and to see where it came from and where it might lead. Some 30 years later, I'm still at it. It's endless. It's a constant source of energy and freedom. I may be bound and limited, but *it* isn't.

Playing music and writing about music are two different things. I do both and I enjoy both, but I don't confuse the two. Playing always comes first – that's where I go to loosen up, to let it rip, to transcend my (over) analytical mind. Later, I observe what I've learned during these excursions and put those thoughts into words. Writing helps me understand this "other" state of mind, but mostly, it helps put all the extra-musical considerations into perspective.



A certain freedom is achieved from practicing this music. From this vantage point, I can see how and why a lot of us keep ourselves under wraps, so to speak. The rules, the ideologies are there for reasons. They give power to some and limit it to others. If freedom is “participation in power”, as Cicero says, then playing music, freely, is a source of power, a power not bound by or dependent on someone else’s rules or agenda.

So, a lot of these writings advocate and defend that activity – playing freely improvised music – and attempt to describe what’s valuable about it. Its value goes well beyond music making. It points to and encourages the value of an open, flexible and independent mind. Improvisation expands our world, rendering us less vulnerable to those who would have us accept *their* box as *our* reality.

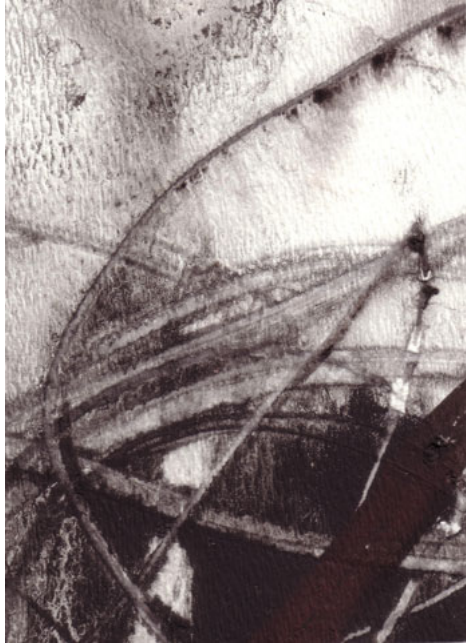
Music is a great mirror of a culture. That something as vast and limitless as music can be narrowed to a few successful formulae is daunting. It makes one aware of how much the concept of “success” has been narrowed, and how much this narrow vision can be internalized, leading people to evaluate themselves according to the reigning propaganda. Re-evaluating one’s idea of success – broadening it, *personalizing* it – is a first step toward more inner freedom, and I hope these writings point fruitfully in that direction.



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Music as Adventure



Why is it that music, one of the more ephemeral arts, has so many adherents who require it to be instantly recognizable? Though no such requirement is put on the visual arts or dance, many listeners, who, no doubt, consider their tastes sophisticated, need music to be put in song forms or over steady beats in order to gain their attention.

Is it possible to “like” music that doesn’t immediately satisfy the need for familiarity? What is it about music that makes it feel threatening if it doesn’t make quick sense? And why is it that people who routinely expect movies, for instance, to take them to “another place” only want music to take them places they’ve already visited? And, perhaps, most importantly, why do these questions seem so thorny, as if it’s offensive to even pose them?

C’mon, I like what I like, for Christ’s sake, it’s all the same anyway, isn’t it?

If we think about the primordial sources of music, long before the Church, the Publishing Houses, or the Music Industry commandeered its myriad powers, we must assume that sounds were not always put into forms that could be recognized as what we call music. Were these primitive urges to use sound as a form of communication so different from today’s urges? And if so, in what way? What was music used for back then: what activities did it accompany, which ones did it induce? Have thousands of years of progress made music any more necessary?

Jacques Attali, in his profoundly enlightening book, *The Politics of Noise*, surmises that music initially was used to accompany ritual killings, which, in turn, had been used to take the place of widespread, mass killings. The sacrifices became a ritual to “civilize” societies and, eventually, the accompanying sounds became a substitute (a simulacrum, to be more precise)

for the sacrifices themselves. From this theory, it's apparent that music has a long and extremely important function for humans – to channel violent urges in a way that simulate, and thus obviate, the violence itself. Music's power to soothe, seduce, stimulate and create fantasy surely must have developed from these simple, but crucial, origins.

Another useful theory is that music, from its very inception, has been a means to both imitate and understand nature. From birdcall imitations to the simulation of wind through the bulrushes, humans have attempted to reproduce and refine the sounds of nature. And, beyond that, humans have attempted, through the mathematics of sound, to understand nature's underlying laws: the intervallic relationships between the major scale and planets, the correspondence between forms in nature and the beginnings of geometry as in the Pythagorean ratios of sound, for instance.

As humans learned to shape and conquer nature, music followed accordingly. Architectural shapes, derived from mathematical formulae of pleasingness (the Golden Rectangle, the Circle) led to the formulating of pleasing music intervals (the major 3rd, the 5th) and later to chords: those replicas of "harmony" wherein dissonance is reduced to consonance, reflecting an ideal world with man buffered against the undifferentiated forces of the universe.

So, over time, music seems to have developed along parallel paths: (1) the arrangement of sounds which construct/reflect a human environment and (2) the arrangement of sounds that mirror the world "outside" the human.

Fast forwarding to the late 20th Century, we find that music, which is now an omnipresent background to everything, still has the power to reflect the familiar and the strange. Every conceivable human endeavor by now, though, has been "put to music" (analyzed, formalized, and commodified) and only has to be marketed in a form "new" to each succeeding generation of adolescents in order to seem familiar, but nature remains a

mystery, particularly at the sub-atomic level, and has yet to exhaust the sounds and new forms it suggests. Chance Music, 20th Century Aleatory and, particularly, non-idiomatic free improvisation have been developed to mirror and investigate the world of quantum reality – a world where causal laws are turned on their heads, and form follows rules that defy normal human logic or the heretofore accepted laws of nature.

To be immersed in these sonic worlds reflecting other realities may at first seem bewildering and threatening in the sense that the music doesn't sound comforting or pleasing (much less familiar), causing listeners to question the motives of the players – are they trying to assault, to alienate, to consciously confound? And, even more distancing, perhaps, is the ambiguity of the emotions being expressed – are these sounds capable of stirring an emotional connection between musician and listener? And, should it appear that others are getting something meaningful from this noise, where does this put me? Am I clinging to something outdated? Are these folks just being duped by some new nonsense? Am I hopelessly nostalgic for standards – songs which have always been there to make me feel good?

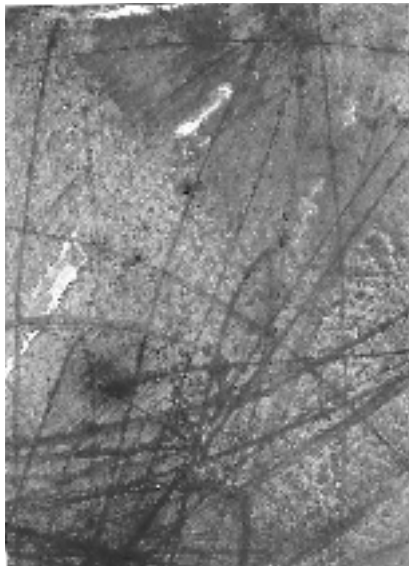
Music is an infinite game: it reflects both the human world of understanding (and all the subtleties contained therein) and the non-human world of what remains to be understood. To use music as an imaginative means to understand the new and unfamiliar is what separates the artist from the entertainer. The need to feel comforted by music reflects a need to feel at peace with existence; the aversion to "uncomfortable" music would, therefore, reflect a sense of unease with the unfamiliar.

Music which requires attention to the unfamiliar doesn't necessarily command instant likeability. It requires a desire to go outside our comfort zones, risking alienation from our selves, which have, in this century of recorded music, been partially constructed out of what we've heard and identified with – music as life-style accouterment. Above all, it requires an active ear and imagination, engaging and interacting with the sound,

willing to give it time to cohere and reveal its form.

But, it seems to me, that Music is the least threatening guide to unfamiliar realities. All it asks is that we open our ears to the adventure of sound – we are in no physical danger, and what precious time we squander in a less than satisfactory musical adventure can always be compensated for by replaying old favorites. From the familiar to the unfamiliar, from sound as mirror to sound as guide, from the campfire to the mountainside, imaginative and evolved music has the power to transport us beyond ourselves to realms bounded only by our limited imaginations.

First published by the *Washington Free Press*, 1998



An Opinionated Treatise on “Doing It Right”

I understand that in opera, the right pitch is not achieved until the *precise* emotion which corresponds to that pitch is produced as well. That is, the pitch and the desired emotion must be *one* before the “right” note is actually reached. Though improvised music is devoid of this historical basis (the consensual knowledge of correctness) that informs classical opera, I believe that emotional precision is of equal necessity when making strong, convincing improvisation.

Emotional precision to what? To what, precisely? Murky waters begin flowing when these questions get asked. How do we know when the right note is getting played, much less the emotionally right note? It’s all subjective, is it not? And we’re not even sure who the villain is. In fact, isn’t improvisation a way out of historical correctness, an alternative to the idea of “perfection” and an embracing of the unexpected, a permission granted to make “mistakes” and use wrong notes?

Yes, yes, yes to all these questions. Still, how is it that some gigs, sessions, pieces just feel right and some don’t? How some improvisations really satisfy and feel complete while some leave a nagging sense that things just didn’t quite “work”. I’ve played long enough now and put on enough gigs to realize that these feelings of mine – these ones of “rightness” or “not quite being there” – are often shared by others, particularly at performances. Not a hundred percent, mind you, but very, very often. It’s an intuitive, felt knowledge that’s remarkably similar, no matter how sophisticated the audience in terms of listening exposure to non-idiomatic music.

Here are a few thoughts on the ground from which collective intuitions spring.

From painting, I’ve come to realize that the most abstract looking pieces are the most concrete and real to my imagination. A piece containing no identifiable objects stirs my imagination toward wondering what this particular mass of paint and texture

might actually depict. Microscopic blow-ups of real objects – fibers, mineral, internal organs, etc.– look like “abstract art” but are in fact real, full of highly detailed and rich forms. The world as it appears is only the first outer skin of an extremely complex, highly mobile order which can only be seen when frozen by microphotography.

At the time, this was quite a revelation – it made so-called realistic painting seem not only artificial, but clumsy and arrogant as well. That whatever didn’t conform to accepted notions of surface structure must necessarily be “abstract” (not real) or “formless” (chaotic). This was, however, the nature I wanted to paint from and to intuitively know, not just the nature I could see but the nature I could imagine as well: the inside of things, the form within form, the *underlying* structures. Over time, perhaps I could develop techniques which revealed this imagined world in a way that felt as right as these photographs did.

It’s also to this world that I often direct my music. Or, better put, it is this world that I find myself visualizing while making sounds, either alone or with others. This world has its own particular and idiosyncratic attributes which are best expressed through non-idiomatic improvising. It’s a form of sound sculpture to my ears, but what’s getting sculpted is something microscopic and indeterminate, so by the time we hear it, it could very well be stretched out, like a sound-track to time-lapse photography. And chances are that this time-lapse photography and its corresponding soundtrack are things only our imaginations can identify: like, say, lightning bolts slowed down a hundred fold or gargantuan matches being struck or, perhaps a single silkworm’s stomach (at work, of course).

Each of these sculptures (which emerge from the invisible world, crafted only by sounds) has not only an evolving form, but a corresponding feeling as well, and it is to that which one must pay close attention. I would even go so far as to say one must pay tender and affectionate attention, no matter what the sounds, because the quality and essence of an improvisation is completely dependent on the emotional concentration you (and

your mates) give it. It’s a matter of agreement not so much on what the *exact* feeling is, but on the fact that a feeling exists, that it’s multi-faceted and therefore susceptible to play. Otherwise, you end up with a string of arbitrarily created sounds which, no matter how interesting or cleverly concocted, never seem to resonate beneath the surface or suggest a deeper sense of purpose.

It is not always the human world that is getting expressed or described – the feelings may be subtler than our normal emotional range, but real nonetheless. That is, unless our arrogance prevents us from believing that the invisible world is real or that structures of music as we know it are the only ones which can depict an emotional universe. I mean, really, who’s to say that a series of well-placed squeaks (pardon me, upper partial micro-tones) might not be precisely the sound called for when a cherry ripens, a bubble bursts, or when an electron moves its furniture. It’s all about timing, intent, and the amount of vibrato you add, isn’t it?

Improvisation is a precise art and an imprecise science. It’s about learning to perceive the felt, but unknowable, scenario of the moment and developing the technique that precisely gives voice to those feelings, however vague and shifting. This is a tall order, an ideal actually, more one to strive for than actually reach. People fool themselves greatly when they think they’ve “mastered” the art of improvising, and it’s time to move on. It’s something that requires constant and diligent work: trying to stay fresh, unjaded, playful, humble; increasing one’s vocabulary, enriching one’s sound, digging deeper into one’s psyche. Every situation is different. Feelings are fluid, boundaries uncertain; the feedback ambiguous.

But *we know* when it feels right: when the emotion and pitch are totally in sync, when the abstract becomes concrete, when unfettered sounds take on an uncanny life of their own. At least, I *think* we do, and if we’re serious as players, as listeners, we should demand nothing less, especially from our performers and ourselves, should we decide to perform. At the risk of sounding

high-handed and Way Too Serious, I really mean that. Otherwise, it's just a big waste of time and does a disservice to the art form and its faithful practitioners.

[These thoughts were inspired by comments made by poet margareta waterman and come on the heels of my angry and confused reactions to the 10th Seattle Festival of Improvised Music, which had more than its usual share of lackluster, uncommitted and misguided performances. Bear in mind that I've helped develop and organize this festival and must accept some responsibility for its fuzziness, its lack of clarity and purpose. Everyone can improvise, I suppose, but it's clear that not everyone has put the necessary time, thought and work into it to warrant someone else's attention.]

It's always interesting to me that audiences sense when it's right, when it's worth listening to, but all too often the musicians don't, and in their self-delusions (or hidden insecurities) refuse to work at it, to develop anything approaching originality, or at least make it compelling or urgent. It's treated like a joke by many, a far and distant cousin to their rock, pop, jazz dreams, or like some left-over hippie dream of Oneness through Tribal Jamming. I don't want to sound too harsh; many players are sincere and well intentioned (although, really, is there any other kind?).

But I see it as opportunities wasted – those rare chances to reveal the strength and beauty of another game altogether; one not dependent on externals (sales figures, sex appeal, conformity, desire for approval) but on the inner, hidden qualities of sound which have the potential of completely transforming the imagination and speaking directly to the unconscious mind.]

First published in *The Improvisor* - 1996

Countering the Con

After viewing David Mamet's latest film, *The Spanish Prisoner*, pondering its hopeless, cynical slant, several thoughts ran through my head, the predominant one being, what isn't a con, what constitutes an honest activity? Hopefully, this question intrigues Mamet, as well, and though I don't presume to know if he's posing questions about the larger Con we all participate in (including him), I will readily offer my interpretation and give him an answer he's unlikely to have thought of.

He must assume that many have already seen *House of Games* and understand that a con is also being run on the audience as well. But after you've given over to the con, he seems to be cleverly saying that the dupe in the film is not someone you're superior to. You might not obviously be getting duped like him, but, hey, you're conning yourself into believing that you're not getting conned. Particularly if you find the Process (the mysterious formula that is going to get everyone rich) an unquestioned object of desire and hold the notion that the market can be rigged in your favor, providing untold material rewards. If this is something you find attractive, then you have been duped into the Great Con, the illusion that free-market capitalism, wherein there must necessarily be a small number of winners and a globe-full of losers, can work to bring your dreams to fruition.

A great allure of this con is the promise that that the images of wealth and celebrity can be yours by merely incorporating them into your inner life and emulating them. That is, by desiring to be like them – winners by definition – and acting like them, seeing yourself in their surroundings, you can miraculously become a winner yourself. So, part of this con, (one which Mamet seems particularly aware of) is that only "actors" are acting and the rest of us are living "real" lives. The fact is that most people are "acting", in the sense that they are being manipulated by a Game they're not even aware is being played, acting out roles that would be non-sensical if the Game were

different from what it is. Particularly, the Game of getting Famous or Successful in the nebulous worlds of entertainment and art. Or, more insidiously, the game of defining oneself by identifying with the famous or successful. It's all wrapped up in a larger game called "Who Am I?" and the degree to which this answer is determined by those who control the images of success and those who accept this world-view as a desired reality.

Because, unless we know who we truly are, we're always open to getting conned into trying to be like someone else. The whole purpose of advertising, to give the most blatant example, is to influence the viewer/listener/reader toward a "better" self, accomplished ostensibly by consuming this product over that but more so by accepting the illusory "better world" as real. Usually, this is done by identifying with a successful or hip person who's aligned with the product and who gains our confidence by fostering a false sense of intimacy: that we can get close to them by imitating their buying habits and, thus, move ever so slightly into their world. Those satisfied with themselves, however, are much less susceptible to the advertising; in effect, the self-esteem equivalent of "you can't cheat an honest man."

Unfortunately, the net effect of years of getting bombarded by advertising and veiled threats that if you're not a winner (by rules the winners have established) then you have to be a loser is that no one feels totally secure with themselves. This worldview fosters anxieties and fears which, it comes as no surprise, can only be alleviated by continuing to play the game, but better luck next time. And, as it grows larger and larger, no one is protected from having to play the game whether they want out or not. That is, it's utter folly to think you're "above" this game by not participating in it; this form of delusion, a staple of the counter-culture, tended to yield cynicism and bitterness from those who couldn't develop a true alternative to the Main Game. Even the financial elite, who control the game, are not immune from the delusion that theirs is the only game to play.

So, back to the original question – what isn't a con game? Is there such thing as an honest activity, one not requiring a mark in order to complete itself? One that doesn't depend on false desires, driven by illusory needs to control or win or get ahead? Well, my friends, I think there is, and it's the practice of free improvisation which, when practiced correctly, bypasses the Main Game and its hollow core of value altogether, creating an area of authentic autonomy. It is a method to access one's individuality which lies beneath the constructed, surface self: the one shaped primarily by values associated with winning the predominant societal game, mistaking it for reality; conned, as it were, into over-looking the difference. In its purest practice, which necessarily takes place outside the halls of money and prestige by its conscious disavowal of their value, free improvisation can help in re-discovering the voice of one's truest self. There is little or no value in its practice other than this discovery, and it is the recognition of this need that helps keep it a rigorously honest form. Of course, there are some doubly deluded souls who think free improvisation can help them become players in the Main Game and who bring Main Game values to its arena, but the shallowness of their voice and intentions guarantees a short-lived dalliance with the practice. There are far better avenues for societal reward than becoming a free improviser. If the motives are shallow or suspect, the dedication soon flags – the revelation of the self-con comes rather quickly.

And should there be any doubt as to the "honesty" of this activity, I think there's nothing more telling than how the voices of commercialism (including the education business) decry it as illegitimate; trumpeting it as the providence of "put-on" artists and charlatans, trying to put one over on the audience and themselves. And, though it gives the appearance to some of undisciplined fooling around, I'm reminded that the Fool in the Tarot masks a similar subterfuge: the symbol of the highest consciousness hides behind the mask of blitheful self-delusion. That which requires the most discipline is disguised as the least

demanding; the form requiring the most self-awareness appears as the most self-indulgent; and the most collective of forms seems dependant on the most selfish of individuals.

Discounting the value of free play by deeming it the province of fools whose only desire is something for nothing makes for powerful propaganda (and no doubt helped along by mis-guided dilettantes), but it also reveals an unrelenting fear that this activity undermines the entire scaffolding upon which the whole big con is built: that one can only play with the cards already dealt; that new cards aren't available; and to invent your own deck is to remove yourself from society. But, in fact, if pursued with diligence and purity, free improvisation, built as it were on a distrust for pre-conceptions and preferred outcomes, constitutes a truly honest activity, concerned neither with conning or being conned, but with excavating and revealing the reality of the situation, and the true self's response to it. One's reaction toward a "dangerous" predicament – working spontaneously, without a script, possibly in front of a doubting audience – leads either to greater self-arming or to greater openness to self. And while it's possible to act out a part – the Spontaneous Person – that strategy is far less reliable in shifting situations than becoming a spontaneous person, which occurs naturally over time as a result of the practice of improvising. And, in my opinion, the only spontaneous person within is the real self – that self which identifies with the permeating consciousness of nature and which freely chooses which stimuli to play with, neither reflexively responding to the nearest or loudest one or relying on fantasy to motivate its creativity.

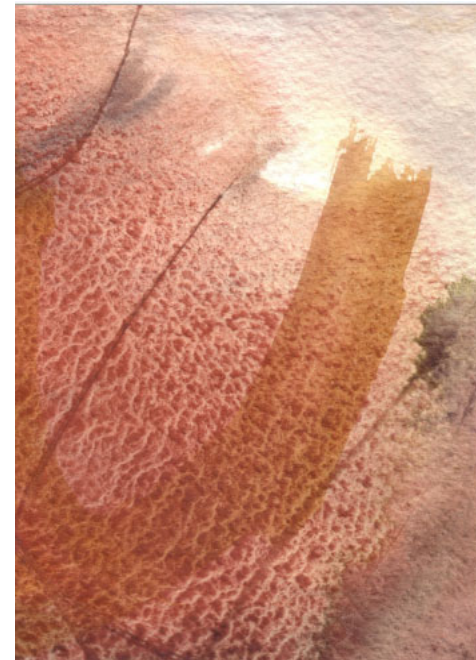
This self – which revels in unbounded play and free association – knows that the winner/loser reality is a societal game and an artificial construct posing as reality. Not that reality can't be revealed in these games, it can, but the games themselves are not real – they are only the means by which limited human consciousness deals with the terror of exposed, naked, undifferentiated reality. The games are civilizing agents whose usefulness eventually gets outstripped by greater appetites for

reality. Science, popular culture, politics, the market all tell us something about being real, but the narrowness of their forms excludes the complexities which make reality such a harrowing thing to bear and yet such an exciting realm in which to improvise.

It is no wonder that free improvisation doesn't fare well in the larger con of societal manipulations: it neither reflects nor re-enforces the values of that game and is necessarily ignored and marginalized by vested interests in that game, and by the many marks it has already conned.

I wonder if David Mamet has ever been moved by or actively engaged in free improvisation. I kinda doubt it.

First published in the *Open-Space Magazine*, 2004



Freedom at Normal's

A recent trip east afforded me the opportunity to play Normal's Red Room in Baltimore, a near-perfect room to practice free improvisation, on this occasion in duo w/drummer Toshi Makihara. Whatever made this room feel so right got me to thinking about the nature of free improvisation, in general, and about the necessary confluence of events, in particular, that make a venue conducive to that practice.

Free improvisation, when you get right down to it, is about freedom – what you actually *do* (or fail to do) when a situation implicitly says, “you're free to express your freest self.” Despite all the palaver about freedom in this country, precious few opportunities avail themselves to express this option fully; fewer still the people who can mine the opportunity properly; and, fewer still, the people who will allow such liberties to be taken, at their expense.

Freedom is a daunting thing, in fact, frightening, and rules and regulations are necessary parts of maintaining “order” and “structure” for the vast majority of human activities. And music, to the degree that it gives voice to deep human needs, generally mirrors this desire for structure and rules. However, Music (with a capital M) and Freedom (with a capital F) are not restricted in and of themselves, as anyone who explores them freely will discover. It is our limitations, not theirs, we eventually confront.

Long before this eventuality is met, much less dealt with, limitations are *imposed* from outside forces. In the music world, this usually takes the form of accepting convention, delivering what potentially sells and what keeps the bar tabs running. Most musicians accept these limitations as givens and work within them – occasionally taking whatever liberties the particular genre may offer, though rarely challenging the game itself. Some have even been known to call this confined zone “real music”, confusing their acceptance of “real-world” limitations with the larger realities that music potentially de-codes.

Things began to change when brave black musicians asserted

their freedom in the “free jazz” era, and things really changed when the Europeans (particularly the British) took freedom as a given and started developing languages to explore it fully – when the advent of non-idiomatic free improvisation took shape. These cultural differences help explain why some find free jazz more compelling than free improvisation – lifting the yoke of oppression requires considerably more force than expressing the Void which comes in its aftermath.

Thirty years (or so) hence, this is still an on-going challenge: to take a stage and explore, with conviction, the numerous possibilities free music offers. Although the musician's responsibility is to discipline the forces of sound, imparting shape and meaning, the audience is nonetheless an integral part in what ultimately turns out to be a two-way street. The musician explores, the audience reacts, and a *reciprocal* relationship develops – one truly needs the other for the experience to transcend the potential narcissism or hero worship inherent in a free environment.

Engendering an astute audience willing to embark on this freedom journey is no mean feat, but the folks at the Red Room have succeeded remarkably in doing just that. The Red Room is adjacent to a large, rambling co-operative bookstore called Normal's (where amongst the books, thousands of vinyl-era LP's are for sale) and consists mainly of chairs and an odd array of clown portraits adorning the red walls. That's about it. It's comfortable and non-threatening, inviting in an un-pretentious way.

The bookstore staff is friendly and has obviously accepted the audience for the Red Room's offerings as “good people”. (I mention this because staff at clubs in Seattle where the off night of “weird music” happens are generally condescending to that audience – one reason, among many, that exploratory, unfettered music doesn't work in most clubs, cultural good-intentions notwithstanding.)

Additionally, and significantly, the bookstore doesn't depend on the Red Room's revenue for income; consequently, the “door”

Free Jazz As Punk

goes to the musicians, as it should, and financial concerns don't influence and lessen musical ones.

But, most importantly, the audience has come to expect (and therefore implicitly demands) the music to go outside the conventions laid down by bars and the recording industry and has been adequately *rewarded* for that decision. Any audience willing to explore must have its risk-taking compensated, or else it will necessarily settle for the less adventurous, more guaranteed forms which constitute the norm.

The Red Room presents a broad spectrum of musicians, including some Knitting Factory stars, but I sense the audience doesn't care so much who you are, as what you have to offer. A distinct feeling that freedom is there for the taking permeates the room, creating an air of heightened expectations. We're willing, they seem to say, what about you?

It is this atmosphere which free improvisation seeks and to which it offers a clear alternative to the norm. Music can, in this environment, take wings and assert its freedom. It is Music, not the musician, which is free. Whenever a setting lays the groundwork for this occurrence, spontaneous pleasures (the best kind?) and spontaneous epiphanies (the only kind) can be mutually discovered, and at Normal's Red Room, I can personally attest to this phenomenon. The fact that these settings are rare in no way diminishes their value.

First published in *The Tentacle*, December, 1998

A guy running a local record store is coming pretty close to convincing me that free jazz is Punk. I've always been reluctant to accept this, figuring the two weren't even in the same league, but my view of punk has been broadened. Up to now, it's been rather narrow, mainly because I've always associated punk with punk rock.

Punk rockers (i.e., the Sex Pistols, the Damned, etc.) just seemed like more duped rebels to me. The rebelliousness was there, but it was already so subsumed by the hegemonic harmonic/rhythmic world in which it existed (and to which it offered no real challenge) that it was already appropriated before it began. The words might have been angrier and the playing more aggressive, but the musical grounding was the same ole same ole. Trying to revolutionize the musical universe by using the same chords/tunings and rock n roll rhythms seemed/seems as futile as trying to change the oil and gas empires by becoming independent drillers for oil and gas. Your attitude may be subversive and rebellious, but the tools you're using have long ago been stripped of any power to challenge the appropriators. They've already defined the parameters of the game and to play within those parameters is to concede that theirs is the only game to play. Fast and furious won't do much except wear you out, until the next set of young "rebels" appear, all playing within the same set of un-examined guidelines.

Free jazz, and later free improvisation, made a much more dramatic break from the hegemony of western chord structure and heartbeat rhythms. Those of us who followed and learned to enjoy these breakthroughs – i.e., learned to appreciate the music of Beefheart, Derek Bailey, Ayler, Evan Parker, AMM, et al – were afforded a glimpse at how vast and expansive music could be, and how much it had been chopped and channeled to conform to mass taste (while, simultaneously, manipulating mass taste).

Punk rock, to me, hadn't really analyzed the forces opposed to it deeply enough and played right into their hands. When latter-day punk became hugely successful through Nirvana, I was surprised that this somehow shocked people. It was bound to happen – it was just a matter of time – though it is indeed tragic that mega-success led Kurt Cobain into such desperate straits. I was reminded of the James Dean character in *Giant* who strikes it rich only to realize that he can't stand rich people and now he's one of them. It's like buying into someone else's dream, only to find out it's your nightmare – Hell, in this case, being all those people who are *now* attracted to you, people who wouldn't have spit on you before, people who derided your "Punk sensibility" until it turned into money.

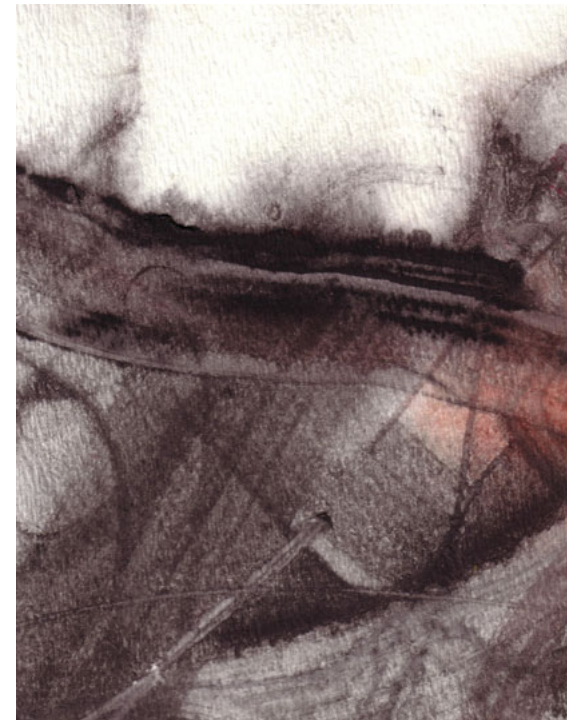
There's simply no way that free jazz or free improvisation will ever become popular in this huge, mass appeal way – it's unthinkable and, in my mind, undesirable. The free music rebellion took place not only in energy and spirit but by consciously removing the restrictive roles musicians were *expected* to assume: Supplier of the Chords, Keeper of the Beat, Player of the *right* notes at the right time in the right way. This disavowal doomed it from popular acceptance. And it still does. Hopefully, serious players understand these roles are as much economically pre-determined as they are musically; shedding them automatically means becoming an economic outsider. This is a huge trade-off, one not to be taken blindly. Being a rebel then isn't so romantic, especially when push comes to shove, and it always does.

But, as I said, my friend has convinced me that punk rock and Punk are not necessarily synonymous: some punk rock is Punk and some isn't, but that free jazz is *definitely* Punk. Punk, from his standpoint, simply means going for it, refusing to allow your limitations or others' criticisms to prevent you from expressing yourself. Just barreling ahead, following your muse, come-what-may, not concerned about the response. In this sense, Aylmer, Bailey, Sun Ra, Brotzmann *are* Punk. They went for it, didn't wait to see if it was going to sell or if it was cool

with other people or not. Punk, in this sense, isn't about genre but about passion and purpose; trying to break out of whatever accepted cultural norm you've been handed. If this involves destroying the genre you've grown up with, well, so be it.

To him, Punk is timeless: Mozart's Punk, so is Charlie Parker. And it's not just about aggressiveness, either. Chet Baker's Punk, a smooth Punk. And it's not about age – it's about attitude, and that attitude isn't limited to the young. In fact, a young band copying their favorite punk band, hoping to emulate their success, isn't Punk, at all. Nor is an aging punk band playing its old hits: nostalgia for punk isn't Punk.

Keeping it near the edge, refusing to get complacent: these are Punk qualities. And ones which any free jazzer should possess. OK, I'm convinced – Free Jazz is Punk. Long live them both.



Knacks and Skills

Example of the difference between a knack and a skill vis-a-vis music and improvisation:

A knack necessary for improvisation is the ability to hear one's *own* input to the collective sound *while simultaneously hearing* the entire collective sound. This knack is most fully exploited/in demand when one "loses oneself" in full-out immersion into the music. *To completely lose oneself and yet stay totally aware of the collective moment could perhaps be a working definition of a good improvising mindset.*

A musical skill, however, might be more along the lines of being able to imitate note for note something one hears. Or the ability to transpose melodies to other keys.

The difference here rests in the ability to access different parts of the brain. To be aware of the collective flow/sound while, simultaneously, making an audible contribution to it requires a two-tiered/split-brained access to intuition:

(1) The intuition to sense precisely what the collective flow/sound needs

at *any* given moment

&

(2) The intuition to make appropriate sound choices *responsive* to those needs.

This requires a willful leap from self-consciousness (being overly aware of oneself) to *group consciousness* without, however, *acquiescing* to that group consciousness, becoming part of a mindless mob or, perhaps worse, a metaphorical herd of sheep. Maintaining a *staunch* individuality while, at the same time, taking part in and directly influencing a collective activity.

This mindset radicalizes the concept of group music-making. Being mindful of the collective without sacrificing one's singularity makes the knack described above of absolute

necessity. Without this knack, group improvising becomes either a dialogue of the deaf, or, more often the case, a sound stew without distinction, no different from any other group of musicians playing without pre-determined order.

On further reflection, I am reminded of how some people just seem to get free improvisation (as in getting an obscure joke or reference) and some don't.

It's a kind of music that requires an epiphany – and you never know who's going to have that epiphany. It doesn't seem related to how much music knowledge someone possesses. Highly skilled musicians often don't get free improvisation. For some, it's just pissing in the wind – a stream of meaningless notes/sounds being strung together arbitrarily without structure.

It really takes the ability to surf, run skree, or run rapids, to improvise freely. It takes the ability to stay composed and calm while in the midst of seeming out of control forces. In fact, it takes people who *become* calm and composed when forces beyond their control take over. It is *then* that a deeper, unconscious part of the brain is given full shrift. This deeper part of the brain is more capable of making instantaneous decisions, getting into the flow, than the more reasoned, compositional mind.

A reason audiences respond to good improvisation is that this deeper brain, the one able to surf unleashed forces, is a part of us all. It comprehends the beauty (and necessity) of maintaining equilibrium and balance in the midst of an unstable, ever-changing world.

More musings from a One-Track Mind:

One of the more compelling aspects of Blues Music is the fierce quality of its voice-like instrumental lines; particularly, those by the electric guitarists. It's as if they've given voice to the demons and spirits haunting them. The razor-sharp moans and cries bespeak a complete and utter ambivalence about these demons and help give blues lines their power. As Davey

Williams once commented, they have the sound of a cocked gun. From a technical standpoint, these lines depend on the *limitations* of the blues structure to derive their preciseness.

Skipping fast-forward to the beauties and demands of abstract free improvisation:

Giving voice to equally surreal and scary forces is not only possible in free playing but achievable at levels not available to the blues player. Since the rhythms of free playing are far more mobile and unstable than blues, voice-like phrases can become more intuitively unleashed and not result from riffs built upon the stability of limitations.

Speaking in metaphorically rhythmic terms, the screams on a roller-coaster ride are more persuasive and compelling than those on a stationary-bike machine.

Still, the connection is there. Giving voice to demons and spirits is the *compelling* force – whether it's blues or free playing.

Far too much free playing sounds intellectual and sterile, lacking in blood and gristle.

One doesn't have to play blues (or similarly primal musics) to be interested in setting sexual urges free. That is, the *voice* of one's primal self becomes more audible the more one opens up to the intuitive *poly*-rhythmic world we all inhabit.

After all, sexual rhythms are not limited merely to the human sphere. They happen all the time, everywhere, at all levels: micro, macro and everywhere in between. In fact, they never stop. It takes only a little imagination to sense that we're all merely one vibrational aspect of the Universal Rhythm, and that our music can and should reflect this awareness.

Bad Blues Playing

The piano groaned
Under the weight
Of protracted chords

It cried for release –
Relief from the
Relentlessly
Ponderous
Sincerities.

Never, the piano complained,
Did I ask for these
Weighty fingers
Over-loaded with would-be
Fulminations of grief and
Copy-cat pain.



Re-Viewing Influences:

Little Willie John, Albert Ayler, late Trane

Like most musicians, I have a stockpile of influences, people who strongly impacted my direction. From time to time, I find it useful to go back, take a re-listen, see if the stuff holds up, hear it with older ears, see if it still has the power to influence anew.

To that end, I recently bought the *Best of Little Willie John*, which includes “Talk To Me”, “I Need Your Love So Bad”, “Fever”, “All Round The World” (“If I don’t love you, Baby, grits ain’t groceries, eggs ain’t poultry, and Mona Lisa was a man”).

Little Willie John was a prominent R&B singer of the late 50s, probably best known for his #1 single *Fever* (later covered by Peggy Lee), who, along with Jackie Wilson, Clyde McPhatter, Sam Cooke and James Brown, were former gospel singers ushering in a vocal style later dubbed Soul Music. James Brown, in fact, opened for Little Willie John in 1956 and proclaimed him the only singer he ever considered better than himself (coming from JB, no shrinking violet in the ego department, that’s quite a statement.)

Little Willie John has this rich, quivering voice that just *radiates* emotional fervor. It’s an amazing instrument, and though some of the songs are bad (pastiche of some producer’s idea of what would sell – strings, vocal chorus, novelties) his voice always cuts through the murk. There’s an emotional depth that belies his age (17,18,19 when these songs were made) and his small physical stature. Perhaps it came from his rough, belligerent, apparently arrogant, nature, which eventually led to his downfall. After murdering a man at an after-hours private party in Seattle, Little Willie John was sentenced to 20 years at Walla Walla penitentiary, where he died in 1968 at age 31, reputedly from the beatings he suffered there.

Years later I became aware of free jazz and was immediately

drawn to it because of its similarities to the emotive R & B singers, such as Little Willie, that I had grown up listening to. So, I recently re-purchased the LP version of *Spiritual Unity* by Albert Ayler (the second release on ESP Records). Albert Ayler had been a child prodigy, playing saxophone at church from age 4, and developed into perhaps the first psychedelic saxophonist. I know when I first heard him (on *this* record – circa 1969), his saxophone sound had an electrical charge that only Jimi Hendrix and Sonny Sharrock seemed to possess at that time. Albert’s throaty, vibrato-laden tenor sax sound still sounds incredibly unique despite nearly 40 years worth of imitations. It’s truly *sui generis*.

What strikes most is his evocation of emotional *fervor*, in much the same way as Little Willie John’s voice, but on a whole other level of sophistication in terms of abstraction and intent. Whereas Little Willie John put his voice at the service of commercial songs about heartbreak and pain in typical song formula structure, Ayler’s intense sound conveys a more personalized and highly ambiguous conflict between the extreme joy and extreme pain of just being alive. By ambiguous, I mean these feelings come through his horn *at the same time* – it’s difficult to separate them, to say, oh, this is joyful, oh, this is painful. Plus, his phrasing and the shape of his lines are so organic, yet so convoluted and illogical (from a Western harmony view-point) that, when coupled with his plangent, over-driven, tone, stir up deep-seated, often conflicting, emotions that are difficult to categorize.

They provoke a sort of vague anxiety and an equally vague glimpse of utopia, each of which cuts much deeper than Little Willie John’s more obvious hurt and discomfort. It’s as if he understood the origins of his voice better than Little Willie – an intuitive grasp of gospel’s and blues’ built-in contradictions and dilemmas. A willingness to see that the joy and pain of love relationships are but mirror images of deeper anxieties about either feeling at peace or alienated in this lifetime, and whether or not there will ever be anything better coming in an after-life.

Ayler's combination of holy-roller emotionality with a modernist's conception of abstracted space took Black Music to a new dimension. It's still viewed as an exaggeration of some kind, perhaps the only way most folks can deal with its radical implications. That such a primitive and guttural sound (and all the things associated with that) could be put to such sophistication in terms of form put almost everyone in a quandary. Do you take this guy seriously or simply write him off as a 60s-era idiot savant? That question still separates the jazz world at a deep and perhaps irreconcilable level. Plus, like Little Willie John, his extra-music life was somewhat off-putting: his death (at age 33) was not peaceful, ending up in the East River under mysterious circumstances, and, though quite the flamboyant dandy in attire and demeanor (again like Little Willie), he was, by all reports, a gentle and sensitive soul.

Contemporaneously (*Meditations*-era), the highly respected John Coltrane had also been trying to find some way to express unbridled, universal emotions but through the labyrinth of chords and chord-based patterns he had worked so hard to master. It was the equivalent of removing a wall by using the same methods upon which it was built – whereas Ayler simply jumped over the wall. His was literally the sound of deconstruction – you hear jazz' ties to the banality of popular song structure and content totally obliterated.

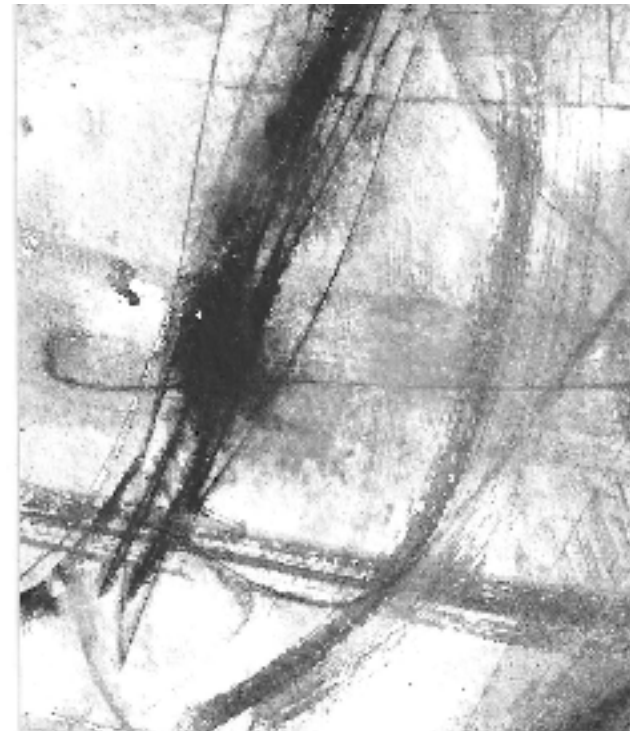
Both saxophonists, however, are equally exhilarating to listen to – each has that compelling voice only true believers possess. Theirs is music undiluted by parody or commercial intent, though Ayler certainly has a fun-house view of the absurd and a sense of broad humor that Coltrane's music, for all its great strengths, lacks.

All three musicians, however, share this quality: their sound is so moving, so powerful because there is no buffer, no detachment between it and their most deeply felt emotions. The distance from these feelings most people need to maintain sanity and equilibrium are absent when these men played music. You can *hear* it – raw, vulnerable, almost harsh, yet containing a

beauty that only a deeply ingrained emotionality can know.

Little Willie John, Albert Ayler, late Coltrane – these are great sources. One can be moved by the depth and richness of their voices while simultaneously being reminded that philosophical conflicts are not cold, intellectual abstractions, but rather the very stuff of emotion and existence.

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The Beats, the Blues & the Films Noirs.

In my personal iconography, I make no distinction between blues, beat writing and film noir. They all run together seamlessly, an undifferentiated mass of influence on my formative stages.

I was listening to blues when I was very young (9, 10, 11) over WLAC out of Nashville, late at night, hearing potent black music on the transistor radio. Later, (6th, 7th, 8th grades), I watched hundreds of TV detective shows coming on the heels of film noir. The classic film noir cycle ended in 1958 w/Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* around the time that *Peter Gunn*, *Richard Diamond*, *Johnny Staccato*, *M-Squad*, *Mike Hammer*, *et al* were in full bloom. A little later (11th, 12th grades) I read *On the Road* and discovered beat literature, totally obliterating my narrow 1950s Southern world-view.

Those three – blues, film noir, and beat literature – formed something essential in my world-view, particularly when it comes to music.

No sound means much to me if I don't hear the sound of alienation and the desire to overcome it. Anything that sounds too comfortable, too self-satisfied, too at home in this middle class fantasy called America sounds false to me.

All of the best in blues music, beat writing and film noir filmmaking have a common message: there's redemption afoot, though it's likely to come through pain, sadness, and suffering.

These things cannot be ignored, but they can be overcome. Not through flinching or sugarcoating but through acceptance and honest expression. The stark acceptance that life unremittingly serves itself up hard-boiled to underdogs everywhere gives solace to those of us who can't or won't accept the platitudes of middle class comfort seeking.

Blue-notes & wails, shadows on wet pavement, pools of striped light, ecstatic escapes from down & out-ness intermingle in my world, resonating far beneath the surface of gung-ho, work ethic, flag-waving respectability.

Those on the outside, looking not so much to be included but to *proclaim* their outsider-ness, are the ones who inspire, who point to valuable truths.

Their truth is embedded, *wholly*, in their sound, look and vision. Just look and listen closely – it's right there. Over time, it's been imitated, faked, appropriated and watered-down, but at its core, the seminal artists and their visions have remained potent. Both sprang from a culture coming to grips with its illusions and false promises and from artists who couldn't/wouldn't be satisfied with the superficial pieties of post-WWII America.

Every blues musician, beat hero or film noir protagonist of the 40s and 50s, who, when faced with the world of numbing subservience, conformity, repression and drudgery, said, in effect: you don't have to accept it. You don't have to live in their world. You don't have to play their game. You don't have to see yourself in *their* eyes. You can speak from *your* gut. You can say and act how you *really* feel.

No doubt some could say, with assurance, that the stance of the alienated outsider is but another romance; a compensating myth for loser-hood. Given the perspective of age, I *might* say yes, you're right, but the fact remains (at least in my aesthetic) that the *sound* of the blues, the *look* of film noir, & the *feel* of beat writing contain a dark, deeply *satisfying* beauty no comfort seeking art comes close to.

The joy, *the sound of joy* comes – *has* to come – from a hard-boiled, *hard-earned* transcendence. None other rings true.

Dealing with Disagreement – the Music Way

Over the centuries, people have found agreement centers that form the basis for making music together:

Harmony, rhythm, melody

If you jettison these, what are musicians to agree upon?

The radical language of the British improvisers – Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, Evan Parker, Hugh Davies, John Stevens, among others – addressed the problem by putting rhythm foremost.

Not rhythm as a countable element, supporting melody and harmony, but rhythm as the *fundamental* element.

Pitch (melody) and how pitches fit together (harmony) become secondary to an expanded idea of rhythm as the primary universe of sound, provided one jettisons the reliance on meter.

There is no element of the world's sound devoid of rhythm. None. To say something is non-rhythmic, a-rhythmic, or out of rhythm is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of things.

Everything springs from rhythm.

Without rhythm, there would be nothing.

Nothing perceptible, at any rate.

Rhythm is vibration

Vibration is rhythm.

By expanding the idea of rhythm to encompass the *whole* of music, a music evolved whereby agreement and conflict could be worked out *within* the music. Rather than deciding beforehand where the music would go and *agreeing* upon that, the music could go its merry way, each musician intuitively finding his way with the others

In the same way that nature works out its differences at a molecular, vibrational level to create wholly formed entities,

music played with an expanded idea of rhythm can form itself into shapes and structures mirroring the intuitive nature of the players themselves. Consonance and dissonance then become equal partners when rhythm is at the fore.

Melody, harmony, consonance, dissonance are like words – concepts which come after the rhythmic fact – and like words, they can lead to un-resolvable disagreements unless everyone is on the same page in advance.

Whereas in a wholly rhythmic world, a more primary world, disagreements become *negotiable*: elements to be played with, jostled with and eventually incorporated, leading to more playing, more shapes, more textures, more feelings, more moods, more depth.

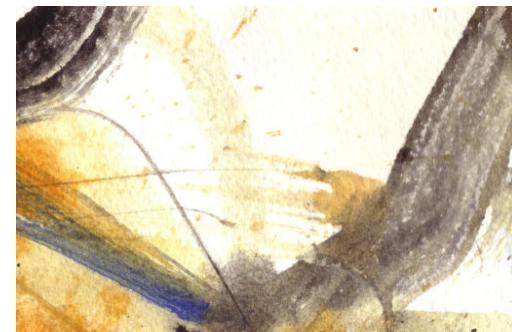
In this world, only two rhythmic elements have the potential of being un-resolvable:

a heavy-handed, constrictive one-size-fits-all rhythmic
framework

or

a reluctance to acknowledge one's own personal rhythms,
trying too hard to mimic others.

Beyond those, this musical universe offers the rare opportunity to create music from scratch, the only pre-requisite being a trust in your fellow players to keep the game open, fluid and discursive.



How One CAN Fail at Free Drumming

A recent article in a local jazz rag posed the question how can one “fail” at free drumming? Without casting aspersions on the writer or the article (an otherwise insightful critique of the Ken Burns series), the question jumped out, revealing an all-too-predictable take on the merits and demands of free playing, indicative of a general attitude, not just this writer’s.

Implied in the question is the notion that free playing has no rules, no right or wrong, no structure, and no rigor, so it doesn’t matter what happens – anything can be just as good or bad as anything else. Also implied is the obverse; that there’s no such thing as “succeeding” at free drumming/playing. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For starters, one can easily fail at free drumming by playing in *any* manner that dominates or obliterates fellow playing partners. The former usually happens by assuming everyone wants a strong groove (when they might not); the latter, by playing too loud, insensitively or heavy-handed. Secondly, one can fail at free drumming/playing by either missing or unknowingly obstructing the general flow of the music, failing to discern, through listening, where the music is headed, by going off on tangents which have no relationship to the music being made at that moment. In a word, not being *present* with the music, not being aware or concerned with the other musicians, not having the ability to move the music forward.

Free playing, it should be pointed out, simply means playing music without specific *prior* agreements. (The word free is a misnomer because no one is free of what s/he’s already learned.) As a consequence, the music can only develop as far as the players allow it to; as such, it’s a *negotiated* form of music making. No one automatically assumes or is given the upper hand. All the various roles/structures usually determined by composition or convention are up for grabs. Rather than creating a situation where no one can fail, this wide-open field of possibilities places even greater demands on the players.

Structure is invented and maintained according to the player’s ability to create in real time. Some are definitely more suited to this than others, in much the same way that some painters need preliminary sketches to work from, while others prefer a white canvas.

With so many choices and no blueprint to follow, the musician’s responses vary according to their personalities. Some seal themselves off by holding on to a free language come what may (i.e., no matter what their partners are doing); others, by shadowing the most assertive voice (through echoing or playing close counter-point); others by becoming very assertive, usually through volume, repetition, playing known riffs, whatever will get the attention of fellow players. All these solutions – to the challenge of playing without prior agreements – have their value, but, if over-done, can fail in one way or the other by bringing inflexibility to an otherwise dynamic and elastic environment.

Successful free playing occurs when the music moves organically, on its own terms, in surprising and unpredictable ways, free of coercion. This demands a truly collective mind-set, bent on both cohesion *and* unfettered expression. I make this statement not as dogma, but as an ideal – something to aspire to.

Rather than being either easy or fail-proof, this mind-set is, in fact, very difficult to find or develop. It requires not only letting go of control (or supervision) but also trusting that instinct and intuition will produce something wonderful and truthful, something that stands on its own. For those who don’t *work at it*, this doesn’t happen – formless, aimless, nebulous music results.

Just the sort of thing that sends people back to composition and/or convention, ridiculing free playing in the process, wondering how someone can fail at something for which there are no standards. (The sort of thing that breeds neo-cons like Stanley Crouch – the subject of the original question – who, when faced with the difficulties of free playing, seemed to feel a need to defend proven traditions against guys like himself).

For those who *have* worked at it – at not only the collective expression but also at their own individual abilities (i.e. instrumental skills) to foster such collectivity – it has yielded (and continues to yield) a huge body of great music.

To the apologists for Ken Burns’s take on jazz:

The crux of the issue, it seems to me, is whether any improvised music that bases itself on foundations other than the popular song will ever be considered jazz, and the degree to which jazz purists can define (and defend) what they’re “pure” about. Because if you tout improvisation as that which exalts jazz above the other genres, and then you deny the validity of free improvisation, which is exclusively based on improvisation, then what are you left with? An allegiance to Western harmony and African-American rhythms, nothing more, nothing less.

In the mid-60s, free playing, both in its American and European forms, challenged this allegiance. Its boundaries were seen as restrictive and *the* tool for appropriation by the capitalist music industry, which had a vested interest in colonizing particular aspects of music, thereby invalidating others. If the music industry said music had to have *certain* rhythms and *certain* harmonies or it wasn’t music, then that (and solely that) was what people heard.

This challenge began in earnest over forty years ago, and it is lamentable that jazz traditionalists (both old and new) cannot hear the beauty and strength that free improvisation led to. The spirit of improvisation *needed* something beyond popular song structure and harmony to build on.

Fifty years from now, the Evan Parker trio will be just as important and influential as the John Coltrane quartet. Which is not to deny the beauty of Classic Jazz, but to wonder why that particular period has to be defended so strongly.

I mean, it’s one thing for the industry to marginalize music that deviates from the mass market, but for Jazz to do the same suggests a dark little secret – that the goal of this series was not to exalt individual creative urges (i.e., its mythology), but to

help Jazz become a music for the masses.

Is it, however, possible to have a mass music that constantly challenges itself? I think not. And should we care? There seems to be way too much hand wringing about jazz becoming a mass consumption music again. On the one hand, Jazz pounds itself on the back for being America’s great indigenous art form and then, on the other, laments that it’s not popular. Capitalism and its free-market system will *never* respond in large numbers to any music, much less one calling itself art, that requires some work on the part of an audience to appreciate.

Branford Marsalis’s calling Cecil Taylor’s assertion that the audience needs to do a little homework “total bullshit” seems to me particularly self-contradictory (not to mention self-serving). Branford, Wynton, and the neo-boppers, in general, are constantly congratulating themselves for not succumbing to dumb three chord rock (remember the brouhaha when Branford “sold out” to Sting) or whatever other easy, spoon-fed music the masses eat up. Hey, man, we’re Jazz Artists. But when those folks (the mighty music-buying public) don’t buy their brand of jazz in large numbers, they seem unwilling to defend their art, assuming a mantle of faux-populism, chastising Cecil for telling the truth. Why is it so damning to suggest that some music requires a little more effort than others to enjoy? Particularly, a music that has always reflected (and not shied away from) the complexities of modern life?

Jazz lost its mass audience a long time ago. In my opinion, it’s a much richer music for having done so. Those who wish it to be a mass music delude themselves and, in their insistence on narrowing jazz to retro-fit a once popular era, are missing out on a lot of incredible music which has based itself on improvisation. The popular song (in particular, its structure) served (still serves) improvisation well, but to insist that it (and only it) is the basis for real jazz is to limit the scope and spirit of exploring musicians who also love jazz in its earlier incarnations.

Reality as Masterpiece

The only masterpiece is *reality* and our perceptions of it which, however limited, give us a glimpse of it.

We speak of masterpieces and we hear of God and his creations, but let's do our best to *face* reality: reality might be the only masterpiece we'll ever know, and we know so little about it. Our senses are limited and selective, and our egos self-protective.

So, what we get over and over again are *reactions to* and *opinions about* reality. And in those opinions (which, over time, harden into religions and dogma) we find differences. And those differences separate humans from one another.

What we need to recognize is that reality is infinitely deep and wide and is *all there is*. You can call it nothingness, you can call it God, you can call it whatever you like – but in naming it, you neither define, nor limit, nor experience it.

Occasionally, a work of art, an act of nature, a vision or a flash of intuition will put us face-to-face with reality, moving us to the depths of our beings. Whether you call this a “religious experience” or satori or whatever, you *know* when it's real, when it's *fundamentally* life-changing.

Reality, when fully and nakedly experienced, can *rightfully* be called awesome.

But because reality is *so* awesome and beyond thought, humans flock to leaders who define reality for them or who use force to control them. Religious and political leaders form themselves on the basis of their *opinions* about reality.

Reality itself, however, is *much* deeper and *far* more powerful than any human claiming to know it.

Whatever has touched or moved you deeply is an expression of reality penetrating your separateness. It is you, and you are it, but since you cannot be all of reality, you necessarily react to it to the degree that you're conscious of it (and not merely with your reflection in it).

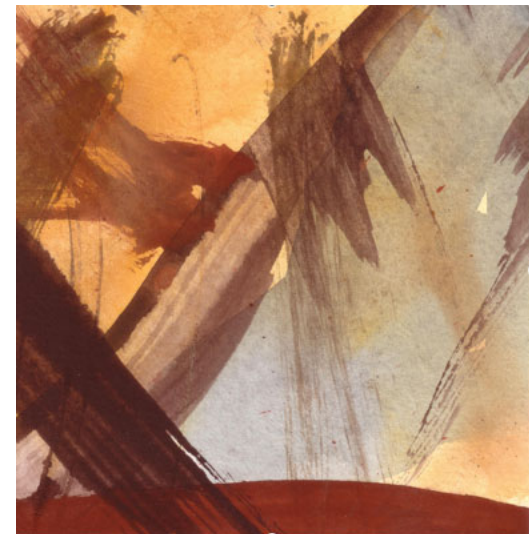
Those reactions are simply that: reactions, not the thing itself.

Therefore, we should remember to be light and playful in our attitudes about opinions other than our own.

Ours is not the last word.

Yours is not the last word.

The last word – first, last, and always, is undifferentiated Reality.



Inter-related Ideas and Opinions – 1989

Opinions, if lived, become principles. Yet principles, especially the kind that are handed down, put upon you, are often the basis for un-lived opinions.

A major word/concept of the 80s: versus (as in Reagan vs. nearly everything). And if indeed winning has become everything, then the idea of fairness has become a naive, and somewhat quaint, assumption.

z Appearances, as we know, are deceitful, though we continually let them lead our lives. Ken Kesey once wrote that he just couldn't accept (that is, his brain wouldn't process) the fact that a black man wearing a red plaid shirt could be steadfastly peering and plunging into the void. He was referring to a night club appearance in San Francisco of John Coltrane (ca. 1963). He remarked that it was the red plaid shirt: it just wouldn't compute, and though he knew this was prejudicial, it nonetheless affected his perception of the depth of the music.

How telling and honest a remark!

If we're faced with someone questionable, someone potentially confusing or someone just plain difficult, too often we rely on appearance value to help us through (though we *know* appearances deceive).

If anything, I've become prejudiced *against* outrageous attire – the more outrageous, the more likely a conservative soul resides therein. Mistakenly, I believed the 60s indicated a trend toward removing the prejudicial content of appearance, but once it became clear that the trend was (or was turned into) simply another fashion show, I've been unable to put much faith into what people wear or how they cut their hair.

In fact, the current conservatism manifests itself as much in the punk attire as it does in Edwin Meese's. A more radical stance would have one guessing a little at least.

After an improvised music performance recently, someone told me they had enjoyed *not* knowing how much music was pre-planned and how much had been improvised. Though I

appreciated this atypical response (differing greatly from the vast majority, who feel uncomfortable with *any* type of ambiguousness), I wondered why this question (of how much pre-planning) so often seems to be the focus of attention.

It caused me to think how deeply (and unconsciously) puritan work ethics go into our culture. Even amongst those who would profess to be liberated from/opposed to them.

Does it really matter if a group of musicians are improvising a piece on the spot? Does it really matter if they spent two years rehearsing a piece of music? And if it matters, and if this mattering affects your experiencing the piece, then what's really going on? Are we listening to music or are we placing our non-musical values *onto* the music?

I think there's a deep-set, work-ethic prejudice against artistic improvisation in almost every form. Improvisation just doesn't demonstrate Work in the same ways that composition, choreography, or other pre-planned, rehearsed systems do. One reason is that improvisation places such a high value on developing the individual's intuition, spontaneity, and timing while simultaneously depending on group inter-action and responsiveness. That these areas should be considered bereft of work value says volumes about what we do value in work. Furthermore, the notion that we have all these qualities in abundance (and, therefore, don't need to work on them) equally reveals some glaring holes in our value structure.

There's a fear that if a system doesn't demonstrate the values of hard work (read: long hours, nose to the grindstone, repetition of "proven" techniques), then it could possibly be no more than "mere" play and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. Furthermore, there's a deeper fear that a system not based on those values might get out of hand, over-indulge itself, and tend toward chaotic, anarchic and time-wasting activities. Activities, one and all, which do not, nor ever have served industry, the military or the church very well.

On the other side, for the industrialist, there's a still greater fear, a fear so great that, from the beginning, it *had* to be gotten

rid of; and what better way than through a quite willing religious doctrine: namely, the fear of nature. Nature is self-regulating, inner-disciplined, adaptable, adjustable, responsive, spontaneous, intuitive and perfectly timed. But, as we know, nature was something to be tamed, shaped and, indeed, *conquered*. The fact that something could have a discipline from within, rather than imposed from without, was, and still remains, a threat to any system which wishes to repress or exploit.

In so many ways, the world we live in seems to be the creation of minds fearful of nature, unable to deal creatively with aggression and sexuality, forever devising labyrinthine methods that either suppresses natural urges or packages them as commodities to sell.

Why do we continue to unconsciously reward those activities that conform to the work-ethic system? Why do we continue to reward technique (technology) over spirit? Is it because, deep down, we don't believe we have the inner discipline and inner resources to experience things fully and completely? That we must rely on appearance, technique, a sense of hard work, or pre-established principles in order to evaluate our experiences? Have we really separated ourselves that far from our (true) nature?

If so, the Path of Return will not be found through the increased use of those systems which have separated us from ourselves in the first place. Those systems must not only be recognized and questioned, they must be put alongside alternative systems; some of which, on an *on-going basis*, encourage change, renewal, and self-questioning.

Improvisation (as a methodology, an attitude, a generator of ideas), in my mind, is certainly one of those alternative systems.

To the degree and manner in which it meets resistance (most virulently, ironically enough, from left-leaning mentalities) indicates the depth of our out-dated (and decadent) puritan heritage.

First Published in *The Improvisor* 1989

On Freedom: Free Jazz/Improv

As a saxophonist and longtime practitioner of freely improvised music, I'm heartened by the renewed interest among younger people in unfettered jazz and other "open" forms of music. My own interest in this music has always been as much for its political and cultural implications as for its sound and style, and I feel these have particular relevance to the current times. Plus, these "meta-music" aspects of free improvisation need to be put in perspective for the truly radical nature of improvisation to be appreciated. Otherwise, it remains merely another genre of music and, as such, easily marginalized, trivialized, diluted or otherwise appropriated to placate the status quo.

Far more than late 60s rock or folk, free jazz and (later) European free improvisation proposed a true break with the predominant consumer- and Authority-driven culture of postwar America. Bebop jazz (in itself revolutionary in its denial of the need for white acceptance or validation) had lost its radical spark by the early 60s and had become somewhat codified in form, sound and intent.

The record industry, having discovered that a black influenced hybrid (rock n' roll) could capture white youth, and that the demands of hard bop could only be appreciated by a relative few, wrote jazz off, forcing many mature beboppers to move to Europe in order to continue to make a living. The younger, more militant black musicians who remained – Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Marion Brown, Milford Graves, and Sonny Murray, among others – were not content to play any music which could be easily assimilated by a white culture they were essentially at war with. So, before acid and electric guitars, there was a music – free jazz – that totally broke from the Establishment in its sheer explosive sound of rage and self-determination.

Completely uncommercial and uncompromising, free jazz was both powerful and scary. Among its attributes was a

collective freedom: the drummer and bassist were no longer relegated to the function of timekeepers, but contributed to the constantly shifting textures, rhythms, and tonalities brought on by the removal of pre-imposed chord patterns; and the horn players, no longer restricted to Western harmonies and a tacit demand to stay “cool”, started delving into a rich repertoire of screams, brays, shrieks, stutters, honks, wildly overblown notes – anything to propel the intense, urgent self-discovering/self purging of this truly rebellious music. At the same time, networks and collectives (the most prominent being the AACM in Chicago, which later spawned the likes of Anthony Braxton, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Muhal Richard Abrams) began producing events and distributing records, aware that the vast majority of labels would not touch this “anti-jazz” (as critics dubbed John Coltrane’s late work).

To get a truer picture of the American 60s, I recommend listening to Albert Ayler’s *Spiritual Unity*, Coltrane’s *Meditations*, the Art Ensemble’s *People in Sorrow* and Archie Shepp’s *Fire Music*. These will tell you more about the times than most of the rock music which was, unfortunately, quickly appropriated once the major labels realized anti-establishment records could be sold as part of the rebellion. The power of free jazz was not its economics, but what it portended and the degree to which it radicalized its listeners.

Many of us influenced by free jazz realized its revolutionary nature – it changed the game from being industry/consumer driven to musician/creator driven, with a goal of liberating musicians from market-oriented hierarchies. The criticisms it received – it lacked “structure”, it invited “unschooled charlatans”, it couldn’t be repeated (i.e., documented for written scores and, hence, copyrights), it wasn’t “pleasant” to listen to – all these were, in fact, its conscious strengths. The music establishment (including music education) was being seriously questioned and challenged. Whose “structure”, whose idea of taste, whose notion of instrumental expertise, whose control of the material? The depth of this challenge to the musical/socially

acceptable hegemony went far beyond hair length and drug experiments. It went, finally, to the notion of individual freedom in a country loudly proclaiming itself to be the “Land of the Free” while simultaneously bashing the heads or quelling the music of anyone who thought otherwise.

Free jazz carried several implications: (1) develop a truly individual sound/approach to your instrument; (2) incorporate this individual approach collectively with others, eschewing the (potential) dictatorship of composer or conductor or the need to dominate/submit to anything other than the demands of the music; (3) develop an inter-active music, free of preconceptions, open to surprise, disruptions, and abrupt dynamic shifts in rhythm and mood (the latter differentiating it from “jamming”).

The disaffected European musicians of the 60s took the implications of black free jazz and made a music all their own. Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Tony Oxley, Peter Brotzmann, Han Bennink, Paul Lovens, Barry Guy and many others broke from both free jazz and 20th century notated music to create “non-idiomatic free improvisation”, a mosaic of sounds free of cultural reference points. As much noise as music (calling into question the distinctions between the two, particularly the ideologies behind the distinctions), it reflected a constant flux, always in transition, keeping itself in the most present moment, never “resolving”, refusing the groove, the melody, the tonic that might give a fix on its course. Instead, rhythm became defined more by its push and pull, its continuous discontinuity, than by repetition of pulse, calling for a broader canvas of sounds and closer attention to the whole as it developed in its own “illogical” way. These qualities, along with a distinct distaste for the ego/star/soloist mentality of rock and jazz, pushed 20th century music toward a pinnacle of collective creativity that has yet to be transcended and which remains fertile to this day, albeit not so eccentric or radical sounding as when it first emerged.

However, all the forces which improvisation rebelled against or poised alternatives to slowly and subtly crept back into the

picture during the 70s and 80s: business, music and otherwise, went back to usual. But the revolutionary content, which was substantial given the fragile nature of liberty (the true goal of revolution), did not go away, and I feel the times have come again for its implications to take root.

Many rebellious young people listening to their peers dissect the American Woe in music, words and art are realizing how easily and quickly that critique can be bought up, compromised and destroyed (either by self or others). Where can an ongoing complaint be registered against the consumer/product mindset, both inner and outer, that consistently leads to material gain/loss at the expense of spiritual and artistic growth? Where can a real and beautiful alternative be expressed free of self-protective irony, misplaced cynicism, or subconscious desires to join the forces of those who oppose you? For both musician and listener alike, I would like to suggest becoming more conversant with the ideas behind free improvisation, learning a little more about it through records and magazines, taking in a gig or two, and becoming an active, questioning listener.

By no means am I saying that free improvisation (its methods, its implications, its critique) offers any answers toward leading a better life, or necessarily gives us better glimpses into (potential) utopias. I am, however, suggesting that it makes an extremely important cultural contribution when played with conviction by developed and passionate musicians. Though the ethos is suspicious and perhaps disdainful of hero-worship, reverence, or over-seriousness, the music should be listened to and played with respect.

It's one of the few forms I know of which offers a continuing challenge to practice its uncompromising nature. Anyone can improvise (refuting arguments that it's elitist) but not everyone can *continue* to improvise. It requires a genuine openness to oneself and others. The game is to consistently play *with* self-created boundaries rather than *within* given ones; to play not for the sake of winning or losing someone else's game but to continue playing, individually and collectively, at the highest and most intuitive level possible.

A recent quote from Masahiko Satoh in the August (1994) issue of *Cadence* sheds light on this aspect:

The method of free jazz is like Shogi [Japanese Chess]'s world. A player tries to read the other one's next move. I do the same. I take the method of free jazz as oriental thinking. I think players always have three different kinds of answers, "yes", "no", "ignore" and variations of each element. Prominent artists have many variations. A person who has a lot of experience and has many things in his background plays better. Intuition is also based on experience. I'm always neutral. I am always open. I can't imagine a good musician coming to a dead end in free jazz play. When you listen to it, just open up and enjoy it. There is no need to listen to free jazz logically."

The Same Ole Music Game with its emphasis on Popularity, Sex Appeal, Market Shares, Fantasy Dreams Coming True etc, will continue in all its glory, but it is irrelevant to the true nature of improvisation. Improvised music might seem like just more sounds in the air, but it really is a different game altogether. It is not going to be the next big thing. For that reason, enjoy it while you can, when you can. Its beauty is partially its ephemerality. I'm under no illusion that it will change the dominant American culture but, in the playing and/or listening, it might change you. And that's where the real change starts.

Suggested Reading:

Finite and Infinite Games, James Carse

Improvisation: Its Nature in Music, Derek Bailey

Black Music, Leroi Jones

The Freedom Principle, John Litweiller

The Politics of Noise, Jacques Attali

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September 13, 1994

A Good Impresario

True to the spirit of the unrepentant Host,
the Saxophonist,
Eyes glazed,
wailed mercilessly,
piercing the air with
Large-Bird-mangled-screams

To the initiate,
The clamorous tones
Ushered forth
Imagetic chain reactions
Of angers and fears long withheld,
Setting in motion
Uncontrollable convulsions:

Pleasure, pain, fancy, flight –
Co-mingling with an
Extra-sensory plasma,
Responsive to the tiniest
Inflection of tone and timbre.

This, the Host thought, was the true purpose and beauty of music
To by-pass all those polite refusals to encounter one's inner hurt

All else, he thought, was window-dressing
disguised as emotional truth,
Candy offered to souls in need of firmer sustenance.

Re-listening to Touch

Reflections on nostalgia and psychedelia

During the summer of '69, word on the street was that the ultimate psychedelic rock record had been released and was out there somewhere, just below the radar screen.

My buddies and I, interested in all things psychedelic, were determined to find this Holy Grail. And, sure enough, we did.

The record was the self-titled debut of a group called Touch and everything about it – the cover art, the personnel, the trippy lettering – was as mysterious and enigmatic as you hoped it would be, as if this unknown artifact had dropped in out of the blue for world edification.

We got ourselves properly prepared, so to speak, and put it on. The sound poured out – rich, full, reverberant, state-of-the-art studio magic – the music full of twists and turns, the singing celestial, the lyrics enlightened and appropriately anti-establishment, but our minds, sadly, were not blown. Impressed? Yes, but the ultimate, no.

Then came the clarion, morse-code-like beginning to the final cut, “Seventy-Five” and, for the next twelve minutes, we were transfixed, buffeted and hurled through a sonic universe that shook us to our boots. We looked at each other. Fuck. What was that?

OK, OK – this *is* the ultimate – and for the remainder of the summer, we, like good disciples, spread the word, turning everyone we knew – acid head or not – onto *Touch*, specifically the track “Seventy-Five”. It never failed. It even freaked a few folks out. But, invariably, the music blew people away.

Fast forward thirty-five years and a few words about me. I play freely improvised sax and have been involved in improvised music since the mid-70s. I'm decidedly not nostalgic – in fact, anti-nostalgic. I feel little connection to members of my generation who drop beaucoup bucks keeping 60s re-hash acts alive, who show little or no interest in current music, and who can't comprehend the spontaneous, in-the-moment music that fills my life.

I'm personally not interested in re-living a dim past where 60s music serves as a reminder of idealism, shucked long ago in order to "get a life". (Prophetic quip from the 70s: In the 60s, there was marijuana; in the 70s, there's real estate)

But, for some reason, I started thinking about *Touch* and found a newly minted CD. I was curious as to how it would sound now, how much it would hold up. Because it sure as hell knocked me out at the time.

I put on "Seventy-Five" right away, and though no serious flashbacks (for better or worse) occurred, a strong surge of feelings overcame me. As the music progressed, I found myself caught up in it once again, carried away (in spite of myself) by the sheer exhilaration and dynamism of the music.

It's a compelling artifact from the late 60s. Five relatively unknown musicians, transformed by studio wizardry and psychedelics, had, in their own way, broken through and liberated themselves. You can hear it. It's contagious. Whether or not it comes from naivete or a calculated jump onto the bandwagon, they've gotten the message and they're spreading it. It's LSD evangelism – pure, sincere, unadulterated, all packaged up in glorious 20/20sound.

"Twenty/twenty sound is to sound what twenty/twenty is to vision. In its concept, an equal division of musical content has been distributed on both channels, thus, as in the case of the eyes, the ears are both able to focus for themselves and the listener is not required to sit directly center as in the case of the phantom center speaker" (from the liner notes).

After all, their stated message was "to cause the listener to achieve an altered state of consciousness, not through meditation or drugs, but through music".

I got an immediate jolt of nostalgia. It evoked in me what nostalgia evokes in everyone – a memory, seemingly timeless, that erases all the years. I hadn't heard this record in 30 years, yet it could have been last week. I was riding high on a blast of yesterday. It didn't last long. That's a problem with nostalgia. But once it wore off, I realized that this music, or, at least, its spirit has stayed with me all these years, occupying a very special

place in my musical soul, and that spirit isn't a nostalgic one.

But first, what about the music? Well, for many today, it will definitely sound old-hat, maybe, even cringe-worthy. All the later excesses of progressive rock – the visions and ambitions of groups like Yes, Styx, Kansas, King Crimson – are here in spades. Mixed and morphed genres, shifting time signatures, orchestral movements within pieces, five-part harmonies – Touch used all these and more unabashedly.

But – and here my nostalgia no doubt kicks in – "Seventy Five" goes way past these latter-day groups in its psychedelic effects – extreme stereo-panning, radical use of reverberation, really really quiet/really LOUD dynamics, experimentation in voice alteration (not unlike Tim Buckley's in *StarSailor*) and guitar tone (making it sound just like the singer's voice), and the incredible conclusion where the stereo cabinets themselves become buzzing agents of sonic over-drive – all these go into zones where the comparisons end. The latter-day groups – for all their excesses – were *much* more reined in than Touch. Touch also has that sound of discovery – they were innovating this stuff, taking chances, going further out, setting the bar higher. That was the zeitgeist of the era.

The musicians, it turned out, were pros – Don Galluci, the main writer and keyboardist, was a big part the early 60s Northwest rock scene; had, in fact, played on *Louie, Louie* and led a band called Don and the Goodtimes, which included several members of Touch.

They moved to LA and became regulars on Dick Clark's *Where The Action Is*, but the times changed, the post-*Sgt. Pepper* music world was no longer interested in their brand of old school, so they decided to push their creative juices. The organ-driven R & B underpinnings and rocking guitar indicate their roots, but the classical flourishes and jazz flirtations hint at musicians who had been cooped up in good time music too long. They were ready to spread their wings.

So, beyond the studio effects and acid propaganda ("Your eyes, they just see Truth you make them, why not let them see, why not set them free?"), what's ultimately striking about the

music is its sheer uplift and sense of exultation. These guys wholeheartedly embraced the tacit message of the 60s: that there *is* something beyond – you can touch it, you can experience it, you can express it. The self-questioning, doubt and cynicism of the 70s seemed light years away when they went into the studio in 1968.

Unfortunately, not everyone wanted to go on their ride. After declining to tour, for the very good reason that the recorded sound couldn't be duplicated live, record sales dropped and that was the end of Touch. One visionary album and out. As it should be. Ultimate albums can't be topped. Besides, the 60s were nearly over, edging closer and closer to hitting the wall.

Don Gallucci remained in the music business, producing Iggy and the Stooges' *Fun House*, another amazing record (that didn't sell), another artifact of the times and one just as exhilarating as *Touch*, though headed 180 degrees in the other direction (back toward the primal) and much more influential in the long run.

For me, the psychedelic spirit embodied in Touch's music made me yearn for other music to take me where theirs had taken me. Music that took me beyond what I knew or thought possible. And it wasn't hard to find. It was everywhere. You just had to go outside the rock world. The spirit of quest and search in their music pointed *out* not down, inspiring me to scour the musical horizons, eventually discovering my own music, one which hopefully embodies the same spirit, though expressed in a much different language.

Their message, their sound, however quaint, dated, or grandiose it might sound from today's jaded perspective, pushed 60s rock music about as far as it could go and deserves a place near the psychedelic pinnacle. In its highest form, psychedelia represented a strong cultural need to expand and grow spiritually, and that spirit, if applied rigorously, can serve as a useful antidote to the human, all-too-human, desire to dwell in the past.

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The Stooges, Funhouse and Don Gallucci:

A Belated Appreciation

The seminal and highly influential Stooges album FUNHOUSE is fast approaching its 40th anniversary. Given the recent death of guitarist Ron Asheton, it will undoubtedly be re-spun, re-appraised, and once again, re-affirmed as a true American classic. The Real F-ing Deal.

After making a loud thud initially (commercially speaking), it has developed mythical status as the First Punk Record. Bands worldwide claim it as their strongest influence.

It's an amazing record. I bought it back in the day, loved it then, love it now. It's just as feral, virile and skanky today as when the needle dropped in 1970. Nothing about it sounds dated. Also, around that time, another album came out called *Touch*, a monumental slab of psychedelic wonder that dazzled the cognoscenti, but, like FUNHOUSE, failed to sell records and quickly dropped into obscurity.

What these two LPs had in common was Don Gallucci.

For me, that was always significant. Both records were exceptional, even by late 60s standards: completely original visions and a terrific sound. But two records could not have been more dissimilar: *Touch* – otherworldly, lush and complex; FUNHOUSE – primal, raw, and gritty. How did this one musician become part of both?

Maybe, in answering this, I can also shed some light on Don Gallucci's contribution to FUNHOUSE, something long over-looked and under-appreciated.

Don started young as a musician. By 1970, he had been a member of the Kingsman (played on *Louie, Louie!*); the leader of Don & the Goodtimes, a popular NW band; the leader of the TV house band for *Where The Action Is*; and, most importantly, the creative force behind Touch.

For those few who heard it, *Touch* made a lasting impression. It pushed rock into previously unexplored areas and laid the groundwork for later, heralded, progressive rock groups, such as Yes, Genesis and King Crimson. I've written about it

elsewhere (www.furious.com/perfect/touch.html), and I urge anyone interested in creative, progressive rock from the acid-rock period to check it out.

So, by the time he produced the FUNHOUSE sessions, Don Gallucci was an experienced, highly creative musician – a seasoned pro and visionary wrapped in one. Had Touch taken off, Don would have been viewed in a wholly different light. A much loftier and revered one. No doubt about it.

But that was not to be. *Touch* went nowhere, and Don soon found himself the house producer for Electra Records, happy to have a job, and handed the assignment of producing The Stooges' second album.

I've always been curious as to how Don viewed those days. After a recent phone conversation, here's what I learned. (all quotes are his.)

He was flown to NY, saw the Stooges play live, was intrigued by the music and the show, complete with Iggy pouring candlewax on himself, but told Jac Holzman, head of Electra, that it couldn't be captured on tape. It was an act – a live performance experience, complete unto itself. Holzman, however, was un-deterred, and the Stooges were brought to Electra's new LA studio.

Don, much to his credit, is very candid about the experience. The Stooges were not happy with him. They didn't want a producer, much less a staff producer, and viewed him as a "suit". Most recorded music, to them, was contrived, pretentious and phony – in a word, lame. Convinced there was a conspiracy against real music, they didn't want a producer tinkering with their sound or pushing them in a direction other than their own.

Don, also much to his credit, didn't try to. He heard the integrity in their sound and felt that he got it. They had their genre down. What genre, I ask? "I don't know. I'm not sure they knew. But they knew when it *felt* right, when the sound in the room *felt right*." To him, their music was "minimalist, yet seamless, every piece fitting into place, creating a trance-like state. They knew adding too many chords or other stuff would break the trance".

Plus, the studio was far too pristine, set up for folk musicians, not garage rockers, and the engineer, Brian Ross-Myring, was an old-school Britisher, complete with coat and tie. So, Don went about taking out the baffles, curtains, and fancy rugs. The idea was to "make them comfortable and turn the studio into a stage, so as to let them perform. Iggy was given a hand-held mic, a small PA, while the other guys played behind him. Everything was recorded live – take after take of each song – with plenty of bleed". So, you and the engineer were their audience, so to speak? "Yeah, two guys they didn't even like."

Few changes, if any, were made. Though "raw, they were flawless and knew exactly what they wanted". Different tempos were tried and an over-dubbed guitar part added here and there, but the music heard on the record represents exactly what was played in the studio. This was a radical departure from standard rock recording techniques at the time, and Don deserves a lot of credit for using this approach. His attitude was "don't mess with it". Personally, I think he's being a little modest. Many a band has played great in the studio, but few have a record that sounds anything like FUNHOUSE. *That* took an intuitive producer and a quality engineer, both of whom had studio chops, savvy and great ears.

When I first heard FUNHOUSE, I was struck by the quality of the grooves, how the bass, drum and guitar inter-lock into these incredibly compelling riffs that were at once propulsive and hypnotic yet melodic. There was a little strut, some swagger, but, mostly, they *slithered*. Ten seconds into "Down on the Street" and you're hooked. I definitely heard the black influences – the Bo Diddley beat, Willie Dixon, James Brown, the King Curtis/John Coltrane sax (via Steve MacKay) – but filtered through a new sensibility. I ask Don if he heard that. "Yes, what they gave Iggy was a *quality base*: a strong groove and attitude, for honest emoting. All the great blues had that." In particular, Ron's guitar playing was "refined, *elegant* but not opulent. He was disciplined, yet creative, which is rare, and his fills were perfect."

Now, a word about Iggy. The Stooges without Iggy are

unimaginable. He's their sound made flesh. Grooves or no grooves, Iggy's the attraction. Has there been a better showman in the history of rock n roll? But, remember, when I first heard the record, it was completely an aural experience. I'd never seen them. Yet, the crazed performance energy came through fully intact. Don's convinced that that by adding "warmth and balance and some control", he helped capture a magic moment that was FUNHOUSE.

Iggy didn't agree. He didn't like the record. Don thinks that just by reducing their act to vinyl, by setting it in time, it put Iggy too close to an industry he didn't respect. Hearing that, I was reminded of the famous Jackson Pollock story where he berated the guy photographing him painting: 'I'm not the phony, you're the phony'. Jac Holzman was pleased though, and told Don he had done a good job. Jac "knew".

Asked if the Stooges came to respect him over the course of the recording and after it was completed, his answer is, simply, "no". And when their 2003 reunion finally took place in London specifically to play FUNHOUSE ("have you ever heard of a band getting back together just to play an album?") he was pointedly ignored by everyone except Ron, who greeted him warmly.

So, this tale has a bittersweet lining, and Don is frank about that. "I'm not going to claim that this was some kind of wonderful collaboration." But I don't detect a hint of bitterness. Instead, I hear humility. To Don, his proudest achievement was "I didn't screw it up."

Don Gallucci's name will forever be linked with FUNHOUSE, and it *will* go down in history. It's a landmark recording. Could the Stooges have achieved this without him? Maybe yes, maybe no, but Don was *integrally* involved in the process. Most record producers are lauded for what they *do*, Don should be appreciated for what he *didn't* do. He heard the quality of the Stooges music and got out of their way. Not only did he not screw it up, he helped record a masterpiece. And for that, he definitely deserves a share of the praise – the proof is right there in the pudding.

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The Deal

Here's the deal:

Unless it lines up with
The Universal Balance,
It's gonna take longer to work out.
It's just that simple.

If something is already hooked up,
It's not going to take as long

All the things that keep
It from working out
(either on *its* terms, *your* terms, or *their* terms)
are those aspects out of balance with
the universal balance.

Because when it's in alignment,
It *will* work out –
For you, for it, for them.

It's always easy to blame it
On *them*
Some may even evolve enough to blame it on *themselves*.
But further evolution always reveals that
Things that don't work out
Aren't supposed to work out.
Some aspect of the total equation
Is out of balance.

Until that's corrected,
The thing will not work out to
Everyone's satisfaction.

In reality we all live with less than satisfactory solutions,
But satisfactory solutions are always available.
That's not a hope – that's the way it *is*.

Speculations on Consciousness

Is it possible that consciousness has a cellular component?

Is that which we call consciousness made up of small units of matter having ever-increasing frequencies which eventually resonate with other units to create kernels of self-awareness?

Is I.Q. actually a measure of vibrational awareness?

Does intelligence signify an attunement to higher vibrational frequencies than other, less intelligent, humans possess?

Is irony an awareness of the dissonant frequencies of human inter-action?

Why is it that the less intelligent seem not to understand irony?

Is common sense the mental equivalent of major scale harmonies, whereas irony, paradox, conundrum and inventiveness are made up of more advanced harmonies, including dissonance?

(Interesting how the media, particularly popular films and TV drama – the barometer of consensus reality – always associates dissonance in music with dirty deeds and scary moments rather than with higher cognition.)

Is Love an expression of the most powerful frequencies?

Is Art?

Is God?

Is God a Frequency Magnate? (A frequency magnet?)

In the vernacular, frequency = how often

In science, frequency = vibration = information

Aspiration = respiration

Breathe your way to success

Mindful = Full of Mind

Is the state of mindfulness the highest state?

Does mindfulness have a vibrational component? That is, are there varying degrees of being mindful?

To be PRESENT means

To be mindful

Of the fullness of the

Present moment

To have PRESENCE means

To *fill* the present moment

To be PRESCIENT means

to enlarge the present moment,

Pushing it into the future, aware of

What it portends.

A *true* ideal: to be fully present, to have full awareness of yourself and others.

Does it require ego-less-ness?

Does it require a heightened awareness of ego? Does ego take up so much space that being present is impossible?

To be *present* is the primary requirement to being a good improviser.

Without it, one remains, to varying degrees, outside the moment, un-responsive to it.

To be present means to be *INSIDE* the moment, inhabiting it with all the awareness one possesses.

Power results from fully occupying the moment. Focus and concentration on the moment creates a vibrational vortex that heightens the moment, increasing its power.

Power, in the modern sense, has to do with what one *already* has and how that can be used to coerce, but power, in a truer sense, means full presence and the accumulation of those presences.

Improvising on a regular basis – either as a participant or an *active* observer – helps create the ability to be mindful of the moment, to investigate its vast potential, and to accumulate incremental bits of personal power in the process.



Wally Shoup has dedicated himself to the art of free improvisation, having been involved in it since the mid-1970s. Informed by black free jazz, European free improvisation, noise, punk, blues and 20th century classical, he incorporates his serpentine alto sax sound into myriad groups and combinations.

Wally was named one of Seattle's 50 Most Influential Musicians by *Seattle Metropolitan Magazine* (2008)

A career visual artist, his paintings are informed by the "sophisticated primitivism" of Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet and the COBRA school. Rock surfaces, microscopic realities, human faces, and the rhythms of trees are also prime influences on his work.