

“Wild notes” ... Improvising

for Ajay Heble, on the occasion of his 50th birthday

I

I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!

This they would sing, as a chorus to words [that] to many would seem *unmeaning jargon*, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. (Douglass 349; emphasis mine)

Do improvisers see the world differently? Do they translate what they see into musical terms, making public the event horizon of the possible that is part of their interior creative process? Is improvised music the collective social practice of interiority? Do improvisatory musical discourses reduce down to only music, self-referencing itself? Or does the content of an improvisation *envision* and call into embodiment a much broader social, spiritual, and creative field of reference that goes beyond purely musical contexts, avoiding all attempts to reduce it to something that can be contained in discourse?

Improvising—for want of a better word or, perhaps, as the best word to describe this practice beyond words—unifies notions of diverse improvisatory practices with what those practices express, the vision—*aesthetic, social, intimate, unspeakable*—that only an embodied, live, improvised performance can bring into being. *Improvising* then: the irruption of the real of creative vision in the here and now of music in which chance, spontaneity, and unpredictability are active. *Improvising* implies not only the active elements in creative practices based on improvisation, but also the seeing into things (the *envisioning*) that improvisation makes possible, the calling forth of the unexpected, the making present of a response that could not have been predicted except in *that* moment, *there* in *that* specific context.

The epigraph to this essay—from orator, social reformer, abolitionist, and author Frederick Douglass’s (1818-1895) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845); as part of an extended passage on 19th-century musicking made by American slave populations—reminds us of two things. One, that music made in the key of slavery and oppression literally sees into the nature of things (in this case the “horrible nature of slavery”) in ways that other discourses do not—cannot. Two, that musical meaning is made out of specific contexts that challenge listeners’ capacity to take what is apparently “unmeaning jargon” and grasp its intent. “Jargon” here designates the very sign of difference upon which the social practice of slavery was predicated—those who can’t understand the “unmeaning jargon” are diminished by their incapacity. But this jargon also marks the utterly unique response, the singularity of the musical vision that captures and “impress[es]” minds with the unspeakable nature of oppression. Song, in this sense, *improvisations*: it sees, literally and figuratively, into things in an utterly distinctive fashion and reveals embedded truths about realities in powerfully affective ways.

Douglass himself understood that in the slave songs he heard, every “tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those *wild notes* always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness [. . .] To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery” (349; emphasis mine). Musical affect is here associated with political consciousness in a way that gets at the connections between musical practices and broader social practices. The inexpressibility of the affect produced by song fills Douglass with a profound vision of dehumanization; and explicit in this description are the “wild notes” that are associated with the “unmeaning jargon.” Both terms evoke how improvisation calls into being both the “wild” and the “unmeaning” in a way that sees into human realities, *improvisations*, and thereby moves to affective responses like those found in Douglass’s own remarkable life trajectory fighting for abolition, for women’s suffrage, for voting rights, and for basic civil rights principles—all founded on the progressive ethical affirmation that “I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong” (Douglass, *The Anti-Slavery Movement* 33).

Douglass’s insights into slave song are a useful reminder of the roots of improvised music associated with African American culture generally and with jazz specifically. These insights point to the underlying “blues” nature of the sentiment slave songs express: “I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to

conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart: and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (349-50). *Wild notes* here are not only improvised musical cries envisioning musical freedoms where other forms of freedom have been revoked; they are also inexpressible anguish brought on by systemic racism and oppression, a response whose ineffability (literally its refusal to be circumscribed by any form of reductive meaning) aligns the real of oppression with the imagination of what liberty might mean. Music literally speaks this suffering into being even as the song's *wild notes* point to liberatory forms of expression that anticipate emancipation. In this very precise sense, then, improvisation is profoundly linked in African American discourses about slavery with gestures that acknowledge the brutal realities of suffering while deploying musical strategies where wildness, unmeaning, and ineffability are also present. How might these notions anticipate emergent discourses of improvisation as a trope for liberatory affect arising from blues discourses of suffering?

In a 2002 interview with Lazaro Vega, the late great tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson reminded that "one of the precepts of the AACM [is that] you have to be familiar with the entire history and evolution of the music," an idea he echoes in a comment in another interview from the same year with Adam Hill: "All the music has a story, has our experiences." The storytelling associated with improvisation coming out of the tradition to which Anderson made such a major contribution is wholly inseparable from Douglass's accounts of his encounters with slave song. "Wild notes," however ineffable, however hermetic in their meaning, give birth to iterations of this narrative that carry forward in the sonic real: these sounds are stories, histories, memories of memories, evocations. What might it mean to try to chart the history of suffering, of feeling generally, if improvised musical iterations did not exist?

The remarkable audiovisual document *Timeless/Live at the Velvet Lounge*, featuring, in addition to Anderson, both Hamid Drake (drums) and Harrison Bankhead (bass), is, as Nic Jones puts it, "about social history, and the changes it can bring, almost as much as it is about the music itself." This story is a forward-seeing story—a wayfaring story that imagines what might come of the moment. Like Anderson's own playing posture—hunched forward, intensely contained physically, but wildly imaginative sonically—the narrative being told carries both a history and a vision of the future, a social history predicated on adaptation and change, the very sound of those things happening in the here and now of the improvisation, the free seeing into things that is *improvising*.

Geoff Dyer's *But Beautiful* tells the story of the great American jazzman and social activist Charles Mingus's response to multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy's unexpected and gratuitous death in Berlin in 1964.

When [Dolphy] died in Berlin, surrounded by people who didn't even know who he was, all of the cruelties and injustices of the music's history seemed to Mingus to have converged on sweet, gentle Eric. Jazz was a curse, a threat hanging over anyone who played it. He'd written "So Long, Eric" as a farewell and now it became a requiem.

He had needed Dolphy. *His playing was so wild*, so beyond anything you expected that Mingus found himself calmed by it. *Mingus could play wild and free as anyone* but as far as he was concerned the kids who produced the clatter and squawks of the avant-garde hadn't even bothered to learn their instruments. He'd briefly got tangled up in some acid-brained spontaneous invention project of Timothy Leary's and what he'd told Leary applied equally to all the noise merchants of the new thing, the new music.

—You can't improvise on nothing, man, he'd said shaking his head at the shambles around him. You gotta improvise on something. (119; emphasis mine)

The passage encapsulates jazz as a crucible for cruelty, injustice, ignorance, wildness, and freedom. It also captures the contradictions Mingus was living as he came to terms with his beloved Dolphy's *wildness* that he found so calming, and the new music he found so disturbing. Unacknowledged here is the enormous distance between dropping acid with Leary and improvising and playing hard with Dolphy, who was in fact improvising on something, his wildness hearkening back to the story told by Douglass of slave song and its *wild notes* speaking to suffering and potential liberation.

Dyer follows this with a further, deeper reading of what Mingus is getting at in his comments on improvisation and their relation to Dolphy.

At best, free jazz was a diversion which might even help in the long run: after a while people would see it was a dead end and maybe then they'd realize the only true way forward was to make the music swing

harder. Twenty years from now, once they'd got all the squawking out of their system, people like Shepp would go back to playing the blues, you could bet on it.

People thought Dolphy avant-garde, experimental, but Mingus heard him crying out as if trying to reach all the dead slaves. Mingus had always known that was what the blues was: music played to the dead, calling them back, showing them the way back to the living. Now he realized part of the blues was the opposite of that: the desire to be dead yourself, a way of helping the living find the dead. (119-20)

The problem here is that the diversion of free jazz was no diversion at all—freedom had always been implicit in the *wild notes* of slave song, and the call to freedom, also an invocation of present suffering, was no tangential, diversionary tactic secondary to the music. It literally *was* the music. So musical freedom was no “dead end,” though it spoke to the dead, recalled their oppression, recalled that theirs had been, perhaps, a “dead end”—except for the very creative impulses they transmuted through song and *wild notes* into a remarkable emancipatory crescendo that came to fruition in the 1960s' civil rights movement.

Nor had Shepp ever stopped playing the blues. Like other infamous, so-called “squawkers,” including Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders, and John Coltrane, the blues was the deep river from whence all this disruptive noise had sprung—it was the sonic continuum sustaining the improvisatory explorations associated with African diasporic musicking. If sustained pain, suffering, and oppression had a sound, “squawks” were part of that musical landscape as surely as the “swinging” that imagined and gave voice to emancipatory musical energies: forward-moving, driving to the future with ineluctable creative power and unstoppable synergies. Squawks had an intricate connection to hardcore overblowing techniques used for expressive purpose, associated with individual voice but also with historic forms of African-American musicking that included field hollers, street cries, and other non-tonal expressive forms that marked collective agency and history.

Dyer gets at some of these ideas in his description of how Mingus heard Dolphy's experimentalism. The way forward was the way back, a way of “crying out as if trying to reach all the dead slaves.”¹ Avant-gardism could not be truly new without reaching out to the past, literally memorializing the dead in the callback; and this realization, this sound made real in Dolphy's experimentalist approach to improvisation, cut both ways. The dead had to be summoned back to the living, but the living, too, had to find their way back to the dead. Dolphy's sounds, *wild notes*, traversed both directions of this matrix, and as Dyer imagines, perhaps this is where the calming effect on Mingus of Dolphy's *improvisation* came from.

What was the sound Dolphy played to get Charon's attention as he sat on the opposite side of the Styx wrapped in his memories of an infinity of travellers bound for the other side? Was swing the way to get his attention? Or squawks? Or both? Since both forms of sound carry forward their legacy of meanings arising from suffering and slavery, was Dolphy capable of swinging and squawking simultaneously?

“Wild notes” in this context arouse the dead and the almost dead. They are the sound played by the *psychopomp* escorting the dead to the afterlife. They give voice to possibility. They memorialize egregious pain. They make their own rules that *nobody*, not even Mingus, can constrain. They are beyond words and reductive attempts to assign any singular meaning. For this reason, they push forward into the future, and where they leave off, the real improvisation begins.

In a 1966 interview with Japanese journalists in Tokyo, John Coltrane, who always remained enigmatic about what his music meant, except as an expression of change and divinity, produced the following Zen-like responses to his interviewers:

Question: What do you think about Malcolm X?

John Coltrane: I admired him. I admired him.

Question: What do you think about the “new thing” in modern jazz?

John Coltrane: I like it.

Question: [How do] the problems of colored people influence you in your playing?

John Coltrane: I don't know. I don't know. (DeVito 272)

Typical of Coltrane's circumspect and guarded ways of responding to these sorts of questions is the way in which the three answers move from direct response to the unknowable.

Yes, to be sure, he admires Malcolm X. He says so twice.²

Yes, he likes the new forms of jazz that he had played such a crucial role in voicing.

But when it comes to articulating a direct link between African American "problems" (as the interviewer euphemistically puts it), he can't know, emphatically. He says so twice.

The exchange exemplifies the necessary circumspection Coltrane exercised when attributing political or any other sort of deterministic meaning to music in any singular way. The music *always already* exceeds simplistic formulae that make it only, in this instance, politically meaningful, only an attribute of a so-called "troubled people." Music's creative power and affect lie in its unknowability, its ciphered resistance to prescribed meanings.

There are, no doubt, connections to be made among Malcolm X, the so-called "new thing" in modern jazz, and Coltrane's musickings. But to say it in this way is to reduce the meaning of all three components in this complex nexus of histories, contexts, and expressive interventions. Coltrane understands this perfectly well and deflects the question in a way that allows for the answer to remain contingent, both yes and no, but ultimately unknowable, because the music necessarily transcends its reduction to discursive meaning. Coltrane's "not knowing" pushes back against facile assumptions that limit the progressive, experimental nature of improvised music to any meaning that limits its expressive freedoms. From Douglass's "wild notes" to Coltrane's "I don't know," in other words, there is a remarkable range of articulations embedded in what improvisation marks as a signifier of creative potential. In wanting to know what Coltrane intended by his music the interviewer may as well have asked, "Where does musical repetition come from?" No answer would suffice.

Coltrane's "I don't know" is, in short, *improvisational*: it sees into the nature of improvisation, literally envisions the space of music as apart from reductive one-to-one correspondences between cause and effect (as in "I'm a Black musician: therefore, the music I play only relates to the 'problems' of 'colored people'"). Who can know *what* it means? It (not so) simply *is* what it means.

In this way, Coltrane's "not knowing" is also *provisional*—it recognizes that improvised music, at the level Coltrane was imagining it, arises from provisional spaces always to be made anew. Improvisation always starts from a present space of indeterminacy and potential, which, to be true to itself, can never assume anything other than its own potential to be uncovered in the act of improvising. Provisional "not knowing" then, in the sense of wholly in the present, but potentially changeable as the contingencies of the present change—as past or future contingencies bring themselves to bear in the present. These "changes" could move in all directions at once, precisely the kind of imagining of improvisatory discourses that had been discussed by Wayne Shorter and Coltrane when "they talked about improvising and language, and how it might be ideal to start a sentence in the middle, then travel backward and forward, toward both the subject and predicate, simultaneously" (Ratliff 49).

How analogous is this *in medias res* (*in* or *into* the middle of things) aesthetic to that of Dolphy's summoning of the dead to the living, and of the living to the dead as *wild notes* sing their way both forwards and backwards in time?

Is this not the fate of the improviser who, always already, begins *in medias res* and makes sense of things from that point on?

Coltrane's "I don't know" is the starting point, then, of being *in medias res*. It can lead anywhere. Everywhere. Or not. And it pushes back at the improviser as the sole locus of improvisatory discourse. In this situation, buried in the "I don't know," is the pushback: "Do you?"

Understood in this sense, improvisatory discourses *improvisation* by asking the audience to see into the nature of the improvisation as well. The listener—as audience, interlocutor, receptor, and even resistor to the improvisation—also improvises a response, a listening, a carrying forward of the ideas caught in that moment. In this sense too, the improviser is at the focal point of multi-directional energies that occur at the interstices of creative potential. These

energies are both embodied in the creative gestures that make the music occur and in the reception gestures that continue to make meaning of that music once it has been played.

Improvisational, wild notes take us to the heart of this exchange, this making of unthought connections that get at the “what” and “why” of not knowing. The collective making of meaning, perhaps, lies at the core of *improvisational* and improvisatory creation. This meaning addresses itself to history as both a legacy and as a “progression”—an iteration of what it might mean to move from unknowing to provisionally knowing.

II

We are all, perhaps, familiar with moments of musical transport, tropes, even stereotypes; of musical engagement that signify the unleashing of embodied, creative energies. The musician or musicians seem removed but powerfully connected. Eyes roll back, eyelids close. Or eyes focus, seeing clearly what must come next. Heads nod to a carrying pulse, feet tap, bodies sway, stillness descends into the center of the pulse.

And from that stillness, a vortex, a groove literally pro-pulses musical ideas into being. Contexts dissipate into the presence of the performer(s), whose physical being turns into a flow of ideas with a logic at once unpredictable but also ineluctable, certain in what must be brought into being as a function of the kind of (*im*)*provisional* gestures I discuss above.

Uncertainty is the apotheosis of creation. As creation tilts from potential into the actual, it literally is brought into being out of a process that must pass through the uncertain, which does not occur *sui generis*, but arises from the multiple contexts, histories, material realities that produce a particular improvisatory intervention. In this play of potential, improvisation is crucial. It enables the turn from the unexpected, the unthought, the unthinkable, into action—into musical gesture, the affect that instantaneously “impress[es],” to use Douglass’s word, the mind. This impression carries forward into other contexts, reminding that improvisation has powerful symbolic resonances and capacities for producing agency.

Musical transport happens in the now, in the moments where *now-ness* is more powerfully present as a marker of human potential, literally self-creating itself out of apparent nothingness. Improvisation, *improvisationing*, lies at the heart of these moments of transport, of embodiment, of dreaming possibility into the language of the real. No one can say *what* it is. Yet it *is*. As in “*There it is!*” That’s *it*.”

Irreducible, inexpressible, uncontainable in any form of discourse, *improvisationing* asks that we see what is possible when the body and spirit improvise themselves into being as *wild notes* that will not be tamed, notes that rise out of serendipitous connections and juxtapositions, notes whose meanings spin forward beyond the notes themselves into affect and reception and embodiment as received sonic gestures that an audience helps turn into meaning.

Perhaps, in this sense, after the notes leave off, the music truly begins, the improvisation carries forward?

Improvisation has its roots in words that bring together the *extemporaneous* (the unprepared, without the time to prepare, driven by the needs of the moment), the *unforeseen*, and the *preparation for what is to come next* (derived from *provisus*, the past participle of the Latin verb *providere*) in the unfolding of the improvisation. These meanings resonate with ambiguity. Without time to prepare, one improvises, and in so doing prepares for what is to come next, as driven by the needs of the moment, the uncertainty that can never fully be known, can never be foreseen. In this sense, improvised music transports from silence to extemporaneity, to iterations built from the extemporaneous.

What language do we have to think of this form of musical transport?

The great Spanish poet (and guitarist) Federico García Lorca, summarily executed in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, used the word “*duende*” to mark a moment of transport. When *duende* is present, self-possession surrenders to an otherness always latent in being,³ always potentially eruptive as a life force that unifies erotic energy with the pervasive awareness of *thanatos*, the daemon associated with death.

Mortality demands creation. For García Lorca, *duende* was profoundly connected to music as a key site for the struggle to enact creation in the face of mortality:

The duende does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible. The duende must know beforehand that he can *serenade* death's house and rock those branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have, consolation. With idea, *sound*, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the rim of every well. Angel and muse escape with *violin*, *meter*, and compass; the duende wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of a man's work. (*In Search of Duende* 58; emphasis mine)

Death is at the core of history. It is also the inevitable outcome of life. As with the summoning of the dead to the living and of the living to the dead discussed earlier, duende appears when this relation is brought into being in moments of creation. Creation is the battle, as García Lorca puts it, of the duende's need to see death present with the creator who undertakes the risk of engaging with death on "the rim of every well."

Pleasure is to be had in this encounter, because the duende enjoys the battle with the creator. And music is figured everywhere in this battle, as "serenade," as "sound," as instrument ("violin") and rhythm ("meter").

There is no consolation for mortality. Yet the battle between creation and death allows for a form of response beyond consolation: the wound that the duende makes possible, a wound that never closes, a wound that always calls for a response through the "strange, invented qualities" of human creation. Creation transports us to the "rim of every well," where the duende awaits. Invention occurs. The wound heals but never closes. Again and again this process of being called to create awaits us as surely as the mortality embedded in both our history and our future.

For García Lorca, the creative power of the duende, which I'm associating with improvisatory expression in its most achieved forms, cannot be repeated. Each iteration is unique—it repeats, paradoxically, its uniqueness: "The duende does not repeat himself, any more than the forms of the sea during a squall" (59). Like improvisatory explorations, the underlying aesthetic of creative potential always trumps and overcomes the compulsion to repeat. Its form is continuously revealing itself as an unfolding of potential that arises anew out of shifting contexts that compose the here and now.

Even when elements of repetition are present, they are illusory because the flow of context and flux constantly make over apparent repetition in new guises of an always-compromised stability. Improvisation trumps stasis, even when stasis is the shape given an improvisation. Repetition is mobile and context-specific at once, like any living form that must surrender to the limits of what it is even as what it remains multiple, protean, impossible to capture definitively.

Improvisation would be incomplete without repetition. Repetition would be incomplete without improvisation. The two are inseparable conceptually.

Duende brings us into the real, what García Lorca called the "drama of living forms" that, paradoxically, "clears the stairways for an evasion of the surrounding reality" (59). Which is more real, after all: the drama of creation so closely tied to both suffering and surrender, to sacrifice; or the surrounding contexts that constrain that drama, that squeeze it out of being, that literally force the evasion, the liberation that creation makes possible? Duende is another aspect of *improvisation*: the capacity of improvisatory practice to envision the real in ways that displace norms, re-activate the power of creation as both a life and death force, and re-vision what it means to engage with yet-to-be-imagined event horizons of the possible.

The duende is *daemonic* in the Greek sense of invoking divinity and genius, where genius means not some over-hyped superior being, but rather a guiding spirit (a spirit capable of guiding), as well as an innateness, a sense of intuitive inclination, a tutelary spirit that is at once deeply characteristic of being human, and of what being human reduces to in its most natural state of inclination toward creation and spirit. Improvisation is a key aspect of this inclination, this hypostatic reality that refuses to be contained or limited, this battle with the duende that is constantly being called into being.

In his famous essay, "On Popular Music," German social critic and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno excoriates jazz improvisation, as he understood it in his own historical context, calling it a form of "pseudo-individualization" (444). Adorno also aligns this assertion with his further attack on the "ferment of jazz's modernity," a "simple deception as much as is its [. . .] immediacy" ("On Jazz" 483).

It is worth recalling these passages not only for their curmudgeonly contrarianism, but also for how they problematize what improvisation is. Adorno's analysis of improvisation, his *improvisation*, gets at key elements in the struggle to preserve improvisational discourses from erosion by aesthetically corrupt practices:

The most drastic example of standardization of presumably individualized features is to be found in so-called improvisations. Even though jazz musicians still improvise in practice, their improvisations have become so “normalized” as to enable a whole terminology to be developed to express the standard devices of individualization: a terminology which in turn is ballyhooed by jazz publicity agents to foster the myth of pioneer artisanship and at the same time flatter the fans by apparently allowing them a peep behind the curtain [. . .] This pseudo-individualization is prescribed by the standardization of the framework. The latter is so rigid that the freedom it allows for any sort of improvisation is severely delimited. Improvisations—passages where spontaneous action of individuals is permitted (“Swing it boys”)—are confined within the walls of the harmonic and metric scheme [. . .] Hence, very few opportunities for actual improvisation remain, due to the necessity of merely melodically circumscribing the same underlying harmonic functions. Since these possibilities were very quickly exhausted, stereotyping of improvisatory details speedily occurred. Thus, standardization of the norm enhances in a purely technical way, standardization of its own deviation—pseudo-individualization. (“On Popular Music” 445)

Cranky as Adorno is, this passage nonetheless acutely identifies crucial improvisatory tropes (some stereotypical): individualization, escape from normalization, “pioneer artisanship,” anti-standardization, *un*-delimited aesthetics, spontaneity, freedom from constraints, inexhaustible possibility. It must be remembered that the “music Adorno knew as jazz at the time he produced his principal work on the subject [. . .] was the popular dance music produced in the waning years of the Weimar Republic [1919-1933] and also in England [. . . and] had everything to do with salon music and the military march [. . .] and very little to do with non-swing American jazz and even less with African-American musics” (Leppert 357). For Adorno, standardizing jazz’s framework, presumably in harmonic and metric terms, circumscribes improvisational possibility and precipitates normalization, inventive exhaustion, and the pseudo-individualization that he associates with the “myth of pioneer artisanship.” It is important to remember that the historical contexts associated with the Weimar Republic are understood to have laid the ground for National Socialism and the rise of Nazism.⁴

Adorno’s attack on normalization targeted this very particular and perverse form of jazz, extremely distant in sound and aesthetics from the *wild notes* heard by Douglass and given new form in the post-war period by people like Dolphy, Mingus, Coltrane, Sun Ra, Shepp, Ayler, and Ornette Coleman—and later by any number of experimentalists including a host of AACM-associated players (Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, Leroy Jenkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and George Lewis); Europe-based players like Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, Misha Mengelberg, Eddie Prévost, Han Bennink, Willem Breuker, and Peter Brötzmann; and New York school players like John Zorn, William Parker, Marc Ribot, and Matthew Shipp. Systematic expressions that delimited improvisatory freedoms, “restraining tendencies” that turned improvisation into a parody of individual expression, were in Adorno’s terms a form of “music practicing obedience, a music that measures itself against ‘an invisible canon of the permitted and the forbidden [. . .] in short, a music of fear’” (Leppert 110). In speaking about a jazz that is *not* jazz in a specifically pre-National Socialist, pre-Nazi context, Adorno identifies how “Jazz no more has anything to do with authentic Negro music, which has long since been falsified and industrially smoothed out *here*, than it is possessed of any destructive or threatening qualities” (“Farewell to Jazz” 497; emphasis mine).

The “here” in the preceding sentence is important. It marks Adorno’s specific historic location and the way in which that location is associated with falsification, industrialization, and the eradication of *duende* (the creative destroyer, the wound that cannot be healed) and *wild notes* from music. As American critic Richard Leppert argues, “Adorno clearly understood the ‘dance-band commercial jazz’ widely available in Weimar Germany to have little to do with African or African-American culture [. . .] ‘For no matter what one wishes to understand by white or by Negro jazz, *here* there is nothing to salvage. Jazz itself has long been in the process of dissolution, in retreat into military marches and all sorts of folklore’—what he calls later in the essay [“Farewell to Jazz”], ‘patriotic kitsch,’ and clearly associates with fascism” (359; emphasis mine). Again, the “here” is important. It denotes that time and place do in fact matter—as Sun Ra was to later make so clear—when it comes to the social contexts associated with musico-creative forms.

Adorno clearly understood the music and the shape it was taking as pseudo-individualized illusions of a radical kind of freedom at odds with the politics of the moment. Jazz in this very particular sense was an expression of a wider social discourse and social practice (specific to Adorno’s own historic context) with serious repercussions for understanding the agency of improvisation as a potentially meaningful act corrupted by standardization, predictability, fear of spontaneity, and aesthetic exhaustion.

By seeing into this pattern and attacking it, Adorno was making explicit the way in which musical structures were congruent with historical agency: a negative proof, if you will, of the power of wild notes to *improvisation*, to see clearly

into the nature of life forms struggling with freedom—or in the case of Weimar Republic jazz, struggling with the fear of freedoms that were already mutating into the repressive historical obscenity of the Third Reich.

The key thing to remember is that even as Adorno acutely critiques improvisation in this context, there is a congruent sub-text present. Improvisatory utterance *is* possible. Challenges to delimitations and standardization *can* be conceived. Pseudo-individualization is to be understood against the possibility of real emancipation, whether musical or critical.

Creative atrophy masquerading as liberatory expression had to be unmasked for what it was; and yet implicit in this negative critique is the ideal of an improvisatory practice that is worth salvaging, a standard for imagining the creative potential in improvisations that have not been co-opted to military marches, popular (read: nationalist) kitsch, and commercial dance bands. Adorno's attack on this form of jazz as an expression of popular music associated with militarization, commercialization, and nationalism is salutary. It imagines fascist discourse as the exact opposite of authentic improvisatory music in which creative and critical freedom give voice to a music driven by *wild notes*, invention, and an inexhaustible creative commons constantly in the process of recreating itself, constantly under pressure from repressive forces.

Might this seeing into the nature of how improvisation had been mutated and co-opted to a specific social context not provide us with a powerful critical tool for imagining the *improvisional* energies and *wild notes* that García Lorca had fought and died for in describing the duende dancing, squawking on the "rim of every well," doing battle with inventive energies deadly serious in their intent to assert relentlessly their right to speak, to sing, to create?

Is improvisation the name we might give to the site of this encounter?

III

This issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* (CSI/ECI) finds many of the themes I discuss above alive and kicking, hollering and squawking, maybe even "swinging" or "dancing" precariously (to use García Lorca's image) on the rim of a well. We're pleased to publish in this issue a wide cross-section of scholarly essays, memorials, interviews, notes, and reviews from distinguished contributors on a truly diverse range of approaches to thinking about improvisation as a musical and social practice. This issue is dedicated to the remarkable life and music of Fred Anderson and is offered to our co-editor and founder and long-standing Artistic Director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, Ajay Heble, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday.

AACM-member Matana Roberts's heartfelt tribute to her mentor gives us a first-person account of how Anderson made remarkable contributions simply by being available as an elder musician in the context of the aural jazz traditions associated with jam sessions: "Mr. Anderson welcomed me [to her first jam session at the legendary Velvet Lounge] and treated me just like he treated everyone else—as a seeker of sound, thirsty for knowledge, thirsty for sounds, wide open for new understanding, held up by his often silent but always incredibly positive encouragement." Roberts points to Anderson as "a shining example of the possibilities of the power of one within an arts community." The comment reminds us that such an example of community engagement remains to be carried forward by each and every one of us.

Anderson, who died on June 24, 2010, left an enormous legacy as a player, as a mentor, and as a canny business man who found concrete ways to make music happen, especially through his ownership of the Chicago club The Velvet Lounge, which he took over in 1983 and turned into a hotbed of jazz and experimental musicking—this after running the Beehive Bar in west Chicago as a locale where musicians gathered. Always humble, in the 2009 symposium to celebrate his eightieth birthday, "Celebrating a Jazz Hero," held at the Chicago Cultural Center, Anderson modestly demurred: "I didn't really consider myself a mentor. I just wanted somebody to play with, and they all found me." Yet the list of remarkable younger musicians whose careers he fostered includes Ken Vandermark, Matana Roberts, Hamid Drake, Harrison Bankhead, David Boykin, Nicole Mitchell (former president of the AACM), Justin Dillard, Aaron Getsug, Josh Abrams, Fred Jackson, George Lewis, Karl E. H. Seigfried, Isaiah Sharkey, Isaiah Spencer, and even his son, Eugene Anderson. CSI/ECI is pleased to publish in this issue not only Roberts's memorial, but also the proceedings of the "Celebrating a Jazz Hero" symposium (also available in audio format), Paul Steinbeck's extended reflection on Anderson's music and socio-cultural impact, and distinguished Canadian author and photographer Tom King's beautifully evocative photo of Mr. Anderson, taken the last time he played the Guelph Jazz Festival in 2009 in a memorable trio with Marilyn Crispell and Hamid Drake.

Highlights of this issue include essays ranging from Tracy McMullen's comparative reading of John Cage's and Pauline Oliveros's improvisatory aesthetics as mediated by their approach to Zen, Protestantism, and Buddhism; to Australian musician and cognitive scientist Roger Dean's and Marcs Auditory Laboratory postdoctoral research fellow Freya Bailes's empirical study of improvisatory intensity as a means for understanding interpersonal equity, dialogic discourse, and transcultural exchange; to ICASP postdoctoral fellow Rebecca Caines's study of improvisation and Australian hip-hop pedagogy.

CSI/ECI is also pleased to be publishing American composer, performer, and scholar Alex Lubet's reflections on disability studies and jazz, focused on pianist Horace Parlan whose "hand-impaired" playing had to address the effects of childhood polio; and an extended interview with storied guitarist John McLaughlin focusing on spirituality, improvisation, and cultural encounter.

In addition, we're happy to publish six reviews that address important new work on improvisation: the earlier cited book of Coltrane interviews edited by Chris DeVito; a new book by sonic provocateur Bob Ostertag; a book of essays on the Grateful Dead's live improvisations; Harris Berger's phenomenological study of expressive culture, *Stance*; Bruno Nettl's and Gabriel Solis's 2009 book *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*; and drummer/improviser extraordinaire Kenwood Dennard's 2005 DVD *The Studio/Touring Drummer*.

Finally, from all of us at the Editorial Board, a heartfelt thank you to our colleague and friend Ajay Heble for his many years of dedicated service, inspiration, and initiative. This issue of CSI/ECI, we'd like to think, puts into practice so many of the ideals Ajay has consistently advocated, including inclusivity, experimentation, and respect for the new knowledge that emerges out of unexpected encounters.

Best wishes on the occasion of your 50th birthday Ajay. May you continue to inspire, provoke, organize, teach, and play.

O, yea! O, yea! O!

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Notes

¹ This sort of calling back to the past through jazz discourses is very much part of the spiritual imagining of what the music accomplishes. Cuban pianist Omar Sosa, in a 2008 interview with the French *Jazz Magazine*, states that "Le jazz est un concept philosophique qui m'aide à percevoir les voix des esprits et des ancêtres" (qtd. in Bouard 39). [Jazz is a philosophical concept that helps me detect (literally "receive") the voices of the spirits and the ancestors. (translation mine)]

² Let us not forget—as key contributor to the Black Arts Movement of the 60s and 70s, Larry Neal reminds—that Malcolm X's words "seemed to spring from the universe of black music [. . .] My ears were attuned to the music of urban black America—that blues idiom music called jazz. Malcolm was like that music. He reminded many of us of the music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane—a music that was a central force in the emerging ethos of the black artistic consciousness" (qtd. in Robinson 49). As New York Times jazz critic Ben Ratliff notes, "Several features prominent in Coltrane's work were perfect for the do-it-yourself, artist-owned jazz of the 1970s: modality and vamps, which could be slotted into all kinds of simple pieces, particularly those with Eastern connotations; the idea of 'multi-directional' rhythm sections, the Rashied Ali-Jimmy Garrison way of late Coltrane; the idea of meditative music; and the idea of instant momentum through a hot, purposeful, improvised music that surges from the first note, as 'Chasin' the Trane' or 'Transition' did" (193).

³ "In Andalusia people say of certain toreros and flamenco artists that they *have duende*—an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability, on rare occasions, to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to them" (Garcia Lorca ix).

⁴ Eberhard Kolb argues that the largest party in the Reichstag until 1932, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), "had not followed the revolutionary-socialist course to the end, so they failed to tread the liberal-democratic path consistently between 1918 and 1930. Restraining tendencies set in at an early stage" (70).

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