

Improvocracy, or Improvising the Civil Rights Movement in Wadada Leo Smith's *Ten Freedom Summers*

Wadada Leo Smith Interviewed by Daniel Fischlin¹

Introduction:

Improvising trumpeter and composer Wadada Leo Smith has consistently attended to the linkages between musical improvisation and social justice issues in his work over a long and remarkably productive career marked by a prodigious output of independently-minded music. Having recently celebrated his seventieth birthday by performing with six groups over two nights at Roulette in New York, he has also just released a milestone achievement—*Ten Freedom Summers* (Cuneiform Records, 2012)—dedicated to exploring through improvised and composed musicking the resonances of the American Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1964. This four-CD set of nineteen pieces, totaling some four and half hours of music, is also a three-night performance event that uses videography (but no spoken word interjections) organized around three sections that oscillate between composition and improvisation. Smith's searing, incendiary, clarion-clear trumpet provides a narrative line that sustains throughout.



Figure 1. Photo courtesy of Wadada Leo Smith.

Conceptually, the piece is a remarkable musical commentary, evocation, and homage to the civil rights movement and its mix of tragic and redemptive histories. As Smith says, *Ten Freedom Summers*

is a large work inspired by the activity of the civil rights movement from The Niagara Falls Congress in 1905 and 1948, when President Harry S. Truman signed the Executive Order 9981 and up to Dr. Martin Luther King's Memphis speech in 1968. Over the years I thought that I would compose a tribute to the civil rights movement, centered in the activities of two decades 1948-1968, much in the same way that August Wilson's plays comment on ten decades of the African-American experience in America, but through musical composition/improvisation. This musical work is the result of my research and reflection concerning the philosophical, social and political history of the United States of America. ("Wadada Leo Smith's *Ten Freedom Summers*")

Ten Freedom Summers is monumental, political, and deeply moving: a remarkable expression by a single-minded creative improviser working at the peak of his form. At the core of Smith's aesthetic is a refusal to use any lyrics in the music, something we discuss in the interview below, even as each piece in the three sections ("First Collection: Defining Moments in America"; "Second Collection: What is Democracy?"; "Third Collection: Ten Freedom Summers") is specifically tied to key events or personalities in the struggle against American racism and inequality. Titles include references to Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democracy Party; Emmett Till, the fourteen-year old Mississippi boy who was murdered in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman; the Freedom Riders ride: Medgar Evers, the African American civil rights activist murdered in 1963 by white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith; Thurgood Marshall; and the Civil Rights Act of 1964—among many others. These titles suggest a profound working-through by Smith of civil rights histories that are tied to aesthetic expression, improvisation being a key tool in how civil rights activism took shape even as it was a defining aesthetic in the music associated with radical resistance to oppressive legal and social structures based on racism and inequality.

Both a memorial and an incitation to further reflection, then, *Ten Freedom Summers* has Smith deploying a lifetime of experience as a creative improvising musician to produce remarkable musical statements about the "movement." In program notes and interviews, Smith explicitly aligns the work with the social, political, and philosophical history of the U.S. in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, and uses improvisatory techniques to produce startling affective soundscapes meant to provoke further reflection of the movement as a whole, but

also of the creative improvised aesthetic common to both the movement and the music with which it is associated. Matthew Sumera's liner notes to *Ten Freedom Summers*, in discussing the connections between music and the Civil Rights Movement, note that "Too often we think about the two as if they were only tangentially related, as if the latter were simply influenced by the former. But this misses the point. Rather, both were interrelated, each crucial to the development and formation of the other, music influencing the movement as much as the movement influenced the music. Indeed, this has been the traditional role of music in global human rights campaigns throughout history, and especially in the twentieth century." The release of *Ten Freedom Summers* coincided with another Smith composition explicitly tied to the 2011-2012 Occupy Movement: "Occupy the World for Life, Liberty and Justice," which premiered in December 2011. These works exhibit over some 40-plus years of musical activity a consistent trajectory tied to a sophisticated practice of conceptualizing musical improvisation in relation to human rights contexts.

Born and raised in the heart of Mississippi Delta (Leland, Mississippi) by bluesman and stepfather Alec Wallace, Smith was a member of the AACM and a close associate of Anthony Braxton, Anthony Jenkins, and Derek Bailey, among many other jazz avant-gardists. Smith says of his early background, "Growing up in that environment made me feel that whatever I play relates to a gigantic field of feeling [. . .] To me, the blues is a literary and musical form and also a basic philosophy. When I get ready to study the mystical aspect of black people, I go to the blues; then I feel that I'm in touch with the root of black people" (qtd. in Palmer 276-77). The blues epistemology seen by Smith as at the root of black experience, that converts itself into myriad musical energies in which improvisation is a key component, is also a rights epistemology: the blues derive from oppression, injustice, and inequality, and how these factors then feed into daily experience. Music in this sense is no passive commentary on things as they are. Rather, the blues and its associated forms, including the flights of improvisatory freedom that Smith and fellow members of the AACM initiated, are embodiments of a practice of being free in spite of how things are, of being free in ways that require disciplines founded on exploratory principles. As John Litweiler notes in his discussion of Smith and the AACM,

When the AACM was new, the young Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell dealt in totally Free improvising and also the opposite approach to music making—totally composed scores. They were investigating all the possible mixtures of improvisation and composition as well. "Primarily you [the AACM artist] sought to create pieces of music that were multi-textured and multi-structured," says Smith. It was specifically this search that led to these four Chicagoans' discoveries of the 1970s and '80s. By now they're among the old masters of Free jazz; it's their explorations that best illuminate the frontiers of today's jazz. (265)

Improvisatory expression is the practice of free speech, the sound of what it means to speak freely in a community of like minds. As such, improvisatory expression embodies a resistant practice that is many things at once: a critique; an expression of the event-horizon of the possible; a hope for the possibility of creative expression to generate change and redemption; and a recapitulation of histories and social practices embedded in the music.

Ten Freedom Summers—like Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr.'s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (Candid, 1960),² Freddie Hubbard's collaboration *Sing Me A Song of Songmy: A Fantasy For Electromagnetic Tape* (Atlanta, 1971) with Turkish composer and experimentalist İlhan Mimaroglu (a devastating anti-war experimentalist album), Randy Weston's *Uhuru Afrika* suite (Roulette, 1976), Sathima Bea Benjamin's anti-apartheid "The Liberation Suite" (recorded on her 1983 album *Memories and Dreams*; Ekapa),³ and Smith's earlier conceptual album *Human Rights* (Gramm/Kabell, 1982)—situates jazz, improvisation, and African American creative musicking at the cusp of political critique and historical change embodied in the civil rights movement's struggles for social justice, struggles that were to have a global impact, that were not solely aligned with ethnicity, but that also included gender and class struggles. Implicit in all these movements was a concept of musical liberation that critiqued febrile notions of democracy that had evolved into managed statism and corporatism where the self-interest of oligopolies and the resulting injustices were the norm. Instead of democracy, this music offered an alternative musico-political form, what I call *improvocracy*: an active, embodied expression of collaborative improvisation that puts to the test freedom of speech, the capacity of community to sustain difference, and the redemptive power of resistant aesthetics as a means to produce active, meaningful critique and change. Improvocracy, in its most achieved expression, is pluralist: welcoming of tension and dissonance; pragmatic, unpredictable, and intuitive in its approach to problem-solving; keenly aware of the need to explore possibilities in co-productive ways; bound by the ethics of improvisatory discourse where collaboration and independence, unity and difference live together in (im)productive, co-creative, and contingently relational modes.

In a 2005 interview with Matthew Sumera, Smith offered the following bluntly honest analysis of global rights dynamics:

We have a world society now that has built a new generation of ideas about solving conflict based off of war, or creating conflict to dominate other societies, based off of war and economics. And it has destroyed the human heart right now. And this repair—and there's a lot to repair and it's going to take a lot of sincere artists to do it—and right now I'm afraid I don't have much trust in what's going to make the repair. And the reason I don't have any trust in it is because art is like every other system right now, and it has become commercial, you see. Now there's an underground, and there's always an underground, but by and large the commercialization of art has taken away the value that art has in society. It has lost that value. (Sumera, "Wadada")

Smith's analysis, coming after 9/11 and during the extended nadir of George W. Bush's presidency, is no naïve notion of art as the cure-all. Failed models of conflict resolution tied to interlinked military and economic models that have consistently shown their inability to offer civilized alternatives are rife, and these are tied with the commercialization of art, which inherently diminishes its ethical and its redemptive, reparative value. The "underground"—and by this I take Smith to be referring to the marginal sites in which creative musicking and improvisatory practices that are inherently non-commercial are occurring—is one of the rare sites where alternative, non-violent, co-creative models of conflict resolution occur. In the alternating waves of consonance and dissonance that emerge from the sound of improvocracies lies, in other words, a radical alternative to corrupt and life-destroying models for conflict resolution.

The register in which this sort of thinking operates is one wholly concomitant with rights discourses that locate global injustices in relation to state-sanctioned militarized, violent responses to social and economic inequities as at the root of most of the problems facing "world society." Music is one form of resistance to these, but it too is under attack as a force for change and alternative thinking. In Smith's terms, music is a form of knowledge and of communication that has a latent power unrelated to its commercial viability. The "underground" community that nourishes and preserves its ethical value is, in this analysis, culturally significant and meaningful in a broader context that relates to how art and larger progressive social forms and movements intersect.

Smith's insights are consistent with much earlier comments made in association with his early album *Creative Music I* (Kabell, 1971), released under the name Leo Smith:

Creative music is dedicated to developing a heightened awareness of improvisation as an art form—I feel that the creative music of afro-america, india, bali, and pan-islam has done much along these lines, and is also creating a balance in the arena of world music (africa, asia, europe, afro-america) and that this music will eventually eliminate the political dominance of european-american music in this world—when this is achieved, i feel that only then will we make meaningful political reforms in the world: culture being the way of our lives; politics, the way our lives are handled. (*Human Rights*, inner sleeve notes)

The linkage between mobile forms of creative musicking that attack dominant modes of musical discourse anticipates, in this view, political reforms that change the structures that "handle" our lives—esthetic change precedes political change. Improvisation lies at the heart of the drive toward esthetic change and innovation—without it such change is impossible. Smith points to a variety of global sites (including Afro-America) where improvisatory musical discourse is actively producing such change, undermining dominant political forms and laying the ground for new forms. Again, improvocracy is at work: esthetic form melding with political form to provide alternatives to derelict structures tied to oppressive and unjust notions of social and political interaction.

This bridging effect is, as Robert K. McMichael argues, crucial to understanding the social implications of jazz: "The role of jazz [. . .] and the reason it is important, is that it has provided, especially since the early 1960s, a site for the production of oppositional identities through its subcultures of integration [. . .] The connections among jazz, political activism, and racial identity in the early 1960s show that jazz music historically has provided sites of integrationist subcultures in which racial boundaries exist but at moments do not reproduce the same power relations as in mainstream society" (381). Though McMichael frames this integrationist tendency in terms of White/Black divides, it is important to understand that improvisatory contexts also allow for differing identities not based on ethnic difference to come together to explore musical and social meaning.

Bridging, or what sociologist John Brown Childs calls “transcommunal,” is based on the notion of “reconstructive engagement of those who are not always in direct contact but who know each other from previous productive encounters. Such engagement effectively, and flexibly, recreates the structures of cooperation that may have lain dormant, on an as-needed basis, with the assent of all involved” (70). Working out of both indigenous and African American contexts in developing these notions of productive communal engagement, he cites Smith’s improvisatory aesthetics as a key model for transcommunal connections:

For example, the creative improviser Leo Smith writes: ‘The concept that I employ in my music is to consider each performer as a complete unit with each having his or her own center from which each performs independently of any other, and with this respect of autonomy the independent center of the improvisation is continuously changing depending upon the force created by individual centers at any instance [. . .] In other words each element is autonomous in its relationship in the improvisation.’ (70)

Childs situates Smith’s notions of improvisatory autonomy, also relational and contingent as part of a movement, beyond European classical formats that are less flexible and more contained, less aware of their contingency but also less capable of autonomy. Again, he cites Smith’s perspective that “It is high time that we begin to help and set up cultural ties with the other more than three-fourths of these Americas (north, central, south) while also seeking other cultures that have improvisation as their classical art music (india, pan-islam, the orient, bali and africa) and make lasting cultural commitments with them. For the days are set in time that this vast world of ours can only survive if we, as humans, become earth-beings committed in our cultural and political aspects to a pan world future” (71). This form of moral vision is not only global in its implications, but also one that profoundly ties cultural and political forms together as indissociable ways of being in the world as “earth-beings” seeking meaningful, creative, and sustainable relations with others.

In the legal-driven language associated with most human rights instruments and paradigms, creative forms and processes are often dismissed as viable strategies for thinking about achieving rights outcomes within political contexts, something that Smith eloquently critiques in the interview below. And this is not to say that idealized notions of what artistic insights can achieve in rights contexts are not above critique. Smith, in a 2003 interview with Howard Mandel, is frank about the failures of the pursuit of “esthetic” freedom to affect rights outcomes directly:

[During the 70s it] was exciting at that time, how music interacted in a social way to exact change in society. Freedom is something we were after in both the social and esthetic moment. Musically, freedom served as a model for whoever could grasp it. Of course, socially we failed—most obviously in the area of human rights, because power and wealth still control how people [deal] with each other. Enron is an example of how the old type of culture has prevailed. But artists can use their visions to transform society by getting people to see ordinary stuff anew, and open up. The artist is a mediator who helps people see things in new ways, and can also serve as a moral visionary.

In spite of Smith’s disillusion and his open recognition of the limitations of artistic discourse, he maintains that the artist who works out of the context of seeking freedom can be transformative, a “mediator,” and a “moral visionary.” Exemplarity in the face of a world that does not change is still important; potentially transformative iterations of ideals and visions are necessary even if they do not directly affect immediate change.

Some 18 years prior to this statement, Smith had made an album entitled *Human Rights* (released on Gramm/Kabell, 1982) using improvisatory free jazz techniques that frequently take the music in the direction of “new music”; reggae heavily influenced by Rastafarian ideals; rock influenced in part by the Mahavishnu Orchestra, which had in its two iterations explored the relations among improvisation, the ethical meaning of music, and world music; and alternative instrumentations drawn from world music contexts ranging from Japanese koto and African mbira to Chinese hand gongs and synth.



Figure 2. Photo courtesy of Wadada Leo Smith.

Human Rights is a remarkably proleptic musical and political statement—a synthetic and visionary representation of how rights discourses and improvised music can be aligned. The side long, thirty-minute improvisation on side two of the recording is entitled “Humanismo Justa [human rights] Tutmonda Muziko [world music],” as if to suggest a direct connection between the two. The cut begins with Smith’s solo voice stating,

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; that until there are no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation; until the colour of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes; that until basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regards to race; that until that day the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, and the rule of international morality will remain but [an] illusion to be pursued but never attained.

These spoken words are then followed by a short prelude sung by Smith in which he states,

People of the world we want to be free
So let’s unite for harmony
Freedom is yet a liberty
Human Rights is not a freedom

We are all one ‘cause in JAH’s creation
There is not one thing unconnected
To that golden cosmic thread
That fabricates the universe

The musical substance of the improvisation (recorded in 1982 by Tokyo Radio in Japan, with a remarkable performance by Tadao Sawai on koto and percussion) is clearly framed within this vision of world citizenship and international morality. Moreover, the album notes clearly show that the spoken and sung words that are heard at the beginning of the track are to be followed by an improvisational exposition of the words: in the interpretative framework of the album the two are indissociably linked, much like the two movements from Randy Weston’s *Uhuru Afrika* suite that use words by Langston Hughes to set the tone of the musical and political content.⁴ In fact, the five lyrics associated with *Human Rights* (“Freedom Song,” “Rastafari #4,” “Don’t you remember,” “Ethiopia/Africa,” and “Humanismo Justa Tutmonda Muziko Human Rights World Music”) elaborate a consistent focus on tropes of freedom, interconnectedness, unity, justice, historical remembrance, and the like—all the while placing racial discrimination and hierarchical structures of superiority and inferiority at the ideological center of the rights issues Smith addresses.

In “Freedom Song,” the lyrics make the comparison between freedom as the “eternal emotion of love” and justice as the “intelligence of the great force of the world.” Linked to these lyrics are images on the album cover of a “Stop Apartheid” sticker and of Haile Selassie (Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974: a key messianic symbol in Rastafarian belief systems, but also a key figure in international movements that promoted internationalism, multilateralism, and notions of collective security). The album jacket also features quotations from “The Revelation of John” and Bob Marley, and another brief visionary ethical statement by Smith: “A time must come, when an African child anywhere on the continent can walk from one end to the other, and never be hungry, never be in any kind of danger. A time must come when that child can walk the breadth of Africa and be protected by every eye that falls upon him.”

The integrity of the album as a total musico-ethical concept is clear and purposeful. And the improvisatory aspects of its music-making, not to mention the world music aspects of its formal content, are not to be separated from its ethical content, its advocacy of a rights worldview that is entirely consistent with other discourses found in arenas where rights matters are being debated. The specific Black diasporic consciousness associated with American civil rights contexts plays a key role in how *Human Rights* signifies and disseminates its meanings.⁵ And the relative obscurity of the recording, even in jazz and new music circles, points to both its conceptual marginalization in relation to hegemonic and non-hegemonic circles and its articulation of uncomfortable truths that mainstream music and culture have little desire to hear.

It cannot be underlined enough how musicians themselves, like Smith and many of his peers, understand music as a form of living history, a co-creative reflection of the personal and group dynamics that respond to historical circumstance in ways that matter. In an interview, Smith has suggested that from its inception through to Ornette Coleman, African American music may be designated as jazz, but thereafter it is *creative* music

(Horton). Cecil Taylor, in a Nat Hentoff interview, argues that “The greatness of jazz occurs because it includes all the *mores* and folkways of Negroes during the last fifty years” and suggests that “In particular, the intellectual and revolutionary character of bop was seen as a foundation for this music: ‘[F]or jazzmen [. . .] have come to the beautiful and logical conclusion that bebop was perhaps the most legitimately complex, emotionally rich music to come out of this country [. . .]’ The revolutionary character of this music, therefore, functioned through simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the constructs of jazz history. It was the mainstream conceptions of black music history, not the history itself, which ‘anti-jazz’ artists sought to debunk” (Hentoff).

Smith takes these thoughts even further in comments from his 1973 book *notes (8 pieces) source a new world music: creative music*:

i, a black man, a creative improviser, strive, through my improvisations and as an improviser to pay homage to the black, the blackness of a people, and that these creations themselves are for all, and the natural laws that are prevailing under these creations are relative as they are interpreted or perceived by beings of other peoples and thus they must extract what is of universality for themselves to each and every individual, but on the level and in the expression that is clothed in the garment of improvisation, and i contend that only the principles underlying these creations are universal to my people. (“notes on my music (part 1)”)

The underlying message of identity and communitarian outreach is loud and clear here, with improvisation a fundamental expression of both establishing and paying homage to black identity.

It is useful to remember, as Krin Gabbard does in *Hotter Than That: The Trumpet, Jazz, and American Culture*, that improvisation in this context emerges out of the specific histories of “violence and institutionalized racism” that African Americans have faced for centuries: “few gestures of resistance were available. Ecstatic worship in the Sanctified Churches was one. Playing the blues was another. It was, after all, the music of an oral, vernacular culture that flourished outside the schools and conservatories of white society and refused to accept the established musical hierarchies. The blues singer would bend notes, cry, moan, and grunt, always in a voice completely unlike any white singer’s” (78). These musical gestures, profoundly linked to specific cultural contexts, were, in Gabbard’s argument, picked up by instrumentalists like New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden, who gave voice to the blues in new instrumental ways that carried its improvisations forward into new contexts. Such African American musical forms and contexts echoed anti-hierarchical, resistant, and vernacular expressions that directly confronted the injustices of a culture predicated on racist exploitation. In Wadada Leo Smith’s lifelong conceptions of music and its capacity to influence change a similar aesthetic is at stake. From very early albums like *Creative Music I* and *Song of Humanity* (with Smith, Oliver Lake, Anthony Davis, Wes Brown, and Paul Maddox: Gramm/Kabell, 1976) through to the previously mentioned *Human Rights* and *Ten Freedom Summers*, Smith has consistently taken his music and his listeners to a place that intersects affect with reflection, improvisation with the sound of alternatives to moribund aesthetic and political practices.

Nor is *Human Rights* an isolated instance of a concept album that uses experimental, hybrid musical techniques and vocalizations in a sophisticated rights context. The previously mentioned *Sing Me A Song of Songmy: A Fantasy For Electromagnetic Tape* is another remarkable example of improvised music blended with composed music, electronic music (analog synth), and *musique concrète* extending the language of rights discourses. This album directly protested the March 16, 1968 torture and mass murder at My Lai (Songmy) in Vietnam of approximately 500 people, most of them women, children, and the elderly, conducted by a unit of the U.S. Army led by Lieutenant William Calley, now a disgraced war criminal.⁶ Hubbard’s and Mimaroglu’s collaboration is a stunning example of multiple cultures, musical, ethnic, and political, coming together to make a profound comment on rights abuses. Hybridization and openness to difference are key features of improvisatory musical discourses—of improvocracies—and in Hubbard’s and Mimaroglu’s work they are deployed in ways that map onto similar cultural hybrids associated with rights sentiments that extend across multiple cultural sites. Like Smith’s equally marginalized *Human Rights* album, the association in *Sing Me A Song of Songmy* between rights and improvisatory discourses is clearly an aesthetic context in which each element reinforces the other in compelling, disturbing, and innovative ways. Both albums demonstrate an inherent aesthetic tension with regard to how improvised responses to rights abuses and hegemony are to be framed: as blatant combined musico-verbal statements as per Hubbard and Smith, or as radical difference via non-verbal significations that experiment with the limits of improvisatory expression as the prime marker of ideological and aesthetic critique (for instance, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, or Ornette Coleman).

Marginalization and censorship have played a role in the public reception of these sorts of albums that fuse visionary and critical politics with improvisation. Smith’s work, for all its conceptual range and brilliance, has, as

the interview below makes abundantly clear, been driven by Smith's own DIY initiative and tenacity. Randy Weston's experience with *Uhuru Afrika* in 1960 is telling. Robin Kelley notes how the album was a "manifesto, a declaration of independence for Africa and mutual interdependence between the continent and its [diasporic] descendants" (61). A landmark album in terms of its global rights implications, *Uhuru Afrika* focuses on (African) independence from (Occidental) colonial structures of oppression and resistance to racism and injustice, and it appeared in the same historical moment as Max Roach's *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite*. Both albums use improvisatory structures to create compelling musical statements with significant political and aesthetic valances, much like Smith's more extended *Ten Freedom Summers* suite. In the case of *Uhuru Afrika*, Weston recalls how "Out of the rhythmic fervor engendered [in the recording sessions for *Uhuru Afrika*], waves of spontaneous creativity rose on the pulse of a common musical emotion to break against the microphones in sprays of exciting sounds—and all this within the basic pattern of an overall conception" (cited in Kelley 62).

The response to *Uhuru Afrika*, with its use of the Swahili word for "freedom," was decidedly cool: white fans were turned away by the politics and Weston's label, Roulette, to whom he had refused to give the publishing rights to the music, failed to promote the album properly. As Kelley notes, "Ironically, *Uhuru Afrika* and [the] *Freedom Now Suite* received a great deal of publicity in [apartheid] South Africa: the government banned both LPs. The South African Board of Censors minced no words—they vowed to censor all records by African American artists, 'particularly any that use "Freedom" in the title'" (63-64). Similarly, Lena Horne's album *Here's Lena NOW!* (20th Century Fox, 1964) was banned and seized in South Africa by the Board of Censors because it included songs associated with the American civil rights movement. Between corporate control and governmental censorship—let alone how African American musicking that explicitly tied itself to rights outcomes was received by a conservative public—Weston, Roach, Horne, and Smith, among many others, have faced an uphill battle, much like that faced by the civil rights activists with whom they aligned.

In the interview below, Smith discusses a range of issues that tie improvisatory musicking to civil rights discourses: his own approach to multi-dominance influenced by Islamic principles associated with the *mashura*, improvising ensembles as a model for democratic principles, the balance between collective wisdom and artistic independence, the need to show initiative and leadership when it comes to performing one's own works, the potential of the Occupy Movement, and the need for an engaged and educated citizenry. Smith's reflections, while avoiding bromides and reductive reasoning, point the way to seeing musical improvisation as a social practice of ethical principles that have resonance far beyond the confines of the music. As the interview unfolded, it was clear to me how Smith's integrity encompasses his musical vision and his politics, how his music productively remakes the very terms that have confined politics to structures that have traditionally excluded the voices of artists, the histories of the oppressed, and the concerns of the poor and marginalized. He teaches that improvisatory practices of music-making that have sustained themselves as markers of innovation and renewal, hope and redemption, are profoundly tied to similar tendencies in rights structures that seek to replace violence with peace, discrimination and inequality with equal rights and the respect of difference: "Improvising is both a right and a natural privilege. No one can live in a society, correctly without knowing what his or her rights are. No one can creatively collect their thoughts to make art in the present moment unless they know what their rights are and how to use them."

Interview:

Daniel: I'm delighted you could do this, Wadada. Thank you so much for the time. After I hung up speaking to you this morning, I went down to my mailbox and there were the just-released *Ten Freedoms Summers* CDs from Cuneiform. So I put them on right away and I've listened to the whole thing between that call and now, and it is stunning—incredible music with spine-tingling performances.

Wadada: Well I certainly hope so, and I can tell you one thing, it was absolutely fascinating to put it together and over the years working on it, I never realized how important it would be. After the premiere, I knew it was going to be a landmark project.

Daniel: The focus of this interview is going to be about bringing together concepts of improvisation and rights—civil rights, human rights. So let's start with *Ten Freedom Summers* and how it came to be. It's so multi-dimensional, there are so many things going on in it, and it's taken a lifetime to compose it would seem—a lifetime of experience.

Wadada: Yes, about half of my life—34 years.

Daniel: So can you tell me how did *Ten Freedom Summers* come together for you conceptually? What was motivating you, what were you thinking about, when did you know that you had this concept clear in your own mind?

Wadada: Well, I'll start out by saying that when I started playing music—in Chicago in the late 60s—I realized then that I had something in me that needed to be expressed regarding the struggle of African Americans in the U.S. The progression of that idea was born in my reflections on being an American. When you grow up in Mississippi and you live close to where Emmett Till was killed, you almost constantly have an impression about the quality of life of African Americans, and what kind of life your children will have, and things like that. So I've always thought about issues of human rights and how they affected my family and me. And it actually affects them now in exactly the same way as it did me back then.



Figure 3. Photo courtesy of Wadada Leo Smith.

My grandson for example has had experiences in the way in which people treat him in their businesses. If he goes into a store to buy an object or something he realizes that all the focus is on him and people are trailing him, when in fact he just went in to share some of his wealth with them.

So it's still there, and that's primarily why when I speak about the civil rights I always refer to it as being a *movement*, because that implies for me that it's far from over.

The first composition composed in the *Ten Freedom Summers* collection was a piece for Medgar Evers, who was also a Mississippian. He was shot down in his doorway a few minutes after John F. Kennedy had given his famous address on human rights.⁷ And we know from commentators that the last part of JFK's speech was all improvised—when he appealed to the nation to open up and allow this segment, the African American of our society, to have the same rights as everybody else has. And a few moments after JFK's speech the Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered in his driveway.

So I was contemplating those kinds of ideas around the time when Leroy Jenkins—who had just put together a new group with Andrew Cyrille, Anthony Davis, (if you think about it that is an unusual ensemble: drums, violin, and piano)—asked me to write a piece. So in 1977, I composed “Medgar Evers: A Love-Voice of a Thousand Years’ Journey For Liberty and Justice” for him. Over the years, that piece just stood there waiting. I heard the premiere of it in Italy with that same trio, because I played the day before that trio at the same festival. I heard it live, but I hadn't heard it since then, and I know Leroy played it a number of times on that tour. That composition was the impetus, or the real beginning, of me letting out what was inside my consciousness regarding the civil and human rights movements.

Daniel: And that would have been about five years before you did the *Human Rights* album in 1982?

Wadada: Yes.

Daniel: So, do you see the *Human Rights* album, which by the way I think is one of the most underrated, neglected albums in the canon . . .

Wadada: Yes it is . . . *Human Rights* has skipped under the radar of a lot of people.

Daniel: So do you see that album as part of the same journey that got you to *Ten Freedom Summers*?

Wadada: It's part of the same tradition. The *Human Rights* project just looked at it in a much more global context. But the *Ten Freedom Summers* thoughts didn't just happen at various stages—these are ongoing contemplations I've had all my life from the time I could realize I was a thinking being.

How do you solve or look at some of these problems around equality and social justice? We know for a fact that Duke Ellington in his early years and straight on through his life used music as a form of activism to change and address these situations.⁸ And in later years, we've had other artists who came through and have done the same: like John Coltrane, Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, and even Marvin Gaye. All these people have the same thing inside them that's pushing them to say something about the rights of people. But artists generally, are not really thought of as being activists, when in fact they are probably the most active activists that there are. And they are also continuing activists . . . they do it all their life looking for some way to get clarity on rights issues.

Daniel: George Lipsitz, the great American studies scholar, says that the very idea of comparing improvisation to rights is something like comparing strawberries to copper plating. It may seem ludicrous, but when you actually start thinking about it, there are so many things that are common to both ways of being in the world. And some of them include respect for others, listening . . . a sense of responsibility to the group and what it co-creates. Do you think about those kinds of relationships?

Wadada: Oh yes I do. And I strongly feel that the most beautiful model that we have of the practice of democracy is in fact expressed through the workings of a musical ensemble when it is improvising. That experience is a microcosm of those same democratic principles. But I might say this to show you what I really mean: artists are the most liberal, the freest, and the most engaged people towards others.

Artists have learned to respect differences at a far greater level than any other part of our society. None of these other areas, like medicine or education, come close to how the artist experiences the same types of phenomena that everybody encounters. We want to get to as ideal a mode of what a society can look like. We play with people from Europe, Asia, Africa, and artists from any of the island nations. Although they may have different philosophical and religious beliefs, it doesn't bother us. And we would never confront them in an angry or a dictatorial way trying to show that our way is better. We accept them and they accept us.

Daniel: So music is a way of—and I've seen this through listening to what you've created but also reading some of the things you've said about improvisation and rights—that it's a way of reconciling but also allowing tension and difference to co-exist in a productive way.

Wadada: It shares that same space, that's right.

Daniel: So improvisation in this view is like the event horizon of what's possible—it's like an imagining of what life could be like if we were in this relationship together that allows for difference and tension, but also productively tries to reconcile that tension through creative process?

Wadada: Exactly.

Daniel: In the recent April 2012 *Downbeat* piece about you, there were two phrases that were striking. One was that when you create music, it's in the context of "the equal rights of every performer in shaping the music object." The other phrase you used was an ideal to create "music that was multi-dominant in all qualities." Those are powerful ideas, and I'm wondering whether you want to say a bit more about them?

Wadada: I look at it like this. Think about the recorded history of the world and how few problems we have solved over that long time, especially regarding the main issue facing civilization, which is how can human beings acquire the ability to get along with each other and actually do that sustainably. Everything has been centered on that idea and everything is affected by it, from the conditioning of how you live in your society day-to-day to the kinds of food you get in your communities and so on. I think that society needs to give artists their voices in how to address this problem of getting along to truly become a part of the thinking bloc that shapes governmental action—in other words, they need a creative cabinet in the Congress that produces input from artists. And I think that if they did, they would find that far-reaching changes in society would come much easier without so much hatred and fighting.

So, as in music performance, the equal rights of every performer are important and must have input into how the ensemble's music is developed and presented. But in a similar way, we must also participate in the political life in our societies to help shape the harmony in people-to-people connections, to help cause a little balance of peace. Peace is impossible without love—without both we're lost!

The idea of multiple-dominance comes from this: it seems to me that we should be able to make a decision together even though we disagree. If the decision concerns the social betterment of our society, we should not only be able to do that, but we should be able to compromise and negotiate for the best ideas to help make this happen. So if you have two ideas that have power, and both of them are dominant, but one of them sees the survival of the collective as being more important and is willing to compromise in the name of a clearer principles . . . that to me is really a pure expression of this idea of multiple dominance. In giving up or compromising a position, you achieve greater collective power.

There's a practice in Islam—I study and practice Islam—we have a practice that's called a *mashura*, which is really a meeting to take a collective decision that is binding on the group. And it was practiced in the time of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. He envisioned and created an Islamic community in Medina that lived by these principles.

In a *mashura*, the leader, who is called the Amir—opens up the *mashura* by taking the opinion of each person, starting from his right side (of a circle) and ending at his left side. The Amir considers what has been stated in the public forum of the discussion and makes a decision. But one of the laws of the *mashura* is that there is no second *mashura* after the issue has been resolved. The outcome or the result of the *mashura* is accepted as *everyone's* decision. So no one person claims the value of it, even though one person may have brought up the idea that actually finally got accepted.

Daniel: So improvisation is a powerful way of embodying that multi-dominance effect?

Wadada: The true practice of the multi-dominant idea is the empowering of the collective and the individual as equal and the insight to accept the result created by their energies. Improvisation teaches us a similar thing.

Multi-dominance is powerful because negotiations always take place, whether its music you're creating or whether you're dealing with other life issues. We must realize our responsibility with care and be mindful of the power of our actions.

In music, sacrificing and sharing involve awareness and connecting to ideas generated from the other musicians. Sometimes you have to sacrifice your own ideas and let other ideas move in, and share those new ideas. So musical elements come and go. Sometimes the music needs silence to enhance its structures or its textures. And the notion of the spontaneous quality of its creation is even a far greater discovery, because it shows us that issues can be resolved in the present-moment without all the argumentative and unproductive gestures that we tend to make when engaged in action. In practice, the creative improvisational moment generates a tangible outcome through the wisdom of the collective, whether it be one thing or idea or multiple things or ideas.⁹

Daniel: So in that context, what do you make of so many of the ways in which so-called "jazz" gets evaluated on the basis of focusing on soloists, and virtuosity? It seems like the community kinds of relationships you associate with *mashuras* and improvisatory ensembles have really been backgrounded in any discussion of creative improvised music. Is that a fair thing to say?

Wadada: I think that *both* the art of soloists and ensemble virtuosity are the hallmark of the collective and give it its truest meaning. Granted, in improvisation these musical elements take on different forms than in traditional musics or even so-called "jazz." The languages practiced by the jazz masters were born from musical collectives. In order for innovative change to take place from time to time the language had to move from the collective to the individual, a movement that creates discovery and expands the tradition.

It is one of the things that has kept the musical institution of free improvisation from moving forward into new discoveries, because often the principle of freedom in free improvisation for the artist is just to make music "free." Yet we have artists who have answered this question with new ideas of systemic languages and come up with fresh visions about the quality of creative music: people like Anthony Braxton, John Zorn, Lawrence "Butch" Morris (and his conduction techniques), or my Ankrasmation language.¹⁰ Historically, George Russell (in

his 1953 *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*) and Ornette Coleman have also addressed the problem of generating new musical directions and realizing new systems and languages. I believe this search to find new ways of expression is ongoing—it applies to our times and will be true in future generations.

Art is about shaping the relationship with oneself and the people who populate our world along with the environment and its consequences on us as human beings. It takes a deep, exceptional inner contemplation for a person or artist to step outside of what is happening and to come to know the energy that will change their direction. We constantly look for the new artist(s), the young men and women, who take on this responsibility to move the art, the life of the art, into the world fresh again.

Daniel: I don't know if you know what's going on here at Guelph, but there's a project called *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice* (ICASP) where we've got what you might call a multi-dominant set of people working on it—and the basic idea is to test out that idea about how improvisation is in fact a form of community practice with far-reaching consequences beyond just the music. And we're trying to produce scholarship that says, look, the music is not just about soloing and virtuosity. The real impetus behind it is coming from somewhere else . . . it's coming from a need for community—it's coming from an exploration of community, a making of community in the moment. And that's the inherent beauty and power of the art form.

Wadada: It is the beauty. And that sounds like a very interesting project. I would love to know a little bit more about it, because I do know that there are corners or pockets out there that are trying to look at these sorts of questions differently. And I would say, please keep listening carefully to those people out there that are practicing the art of creative improvisation. Like archers shooting a target—if they consider only the target, they're going to miss it. Because they have to take into consideration a lot of other points of view, like gravity, and subtle levels of force, and also flight and the implications of flight. There are so many things they have to consider to achieve that bulls-eye. And I really think that that's key to any writing about something as important as improvisation.

Daniel: There's an Indian philosophy or principle that basically says, "you are, therefore I am." The word associated with this philosophy (*so-hum*) reflects the sound of the breath that gives us life. So instead of starting with the "I" at the centre of it all, you look to the other person, and that person is what gives you a reflection of yourself. And you enter into a dialogue then, and that has rights implications too.¹¹

Wadada: It *does* have implications. And actually that's the right model, because just looking out of yourself and seeing nothing, and not communicating with something, automatically puts you in prison—automatically seals you off from reality. And so we are actually defined by not just us, but by our relationship to everyone and everything in our environment that makes us interdependent.

Daniel: I want to read you one thing from Matt Sumera's liner notes to *Ten Freedom Summers*. Civil rights activist Dorothy Cotton has a comment that's used as an epigraph to what Sumera writes and presumably has a lot to say about the spirit of the piece.¹² We just had Angela Davis here at the University of Guelph, and I was reminding myself that this is a woman who grew up on Dynamite Hill in Birmingham, and was subjected to . . . knew what real terrorism was, because her community lived in constant fear of gratuitous violence committed by racists and bigots . . . like so many others. And the Dorothy Cotton comment says, "We sang every night before we went out to protest, to get up our courage. The Klan was always waiting for us, and somehow always we'd come back bleeding, singing 'I love everybody.'" There's something beautiful in that sentiment, and I'm wondering, musically . . . in *Ten Freedom Summers*, there are no words, right?

Wadada: Yes, there are no words.

Daniel: But there is that connection to what Dorothy Cotton is telling us . . .

Wadada: In *Ten Freedom Summers*, there are no words, but I constructed it to have three sections centered on key moments and people associated with the civil rights movement. The names of the compositions are intended to generate discussions and reflections about ideas and issues of liberty and justice in America.

So, for example, I composed “Emmett Till” like this: I looked at his character as a young man, who was close to my age when he was killed. I see him as a beautiful young man. The only photograph I know of Emmett Till is of him in that beautiful hat he wore. In the first part of the composition, I tried to capture that memory. But in the next section I wanted to capture the relationship between him being killed and how and why he was killed. And that’s why the title says “Emmett Till: Defiant, Fearless.” Because I had read during my research that someone—one of those men that was involved in the killing—said, essentially, they meant to teach him a lesson.¹³ Because he showed no fear, they had to kill him.

The middle point in the piece is where I take a quote from my string quartet, “Black Church” and insert it, to signify the importance of the church in the context of the civil rights movement, and also in African-American culture. But also to signify that Emmett Till died so young and is now being given this last ceremony of burial through *his* church.

That section acted as the transition from this world to the next and then to improvisational form that’s part of the piece. I created the improvisation by writing material for the chamber ensemble, and structured the repeats to re-occur, making it absolutely so complex that they could *not* possibly do it correctly. I instructed the ensemble that at the point where the figures begin to break down, they are to add more notes in an improvisatory way. At this point in the score, the quartet is brought into the musical field with its material, so the improvisation expresses not just the killing of this young man, but also his strength, his lack of fear, and his defiance.



Figure 4. Photo courtesy of Wadada Leo Smith.

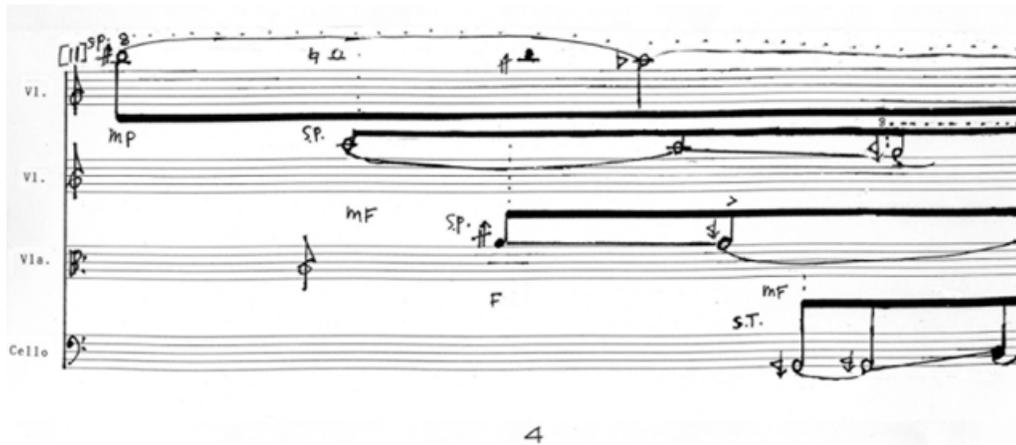


Figure 5. Two examples from the “Black Church” section for string quartet: bar 11 illustrates Smith’s use of microtonal music and bar 19 shows some of the reoccurring musical strategies within the piece.

Daniel: And it gets you back to that sentiment that Cotton talks about, where even after being brutalized by the Klan, people come back singing “I love everybody.” So there’s an indomitable strength that will not be erased no matter what, and that it gets expressed musically and improvisation is a key element in representing that strength. So I was wondering at the fact that *Ten Freedom Summers* is schematic in the sense that you’ve laid out the titles of the pieces in clear relationships to the history of the Civil Rights Movement. But you’ve left the words out of the music so the listener may know that the piece is titled whatever it’s titled, but there are no other words to guide the listener. So you have to enter into a different kind of relationship with the ideas behind the music.

Wadada: I deliberately didn’t write anything in words. I felt that some of the most powerful music that I’ve ever experienced has always been instrumental music. And that it has been so transformative that even today, I can go back really deep in my life and still find a musical memory popping into my consciousness, informing me about something that today shows itself in a new and different light. So I wanted to make the music in *Ten Freedom Summers* available like that. I was thinking that after each complete performance of the suite I would like to have each of the three days’ performances to conclude with an open dialogue and discussion about what it takes to solve long-standing problems associated with rights issues.

Because 2013 is the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement, I plan to get *Ten Freedom Summers* played in many states, like for example, Roulette in Brooklyn, NY has agreed to do all three days sometime in April / May of next year, maybe the J. F Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. I’m not even opposed to having it done in three different places by three different presenters, so long as the distance is close enough that people can attend without taking a flight or a train.

Daniel: And the chances of the piece being done at Jazz at Lincoln Centre . . . what do you think?

Wadada: There is a good chance of that and I do have history on my side, and I have a nice coincidence, thinking that the 50th anniversary of the “March on Washington” is next year.

Daniel: I truly hope that it happens.

Wadada: I’d like to tell you of the miracle that happened during this recording. All of the music with the chamber ensemble was done on the first two days, and then at sunset they released the studio to us for the Golden Quartet/Quintet to record thirteen compositions. The first piece was “Dred Scott.” We did two versions that evening and it looked like it would be impossible to do the recording there. We were in a great sounding theatre, but the engineer had no separation between the instruments, so we spent an hour and a half after the first take of “Dred Scott” trying to do something about all the bleed-through on the instrumental sounds. I actually spent 30 minutes looking through a book trying to find a studio to rent on the spot. Finally we said, “let’s not do any more takes” and we all went home.

The next morning around 9:30, we started with the same piece of music, and at about 11:00 that night we finished recording the 13 compositions. All in one day! Not only that—we did not listen to any of the music, because there was no time. I didn’t know that I had it—all of the music, and if it was in good enough condition to release on CD. It was not until three or four weeks afterwards that I heard the music we had recorded. So I consider that to be an absolute miracle. And when you listen to the strength of the music, everybody playing from the heart, it’s almost impossible to believe that 13 pieces of music could have been recorded between 9:00 a.m. in the morning through to 11:00 p.m. It just seems impossible.

Daniel: One thing that’s very striking is that the ambience of the recording is beautiful. It feels like there’s a lot of space, a lot of pristine sound—you can really hear who’s doing what. But the other thing is that the performances rock. My youngest daughter was with me while I was listening, and I was saying, “You know that trumpet player you’re listening to, he’s 70 years old and he’s blowing like that!”

Wadada: (Laughs)

Daniel: And she said, “You’re kidding me!” Because it’s such hot playing. There’s remarkable continuity in the performance and it feels like it’s happening in *that* moment on the recording, which is a rare thing to hear.

Wadada: It is. We did it! And because most people don’t know how it all happened, I want them to know what I

was thinking about regarding the *Ten Freedom Summers* event. So at the moment, I'm writing some of my reflections on how the idea started, some information about the rehearsals, the performances, and the recording. Hopefully by the end of the year I'll have it all down, because I would like for people to know about these events and what happened—from the composer's point of view.

Daniel: One of the other things you've spoken about is that improvisation is linked with what you call moral visionaries. One of the problems you face, then, is how do you take the voice of that kind of person who is seeing and interpreting the world in that creative way and give it more of a central space in the world? Especially when improvisation, even though it's probably the most ubiquitous form of music, is also probably the most marginalized. So how, how do you get it out to more people is a challenge that the Guelph Jazz Festival here has, that the ICASP project has, and I know that working musicians in Toronto . . . it's the same story. It's always the problem of finding a venue and getting an audience out. So what's your take—with all your experience—on how to do that?

Wadada: I've never depended on my musical works to be recorded by other people. I've never depended on live performances of my music to be done by other people. For a long time I did not seek out performances, and now with the Internet it is in every respect better and more direct when dealing with presenters. I worked with John Zorn's Tzadik for a long time, and that was a great experience. Cuneiform Records is where I've been for the last five years, and it's been a very nice experience working with them.

I use my art for the economical value it can generate to stack up what I call a "war chest." It's something I've done all my life. When I go out to perform with my ensembles, I put the money away and when it has accumulated to a certain point, I go and rent a performance space. That way I can go into any space I want and present my music. And when I get ready to record, I spend money from my war chest. Take my *Heart's Reflections* project, which is a double CD for a large ensemble. I spent a lot of money on that. And what I've found is this: you can create your own momentum by making efforts to have your music presented here and there on your own.

Today, I have people working with me who believe in me—like Braithwaite and Katz Communications out of Boston Massachusetts, A-Train Entertainment out of Oakland CA, and the recording companies Cuneiform and Tum.

I've come across so many of my colleagues who when I say, "let's do this project with our ensembles together," they say, "man that's a great idea," but later they'll say something like, "Well, I don't spend money for my music, I let other people do that." And I'm saying to myself, "Whoa, that's crazy!" I've done this all my life, back from the New Haven days straight on through to now. I still seek out a nice venue, I rent it, I pay the musicians, I assume responsibility for the full project, and yeah, I'll lose money on this or that project, but the truth is, my loss is only minimal when compared to the big scale, the big picture of what I am doing, and of how I want my art presented. So I would encourage the artist coming up to go the way of self-reliance.

Daniel: I was in Cuba—I've had extended contact with Afro-Cuban musicians and have worked in the La Marina community in Matanzas, the same community where Steve Coleman was a couple of years back—and it's interesting because in making that music, it's not solely about commerce, or making money. It's the community function of the music. And so if they make money, fine; if people give them money to make the music, fine, they'll take it; but the music is never ever connected or coming out of that space of need—it's almost completely free of that and made in the face of ongoing challenges related to poverty and racism. And when it isn't, problems almost always happen. In a way it's a great model for thinking about rights, too, because the minute you throw money into the equation, things start to get compromised . . .

Wadada: Yes, they will start getting compromised if they are not careful, and really, in the Civil Rights Movement, when you look at the early days, people made donations from their pockets. That meant that they put not just their vocal power behind it, they put their mode of making wealth into the movement so it could happen. That's what artists have to do. It's such a dead weight to sit around and wait for somebody to call you to perform—or for somebody to endorse you to do a project by commissioning a musical work from you. Just go ahead and do it. Because when you just do it, you set into motion creative actions that will open things up for your art.

One of the compositions on *Ten Freedom Summers*, "The Freedom Riders Ride," is a great example of "just doing it." The piece was to have been commissioned by the University of Georgia. The University had invited

the Golden Quartet to perform there—that was the version with Jack DeJohnette, Malachi Favors, and Anthony Davis. They gave Jack a workshop to lead and they wanted to commission a piece of music from me. The school did not get the budget to fund the commission. So I sat down and composed the music anyway. That music lay hidden away until I began to work on *Ten Freedom Summers*. The first time anybody heard that music it was in the live performance, and now it's on the *Ten Freedom Summers* recording.

Daniel: And the *Occupy the World for Life, Liberty, and Justice* project? Was that the same sort of thing that happened there?

Wadada: Yes. The music for *Occupy the World for Life, Liberty, and Justice* is 45:22 minutes of music—I recorded that music in Helsinki, Finland in March of this year (2012). Last October, I had a residency with the Oxford Improvisers Orchestra in the UK. The OIO commissioned me to complete *Occupy*, as I had worked on the composition for a few years and it did not get completed until I went into the studio in Finland to record it. *Occupy* is a living composition and I intend to keep adding sections to its current form.

Daniel: And has it been released?

Wadada: It hasn't been released. It'll be released sometime in 2013-14.

Daniel: And again, when you were writing the music, the *Occupy the World* title is obviously connecting up to the Occupy movement . . .

Wadada: Exactly!

(Both laugh)

Wadada: The Occupy movement is potentially the most important movement in the history of mankind. Let me tell you why. If it doesn't yield, it will keep on moving forward globally. In my heart, I know that it has a powerful momentum to keep moving forward. I believe it has the potential to reclaim the rights of people and defend in a clear way what it means to be human on this planet. And it will go through many evolutions. But eventually, it will happen. I believe that world change can happen in my lifetime. I believe that all the Occupy the World movement needs to do is to hold a world summit that is organized in such a way that each region of the planet can be addressed equitably. Then we give governments ninety days to change from being a 1%-er to a 100%-er government. 100% for the people! If there is no change then the occupiers all over the world should reclaim their governments. This should be done nonviolently and new governments should be established based on human rights and fairness where everybody shares equally in all levels of society.

Daniel: Well that's a huge hope . . . You're so optimistic! (Laughs) There's a comment you made I was reading earlier on in the day about how we have a world society now that has built a generation of ideas about solving conflict based on war, or creating conflict to dominate other societies based on war and the economics of violence, and how that idea of violence and warfare has destroyed what it means to be human right now. And then you talk about repairing those acts of destruction and the role of music in healing. So I have to ask you how you deal with the pessimism, and the idea that it's so hard to make changes on the scale you're imagining—especially after what happened in the 60s, and the death of Malcolm X, and the deaths of Dr. King and all the lesser-known activists?

Wadada: Well, it's like Dorothy Cotton coming off of that march in Florida bleeding and still feeling capable of love—Real Love! You know that it's a reality that you can affect change in the world, and that's because you're not going to stop challenging the people to take the true life over the limited version of life offered by governments and businesses under the conditions we live in today as world peoples. There's nothing that governments and businesses can do, or that anyone can do alone, to change our situations but us, the people. We *will* go forward. There *will* be change. Because the moment that we as a people realize that we have an inadequate relationship with government and businesses in our society, the governments and its business partners have already lost.

Daniel: And it seems like that's the case for so many people all over the planet.

Wadada: Yes it is. Worldwide.

Daniel: And we're just living this sort of lie about our true relationship to the people who are supposed to represent us.

Wadada: It is true. And they know it is too. That's how our leaders and representatives got their wealth and power over the years by only working for themselves. This is the main reason why they stay in office so long. No government worker should make a career of it. Their work should last for only a few years, and their work, if they are wealthy, should be freely given.

Daniel: One of the words I've been playing with to talk about this sort of a vision is "improvocracy," as opposed to democracy.

Wadada: Well, like I said earlier, the key thing would be to not leave the artists and workers out of decision-making to create a fair world. So they can remind us of how to be creative without being argumentative, combative, and uncaring—they can remind us how to have an energy that's necessary to generate discussion based on the creative artistic principles and visions that make us truly human. A healthy society can and should run off of these principles. It's just that we haven't invested real energy into developing a world like this.

Daniel: Dr. King, at the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1964, said "Much of the power of our freedom movement of the United States has come from the music. It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms when courage began to fail; it has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down."¹⁴ You must be aware of that comment . . .

Wadada: No, I'm not aware of it, but . . . it's straight from the heart and straight to my heart.

Daniel: He spoke at the Festival and had a lot to say about the importance of music in the civil rights movement, reaffirming that jazz, blues I think too, are so important to the spirit of Black people's struggle in America, and the struggle against racism . . . and I know that in the *Human Rights* album you said then that until we get past the racism issue, we're not going anywhere, people. You know? And that was back in 1982, so . . .

Wadada: Well my composition on and for Dr. King, "The Memphis Prophecy," was written based on his last public address.

Daniel: Really?

Wadada: Yeah. The piece is not centered on his whole life; it's centered on his last public address—that address was entirely improvised and

unprepared. The Reverend Dr. Ralph Abernathy called Martin saying, "the place is filling up, people are excited, can you come down": after he got there, they asked him to speak!



Figure 6. Photo courtesy of Wadada Leo Smith.

Please go online and find that speech, and you will see that it's totally improvised.¹⁵ Dr. King used rhyming, he used Biblical imagery and storytelling and his own life situations to set the stage for his message. It's a fascinating piece of art. So my composition "Martin Luther King Jr.: Memphis, the Prophecy" is about that last improvised speech that Dr. King made, not knowing it was to be his last speech. Likewise, my composition for JFK is about him lying in state at the White House, the motorcades, the dignitaries walking in the ceremony, and the procession that carried his body to Arlington. That's what that music is about. *Ten Freedom Summers* is a musical frame based on key people and the events of the struggle for the civil and human rights. It's important that people understand this about what I've done in *Ten Freedom Summers*.

Daniel: I don't know if you know, but Dr. King, the last major public addresses he gave were delivered in Canada on the CBC—the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation—and they've been published under the title "Conscience for Change."¹⁶ And you know, Angela Davis, when she was in Guelph recently, she said something really interesting and shocking to me . . . that Dr. King at that moment historically was organizing to bring, I think it was something like 3000 people into Washington to organize for a similar kind of Occupy Movement that we've got going now, what he was calling the Poor People's Campaign (1968). And there was tremendous fear about the political pressure that would be brought to bear in Washington if you had 3000 people who were being trained to seed communities right across the States, to train them how to take action, and how to become community activists in the name of the struggle against racism and economic inequalities. Davis was saying that in her mind, that was one of the reasons why Dr. King was assassinated—because he was on the verge of a major new rights initiative at an unprecedented, multi-ethnic, grassroots level.

Wadada: It was. It was. And the tent city in Washington D.C. afterward was not the complete vision that Dr. King had. The fact that he had moved to the international arena and was looking for solutions from a worldwide point of view instead of just in America, those things signed his death certificate. And he was very much aware of that. Because they say that night in the hotel, he also acted out his death.

Daniel: Let me ask you just one more thing here about two different ways of looking at how improvisation and rights get thought. When Muhal Richard Abrams was here for the Guelph Jazz Festival a while back he said, "improvisation is a human right." Later I did an interview with John McLaughlin, and I asked him about the Abrams comment and he said, and I quote, "improvisation is neither a right nor a necessity, it is our natural state of being; it is the only way of acting without thinking. This applies equally to music and life" (Fischlin n.p.). So there's an interesting range of what improvisation means in both those ways of thinking about it from some very distinguished musicians with lots to say about these issues. How would you situate yourself in there?

Wadada: I would say that both are correct. What I think is this. Improvising is both a right and a natural privilege. No one can live in a society correctly without knowing what his or her rights are. No one can creatively collect their thoughts to make art in the present moment unless they know what their rights are and how to use them. We have a worldwide political system that continuously diminishes our rights and undermines our rights because the ordinary citizens throughout the world don't know what their contract is with their nations. And it's the same here in the U.S.

Every person should have on their person—in their pocket—a miniature version of the Constitution of the United States, or the Charter of Rights from whatever country you live in. Every person should have that. And they should, from time to time, read a section of it. You don't need to read it from cover-to-cover and put it away and think you know it. You need to read it from time to time, on an ongoing basis, to get acquainted with the ideas of how rights are in fact part of your privileges as a citizen. So I believe that improvisation comes from this natural zone that includes citizens being educated about their rights and how to exercise them.

Daniel: And I guess improvisation then is also one of the ways in which we test our freedom of speech, no?

Wadada: When we test our freedom of speech, we also test the level of our consciousness.

Daniel: So you can't have a creative consciousness without also having a sense of what your rights are and what your relationship is to others. Thank you for doing this Wadada.

Wadada: Peace.

Daniel: Respect.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Tyler Sloane and Matt Manassis for transcription and recording support. Thanks too to Wadada Leo Smith for generously agreeing to the interview and for providing the score samples and photos that appear here with his permission. The interview took place in early May 2012, just prior to Smith's appearance at the Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. Some of my extended critical introduction here appears in the co-authored book with Ajay Heble and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Co-creation* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

² Ingrid Monson notes,

The politics of the 'Freedom Now Suite' have received far more attention than the music. If 1960 was the year of the lunch counter sit-ins, protest against pass laws in South Africa and the admission of 16 African nations to the U.N., it was also the year when the debate over Ornette Coleman and free jazz rippled through the jazz community. The 'Freedom Now Suite' occupies a space somewhere between mainstream jazz modernism and the new thing. It makes use of blues form and chorus structures in some of its movements and almost always defines tonal centers, although often through ambiguous harmonic means, such as parallel whole tone or quartal voicings. Aspects of the work that take from more avant-garde stylistic trends in the 1960s include its use of a pianoless ensemble, moments of collective improvisation, such as occur at the end of 'Tears from Johannesburg,' and the screaming in 'Protest.'" Dealing with the music in jazz is often confused with simply providing a structural account of it—its keys, harmonies, rhythmic patterns, melodic styles, textures, timbres, genres and forms. The 'Freedom Now Suite' offers the opportunity to think about how these musical dimensions also carry symbolic associations that are key to generating a deeper expressive power. The question to ask is what musical means did Roach and his band choose to convey the socially engaged message they desired and how do the structural and symbolic aspects of the music combine? The 'Freedom Now Suite' draws on both long-standing musical symbols of African-American cultural identity (the blues and the spiritual) and more immediate historical contexts, such as the civil rights movement, African independence and the Sharpeville massacre to weave a web of musical interrelatedness. ("Revisited! The Freedom Now Suite")

Ten Freedom Summers expands on the sorts of strategies and symbolic associations used by Roach and his fellow musicians to explore how musical meaning and political activism can co-exist and reflect upon each other. In the case of *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, A. Philip Randolph's opening quotation from the liner notes makes explicit the political context in which the music is to be understood, with the improvisatory structures in the piece perhaps echoing the drive towards rights freedoms: "A revolution is unfurling—America's unfinished revolution. It is unfurling in lunch counters, buses, libraries and schools—wherever the dignity and potential of men are denied. Youth and idealism are unfurling. Masses of Negroes are marching onto the stage of history and demanding their freedom now!" (qtd. in Monson, "Revisited!").

³ Robin Kelley notes that Benjamin's "controversial 'Liberation Suite (1982) consists of three compositions, 'New Nations a-Coming,' 'Children of Soweto,' and 'Africa.' It departs sharply from most 'political music' intent on representing the conditions of black South Africans. Originally inspired by a visit to Mozambique in 1982 on behalf of the ANC, [Benjamin] deliberately created pieces that imagine a liberated future grounded in love rather than in the current crises" (159). Benjamin herself tells the story of how

We were invited to Mozambique (Abdullah [Ibrahim], the two kids and I) to celebrate the Mozambique liberation. While we were there, there are a lot of nationalities that live there and they were all integrated and they got their freedom. I sat at that table and I thought, 'Oh my God! Look at all these people.' And I got the feeling that they also had all these different nationalities within them; and look how they are sitting around here and now they are liberated and free. That was the start of something burgeoning inside of me. On the way home, on the plane, that song came to me: 'Nations in me, New Nations are coming.' It came from that experience and me just wishing that we in South Africa could go through the same thing. (qtd. in Chandler)

⁴ Langston Hughes' opening invocation to *Uhuru Afrika* was spoken by Tanganyikan (pre-colonial Tanzanian) narrator Tuntemeke Sanga in the first piece on the recording, "Uhuru Kwansa":

Africa, where the great Congo flows!
Africa, where the whole jungle knows
A new dawning breaks. Africa!
A young nation awakes! Africa!
In his own tongue, Kiswahili, Sanga salutes the new Africa, Uhuru!
The freedom wind blows!
Out of yesterday's night Uhuru—
Freedom! Uhuru! Freedom

Hughes' poem "African Lady" is the basis for the second piece in Weston's suite:

Sunrise at dawn,
Night is gone—
I hear your song.
African lady.
The dark fades away,
Now its day,
A new morning breaks.
The birds in the sky all sing
For Africa awakes.
Bright light floods the land
And tomorrow's in your hand,
African lady.

Goddess of sun
And of sea,
My lovely one,
African lady,
Your eyes softly bright
Like the light
Of stars above.
Smile and the whole world sings
A happy song of love.
Dark Queen! In my dreams
You're my Queen!
My Queen of Dreams,
African lady! (Weston)

⁵ Cecil Taylor echoes much of what Smith implies about the expansive relations that exist between music and its larger cultural contexts—they are the meaning of the music:

I'm interested in the cultural importance of the life of the music. The instrument a man uses is only a tool with which he makes his comment on the structure of music. That's why the evaluation of what a cat says about how he plays music is not too far from the non-interesting things he does when he is playing. That person wouldn't have too profound an understanding of what has happened in the music and the culture. We have to define the procedures and examine the aesthetics that have shaped the history of the music. That's much more important than discussing finger dexterity. We might as well discuss basketball or tennis.

[. . .] The history of the people, the culture, even the things they forget consciously. The way they cook, speak, the way they move, dress, how they relate to the pressures around them. What you experience in life informs (in-forms) you. If you work on One Hundred Forty-Fifth Street in Harlem and years later in Tokyo, where you are taken to see the sights, you experience [. . .] the environment, listen to the sounds, watch the movement. You'll be able to see that there are not these separations between things. There are different aesthetic choices made. What happened in the latter part of the eighteenth century in Africa had a profound effect on painting. The concepts of musical organization now have to be broadened to accommodate the worldwide awareness of music. (qtd. in Goodheart, Part 1)

Aesthetic choice is informed by historical circumstance and this has play in the global, interconnected discourse of ideas. Improvisation plays a role in this discourse as an aesthetic choice arising out of specific circumstances and contingencies. The ethico-visionary aspects of its historical circumstances in relation to diasporic Black histories cannot be revoked or dismissed, however much of a challenge they represent to traditional scholarship reluctant to move in this direction.

⁶ *Sing Me A Song of Songmy* takes its place in a range of musical responses to Vietnam, including American free jazz violinist Billy Bang's two remarkable albums, *Vietnam: The Aftermath* (2001) and *Vietnam: Reflections* (2005). Bang had served as an infantryman and eventually a sergeant in Vietnam beginning with the Tet Offensive in 1968, a particularly bloody phase of the war that produced significant numbers of civilian casualties and refugees. After the war, Bang joined the Sun Ra Arkestra and the Vietnam albums were created using other musicians who were veterans of the conflict also seeking reconciliation with post-war trauma. *Vietnam:*

Reflections uses two Vietnamese musicians (Co Boi Nguyen and Nhan Thanh Ngo) playing the *đàn tranh* (zither), a traditional Vietnamese instrument, and singing in Vietnamese referencing traditional Vietnamese songs. Bang's concept was to engage genuine cross-cultural improvisations in order to achieve "resolution, restoration, resurgence" (Liner Notes). Like Bang, both Henry Threadgill and Wadada Leo Smith served in the American Army. In Smith's case, Litweiler points out that he "spent five years in five army bands, in frequent trouble with his immediate superiors not only for protesting racial conditions—successfully, for two protests to the judge advocate general resulted in official policy changes—but for the jazz he was beginning to play: In an army band in France he had to talk a director out of disciplining him for the way he improvised" (266-67).

⁷ Martin Halpern notes that

U.S. President John F. Kennedy's *Civil Rights Address*, delivered to the nation by radio and television on June 11, 1963, marked the first time that a president called on Americans to recognize civil rights as a lofty moral cause to which all persons should contribute, so that the nation might fully end discrimination against and provide equal treatment to African Americans. In 1963, the centennial year of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, to which Kennedy alludes in his speech, the movement led by African Americans and their allies for civil rights reached the center stage of American politics. Although Kennedy had hesitated to seek progress with regard to civil rights during his first two years in the White House because of the strength of southern Democratic opponents in Congress, with his *Civil Rights Address* he added the moral weight of the presidency to the demand for civil rights and emerged as an ally of the movement. (n.p.)

The speech, given in the same year he was assassinated, was exceptionally blunt, stating,

This [the discrimination against African Americans in the U.S.] is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right. We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes? (n.p.)

⁸ For a more complete discussion of Ellington's civil rights activism, see Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*. The book shows the long trajectory of Ellington's musical activism, beginning in the 1930s when he played what Monson calls "socially minded" (154) concerts in support of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the Scottsboro Boys. The latter was a group of nine black teenagers accused of rape in 1931 whose trial was important historically, not only because it was such a miscarriage of justice, but also because it exposed endemic racism within an American justice system where frame-ups, all-white juries, lynchings, mob justice, and rushed trials were commonplace. Ellington was

consistent in his approach to rights issues. Monson notes, for instance, that in July 1960 Ellington refused to appear with his orchestra in an engagement with comedian Mort Sahl in protest of the standard practice of having white acts billed first whenever an interracial show was put on.

⁹ Elsewhere, Smith has outlined various improvisational / compositional principles in the following ways:

My pieces are multi-improvisations—my first note is the development and climax already. I don't go from point to point because the points are already inherent in the start.

[. . .] For me, a whole sound or a whole rhythm is dual; it's divided up into the audible property and the inaudible property—that is, the sound you hear and the sound you don't hear. In this system, whatever value that's given to any of the units must be equivalent, in a relative sense, to the degree of silence that will be played from that sound.

[. . .The] center of the improvisation is continuously changing, depending on the force created by individual centers at any instance [. . .] The idea is that each improviser creates an element of the whole, only responding to that which is creating within himself instead of responding to the total creative energy of the different units. This attitude frees the sound-rhythm elements in an improvisation from being realized through dependent re-action [. . .] there is no intent towards time as a period of development. (qtd. in Litweiler, 268-69)

¹⁰ As Smith explains in *Downbeat*, ankrasmatism is a graphic “symbolic language employing rhythm-units, sound-units, improvisation-units, colors, shapes, lines, musical towers and symbolic-units. A large body of works exists in this idiom. *Tastalun* [ECM Records, 1979], *Akhreanvention* [Kabell, 1981], *Luminous Axis* [Tzadik, 2002] and *Kosmic Music* [not recorded] are a good representation” (43).

¹¹ See Vandana Shiva's comment that “In Indian philosophy, we think in terms of *so-hum*: ‘You are, therefore I am.’ Fundamentalisms, however, function on the belief ‘If you are, I am not,’ or ‘My existence requires your annihilation.’ Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is based on this paradigm of mutual exclusion, hence mutual annihilation: ‘For peoples seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential’” (140).

¹² Dorothy Cotton was the Education Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which played a key role in the 60s civil rights movement and whose first president was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Cotton had significant influence in the SCLC as its highest ranking woman and was instrumental in the 1963 Birmingham Movement and the Children's Crusade:

The Citizenship Education Program (CEP) led by Dorothy Cotton (with a team including Andrew Young, Bernice Robinson, Ben Mack, Victoria Gray Adams BJ Johnson, Annell Ponder and Septima Clark), was a critical component of the SCLC's overall organizing strategy. The CEP helped ordinary people identify what was intolerable in their circumstances, envision the changes they desired, learn their civil rights, prepare for democratic engagement, and craft courageous strategies for organizing communities and speaking truth to power. It fostered the transformation of often poorly educated and disenfranchised people from ‘victims’ to full ‘citizens.’ The victories won as a result of this work and the systemic and social changes attained through the growing power of the African American electorate and its emerging leadership ultimately led to state and federal protections against discrimination in voting, access to public accommodations, housing and employment throughout the nation. (“About the Dorothy Cotton Institute”)

¹³ Emmett Till was a fourteen year-old boy who was murdered in Mississippi on 28 August 1954 for having spoken with a white woman named Carolyn Bryant:

Several nights later, Bryant's husband Roy and his half-brother J. W. Milam arrived at Till's great-uncle's house where they took Till, transported him to a barn, beat him and gouged out one of his eyes, before shooting him through the head and disposing of his body in the Tallahatchie River, weighting it with a 70-pound (32 kg.) cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire. His body was discovered and retrieved from the river three days later. Till was returned to Chicago and his mother, who had raised him mostly by herself, insisted on a public funeral service with an open casket

to show the world the brutality of the killing. Tens of thousands attended his funeral or viewed his casket and images of his mutilated body were published in black magazines and newspapers, rallying popular black support and white sympathy across the U.S. Intense scrutiny was brought to bear on the condition of black civil rights in Mississippi, with newspapers around the country critical of the state. ("Emmett Till")

As Alex Levy points out in his introduction to *The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till*, a play conceived by Till's mother Mamie Till-Mobley and playwright David Barr, "Due to her [Mamie Till-Mobley's] courage and persistence, Emmett Till's death became a national issue and the springboard for the civil rights movement" (4). The lyrics in Bob Dylan's ballad "The Death of Emmett Till" capture some of the story as indicative of the racism and injustices faced by African Americans in the U.S.:

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up
They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what
They tortured him and did some things too evil to repeat
There were screaming sounds inside the barn, there was laughing sounds
out on the street

Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a bloody red rain
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his screaming pain
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it ain't no lie
Was just for the fun of killin' him and to watch him slowly die

And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor Emmett Till
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this
awful crime
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind

¹⁴ In addition to this comment, King made explicit in his remarks the connections among oppression, Black identity, and music:

God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment and many different situations.

Jazz speaks for life. The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph.

This is triumphant music.

Modern Jazz has continued in this tradition, singing the songs of a more complicated urban existence. When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth, which flow through his instrument.

It is no wonder that so much of the search for identity among American Negroes was championed by jazz musicians. Long before the modern essayists and scholars wrote of racial identity as a problem for a multiracial world, musicians were returning to their roots to affirm that which was stirring within their souls. ("Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival Program")

¹⁵ "On April 3, 1968, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his final public speech. In a crowded church in Memphis, Tenn., King spoke of the injustice felt by the city's sanitation workers, who were on strike protesting low pay and poor working conditions.

But, speaking hours before his assassination, the civil rights leader went beyond that subject, touching on death and his own mortality [. . .]

'Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.' ("Remembering MLK's Prophetic 'Mountaintop' Speech")

As noted by Keith Miller, "King hadn't wanted to visit Memphis in the sunshine. In spring 1968, he was trying to mobilize the Poor People's campaign, a large, multi-ethnic demonstration that he was organizing for Washington D.C. Despite the vigorous objections of most of his upper-level staff, he insisted on the pivotal importance of staging a huge protest in Washington [. . .] Then Rev. James Lawson, a veteran activist and stalwart Gandhian, contacted King about the prospects of African American garbage workers in Memphis, the blues capital of the universe and the largest city in the Mid-South" (4). On 4 April 1968, James Earl Ray, a criminal and white supremacist, assassinated Dr. King (who was 39 years old at the time) at the Lorraine Motel (now the National Civil Rights Museum) in Memphis, Tennessee.

For full transcripts and video of the Memphis prophecy speech, also known as the "I've been to the mountaintop" speech, see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm> and <http://vimeo.com/3816635>. In *Ten Freedom Summers*, Smith concludes the recording with his musical evocation of Dr. King's Memphis Prophecy, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Memphis, the Prophecy," played by the Golden Quarter and the Southwest Chamber Music ensemble.

¹⁶ In the third lecture of the "Conscience for Change" series, entitled "Youth and Social Action," Dr. King noted how

The collective effort that was born out of the civil-rights alliance was awesomely fruitful for this country [the U.S.] in the first years of the 1960s. The repressive forces that had not been seriously challenged for almost a decade now faced an aroused adversary [. . .] The Negro freedom movement would have been historic and worthy even if it had only served the cause of civil rights. But its laurels are greater because it stimulated a broader social movement that elevated the moral level of the nation. In the struggle against the preponderant evils of society, decent values were preserved. Moreover, a significant body of young people learned that in opposing the tyrannical forces that were crushing them, they added stature and meaning to their lives. (196)

The lectures were broadcast beginning in November 1967 and ending on Christmas Eve, some three months before Dr. King's assassination. They were given in the context of major racial rioting that occurred throughout the U.S. in the preceding summer, known as the "Long Hot Summer of 1967," and that had seen multiple deaths and injuries. Riots broke out in some 159 cities, including Atlanta, Birmingham, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, Rochester, and Tampa—among others. The most serious riots occurred in Newark and in Detroit (the so-called "Twelfth Street Riot," which left 43 people dead, 467 people injured, 7200 people arrested, and over 2000 buildings destroyed over five days of civil disturbance that required both the Michigan National Guard and the Army to quell).

Works Cited

"About DCI." *The Dorothy Cotton Institute: Building Global Community for Human Rights Leadership*. Centre for Transformative Action, 2012. Web. 12 May 2012.

Bang, Billy. "Liner Notes." *Vietnam: Reflections*. Fusion, 2009. CD.

Barr III, David and Mamie Till-Mobley. *The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till: This is his story—told in his mother's words*. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2006. Print.

Chandler, Maxwell. "Sathima Bea Benjamin: Song Without End." *All About Jazz*. All About Jazz, 29 April 2008. Web. 12 May 2012.

- Childs, John Brown. *Transcommunality: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003. Print.
- Dylan, Bob. "The Death of Emmett Till." *The Official Bob Dylan Site*. Sony Music Entertainment, 2012. Web. 12 May 2012.
- "Emmett Till." *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia Foundation, 2012. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Fischlin, Daniel. "'See clearly ... feel deeply': Improvisation and Transformation. John McLaughlin Interviewed by Daniel Fischlin." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 6.2 (2010): n. pag. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Gabbard, Krin. *Hotter Than That: The Trumpet, Jazz, and American Culture*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2008. Print.
- Goodheart, Matthew. "Jazz and Society." *Freedom and Individuality in the Music of Cecil Taylor*. Mills College, 1996. Web. 2 Feb. 2011.
- Halpern, Martin. "John F. Kennedy: Civil Rights Address (1963)." *Milestone Documents*. Schlager, 2012. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Hentoff, Nat. "Cecil Taylor: 'It's about magic, and capturing spirits.'" *JazzTimes*. JazzTimes, Jan./Feb. 2002. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Horton, Lyn. "Wadada Leo Smith: A Vital Life Force." *All About Jazz*. All About Jazz, 12 May 2010. Web. 1 Dec. 2011.
- Jackson, Michael. "Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith: Looking for the Diamond Fields." *Downbeat* April 2012: 38-43. Print.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. Print.
- Kennedy, John F. "Civil Rights Address delivered 11 June 1963." *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*. American Rhetoric, 2011. Web. 12 May 2012.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival Program: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reflects on legacy of jazz." *JazzTimes*. JazzTimes, 17 Jan. 2011. Web. 12 May 2012.
- . "Conscience for Change." *The Lost Massey Lectures: Recovered Classics from Five Great Thinkers*. Ed. Bernie Lucht. Toronto: Anansi, 2007. 163-217. Print.
- Litweiler, John. *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958*. New York: Da Capo, 1984. Print.
- Mandel, Howard. "Yo Wadada! Leo Smith's Long Pilgrimage." *JazzHouse.org*. Jazz Journalists Association, 2003. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.
- McMichael, Robert K. "'We Insist—Freedom Now!': Black Moral Authority, Jazz, and the Changeable Shape of Whiteness." *American Music* 16 (1998): 375-416. Print.
- Miller, Keith D. *Martin Luther King's Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2012. Print.
- Monson, Ingrid. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

- . "Revisited! The Freedom Now Suite." *JazzTimes*. JazzTimes, Sept. 2001. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. New York: Penguin, 1981. Print.
- "Remembering MLK's Prophetic 'Mountaintop' Speech." *NPR*. National Public Radio, 3 Apr. 2008. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2005. Print.
- Smith, Wadada Leo. *Human Rights*. Gramm/Kabell, 1982. Vinyl.
- . "notes on my music (part 1)." *notes (8 pieces) source a new world music: creative music*. N.p.: Wadada Leo Smith, 1973. Print.
- . *Ten Freedom Summers*. Cuneiform Records, 2012. CD.
- . "Wadada Leo Smith's *Ten Freedom Summers*: Defining Moments in the History of the United States of America." *Homepage of Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith*. Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith, 2011. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Sumera, Matthew. "Liner Notes." *Ten Freedom Summers*. Cuneiform Records, 2012. Print.
- . "Wadada Leo Smith: The OFN Interview [part 2]." *One Final Note*. N.p., June 2005. Web. 2 Feb. 2011.
- Weston, Randy. *Uhuru Afrika*. Randy Weston Discography, 2012. Web. 12 May 2012.