

“A Door to Other Doors”: Improvisation and Creation Sound

Henry Threadgill Interviewed by Daniel Fischlin (Guelph Jazz Festival, Friday September 9, 2011)

[Audio clip from Interview with Henry Threadgill](#)

Henry Threadgill is one of the great original, iconoclastic voices in American music, and sits comfortably with other major voices from the U.S. and elsewhere: from Charles Ives through to Aaron Copland and Elliot Carter; from Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, and Albert Ayler through to Anthony Braxton and John Zorn; from Igor Stravinsky through to Edgard Varèse and Luciano Berio.

A breathtaking multi-instrumentalist and improviser and an absolutely original compositional voice, Threadgill has seamlessly integrated being at the forefront of creative improvised musicking with genre-bending swoops of the musical imagination that have anticipated and shaped new directions in the music throughout his 40-year career leading cutting-edge ensemble after cutting-edge ensemble.

Not only has his music integrated new sounds—from Venezuelan drumming to South African accordion and harmonium and the self-made hubkaphone to a rich variety of world musics that encompass Bali, India, Japan, South America, and Africa—Threadgill's music has also reflected on and fully absorbed avant-garde classical musics, but also the music of Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton. In the latter case when you hear Air playing standards from these composers

on Air Lore, the depth of insight into what they had to say and how they remain relevant in the here and now is profoundly moving and revelatory. Threadgill's music is full of unexpected energies, melodic angularities that take us in new directions, kinetic pulses that unleash cumulative imaginative forces and passions that mark truly great music.

Threadgill's unique sonic imagination always invariably asks us to think differently about what is musically possible, what unexpected directions the moment might yield as we move forward musically through uncharted spaces in the human imagination.

A student at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago (with Stella Roberts), then at Governor's State, then in Kansas at the Manhattan School, and then at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge (Mass.), Threadgill has a formidable musical formation. One of the original members of the legendary AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) in his hometown of Chicago working with Muhal Richard Abrams, Threadgill also served a stint in Vietnam (which he has called a “war that nobody understands” [Terkel 163]) as a member of the Infantry Band. In the late '60s, Threadgill went on to co-found Air (along with Steve McCall and Fred Hopkins), one of the truly great trios of all time, renowned for its death-defying feats of sonic exploration and its exceptional capacity to generate intense timbres and textures in complex structures while leaving great open spaces of space and time in which the improvisations, collective interplay, and deep listening gathered force and meaning.

Since then, Threadgill has led any number of exceptional ensembles including X-75, a nonet consisting of four reeds, four basses, and a singer, the infamous Sextett (actually a septet), Very Very Circus with its unique voicings featuring the interplay between two tubas and two guitarists (but also featuring interventions by all sorts of other musical voices), and, most recently, Zooid, which Threadgill led in a highlight performance of the Guelph Jazz Festival that took place on the day after this public interview was conducted.

In the case of Zooid, Threadgill has spent over 10 years working with the group,



Photo Credit: Photo of Henry Threadgill and Daniel Fischlin by Thomas King, Guelph Jazz Festival, September 2011.

creating and perfecting a new system of improvisation in a group setting. A zooid is a cell that is able to move independently of the larger organism to which it belongs, an apt description of the musical language that Threadgill has developed for this band. The compositions are organized along a series of interval blocks comprised of [a minimum of] three notes, each of which is assigned to a musician, who is free to move around within these intervals, improvising melodies and creating counterpoint to one another. The system provides the framework for open dialogue within the group while encouraging the musicians to seek new ways to improvise, away from a reliance on chord changes, scales or any of the clichés of certain “free” jazz. (“This Brings Us To, Vol. 1” n.p.)

And as Threadgill has stated, “I have completely left the major minor system in favour of a chromatic way,” a new system of making music created to “facilitate collective improvisation along the lines of early jazz” (Johnson n.p.).

Across all these groups Threadgill has produced an astonishing range of music that defies genre and category and challenges us to think beyond cliché, conformity, and stagnation. For an excellent overview of Threadgill’s work through these ensembles, the recent release by Mosaic of *The Complete Novus and Columbus Recordings of Henry Threadgill and Air* is a must-listen along with Hank Shteamer’s must-read overview of the recordings. Shteamer’s notes are full of insights into the creative trajectory that the anthology charts (even though it is far from complete, omitting, for instance, recordings from the later ‘80s 18-piece ensemble Society Situation Dance Band). So, with regard to the transitional group X-75, Threadgill notes how “I just thought about winds and strings. That was the thing with the AACM—it did away with the whole idea of a format



Photo Credit: Henry Threadgill and Zooid in performance at the Guelph Jazz Festival, September 2011. Photo courtesy of Thomas King.

... The objective was to make music and to try to make it the best you could creatively. And a lot of times the best way to do that is to throw away a lot of formats, because they make you do things that you don’t necessarily want to” (Shteamer, *The Complete Novus and Columbia Recordings* “Liner notes” 5). The stubborn independent streak that defines Threadgill’s approach to music cannot be separated from the creative and philosophical underpinnings of the AACM or indeed from the experimental scene that was rapidly evolving during Threadgill’s youth in Chicago.

Threadgill has made and continues to make rigorous, challenging, spiritually profound, uncompromising music in a day and age where doing so is no easy task. Nate Chinen opines that “Mr. Threadgill, 65, has long been one of the most thrillingly elusive composers in and around the jazz idiom: a sly maestro of unconventional timbres, bristling counterpoint and tough but slippery rhythms. His output, like that of his fellow multi-reedists Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell, can veer toward contemporary classical territory, though it rarely settles there” (Chinen n.p.).

And Studs Terkel’s preface to his 1988 interview with Threadgill cites Howard Reich, the *Chicago Tribune* jazz critic, who says “It would be difficult to overestimate Henry Threadgill’s role in perpetually altering the meaning of jazz . . . He has changed our underlying assumptions of what jazz can and should be” (161).

In the interview that follows Threadgill covers aspects of his personal history as a youth growing up in Chicago, his first contact with the AACM and other experimentalist musicians in Chicago, his thoughts on the connections between improvised music and the Civil Rights Movement, and an extended reflection on the importance of improvised music and its pedagogy. Conducted in public before a large audience of Guelph Jazz Festival goers, Mr. Threadgill was eloquent and impassioned, especially in his appeal to improve access to quality musical education in North America

and in his dismissal of the attempt to impose European musical structures on African American forms of musicking based on replication as opposed to creation.

Threadgill's take on what he resolutely calls creative improvised music is resoundingly anti-nostalgic, and marked by a refusal to stay put or to be easily pigeon-holed into reductive musical categories. Yet at the same time the interview reveals Threadgill as keenly aware of musical histories and key people in those histories. Scott Joplin. Charlie Parker. Sun Ra. Phil Cohran. Leo Wadada Smith. Amina Claudine Myers. Muhal Richard Abrams. These influential figures in the development of improvised musicking all find a place in the narrative of the interview.

The "door to other doors" metaphor that Threadgill unleashes in the interview's discussion of Charlie Parker and his influence struck me as an apt way into Threadgill's creative, no-holds-barred, freedom-seeking approach to musical discovery. In Threadgill's epiphanic encounter with Parker, the seed is set for a relentless will to explore and open musical doors as they present themselves, perhaps the key underlying premise that grounds all truly improvisatory creation.

Improvisation, then: a door to other doors.

Testimony to the infinite swarm (from the Sanskrit *svāra*, "it sounds, it resounds") of creation.

Improvisation: creation sound resounding.

Interview:

Daniel Fischlin: It's an honour to welcome Henry Threadgill here at long, long last to the Guelph Jazz Festival. I've just been looking at pictures of the last time Henry played Toronto back in the early '90s taken by long-time Toronto jazz photographer Barry Thomson at the Bermuda Onion on Bloor, so it's been far too long.

I'm going to start the interview by asking about your family, Henry. I'm really interested in knowing *where* you came from and in *how* as distinctive a musical voice as you have come into being? I'm assuming there are personal histories and specific stories relating to family that contributed to your sonic imagination and I'm thinking in particular of your aunt, who was a singer who married a bass player? But I'm also thinking there must be others in your youth who sparked you to become a musician and improviser?

Henry Threadgill: Well my aunt, my mother's, she was the middle sister. There were about eleven, twelve kids, my mother has brothers and sisters about twelve of them, and my aunt was the first one to go off to college and she was going off to study opera, which was fairly unusual. We didn't even know what the word meant. I was about three and she met my uncle, Nevin Wilson, who became my uncle, he was the bass player and I thought that the piano in my house, my mother and grandparents' house was, actually I thought it was my aunt's piano, and in fact it was my mother's piano and my mother had studied piano and she never told me. Matter of fact, she never mentioned it until she read where I said that the piano belonged to my aunt and she got upset by it.

My mother was always responsible for taking me to hear concerts when I was a kid, and now I know why because she had studied piano, that was one of the reasons: she liked music and she studied the piano. But I used to live with



Photo Credit: Photo of Henry Threadgill performing at the Bermuda Onion, Toronto 1990, courtesy of Barry Thomson.

my aunt in Rockford, Illinois and at the time my uncle the bass player was playing about with Ahmad Jamal and so I would stay there and I was around a lot of that music that they were doing. I wanted to play bass because my uncle played bass, but when I would get up on a chair to play it, it would just hurt my hands so bad you know, and I would ask why I was having all these problems and he said I was going to have to wait to grow up to play bass and I said, "I guess I won't play the bass if I have to wait to grow up."

I'd already been playing the piano from the time I was about three. I started playing because, like I said, it was in the house and radio. I was just having this conversation with someone outside in German here about how important radio was at that time, the amount of music growing up in Chicago that was on the radio, before television. So when I was three, I started teaching myself how to play boogie-woogie because boogie-woogie was the big thing and at that time the boogie-woogie pianist from Chicago, Albert Ammons, had big hits out. I could sit and play the piano for hours and no one would say anything because they knew where I was and I wasn't getting into trouble and I was like a cow with a bell around his neck. So I discovered this music on the radio, boogie-woogie.

But Chicago also had two of the largest European communities with the Polish community back in the railway yards: there were stop-yards in Chicago, and there was also the Serbian community. That Eastern-Europe music was quite different and I grew up listening to all of this Serbian music, Polish music, and hillbilly music. Besides the blues, and very little jazz, European classical music in Chicago at that time, you'd just have to entertain yourself with the radio. Where kids sit in front of the television now, we would sit in front of the radio and just go from station to station. But there was also the whole scene of gospel music that was born basically in Chicago and the particular churches that were in Chicago. I had heard of all the great singers in Chicago. Regular faces like Mahalia Jackson. I'd hear her just about every week. And that included people like James Cleveland and Clay Evans. I grew up around those people. They'd all sing in Chicago every week and we'd listen to them on the radio. So it was a lot of music to be exposed to as a kid and I didn't have any decisions in my mind about playing music. I just liked it and I wanted to do it at the keyboard until I got to an age where I was able to talk my parents into getting me a saxophone. After I heard Charlie Parker I wanted a saxophone.

DF: I'd be very interested to know how you got in touch with the AACM and with Muhal Richard Abrams, who you really think of as a mentor. One of the things about him that was so interesting to you back then was that he was so original—you just couldn't nail him down or pigeonhole his approach to improvisation and making music.

HT: Well I met Muhal when I was in junior college and we had a music club, and the music club was like a poetry club or science club. We'd invite scientists, we'd invite poets, didn't matter what kind of music or poetry they made. So you might have a string quartet this month or a jazz trio next month or whatever, and we invited Muhal: I didn't know him and I didn't know how many people he was playing with, I only found out who all these famous people who were playing with him much later. So he came to the college and played and that's where I met him. He invited me down to the Experimental Band. The Experimental Band is what preceded the AACM. That's where all those musicians were, these musical heads (Muhal Richard Abrams, Fred Anderson, Steve McCall, and Donald Myrick) were gathered in the Experimental Band and trying out different music they were writing out. Muhal asked me to come down and play and said if I had anything for them to play, to bring some music along also. So that began my relationship with Muhal and that must have been maybe around 1963 or 1964 and then I went into the service in 1966 in Vietnam about the same time when the AACM was starting up so I missed the immediate start of it. So when I returned from Vietnam I came right back into the AACM. But I was there at the very beginning of it when it was called experimental music.¹

DF: Was that your first encounter with full-on improvisation, or had you already had encounters and were already playing improvised music?

HT: Oh I was already playing music when I lived in Chicago in Englewood on the south side of Chicago. Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, they were all living over there. So Sun Ra might be right there in the meat market that only sold wild game—bears, possum—and at night, the owner of this place, the Greek guy, for some reason he was crazy about Sun Ra, would turn the meat market over to Sun Ra. So this friend and me, who liked to follow Sun Ra around, would be there at the meat market just about every night. And we were listening and figuring out what Sun Ra was doing. But we were already playing. We were learning so-called traditional jazz repertory and Sun Ra was the furthest thing from that. So I met Sun Ra before I knew Muhal probably when I was about fifteen or sixteen. Then I met Phil Cohran, the trumpeter for Sun Ra's Arkestra, shortly after that. Phil Cohran was another one of the people that sparked and formed the AACM and ran the Afro-Arts Theatre. A number of great, great artists all came out of the Afro-Arts Theatre: Earth, Wind & Fire all came out of it, the Afro-Arts Theatre, so many great artists came out of that place, you had the AACM in one part of town and the Afro-Arts Theatre in another part. They had one organization and they split up on a philosophical basis, it was a philosophical difference and so it became the AACM and the Afro-Arts theatre in the '60s, that's when that happened.

DF: Do you remember what the differences were that caused the split?

HT: I heard a lot of different things but I wasn't there at the time. Like I said, I was in the service. But I would say that the Afro-Arts theatre had more parameters on the music and with the AACM people it was more wide-open. That was a matter of fact, there were lots of people when I came back about, might have been about thirty-five, forty people that had come into the organization, and after I'd been back a while it got down to be about fifteen of us because people couldn't handle what the AACM was about—they couldn't tolerate what somebody else's ideas were and that was the whole thing, you know, you'd have to sit there in Afro-Arts and do exactly what somebody tells you to do and you could not comment on what they were doing and that's very difficult when people have other ideas about something. So you had to put your own critical sense aside and there were all these people constantly being watched and people would come in and they'd have to leave because of that. So again, with the AACM it's just a small group of people like Leo Wadada Smith, Anthony Braxton, Muhal, Amina Claudine Meyers, again who got together because we wanted a wide open approach to music, to what it was, and we were talking about calling anything "anything." There's no such thing as jazz and there was no such thing as to how things were supposed to go back then for us. Everything was put in front of you by one person and their vision of music and then the next person's vision of music and so on and you were supposed to contribute. If you couldn't give one hundred per cent to that person's vision then you couldn't stay.²

DF: I was dreading asking you a question about the philosophy of improvisation that you were exposed to when you were young, but you've just answered it. And I wasn't sure whether you'd even want to get into it because I know it's a touchy subject and I think there were things going on with Sun Ra as well because it was a different vision that Sun Ra had too.

HT: Yes, that's a whole 'nother approach, Sun Ra's. It's a singular world. There is no AACM school. There's the world of Braxton. There's the world of Leo Wadada Smith. There's the world of Leroy Jenkins. These are all different worlds. You're talking about something where you define people according to particular traits, characteristics, or parameters, but there are no particulars with the AACM. What I do is what I do and we didn't necessarily share with each other. I'm gonna get ahead of your question because this all goes to the idea of the word "jazz," and to what has happened in schools and universities that try to perpetuate jazz because they've forgotten the complete history. That history has something to do with the aesthetics of the art. When you go back to the very beginning of so-called "jazz" it's an independent thing created by each individual and that's the way it's supposed to be made. If you go and study music in India there's a way it's made; in Bali there's another way that it's made; and there's a way that it's broken down in Europe. That's the way it's made—and yet we brought the European method over to America and tried to impose it on so-called "jazz music," which is dead wrong.

DF: There's a really powerful streak of DIY (do-it-yourself) at work in the history of jazz not the least of which came out of the poverty, oppression, and racism that African Americans have had to deal with. What do you make of jazz education, which seems to only peripherally (if at all) get at the very conditions that made the music come alive?

HT: All of that great music that started in 1923 did not come out of any school or university. Schools and universities serve an important part for us in terms of training musicians: they can teach how to play an instrument effectively and they can teach you about a lot of world music. But they should not get in the way of teaching you about what you're doing, not in terms of the music. Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Scott Joplin, they were never sitting up with a whole bunch of people being told that one plus one equals two, and I really take an exception to that approach to teaching music because you've gotten away from the actual way that the music was originally made. And so the music people think is so great, the further you go back they say these are all the jewels of jazz, but *how* was it made? So you look at all the academic degrees that these people have (nothing wrong with degrees) but you have people sitting up here in front of a podium telling you all how to negotiate this fence. So everybody knows in the same way: I say, "Okay, you run up to the fence and you raise your left leg and then bring your right leg over." But if I left it to children they'd come and dive over the fence headfirst, or somebody else would grab one arm and flip herself over. That's the aesthetics of how this music should be made.

When you listen to music coming from the schools and universities, it's like they're all speaking the same language because they've all been taught like we're in a Ford factory or something. That is really not the way for music to be perpetuated. European music worked out a system, a good system, good for the type of music they were doing. But you can't import that system to all music—that's a mistake. So you have to let each individual discover for himself what the art is. You don't tell anybody anything. The role of the teacher should only be as a coach, not as an informer of information. All of the information is already in the student. If he gets it, good, and if he doesn't get it, that's still good; maybe he's not supposed to get it, not everybody's supposed to do everything. This music is *not* pop. It is art

so not everybody's supposed to do it. So I find this confusion about how to perpetuate the music through schools and universities is very damaging, very damaging.³

And if I stand up here and tell you what the sound should be or how to do this or that, or that "jazz" is so-and-so, or how to move from this chord to that chord, or if somebody tells you how to do something and you don't really know how to do it yourself, then there's something wrong. You're doing what *they* told you to do when in reality you have to figure *everything* out for yourself.

DF: So how did you come to understand this sense of personal voice and problem solving given that it very much defines the completely original approaches you've taken to writing and playing music?

HT: Learning this was a very difficult experience for me to live through. Growing up I was a very slow mover and I remember in high school there were some kids who were so technically advanced it would make me feel bad. I'd say, "God, look at how so-and-so can play," and I'd be moping about it while they were just flying. But when I got through with junior college and into the conservatory I was finally able to relax because it was about art and not about economics: you could move at your own pace musically. Then I said, "Now I feel alright." We didn't even take exams: they prepared exams, like you know in six months the boards would come to you and say, "Mr. Threadgill, are you ready to take such-and-such?" I'd say, "No." "Will you take such-and-such?" I'd say, "No." "Well, are you thinking of taking. . ." I'd say, "Make it three months." Three months would come up and they'd ask, "You gonna take it?" And I would say, "No, make it another month." Why? Because you're supposed to *know* it not pass it.

DF: I want to change directions a bit, and ask you about the connection between the Civil Rights Movement and whatever you want to call it, not jazz, but creative musicking by African-Americans. There was an explosion of activity in the '60s around new musics being made by African-American musicians at roughly the same time as the Civil Rights Movement was happening. Do you see a connection there?

HT: You know that's very difficult for me. That was a time of radical change in America, you know. America was going through this very gradual change from about 1957 or '58, which were the years of the Civil Rights Bills enacted by Eisenhower after the bombings of schools and churches in the South.⁴ When you back up to '54, '52, or '51 America was really stiff and I mean the power of Protestantism was so pervasive and smothering, and the Civil Rights Movement sparked movements throughout America, coming from all kinds of ethnic and religious bases, farm workers, women's rights, gay rights. Issues came into focus, and all kinds of things started coming up, and in the music too.

This was a funny thing because when I first started trying to play so-called popular jazz music, I knew I'd never play the music as well as those people that played the music. I said to myself that I could never attain that level. And yet I knew that music had something important to do with your life—it had something to do with your social life and spiritual life. You can't make music about some other time that you have never had anything to do with. I don't believe in that type of art. You live in a time, you are informed by that time, and you get information that's been in that time. Your art takes its form from that time.⁵ So when I remember back to that time during the Civil Rights Movement, we were playing, practicing these pieces of music that Charlie Parker did. So there was this kid who used to get more records than anybody, and we used to go to his house and listen, and Parker's first record was *Charlie Parker With Jay McShann And His Orchestra* or something and we went and heard that and I said, "That's it!" On that exact day I said, "The door has opened again." I said, "This is the door," and it was a door to other doors because before that I had a concept of what jazz was and we thought we had an idea of how wide it was or how big it was, and then all of a sudden another door opened, and that meant there were other doors to go through. As soon as I heard Parker I said, "This is it, this is where I step off the train," and as a matter of fact the kids that I used to play with had a big split because they said, "Oh, no not *that*. We don't like this." And I said, "Well, so much for you all because I'm going this way."⁶

DF: So when you went your own way in that split-up was there a problem with what everyone thought jazz *should* be, as opposed to what you were imagining it could be when you first heard Charlie Parker?

HT: This so-called jazz music that Parker opened the doors to for me has always been a problem in terms of description.⁷ In Duke Ellington's book *Music Is My Mistress* there's a very important question he asks about black music when he says, "Is this jazz?" Ellington said no, it's just music and we should stop trying to define it as "jazz." Ellington did not want to conform to any vogue or to be pigeonholed at all. You see there's a lot of confusion about jazz because people haven't thought back to the origins of it and how it was made. This is very important, *how* it's made. It's just mind-boggling when you look at the songbooks of Scott Joplin and you look at his opera *Treemonisha*, written in 1910. As an African-American composer, Joplin's not sitting in some class, you know. And you have all of

this incredible music that he writes. They discovered *Treemonisha* in the early 1970s and I was still in Chicago when they discovered it. And Joplin is sitting up in Kansas, writing this piece of music in 1910 and anticipates the very same musical devices as Arnold Schoenberg [the Austrian composer who developed the twelve-tone technique and whose music, along with jazz, was deemed “degenerate” by the Nazis]. Yet no one knew it and Joplin had never even heard of Schoenberg but wrote his opera about the same time as Schoenberg was formulating his influential twelve-tone compositional technique. So with Joplin you have this individual discovery being the individual discoverer that he was and that ties into the spirit of what I was saying earlier about learning for yourself as part of the aesthetics of this form of art.

DF: Yes, and certainly one aspect that was informing Joplin’s music was his connection to improvisation through his own African-American heritage, no?

HT: Improvisation is one part of it; you can’t take improvisation out of it and yet you can’t describe improvisation either. Improvisation and the idea of improvisation keep getting bigger.⁸ This is something that we really need to try and get a better understanding of before it gets too far out of hand and everybody thinks they know what improvisation is and thinks that they can teach it and pass it on. I think that it’s not a successful job that is being done by musical institutions because they don’t really know what role they should play to teach students how to reproduce a sound in an instrument in the easiest, best way. Sure you need to teach me these kinds of technical things about playing an instrument, but don’t tell me how to really make *any* particular type of music. It’s always funny when you look and you see the classical orchestra and then you see these young jazz musicians have learned more and more of these classical methods and they all hold their instruments a certain way and they all look and sound the same. Go try to find a video of Cootie Williams playing the trumpet: [*gesturing*] the man has the trumpet up here, he’s got the trumpet down there, he’s got the trumpet over here, and what does it get down to? This is what it gets down to. Here’s the food. The food is good! Now here’s this other food and the person starts telling you what’s in the food and how they made it and all these other things and you say, well let me just taste the food, just let me see what it tastes like. So no one really cares how you do something, they only care about the end product. Nobody’s interested in whether you painted this painting with your toe, that you stepped on it, or how you wrote the book in a fit of delirium. Nobody really cares. All that matters is, “Is it *happening*?” Is it *happening*? Art is only about happening. There was a great young cello player in Chicago, he was named James Madison and he went to audition for The Cleveland Symphony. I forget who the conductor was. So the conductor comes in the door for the auditions and hears him and goes over and says, “Hire him right away,” and the assistants say, “You don’t know him . . .” But the conductor says, “Just hire him, any kid that can play like that, that’s all I want.”

That story is basically what I’m talking about. Nobody really cares, you know. They don’t need a big story. Just let me hear what you’re doing, let me see what you’re doing, let me see what you write, show me what your dance is, you know, that’s the whole thing with this kind of music. So for the schools to be analyzing, there’s a problem. Don’t analyze—let the person analyze. Try to help a person out, keep coaching them, tell them this way and that way but don’t be giving them too much information. Students will beg you for information. They always want something they’re not supposed to have. That’s just being young—you think it’s going to unlock the secret for you or show you something. But it’s not going to show you anything. At a certain time in your life, you’ll have to meet it, the material, you’ll have to *meet* whatever it is that’s going to teach you anything. You’ll have to come to a crossroads about expressing yourself; otherwise all that study is not going to give you anything. I remember having instructors who would say, “Henry, take this book.” I’d go read it and I’d say, “It’s nice, but so what?”

I remember when I first met Yusef Lateef. I was having a lot of trouble doubling on the flute at that time and I asked him—matter of fact we were playing with Muhal at the time; we were playing opposite, and Yusef was watching and I was listening to him and watching him and I asked him, “You know, I have been having some trouble working on some things on the flute,” and he said point blank, “You’ll just have to keep working on it.” I thought that was cruel and insensitive, and I remember saying, “You’re really not very sensitive to a young musician.” So he said again, “I think you’ll just have to keep working on it.” So these basic things about playing instruments, you can tell people how to develop a better touch on the piano and so on and you can understand other music from an analytical point of view. Yet some music defies being analyzed, I don’t really think, for instance, that you can analyze a lot of Indonesian music. You may get close to a mathematical *notation* of it but there are some things that go on in the spirit of playing that music that are entirely *in* music. All different ethnic groups and even individuals have a different spirit in their music. When you sit down and play Mozart it is not the same as when you play Brahms, yet both are German and European. So it’s always some kind of special way that people and different groups interpret things.

Musicians . . . I spent a lot of years in envy of the way they’ll come at a musical problem. If you’ve been to Cuba, the way they deal with rhythmic problems is a whole different way than in the south, South India in particular. Yet South India is really the extension of Africa because this is the part of India that was uncolonized: it was not Catholic, it

wasn't Buddhist, it wasn't Hindu, it wasn't Muslim, and it wasn't Jewish. The Catholic part of India is in Goa and the Hindus and Muslims are in different regions as were the Buddhists. The bottom of India is pure African so that's where the most complex rhythmic information is. Cuba is also a good example of how to deal with rhythmic problems but when you compare Cubans with the path the South Indians have taken, it's a whole different kind of feel: you sense something on the beat and something off the beat and you say that's wrong, but it's not, it's where they're placing their information, placing the information a little ahead of time, a little back, a little forward, and right on top of it, and it can confuse you.

But back to this education thing, we were talking about the young musicians that are living around New York, who've just moved down to the city with me, like Dafnis Prieto [the Cuban percussionist and winner of a 2011 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship]. Dafnis came from Cuba and started playing with me. I was actually astounded at his musical ability and control. And when I compared his skills with musicians I knew in the States, how they stacked up against him, well they stacked up very poorly. So they stacked up poorly because of what the schools were giving them and it made me think, I said next time I'm given a chance, next time I'm in Chicago I'm going to go and see the school curriculum of where I went to school. And I found that it was still the same. They hadn't changed anything; they hadn't discovered anything. So I asked Dafnis, "What was it like? You went to school in Havana [Cuba]?" He said he was very fortunate because everything was taken care of by the State. I said, "So how many days did you go to school?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "How many days a week did you go to school?" He said, "Everyday." I said, "Everyday?" I said, "Oh, so how long was your school day, like nine to five?" He said, "All day." I said, "All day, every day?" He said, "Well, some guys might not go until twelve o'clock at night and come home early to Hall B and play guitar." He said at six o'clock in the morning he might be playing with so-and-so and so-and-so.

I said, "Well, that's very interesting with all these guys coming together because they're all the same age and so focused." And when I look at their skills and compare their skills to other young musicians I say we've been badly underserved in this country. When you look at these Cuban kids, Dafnis can sit up and talk with this hand or talk with this other hand and have both feet dancing with two different rhythms, and there's no reason kids in this country can't do that. We have a distinction, do you know, we have the world distinction of having the worst rhythmic players on string instruments in the world? Did you know that?

DF: No.

HT: The United States has that distinction. That's because they keep teaching the same thing over and over and over and will not change the curriculum. I found out that in Cuba, whatever you were studying you had to study a rhythmic instrument. So in the end what they're looking for is total rhythmic independence that all four or five parts of you are independent. That's not a big deal. You start a kid going off going to that school for four or five years, and you just work on that. If you work on just the independence of the kid's voice, you've created a giant craftsman musician. We were talking earlier about Elliott Carter and I was saying I wouldn't want to be in his shoes when he was in Paris in the '30s with Nadia Boulanger. My professor wanted to send me to France to study with her but I knew that I didn't want to go there because I thought I was too old to be learning French, and she had such a hard reputation. She beat Elliott Carter to death there! All of her students had to gather at her house regularly to sing music. So they're all singing the music, there's no piano, and they're singing the most complicated, difficult contemporary music you can think—probably a lot of it was Debussy and Stravinsky. For me, that's a really good thing to do in our schools if you want to develop a kid's voice and create an independent voice. That's all we really need to do. But they come out of the school now and they can't read rhythm, they can't hear, but they can play some instrument and replicate something. Replicate something!

DF: The music you're making with Zooid is just out of this world, and I wanted to ask you about the pulse to it: it's kinetic, it's full of movement, and there's so much space in it. Where is it all coming from?

HT: It's the musicians that are creating that particular world. It's how we collectively process the music when we're working on it—it's these personalities, these specific musical personalities that create the sound this way.

DF: So for people who are coming new to your music, what do you think they have to know?

HT: Nothing.

DF: Nothing?

HT: Nothing. I don't believe you have to know anything about art. Some people won't be able to engage with it. That's just a reality in terms of any kind of art anywhere. They always say that art is universal. Art is really not universal.

What they mean by universal is that all societies and groups make art. That's what's really universal, but an audience can't always engage with certain things. It's just not within its parameters to do that, you know. But I really don't believe in ever telling people anything. I had one experience in high school with a literature teacher and a girl. And we had to write poetry. The girl came up in front of the class and she said, "This poem is about so-and-so, so-and-so . . ." and he said, "Stop." He said, "Just read the poem. Don't tell us what it's about." And I mean, people say to try to explain things to other people about art. It doesn't work . . . that's not the way it works. I don't really believe in that. And then you get people sitting up with things in their head that they think *should* occur, rather than just letting people go with the flow. Yet I've found that people from all over the world can engage with your music and art because we travel all over the world and it's certainly not just something that people in North America can appreciate, but people in all kinds of places.

DF: What's been your impression coming to the Guelph Jazz Festival? It's a festival that's really unusual for so many reasons.

HT: Well, it's pretty adventurous to have music around the clock!

DF: Yes, this is the second year in a row now that we're having the *Nuit Blanche* . . .

HT: They did this before?

DF: Yes, last year we did . . .

HT: That's great! I like that because it breaks the whole pattern of when things should happen in time. People get so fixed about things. I like concerts at midnight, concerts at three o'clock, concerts at ten thirty in the morning! That's good because it's only going to last for a short period of time. That's what I like about all this music crammed into a few days—it just breaks up all those listening habits.

DF: Thanks so much for gracing us with your music.

HT: It was my pleasure.

Notes

¹ Threadgill calls Muhal Richard Abrams a "fantastic leader, teacher, composer, musician. You can never trap him. You go after him, he goes out another door on you. He's like a rabbit—he's got a bunch of exits" (Terkel 163).

² This comment echoes what Threadgill has said elsewhere about the AACM, that the most exciting aspect of being a member of it was "The achieving of democracy, that is, giving one's musical skills to the leadership of another musician even if one could not accept the other's musical platform" (Oyama n.p.).

³ Threadgill has been consistently critical in recent interviews of musical education in the United States, arguing that many jazz musicians

have a serious problem. They've got a problem because, first of all, they've been affected the wrong way by music schools and universities that interfere with the black music process. Just like the Chinese music process, the Balinese music process, the Indian music process: there's [a] process by which art comes about. See, they've taken a European music process . . . but [the] European music process is not good for the Indian music or the black music or any other kind of music. (Hall n.p.)

On the subject of Black music, Threadgill insists

Black music is the result of an interchange between African music and the music from the rest of the world, not just European music, all music. Wherever there's another culture that the African descendants that came to this country came in contact with, that becomes part of the language. Because the language that the African descendants have, they don't have that language anymore; they lost that when they came here. So

they set up like a new language. This is a new language that's been created, out of bits and pieces of everything. So that's an important aspect of jazz that nobody talks about. Now when you understand that principle . . . you should understand that you need to be studying all music, and all people and all things, not just this particular genre of music. It's inconsistent with the whole history of it. (Shteamer *The Wire* n.p.)

⁴ In the following note I outline some of the key moments in the Civil Rights history the question references.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was passed on September 9, 1957. Written as a voting rights bill, it became the first civil rights legislation enacted by Congress in the United States since Reconstruction following the American Civil War. Following the historic US Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955), which eventually led to the integration of public schools, Southern whites in Virginia began a "Massive Resistance." Violence against blacks rose there and in other states, as in Little Rock, Arkansas, where that year President Dwight D. Eisenhower had ordered in federal troops to protect nine children integrating a public school, the first time the federal government had sent troops to the South since Reconstruction. There had been continued physical assaults against suspected activists and bombings of schools and churches in the South. The administration of Eisenhower proposed legislation to protect the right to vote by African Americans. Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, an ardent segregationist, sustained the longest one-person filibuster in history in an attempt to keep the bill from becoming law. His one-man filibuster lasted 24 hours and 18 minutes; he began with readings of every state's election laws in alphabetical order. Thurmond later read from the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and George Washington's Farewell Address. His speech set the record for a Senate filibuster. The bill passed the House with a vote of 270 to 97 and the Senate 60 to 15. President Eisenhower signed it on September 9, 1957. ("Civil Rights Act of 1957")

The 1960 Civil Rights Act came into being as a result of events that occurred at the end of 1958. Following the 1957 Civil Rights Act described above, Eisenhower introduced yet another civil rights bill in late 1958. The new Bill was in response to a streak of bombings against churches and schools in the South, though the infamous bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama on Sunday September 15, 1963 that killed four young girls had yet to occur. That latter bombing spawned memorable musical tributes by both John Coltrane (the song "Alabama" on Coltrane's *Live at Birdland* recorded on November 18, 1963 was an elegy to the deaths of the young girls) and Nina Simone (whose song "Mississippi Goddam" was written in reaction to the racially-motivated bombings). The event caused widespread revulsion and radicalized a generation of young African-American activists including people like Angela Davis, whose family not only lived in Birmingham in the area known as Dynamite Hill (because it was so frequently the target of Ku Klux Klan bombings), but who was also friends with one of the victims and whose mother had taught another one of the young girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church (Davis states this in interviews that appear as part of the 2011 film written and directed by Göran Hugo Olsson, *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975*).

The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church itself proved to be a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement in the States, giving rise to the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination against blacks and women (including racial segregation in schools, the workplace, and public service facilities) and ended irregularities in the voter registration process that discriminated against minorities. Though Eisenhower is not usually associated with civil rights issues, his contributions, including the 1957 Act, were part of the legislative changes that responded to growing public protests and indignation against the systematic racism faced by African Americans. In the case of the legislation Eisenhower introduced in 1958 in response to ongoing racially motivated attacks against Blacks, it only achieved passage as an Act in 1960, largely because both Republicans and Democrats were fighting for the so-called Black Vote.

The 1960 Civil Rights Act levied penalties against anyone found guilty of obstructing any citizen's attempt to register to vote or any citizen's attempt to enact his or her franchise. The 1960 Bill also created, importantly, the Civil Rights Commission. It is worth remembering that integrationist arguments were in themselves deemed to be denigrating by activists like Stokely Carmichael, who in 1966 argued,

Integration speaks to the problem of blackness in a despicable way. As a goal, it has been based on a complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, blacks must move into a

white school. This reinforces among both black and white the idea that “white” is automatically better and “black” is by definition “inferior.” (cited in Panish xxi)

As Jon Panish shows, this attack on normative whiteness was echoed in some of Cecil Taylor’s (and others’) pronouncements in the same year:

There should be a boycott by Negro musicians of all jazz clubs in the United States. I also propose that there should be a boycott by Negro musicians of all record companies . . . We’re no longer reflecting or vibrating to the white-energy principle. The point is: we know who we are. We have a whole history of music in this country. (cited in Panish xxi)

Mazzola and Cherlin note that 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 . . . 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, he argued that “jazz is one of the socially and esthetically most significant contributions 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 . . . 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: “I am black and a jazzman. As a black and a jazzman I feel miserable.” (4)

Many of Threadgill’s observations, here and elsewhere, about imposing European musical on African American musicking resonate politically with these sorts of statements from the ‘60s. In short, beware the exploitation of jazz and the neutering of its creative potential via both commercialization and the willful ignorance about the historical conditions that generated African American creative improvised music.

⁵ In an interview conducted just before the Guelph Jazz Festival, Threadgill was even more explicit on this point:

music is related in time. Music and all art [are] related to the period in which [they] occur. To the social circumstances, the spiritual circumstances and all those other pertinent circumstances that exist at a certain time . . . We got a lot of your people now, they [are] sitting up playing music, they’re playing very well on these instruments, because that’s one thing they’ve taught them very well . . . But they’re sitting up trying to become great at some music that’s *older than me*. (laughter) (Hall n.p.)

⁶ Elsewhere Threadgill says of Parker:

we made Charlie Parker a museum piece and made him a stylistic end. He didn’t finish. You can’t hardly pick up a book written on Charlie Parker and even see where they mention his interest in the music of Edgard Varèse. That’s where he was moving next. But you don’t see that in books on Charlie Parker. You got him classified in some little stylistic museum category. But he was a man in evolution; he was evolving. (Terkel 162)

This sense of forward movement in improvised musical practices is key to Threadgill’s overall outlook:

The tradition is one of going forward. It’s not like something in terms of a repertory body of music that’s reinterpreted and reinterpreted and reinterpreted. That’s my understanding of the tradition that I’m a part of. It’s one that goes forward. It’s one that keeps extending itself. And it was just in my nature as a human being, you know. I wasn’t going go over and over the same thing. (Hall n.p.)

⁷ Threadgill has said,

I don't really like the word *jazz*; I prefer *creative improvised music*, because there's confusion about what *jazz* means now. I think it's lost its meaning and I don't think it's relevant anymore . . . and then people make films, documentaries, Ken Burns for one. He and the people that were his consultants, they give a picture of what they say jazz is and then exclude generations of people, whole schools and generations of people are excluded from it, and it's played nationally and internationally, and it's giving an idea of what jazz is. So that's why I say that word has lost its meaning, you know. (Shteamer *The Wire* n.p.)

⁸ In a 2009 *Wire* interview with Hank Shteamer, Threadgill says of improvisation,

real creativity needs to occur not by playing something that you been playing over and over again and playing some variation of it, but to create something in the moment, right in the moment. That's creative improvisation. To be able to approach a musical terrain and you've got all these solutions for it, I don't consider that creative at his point.

And in an interview with Ethan Iverson, Threadgill states,

I go into rehearsal to look for its [music's] discovery. What's on paper is a place to start . . . Now with Zooid, form is in process with me. Before Zooid I had been working on interior parts in advancing harmony, counterpoint and getting rid of the method of improvisation that has lasted for a long time. I needed to go another way with improvising to have people play more spontaneously. Well, now form itself is in a state of improvisation. These little things you were talking about, the "mistakes," affect form. The same thing happens in research labs where most of the discoveries are made through mistakes. (Iverson n.p.)

And in a 2011 interview with David Adler, Threadgill reiterates, "In jazz the form has been treated as sacred. The form is not sacred with me" (Adler n.p.).

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