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Guerino B. Mazzola
Moreno Andreatta

Guerino B. Mazzola • Paul B. Cherlin
In Collaboration with
Mathias Rissi and Nathan Kennedy

Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz

Towards a Theory of Collaboration

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Prof. Dr. Guerino B. Mazzola
164 Ferguson Hall
Minneapolis MN 55455
USA
mazzola@umn.edu

Paul B. Cherlin
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Dept. Philosophy
271 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis MN 55455
831 Heller Hall
USA

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Für Christina,
die immer
alles gibt

Preface

Let's try to play the music and not the background.
Ornette Coleman, liner notes of the LP "Free Jazz" [20]

When I began to create a course on free jazz, the risk of such an enterprise was immediately apparent: I knew that Cecil Taylor had failed to teach such a matter, and that for other, more academic instructors, the topic was still a sort of outlandish adventure. To be clear, we are not talking about teaching improvisation here—a different, and also problematic, matter—rather, we wish to create a scholarly discourse about free jazz as a cultural achievement, and follow its genealogy from the American jazz tradition through its various outbranchings, such as the European and Japanese jazz conceptions and interpretations. We also wish to discuss some of the underlying mechanisms that are extant in free improvisation, things that could be called technical aspects. Such a discourse bears the flavor of a *contradicto in adjecto*: Teaching the unteachable, the very negation of rules, above all those posited by white jazz theorists, and talking about the making of sounds without aiming at so-called factual results and all those intellectual sedimentations: is this not a suicidal topic?

My own endeavors as a free jazz pianist have informed and advanced my conviction that this art has never been theorized in a satisfactory way, not even by Ekkehard Jost in his unequaled, phenomenologically precise pioneering book "Free Jazz" [57]. Many attempts to catch the phenomenon and its rationales have been absorbed by either political, sociological or personality issues, such as in Valerie Wilmer's brilliant treatises "As serious as your life" [110], Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli's radical sociological essay "Free Jazz Black Power" [13] or Meinrad Buholzer's personality story "Auf der Suche nach Cecil Taylor" [11]. Also most recent publications, such as Howard Mandel's "Miles, Ornette, Cecil" [64] or Phil Freeman's "New York is Now"

[36] show little if any progress in the comprehension of the phenomenon of free jazz.

We are still far from reaching an accord concerning the concept, definition and implications of what is meant by free jazz. Some call it "New Thing", others prefer "Cosa Nova", "Great Black Music", "Out Music", "Energy Music", "Nouvelle Gauche" and so forth. The limitations of the concepts connected with such terminology rightly reflect the predominant lack of understanding of what is really happening when this radical method of creativity unfolds. I intentionally use the present tense and not the historical past tense, which refers to the first manifestations of this art in the early nineteen sixties. I do so, since it would not be sufficiently justified to write another book on the merely historical phenomenon of free jazz as it appeared in the context of those socio-political liberation movements.

My motivation for rethinking this art in fact transcends that historical context and elaborates on the art's universal characteristics as an unprecedented collaborative endeavor that relativizes facticity—the paradigm of the ready-made objects (even in its most sophisticated form of Western cultural heritage) and the deeply engraved principles of an economy that is based upon the commercial exchange of factual objects. The question backing these perspectives is about values, about what makes a cultural achievement a valid thing, a truly human activity, and not just a placeholder for idle consumer transactions.

Free jazz, as a model for collaborative arts, with its momentum of flow in a specific gestural action space it populates, opens a new perspective that is now being addressed by creativity research, e.g. in Keith Sawyer's concise book on Group Creativity, David Borgo's work "Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age" [9] on complex systems associated with free jazz, or Robert Hodson's detailed account in "Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz" on the structural elements that differentiate free jazz improvisation from traditional jazz practice.

Free jazz is therefore viewed and investigated as a unique example of collaborative behavior, leading to group creativity and collaborative flow, i.e., to characteristics of a groundbreaking direction of human performance, which is desperately needed in the arts, in management[1]*, in computer programming and software design communities, and above all in the research culture. The latter is crucial with regard to interdisciplinary projects and organizations, since it is not possible to perform innovative interdisciplinary research without also changing the fundamentals of scientific behavior from individual and isolated working styles to intense exchange of data, ideas, and engagements.*

We are fully aware that our approach takes not only a musical perspective, but also a new theoretical position on the generic art of collaboration. In so doing, this book opens a discourse that involves cognitive, philosophical, mathematical or psychological threads that may not have been seen in

[1] See [43] for such an approach.

conjunction and may therefore provoke astonishment or even refusal. However, the students' positive response to the free jazz course, from which the present treatise is derived, proves that such a project may perfectly fit in the understanding of unconsumed and inquisitive minds. In this sense I also want to acknowledge the creative discourses, which my class has fostered, the creative experiments in free jazz class rehearsals, and the strong resonance I received from the workshop and CD recording session with the Tetrade group composed of the legendary and deeply grounding Sirone on bass, my long-year companion and omnidirectional percussionist Heinz Geisser, the electronically mazed sky-high trumpeter Jeff Kaiser, and me on grand piano. They have all made it possible to think about free jazz in a more complete way that transcends historical contingencies. The resulting CD "Liquid Bridges" has been included in this book as a proof of concept for the principles of flow, gesture, and collaborative spaces.

My acknowledgments go to my students of the free jazz course, who did contribute to this book by their strong interaction in class and so many inspiring thoughts and comments. I am grateful to one of my most talented and attentive students, Nathan Kennedy, who added a number of textual improvements. My deep gratitude goes to one of the students and now inspired coauthor of the book, Paul B. Cherlin, who is not only a distinghuised free jazz drummer, but also carefully reviewed the entire text, added so many improvements and clarifications to my often arcane text, and has written the very last chapter: a young voice for the future. I am also very grateful to the truly encyclopedic jazz expert Mathias Rissi, my long-time musical companion and energetic saxophonist, who brought me back to jazz twenty years ago, who checked the names and dates of the jazz cats and recordings cited in this book, and who added some thoughtful comments, especially on the extension of instrumental techniques.

I am also grateful for a grant-in-aid support of the University of Minnesota, which enabled me to enrich the free jazz course by realistic artistic performances, and in particular to Michael Cherlin, the Founding Director of the University's Interdisciplinary Program in Collaborative Arts, who wisely encouraged me to embark in theoretical and practical aspects of this innovative program. Last but not least, I am pleased to acknowledge the strong and singular support in writing such an advanced treatise by Springer's Science Editor Stefan Goeller.

Minneapolis, August 2008 Guerino Mazzola

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Part I

Getting off Ground

1

What Is Free Jazz?

Jazz is singularly unique in that
the people who control it are
thoroughly ignorant of it,
know nothing about it.
Archie Shepp [91]

1.1 The Social, and Political, and Musical Origins of the Movement

Although many musical signs of change and progressive saturation of the bebop tradition had been around since the the nineteen-fifties, there is one single event, which can be coined the birthday of the social expression of the free jazz movement, namely the so-called "October revolution", a concert series that took place during one week early October 1964 at the small Cellar Café in New York's West Ninety-Sixth Street. The series was initiated by trumpeter, jazz pedagogue, art historian, and painter Bill Dixon.

For the first time a larger public could hear tenor saxophonists Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, pianist, composer, and conductor Sun Ra, percussionist Milford Graves, and multi-instrumentalist Giuseppi Logan. Dixon had recently founded the *United Nations Jazz Society* and had worked with Shepp's group *The New York Contemporary Five*. Following a discussion with free jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, he founded the *Jazz Composers Guild*, whose members included Dixon, Shepp, Taylor, pianists Paul and Carla Bley, composer Mike Mantler, alto saxophonist John Tchicai, Sun Ra, trombonist Roswell Rudd. He also founded a Composers Guild Orchestra that did four concerts on a weekly basis at the Contemporary Center near Village Vanguard in December 1964. The guild discussed ideas concerning collective musicians' contracts, independent recording labels and jazz institutes.

Occasionally, Shepp negotiated with the Impulse label on an individual basis, in order to survive and to feed his four children. The Guild was furious,

and soon the entire initiative was buried (see Robert Lewin's article [62]). Sun Ra sarcastically commented on Carla Bley's membership by the old seamen's legend that "taking a woman on a voyage will sink the ship".

The political dimensions of the free jazz movement are described in detail by Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli [13]. As our focus is not on that historical aspect, we shortly summarize these aspects and refer the reader to loc. cit and also Wilmer's book. The situation with jazz in the early sixties was the impression that this music had been stolen from its mostly black creators by white companies, white intelligentsia, and white organizers. Shepp commented (interview in the DVD [96]) that "Jazz" had become a commercial brand like "Coca Cola". According to him, free jazz was also an attempt to liberate the music and its creative expression from packaged commercialism. In a Down Beat interview in 1965 [91], he argued that "jazz is one of the socially and esthetically most significant contributions of America. Some do accept it for what it is: A significant, deep contribution to America—it is against war; against Vietnam; for Cuba; for the liberation of the peoples of the world. This is the nature of jazz. Without having to search very far. Why? Because jazz is itself born from oppression, born from the subjugation of my people." The community of jazz musicians progressively felt miserable and exploited. Ornette Coleman sums this up with his comment [99]: "I am black and a jazzman. As a black and as a jazzman I feel miserable."

The political dimensions and interpretations of free jazz were however not homogeneous. Writer and poet LeRoi Jones, now aka Amiri Baraka, initiated an intellectual reshaping of the cultural theory of jazz within the framework of Black Studies at US universities, stressing the pride and beauty of the black, as described in his book *Blues People* [56], and then supported by Stokely Carmichael's cultural nationalism (his *United Brothers* in Newark). This cultural approach was relativized by the Black Panther Party in that the capitalist exploitation and colonization were understood as the underlying forces of the transformation of jazz into a commercial brand. Rather than Carmichael's slogan: "What counts in our struggle is the culture", the Black Panther Party would radically state that "the power is at the end of a sashiki" (sashiki is Swahili for a long African shirt).

This somewhat marxist perspective is also a point of view shared by Carles and Comolli [13] and argues that black mythology is insufficient to fight capitalist forces. They however also recognize the music-aesthetical revolution of free jazz. The tenor is that the whitened jazz tradition had been casted to typically II-V sequences of chord changes, the blues scheme of 3×4 bars, or the 4×8 bar song form: A, A, B(ridge), A, and defining standard forms of instrumentation and roles: a rhythm section (piano, bass, drums) comping the soloists' (saxes, trumpets, singers) virtuosic playing in a spirit that mixes the racist black clown caricature with the Western virtuosic (but also somehow clownish) tradition as created by Franz Liszt and Niccolò Paganini. The classical bebop recordings of Charlie Parker (alto sax), Miles Davis (trumpet), Tadd Dameron (piano), and Curley Russell (bass), Max Roach (drums) in 1945 are

excellent examples of such standardized and very short (typically two minutes) background jazz pieces performed by "tamed" black artists, also called "the black of the white". The atmosphere created by the white aesthetic's usurpation of jazz is symptomitized by Miles Davis' 1972 comment to saxophonist Joe Henderson: "No more quarter notes, no more books, jazz. You are fired if you go on with jazz!"

Much more than the contemporary political drive of free jazz, a more universal and more powerful force turned out to nurture its enduring fascination. This impression is beautifully detailed in the still impressive documentary "Imagine the Sound" from 1981 [65], which features a series of performances and retrospective interviews with Taylor, Paul Bley, Dixon and Shepp. The documentary illuminates a multitude of new approaches concerning the deep significance that art has to life, a new way of listening to music, and the uncompromisingly non-commercial approach to creating music and the discovery of the body is at stake. Dixon puts it very markedly: "A jazz musician is a social category." And Taylor adds: "Music is everything you do in your life."

There are two exceptional documents that exhibit the influence that the "New Thing" had upon our notions of this thing called "jazz." The famous Down Beat interview with John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy in 1962 [26], where they were asked about where they were heading with their new musical directions, had provoked a number of violent reactions among jazz critics and a thoroughly alienated audience. The second document is a dramatic live confrontation at the German TV, broadcasted in 1967 [37], between two saxophonists' groups: Peter Brötzmann's free jazz trio and Klaus Doldinger's hard bop quartet, and a vehement discussion among six leading jazz critics and jazz producers. Both documents seemed to confirm the judgments of Carles and Comolli that free jazz was intolerable, did literally hurt. Critique had become irrelevant and out of use. The death of jazz was proclaimed (a remarkably recurrent theme). Both documents share the still ongoing and problematic struggle to define free jazz: It is mainly determined by what it is not, a type of "negative theology." This is a heavy misconception since, as we shall see in the sequel of this book, it is very possible, and ultimately more useful, to characterize free jazz by what it positively *is*. The process of positively characterizing free jazz is still, admittedly, in a very germinal stage, and thus it is not surprising that a number of positive characterizations have emerged only in recent times.

That Down Beat interview with Coltrane and Dolphy took place shortly after the famous televised Baden-Baden concert in Germany of the Coltrane quintet (featuring Dolphy, pianist McCoy Tyner, Reggie Workman on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums) in December 1961. Down Beat's associate editor John Tynan in November 1961 had reported "I listened to a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend exemplified by those foremost proponents (Coltrane and Dolphy) of what is termed *avant garde* music. I heard a good rhythm section (...) go to waste behind the nihilistic exercises of the two horns. (...) Coltrane and Dolphy seem intent on delib-